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# *'The Idea of History' Revisited*

**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to consider Collingwood's *Idea of History* in the wider context of his thoughts on historical knowledge, and in the light of criticisms which have often been less than generous in giving a certain latitude to what he meant to convey. The article shows how the main doctrines, that are often taken in isolation and forensically analysed and criticized, may be defended and made more intelligible when considered as an integrated whole. Such an idea as re-enactment, for example, need not be considered to lend itself to intuitionism in philosophy, nor methodological individualism in interpretation. It is possible to understand Collingwood presenting the theory of re-enactment as at once a method for the attainment of historical knowledge, which doesn't simply come about fortuitously, while also being an ontological condition of understanding, that is, when historical knowledge is attained, something will have happened to us, that is, we will have thought exactly the same thoughts, broadly speaking, as the historical subjects themselves.

As will be familiar to readers of *Collingwood Studies,* R. G. Collingwood was born in England on 22 February, 1889 when Hegelianism was ascendent in British philosophy.

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By the time he died on 9 January, 1943 he was one of the last representatives of a philosophy that had gradually fallen out of fashion since the end of the First World War. Although Collingwood never fully embraced the idealist label for his philosophy, he was along with Michael Oakeshott (1901–1990) widely acknowledged as one of its leading latter-day exponents. Both Collingwood and Oakeshott did more than any other twentieth century English speaking philosophers to establish the autonomy of history as a form of knowledge independent of positivist science. Oakeshott's first major contribution to the philosophy of history appears in his *Experience and its Modes*.[2] in which he argues that our modes of knowing are arrests in the undifferentiated whole of experience. The historical mode of experience, like science and practice, are conditional forms of knowledge based upon unquestioned postulates. All experience is present experience, and the past for the historian is merely a category in terms of which to organize present evidence. It is this assertion that the past is dead for which Collingwood takes Oakeshott to task in *The Idea of History*. For Collingwood the past lives because in being known it is re-thought, or re-enacted, by the historian. This is the central theme throughout the book and it is used to sustain all of Collingwood's most important doctrines. Although Oakeshott published important works on the philosophy of history after Experience and its Modes,[3] he is now much more highly thought of a political philosopher. It is ironic that Collingwood abandoned his life-long project in the philosophy of history to write his major political treatise *The New Leviathan* (1942), yet in death his reputation as a philosopher has been sustained

[2] Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Mode*s (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933).

[3] See, for example. 'The Activity of Being an History', in Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism on Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962), pp. 137–167. *On History and Other Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983). *What is History? And Other Essays*, ed. Luke O'Sullivan (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004).

by the posthumously published *The Idea of History* (1946) which was compiled and edited by T. M. Knox, one of Collingwood's pupils and later Principal of St. Andrews University in Scotland, from lecture notes written in 1936, published pieces from 1935 and 1936, and fragments from an uncompleted manuscript of 1939 (much of which Knox disregarded despite Collingwood's authorization to publish it).

A further irony is that *The Idea of History* is not just a work of philosophy, it is also intensely political. History is not the mere satisfaction of an idle curiosity into the events of the past. History for Collingwood is equated with self-knowledge of the mind, and the attainment of human freedom. Historical knowledge of the past better prepares us for the problems we face in the present and future. History as self-knowledge of the mind brings into view the full potential of human nature and better equips us to respond appropriately to the situations we encounter in our own lives. This assumes that there is no absolute distinction between theory and practice. It is practice which sets the problems out of which theory arises, and it is back to practice that theory returns in its conclusions. A false theoretical conception cannot help but have insidious implications for practice. If each person is regarded as a means to an end, then such a utilitarian foundation to one's thought is bound to affect the relations in which a person stands to others. Collingwood was always quite explicit about the fact that all his books had a practical purpose. *The Idea of History* is itself an immensely practical treatise in that it claims for history pre-eminence in combating the forces of barbarism and irrationalism. Historical thinking was for him the key to defeating all types of irrationalism, including Fascism and Nazism. It is history that prepares us to make the choices and shoulder the responsibilities that human freedom entails.

It is also ironic that during his lifetime Collingwood was more famous for his archaeological work than for his writings on philosophy. He was one of the leading experts on Roman Britain and was famous for his ability to synthesise the results of hundreds of archaeological digs, piecing together a coherent, if somewhat speculative, picture of Roman life in Britain. His practical work in excavations at Ambleside and Hardknot, in the Lake District of England, writing about Roman Britain, and drawing the thousands of Roman inscriptions that he found were not, however, mere distractions from philosophy.[4] He saw this work as vital to arriving at his own philosophy of history. It was these excursions into archaeology and the philosophical conclusions he drew from them that Collingwood thought would be his special contribution to Oxford philosophy.[5] It was his archaeological work that first impressed upon him the importance of the questioning activity in any form of knowledge. If one does not ask the right questions, then

[4] Stephen Leach, 'Collingwood and Archaeological Theory', in *Collingwood on Philosophical Methodology*, ed., Karim Dharamsi, Giuseppina D'Oro and Stephen Leach (London: Palgrave, 2018), pp. 249–264.

[5] In his inaugural lecture he describes his archaeological work as truancy away from the real work of philosophy. He goes on to say: 'But having faced these qualms of conscience I ask myself whether certain fruits of this truancy, the lessons which in my experience as historian I have learned as a philosopher, may not be the special contribution I can make to Oxford philosophy today.' R. G. Collingwood, 'The Historical Imagination' (Oxford, Clarendon Press: 1935). The lecture is reprinted in *The Idea of History* [1947], new revised edition ed. Jan van der Dussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), but the paragraph in which the above quotation appears is omitted. After Knox edited and published *The Idea of History*, *The Principles of History* have been found in a tea chest in the basement of Oxford University Press. Knox used only one chapter of it, and disregarded the rest. It has now been published, re-united with the one chapter that Knox published in the 1946 edition of *Idea of History*. See R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of History and other writings in philosophy of history*, ed. W.H. Dray and W. J. van der Dussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). For an interpretation of the significance of the rediscovered manuscript see David Boucher, 'The Principles of History and the Cosmology conclusion to The Idea of Nature', *Collingwood Studies*, II (1995), pp. 150–84, and 'The Significance of R. G. Collingwood's Principles of History', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 58 (1997), pp. 309–330.

no human artifact can be made to reveal its mysteries.[6] What Collingwood is saying is that the historian is not simply a receptacle of data. The historian does not merely receive what is given in experience. It is up to the historian to take the initiative by asking the right questions and by devising the right means by which to make the evidence reveal what he wants it to tell him.[7] One has to discover the question that was in a person's mind when he or she created an artifact, whether it be an object or a piece of writing. Thus a lump of shaped iron with a sharp edge may be the answer to the question 'what instrument will be most effective for cutting wood for the fire?' It is the thought process embedded in the artifact that the historian has to uncover. Unless we know what the purpose of an object is, that is, the reason a person had for producing it, then we will be unable to understand what it is. A carved image may have a whole range of purposes. The identification of the fact that it is carved imputes it with human design, but this is not enough to understand it fully. Only when we go on to discover that it is the answer to a question relating to religious worship, or to voodoo, can we understand it as an integral element in a ritual human practice. It is considerations such as these that led Collingwood to make his famous, and often misunderstood, claim that all history is the history of thought.

In Collingwood's *Autobiography* (1939), which traces the development of his thought as opposed to his life, he develops the theme of the importance of questioning further. In reporting the conclusions that he had reached over many years, and which he had worked out in particular in two unpublished works *Truth and Contradiction* (1917) and *Libellus de Generatione* (1920), Collingwood argues that tra-

[6] In *Speculum Mentis* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1924), p. 78, Collingwood argues that: 'Questioning is the cutting edge of knowledge; assertion is the dead weight behind the cutting edge that gives it driving force'.

[7] Collingwood suggests that it was Francis Bacon, the seventeenth century English philosopher and natural scientist, who first clearly articulated these important truths. See *The Idea of History*, p. 269.

ditional propositional logic is inadequate because it is incapable of discerning whether two statements may in fact be contradictory, or whether they are answers to two different questions, and thus not contradictory at all. Collingwood argues that: 'Whether a given proposition is true or false, significant or meaningless, depends on what question it was meant to answer; and anyone who wishes to know whether a given proposition is true or false, significant or meaningless, must find out what question it was meant to answer.'[8] Statements have to be seen as integral aspects of question and answer complexes. In this respect each question has to be appropriate, or be understood to arise in the given circumstances. Furthermore, philosophical answers are not given to perennial questions. Questions arise in specific contexts, and those regarding the state or polis in Ancient Greece are necessarily very different from those relating to the seventeenth century state.

*The Idea of History* is in fact the amalgamation of two projects. The first was to write a history of the idea of history. If a philosopher is to reflect upon what historical knowledge is and how it is to be attained he or she must be aware of how that type of knowledge has emerged and developed over time. In other words, its legitimacy must be established by showing how certain fundamental philosophical problems are addressed and resolved over time. This essentially was to be the subject matter of *The Idea of*

[8] R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 39. Also see R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography and Other Writings*, ed. David Boucher and Teresa Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Collingwood, fearing imminent death, wrote this book in order to record the significant doctrines that he had formulated prior to publishing them in a more extended form should he ever get the chance. He wrote two more books after this, *An Essay on Metaphysics* [1940]. New revised edition, ed. Rex Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), in which he makes the controversial claim that metaphysics is an historical discipline, and *The New Leviathan* [1942], new revised edition, ed. David Boucher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992)) which he described as his contribution to the war effort, and which the latter part displays the effects of his severe ill health.

*History* and it was to be a companion volume to the planned, but posthumously published *The Idea of Nature* (1945). Both were to be exercises in the history of ideas. The second work on history was to be a philosophical study of the principles of historical knowledge, of which Collingwood wrote about one third before his death. This was to be the third in a series comprising *The Principles of Art* (1938), and *The New Leviathan* (originally to be titled *The Principles of Politics*).

There is, however, no discontinuity between the four parts which constitute the development of the idea of history and the fifth part that makes explicit the conditions of historical knowledge. The authors discussed in the development of the idea of history are criticised from the point of view of the principles established in the epilegomena. Take, for example, Collingwood's discussion of the German thinker Meyer. Collingwood tells us that there is no such thing as empirical history. There are no facts waiting to be discovered empirically, only past events which are apprehended by a process of inference faithful to rational principles. The data upon which our inferences are based are discovered in the light of the principles themselves. In other words, he is denying that there is a world of fact independent of the principles of history. Furthermore, the historian having apprehended past events does not go on to explain them by identifying general causes or by subsuming them under general laws. Having ascertained the historical fact by means of a process of re-enactment the historian has already explained it: 'there is no difference between discovering what happened and why it happened' (IH, 177). Or to put it in the words he uses in the epilegomena: 'When the historian has ascertained the facts, there is no further process of inquiring into their causes. When he knows what happened, he already knows why it happened' (IH, 214). Collingwood is denying the efficacy of social scientific generalisation. Nothing

is added to our understanding of an event by demonstrating that similar things have happened elsewhere.

These are some of the significant conclusions that the reader will encounter in *The Idea of History*, but what reasons does Collingwood have for advancing such theorums. The answer has to be seen in a much wider context than the book itself.

British idealism, or Hegelianism, is not a uniform doctrine. There are a great many differences between the philosophies of the major representatives T. H. Green (1836–1882), F. H. Bradley (1846–1924) and Bernard Bosanquet (1848–1923), and between them and Hegel himself. In general terms, however, they dismiss the false dichotomies that have been generated by various philosophers in trying to find a satisfactory answer to the question of how thought is related to reality. They reject the correspondence theory of truth which suggests that thought must conform to, or describe, the external world. Kant's contribution to resolving the dualism between the mind and its objects was to formulate the question differently. He asked himself whether it was more fruitful to understand reality as conforming to thought. In other words, thought does not represent, but is actually constitutive of reality. In retaining the distinction between things in themselves and as they appear to thought, however, he posited a dualism which his own philosophy was unable to overcome. The great merit of Hegel was to dispense with the traditional dualism between the mind and its objects altogether. Beginning from the principle of an undifferentiated unity, the problem then becomes not to account for the relation between thought and its external objects, but to explain how this unity has given rise to the multiplicity of things we encounter in the world. In others words we must attempt to show how there is unity in diversity and identity in difference.

The whole of Collingwood's philosophy is permeated by the persistent and relentless effort to overcome all dualisms, particularly that between the mind and its objects, and the principal instrument for doing so is the idea of re-enactment. The whole of the first four parts of *The Idea of History* is conceived in terms of the retention of elements of this dualism in the various thinkers discussed. Some form of naturalism is invariably discovered to undermine the conclusions of even the most tenacious idealists. The revolt against positivism always proved too difficult. Idealist philosophers such as F. H. Bradley reacted against the positivist elevation of the methodology of natural science to a universal methodology equated with knowledge itself. Bradley was right to recognize that the criterion of historical knowledge is brought by the historian to the evidence, and is not merely the acceptance of testimony. Collingwood's criticism of Bradley, however, is that the criterion attributed to the historian is positivisitic and not historical. The criterion of what happened in the past is the historian's own experience of what is possible in the natural world. Thus the test of historical knowledge is the laws of nature. In Bradley, Collingwood argues, the mind is immediate experience and cannot know itself. All it can know is the mediated objects (like scientific, historical, artisitic, religious), outside itself.

History conceived as a process of events outside the mind of the historian has not emancipated itself from natural science. It still relies upon the positivistic universal methodology of natural science. The historian in this resepct is a mere spectator. When the historian is conceived as integral to the historical process the false dichotomy between the mind and its objects can be overcome. The process of history is the relentless unfolding of mind in the world. The historian has to trace that process and is indeed himself part of it. By understanding the past of a

particular present the historian better understands himself.

Collingwood attempts to transcend the dualism of the mind and its objects by making a distinction between the inside and outside of an event. The outside of an event is its physical properties, and these are amenable to subsumption under general laws. The inside, however, is the thought that informs the manifestation we see as the outside of the event, and which is unintelligible without it. The inside and outside together constitute human actions which are the subject matter of history. No physical occurrence in itself can qualify as an object of historical knowledge, nor can it ever constitute a cause of human action. The same natural phenomenon may in two different individuals or people lead to very dissimilar reactions. An island surrounded by sea may lead one people to become excessively insular, while another may perceive it as a challenge to be overcome and mastered by transforming itself into a seafaring nation. The point is that thought mediates natural occurrences and that the human actions performed in conjunction with them are unintelligible unless the thinking that informs them is known.

The dualism between the mind of the historian and the objects of his thinking is overcome by re-enacting the thought of past actors. The thought of Napoleon, for example, becomes my thought, brought back to life in the present. To know someone else's thought presupposes that we can rethink it for ourselves. If we deny this, Collingwood suggests, we are asserting that all we can know is what goes on in our own minds. We are condemned to accept solipsism.

If we accept that knowing the thoughts of another person necessarily entails rethinking them for ourselves, the past is not dead, but lives in the present by the process of being rethought in the mind of the historian. History as a self-knowing process is possible only because the past

continues to live in the present. There is a significant difference between a natural and a historical process. The various phases in a natural process are separate and distinct. Each phase in a natural process falls outside of, and supersedes the others. The past in a natural process dies in being replaced by the present. The historical process is quite different. History for Collingwood is the self-knowledge of mind and with each successive change something of its past is retained. The phases in an historical process are not separate. In becoming something new mind does not cease to be what it was. Each stage in the development interpenetrates with the others. Re-enactment is the means by which the historical process as self-knowledge of the mind is continuously sustained.

Re-enactment is not the mere passive acceptance of the thoughts of another person. In the section on Human Nature and Human History in *The Idea of History* Collingwood argues that the historian brings all his or her knowledge and critical faculties to bear upon the problem of re-enacting another person's thoughts. Re-enactment occurs in the context of the historian's own thoughts which are brought to bear upon those of the person he studies and uses to criticise them. The historian has to make a judgement on the value of the thought he re-enacts and attempt to correct the errors he perceives. This critical moment in the process of re-enactment is not extraneous to it, but a fundamental condition of the practice of history. The historian at once re-enacts and criticises past thoughts.

History, then, is very different from memory or the mere acceptance of authority. In memory we recollect and re-interpret in the light of what we subsequently come to think. Memory is not anchored to evidence and lacks the critical moment of history. In memory the past remains a spectacle and the mind a mere spectator of the flow of sequences of events. The difference between memory and

history, or autobiography properly conceived, is that we must have evidence of our past activities and re-think the thoughts that we had then, subjecting them to our critical judgements as we do so. History is an inferential activity, by which Collingwood means that it is an organized body of knowledge. In this respect there is no difference between writing a history of myself or of Caesar: the act of knowing is exactly the same, that is, the rethinking of past thoughts in the context of the present. Memory is non-criteriological in that it is not subject to adequate critical scrutiny, and it is therefore not inferential: 'memory is not history, because history is a certain kind of organized or inferential knowledge, and memory is not organized, not inferential, at all' (IH, 252). It needs to be emphasised that re-enactment does not provide historical explanations. It is the condition of historical knowledge. Knowing historically is conditional upon re-enactment.

The main difficulty to which the theory of re-enactment gives rise is the problem of being able to distinguish one's own thoughts from those of the historical actors whose ideas are being re-enacted. It could be objected that the thought in being re-enacted has become purely subjective and ceases to be past at all by being thought again in the present. In knowing the thought as my own I can no longer know it as that of someone else whose thinking occurred at a different time.

Collingwood's answer to this objection is expressed in his theory of incapsulation. We get an intimation of this theory in *The Idea of History*. In his criticism of Dilthey, for example, Collingwood argues that in rethinking Caesar's thoughts I do not become Caesar. I am aware that I remain myself, and in making his experience part of me I continue to differentiate myself from him. This is because past thought can never be re-thought as living thought in the immediate experience of the present. It is re-thought as part of the self-knowledge of the present. In other words,

it is mediated thought. Collingwood explains this further in the section on 'History as Re-enactment of Past Experience' (1936). He argues that thought is neither pure immediacy caught up in the flow of consciousness, nor purely mediate standing outside of this flow. It is both at once. A thought arises in a certain context of feelings and considerations. It is its capacity to be rethought that enables it to be revived in another context. The multiplicity of elements which comprise the context in which thought arises is largely lost in the process of re-enacting it. In this sense the thought of Caesar in its immediacy is different from my rethinking it in another context. In their mediation, however, both thoughts are exactly the same. What this means is that the process of arguing from the same premises and working towards the same conclusions and in the same manner makes my thoughts not a mere resemblance, but identical with those of the thinker who first thought them.

In 1939 Collingwood returned to this problem in *An Autobiography*. Here he confesses that the idea that a thought re-enacted is the same thought, and at the same time two different thoughts was the most difficult problem that he had addressed in the philosophy of history. His answer to the problem was that thought exists at primary and secondary levels. The immediate context of a thought, with all the considerations entailed, is the primary level. It occurs in a question and answer complex generated by 'real life'. Rethinking that thought incapsulates it in the present, and is distinct from the considerations that constitute my primary, or real, life. Incapsulation is thought of a secondary level which is prevented from overflowing into, or being confused with, my own person by the mundane considerations which constitute my primary level of thought. Such considerations would be the knowledge that I am sitting at a desk in Britain or Romania in the late twentieth century with limited time and pressing practical problems that I must rush off to

attend to rather than in Ancient Greece over two thousand years ago expounding philosophical ideas at the Lyceum or the Academy. Re-enacted thoughts, in Collingwood's view, are 'incapsulated in a context of present thoughts which, by contradicting it, confine it to a plane different from theirs'.[9] We know that it was Collingwood's intention to further explore these problems in *The Principles of History* and he finished the chapter on re-enactment in which his discussion would have occurred. Unfortunately, nothing of that chapter has survived.

How are we to understand the idea of re-enactment? Is it a method or an ontological condition of understanding? It is clear from Collingwood's account of historical knowledge that it is not open to everyone to understand historically. Historical knowledge is an achievement, not an inadvertent passive experience. Furthermore, history is not an idle curiosity, but as self-knowledge of the mind, more adequately equipping us for present and future action, it is our duty to attain it. Here Collingwood's distinction between history a parte objecti (the object of historical knowledge) and history a parte subjecti (the subject or historian who thinks historically) is of some importance. The former must be capable of being re-enacted, that is, it must be purposive thought, and the latter must be capable of re-enacting. The person must not only be capable of thinking about the past. That would be the stance of a mere spectator. He or she must also be capable of reflecting upon thought thinking about thought. This would seem to indicate that Collingwood viewed re-enactment as a method for achieving historical knowledge. There are many passages which can be cited to support this interpretation. Take the following instance: 'How does the historian discern the thoughts which he is trying to discover? There is only one way in which it could be done: by rethinking them in his own mind' (IH, 215). Fur-

[9] Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 114.

thermore, in *An Autobiography* where Collingwood discusses the philosophy of history he repeatedly refers to the methods or methodology of achieving historical knowledge. In addressing the question of how a re-enacted thought could be the same as the original and simultaneously different, he says: 'No question in my study of historical method ever gave me so much trouble'.[10]

It is understanding re-enactment as a methodology, however, that has given rise to a considerable degree of misunderstanding. Many of the early discussions of Collingwood's philosophy of history by prominent philosophers in the English speaking world, such as W. H. Walsh, W. B. Gallie, and Patrick Gardiner, as well as prominent historians of the calibre of Geoffrey Elton and Geoffrey Barraclough, interpreted him as offering methodological prescriptions. They went on to suggest that Collingwood's theory was intuitionist. That the historian in some way had a direct empathetic link with the minds of the actors he studied. They criticised the distinction between the inside and the outside of an event, suggesting that it implied that mind is locked up in some non-spatial compartment into which the historian mystically projects his or her mind. History was therefore seen to be non-inferential, non- (or barely) evidential, non-criteriological, and permissive of unconstrained flights of the imagination, incapable of corroboration by evidence. Historical knowledge was immediate and intuitive rather than inferential and discursive. Patrick Gardiner, for example, suggests that Collingwood strongly intimated that some sort of telepathic communication with past thoughts was possible, and that the criterion of knowledge offered is the acquaintance theory of truth, where knowing something is equated with being acquainted with it.[11]

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[10] Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 112.

[11] Patrick Gardiner, *The Nature of Historical Explanation* (London, Oxford University Press, 1961: first published 1952), pp. 36 and 39.

It is very difficult to reconcile this interpretation with what Collingwood has to say in two of the most important sections of *The Idea of History* (§3 'Historical Evidence' [1939] and §4 'History as Re-enactment of Past Experience' [1936]) and *An Autobiography*. He repeatedly argues that historical knowledge is inferential. It is inference based on evidence, rather than observation. When Collingwood talks of autonomy he is not suggesting that the historian is independent of evidence. The historian is autonomous in that he is independent of testimony or authority. In other words, the historian must think for himself, by means of inference from evidence, the thoughts of the agents he studies and criticise them in the context of his own thoughts. In *An Autobiography* Collingwood suggests than any survival from the past has to be interpreted in terms of its purpose. We must ask what a particular artefact was for, and whether it succeeded in its aim. Such historical questions, Collingwood argued, 'must be answered not by guesswork but on historical evidence; any one who answers them must be able to show that his answer is the answer which the evidence demands'.[12] Furthermore, the intuitionist interpretation unashamedly contradicts all that Collingwood has to say about the Baconian method in historical enquiry, namely, that the evidence has to be put to the question, and answers to questions that the actors themselves did not necessarily pose, forced out of it. Collingwood, then, is clearly affirming a non-intuitionist, evidential mode of inferential reasoning as the condition of historical knowledge.

It has now become common to reject the contention that Collingwood held an intuitionist and acquaintance theory of knowledge. Such influential philosophers of history as W. H. Dray, Alan Donagan, Leon J. Goldstein and W. J. van der Dussen all claim that Collingwood's theory of re-enactment does not amount to a prescriptive methodol-

[12] Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 128.

ogy.[13] Thought can be re-enacted not because there is immediate telepathic communication, but because evidence of past thought survives in the present. The distinction between the inside and outside of an event is really a metaphor and Collingwood was adamant that the thought and its objectification or manifestation were inextricable. Goldstein argues that all Collingwood intended by the distinction was to show that all human action was 'behaviour informed by thought'.[14] Dray maintains that the issue of understanding what it means to think the same thought as another person is for Collingwood conceptual rather than methodological,[15] while van der Dussen suggests that the doctrine of re-enactment is 'a response to the question how historical knowledge is possible, not to the different question how we can arrive at it.'[16] In relation to modern hermeneutic theory Collingwood's idea of re-enactment is an answer to the question: 'what happens to us each an every time we think historically?' re-enactment is what happens as a result of the sensitive handling of evidence of past thought.[17] It is an ontological condition of historical understanding.

Are the two interpretations mutually exclusive? The attribution of an intuitivist theory of knowledge to Collingwood is seriously to misunderstand him. We have seen what importance he attaches to evidence and inference and to the Baconian questioning activity. This is not to say, however, that Collingwood did not think that his

[13] An interesting interpretative variation is to be found in Margit Hurup Nielsen, 'Re-enactment and Reconstruction in Collingwood's Philosophy of History', *History and Theory*, xx (1981). She agrees that Collingwood rejects intuitionism, but denies that re-enactment is not a method. She argues that re-enactment has to be equated with reconstruction in the work of Collingwood.

[14] L. J. Goldstein, 'Collingwood's Theory of Historical Knowing', *History and Theory*, ix (1970), pp. 34–5.

[15] William H. Dray, *Perspectives on History* (London, Routledge, 1980), p. 22.

[16] W. J. van der Dussen, *History as a Science: The Philosophy of R. G., Collingwood* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980), p. 148.

[17] See, for example, John P. Hogan, *Collingwood and Theological Hermeneutics* (Lanham, University of America Press, 1989), p. 141.

theory of re-enactment had any methodological import. This would imply a disjunction between theory and practice that Collingwood flatly rejected. Given that Collingwood firmly believed that there is an overlap between theory and practice it is possible that Collingwood thought re-enactment both a practical method and a theoretical condition of understanding. If the term re-enactment is taken literally then it gives rise to all the problems that his critics have attributed to him. Re-enactment is not a passive experience. Collingwood talks of imaginative re-enactment, and asking questions of the evidence that past thinkers did not pose. This means, of course, that we could not literally re-enact something that someone has not thought before. If re-enactment is more generously interpreted as the process not only of coming to think the same thoughts, but also thinking in the same way as past thinkers, then scope is given for the historian to work out for his or herself answers to questions that were not posed by the people who are being studied but to which, nevertheless, the evidence gives rise. This would also fulfil Collingwood's condition that the attainment of historical knowledge must be self-conscious, that is, we do not inadvertently stumble upon it.

Furthermore, a departure from too literal an understanding of the idea of re-enactment absolves Collingwood from the charge of extreme methodological individualism. This doctrine maintains that the actions of any collective or institution can be resolved into the thoughts purposes and intentions of the individuals who comprise them. It is clear, however, that Collingwood did not restrict historical knowledge in this way. It is unfortunate that unlike Johan Huizinga, the Dutch historian, and Wilhelm Dilthey the German philosopher, Collingwood says very little about the collective and social aspects of human life and the relation of the individual to them. Any theory which emphasises the importance of re-enacting

past thought without providing a detailed account of the relation of the individual to the wider whole is subject to criticism on the grounds that it unduly restricts the scope of historical knowledge. Collingwood has been accused of committing a serious error in confining history to the thought of the individual actor and excluding from our understanding such areas of study as economic history. This criticism is in fact unfair. His own historical practice shows that social movements and economic conditions played a considerable part in his histories. Historical facts are not for Collingwood datum, but achievements, and the individual mind is a product of society. Society, then, is reflected in the individuals who comprise it, and is not merely the sum of its parts.[18] Collingwood also tells us that it is important to recognize that in studying any historical process outcomes occur without anyone necessarily intending them (IH, 42 and 269). Similarly, Collingwood talks of knowing the 'corporate mind' or the spirit of an age (IH, 219–20). Although *The Idea of History* does not adequately explain how we are to accommodate such collective entities, it is clear that he did not wish to exclude them from the practice of history. To interpret Collingwood's idea of imaginative re-enactment as a methodological prescription does not exclude the possibility of it also being an ontological condition of historical understanding.

The *Idea of History* is not a book about historians, or history, but instead a philosophical examination of the development of historical principles, and a reasoned exposition of the conditions of attaining historical knowledge. It is not a speculative philosophy of history discerning a pattern and meaning that the participants could not in principle accept. History is an organized body of knowledge based upon rational principles and inferred from evi-

[18] Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 240–4; Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1925), 299.

dence. Collingwood assumes with Dilthey that we are at home everywhere in this historically understood world and that there is no meaning in it apart from that to be discerned in the activities of the actors in their interrelations with each other. *The Idea of History* was the first full scale philosophical study in English to attempt to establish the autonomy of historical understanding in opposition to the claims of positivism. No subsequent study has been able to ignore its conclusions and the book has now become a classic in the philosophy of history.