Document generated on 02/12/2025 1:34 p.m.

Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association
Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

The Autonomy and Limitations of Historical Thought

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Volume 27, Number 1, 1948

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300288ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/300288ar

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Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (print)
1712-9095 (digital)

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Cite this article

Fieldhouse, H. N. (1948). The Autonomy and Limitations of Historical Thought. *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association / Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada*, *27*(1), 12–22. https://doi.org/10.7202/300288ar

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THE AUTONOMY AND LIMITATIONS OF HISTORICAL THOUGHT

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THERE is little in this paper which is original. It is meant to bring before our two associations some elements in the ideas of history which have been put forward by two philosophers—R. G. Collingwood in Oxford and Michael Oakeshott in Cambridge.[1] I have called the paper "The Autonomy and Limitations of Historical Thought," and if it might be said, briefly, that Collingwood emphasizes the autonomy, and Oakeshott the limitations, that is not to say, of course, that Collingwood does not imply limitations, nor that Oakeshott, within the frame of his own definitions, does not affirm an autonomy.

It cannot be said that philosophers have concerned themselves overmuch with history, nor historians with philosophy. After the long[2] speculation about the nature of historical thought in the period which stretched from Descartes through Vico to Hegel, the later nineteenth century brought the rule of positivism, with its step-children, the identification of history with natural evolution, and the attempt to find historical "laws" on the analogy of natural laws; and, confronted with this development, the more reflective among historians said, in effect: "If this be philosophy of history, we want none of it." But to turn our backs on the question of the relation of philosophy to history under the impression that positivism was all that there was of philosophy, was to act as did Mr. Shaw when he turned his youthful back on Christianity under the impression (it is alleged) that Belfast Protestantism was all that there was of Christianity: and now that the long winter of positivism has broken up, we can reach back beyond it to ask, as does Collingwood: "What is historical thinking?"—and—"What light does it throw on the traditional problems of philosophy?"

The question has to be asked because when, in the last one hundred and fifty years, history began to be regarded as a special form of thought, encountering its own difficulties and devising its own methods to meet them, it did so in a world in which the current theories of knowledge had little or nothing to say to it.[3] They accounted for knowledge as it is understood by those sciences of observation in which it is treated as a relation between a

[1]Especially in R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946) and in Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes* (Cambridge, 1933). Except where it is otherwise stated, quotations in the paper are from, and references in the notes are to, these two works.

[2]Long but not very fruitful. The Cartesian schools condemned history as being able to deal only with testimony, and while there was a sufficiency of idealist philosophies of history, they were not notably philosophic in their treatment of the question of historical knowledge. The tendency of such philosophies is to take human history as given, and to pay little attention to the prior question of how we know what that history has been. It is one thing to recognize the inter-dependence of philosophy *and* history, and another to construct philosophies *of* history; and historians have been frightened away from philosophy because philosophies of history have meant either history as the self-revelation of some Absolute (as with Hegel) or history as empirical science (as with Comte, Spencer, and Buckle).

[3]Collingwood points out that philosophies tend to reflect the intellectual pre-occupations of the period in which they are constructed. Greek philosophy placed mathematics in the centre of the picture; mediaeval philosophy, theology; modern philosophy, the natural sciences.

subject and an object confronting one another; and they provided for the abstract thought which is characteristic of exact sciences such as mathematics. But history is unlike the sciences of observation in that, while they deal with events which are perceptible, history deals with actions which are no longer perceptible; and it is unlike mathematics, in that the latter deals with the abstract and the universal, and history with the concrete and the particular: so that when we are offered theories of knowledge which explain either acquaintance with transient events or reasoned knowledge of abstract universals, we still have to explain a third form of knowledge—historical thought—which seeks a reasoned knowledge of what is at once transient, concrete, and no longer susceptible of direct observation.

The last two decades, however, have brought a very noticeable realization that philosophy and history are inter-dependent. We historians will admit that we beg all manner of philosophical questions. We try to apprehend the unique and the singular, often without asking whether—if there are merely uniqueness and singularity—it is possible to apprehend them. We work with "individuals" (such as this or that empire) which we get from convenience and commonsense, and with "universals" which are seldom more than the empirical groupings of facts related in time; and into any field of thought beyond that of events in time, we usually feel no occasion to venture. On their side—and while insisting that philosophical questions are not, *qua* philosophical, historical—there are some philosophers, at least, who are disposed to think that philosophy has been overmuch concerned with exact and natural science, and would gain by taking account of the concrete knowledge which is sought by history.[4] For such philosophers, it is not a question of fitting history into existing systems, but of asking, as does Professor Alexander, how philosophical thinking is affected by the historical nature of things. In Collingwood's terms, we have to take account of the development in historical thinking which has taken place since Kant, as Kant took account of the development in scientific thinking which had taken place since Descartes.

I

Such an undertaking would ask two questions about history—the question of the *nature* of historical knowledge, and the question of the place of history in the field of knowledge generally. Collingwood would almost certainly have contended that the two inquiries cannot be separated, but if we may be permitted to separate them (merely as a device in exposition), we may, perhaps, suggest that Collingwood's chief contribution is to the analysis of the nature of historical inquiry, and Oakeshott's to the discussion of the relation of history to other forms of knowledge.

This paper is meant to bring out three aspects of the work of these two philosophers which seem, to the writer, to be important for historians and social scientists in contemporary Canada. It cannot, in the time available, deal in full with their respective "systems," but something must be said of those "systems" if what follows is to be intelligible. Briefly, Oakeshott draws, from the premises of philosophic idealism, the conclusion that history is defective philosophy. Collingwood draws, from the premises of

[4]See W. G. de Burgh, "Philosophy and History" (*Hibbert Journal*, London, XXXV, 1936-7).

philosophic scepticism, the conclusion that history is the only kind of knowledge and that philosophy is "incapsulated" in it.

In Oakeshott's terms, history is a mode, or modification, of experience.[5] Experience itself "is a single whole . . . which admits of no final or absolute division." It is a world, and what differentiates a world is unity.[6] The idea of unity, however, remains imperfect so long as it is separated from the idea of completeness:[7] and "experience remains incomplete until the world of ideas is so far coherent as not to suggest, or oblige, another way of conceiving it."

What is ultimately satisfactory in experience, then, is a completely coherent world of concrete ideas,[8] and where this concrete purpose is pursued without qualification, there we have philosophy.[9] It is possible to turn aside, however, from the attempt to construct such a world (the business of philosophy), and to rest content (as, in Oakeshott's view, and from the standpoint of the totality of experience, do the scientist, the historian, and the practical man) with the construction and exploration of a restricted world of abstract ideas. It is such turnings aside which Oakeshott calls divergences from, or arrests in, experience, and it is these restricted worlds which he calls modes of experience.[10]

Oakeshott holds, then, that both science and history are defective philosophy, or, more accurately, that what science and history study are abstractions from what philosophy studies. Collingwood began by defending both philosophy and history against natural science, but he ended by identifying philosophy and history. He began by defending philosophy against the positivist tendency to absorb it in natural science, and by insisting that history produces results which are as worthy to be called knowledge as are those which are produced by science: but he went on to claim for history a position which seems to be much what the positivists had

[5]By experience, Oakeshott means the concrete whole which includes both experiencing and what is experienced. He does not condemn the attempt to analyse experience so as to distinguish between sensation, reflection, volition, etc., but argues that these are only devices of analysis, "lifeless abstractions" (pp. 9-10).

[6]The "given" in experience—that is, the recognized and understood—is always given in order to be transformed. It is not given to be acquiesced in, but to be criticized and elucidated. By such elucidation, we pass from the given to the achieved, and what differentiates the world of ideas achieved from that of ideas given in experience, is a greater degree of unity.

[7]"In experience what is established is the necessary character of a world of ideas; and no judgement is satisfactory until it is an assertion, the grounds of which are both complete and seen to be complete. . . . A unity achieved without regard to completeness is both arbitrary and precarious; and a whole which is all-inclusive and yet not a unity is a contradiction" (p. 33).

[8]When Oakeshott affirms that experience is a world of ideas, he is not, of course, affirming that it is either a world of mere mental events, or a world of mere ideas. He is affirming that "there is . . . no experiencing which is not thinking . . . and consequently no experience which is not a world of deas" (p. 26).

[9]"Philosophy . . . means experience without reservation or pre-supposition, experience which is self-conscious and self-critical throughout, in which the determination to remain unsatisfied with anything short of a completely coherent world of ideas is absolute and unqualified" (p. 82). Lest anyone should be tempted to suspect arrogance here, be it added that Oakeshott notes that "philosophy, experience for its own sake, is a mood, and one which, if we are to live this incurably abstract life of ours, must frequently be put off" (p. 83).

[10]If we agree that history and science are the products of different categorical selections from concrete experience, and are bound, therefore, to be but partial, does it follow that, as Oakeshott appears to say, they have nothing to give to philosophy?

claimed for science. In a passage which is quoted by his editor, he implies that only history is genuine knowledge.

> Logic [he wrote] is an attempt to expound the principles of what in the logician's own day passed for valid thought; ethical theories differ but none of them is therefore erroneous, because any ethical theory is an attempt to state the kind of life regarded as worth aiming at, and the question always arises, by whom? Natural science indeed is distinct from history and, unlike philosophy, cannot be absorbed into it, but this is because it starts from certain presuppositions and thinks out their consequences, and since these presuppositions are neither true nor false, thinking these together with their consequences is neither knowledge nor error.

This is not historical relativism as that term is usually understood. It is complete historicism with regard to all knowledge.

II

The first aspect of Collingwood's work which I wish to mark is his vindication of historical thought as self-determining, self-dependent, and self-justifying. To the question, "What is historical thinking?", the commonsense (and, if I may use the term, undergraduate) answer is that history depends on authority. The historian, having decided upon the event about which he wishes to know, is supposed to begin by going in search of statements about that event by "authorities," and then to make those statements his own.[11] Actually, the historian is so far from relying on authorities to whose statements he must conform, that, at all stages of his work, he is his own authority, and his thought contains a criterion to which his authorities must conform, and by reference to which they are criticized.[12] For if he has it in his power to reject what his authorities tell him (and he has this power), it follows that the criterion of historical truth cannot be that a statement is made by an authority. If the historian accepts what his authorities say, it is not on their authority, but on his own: because it satisfies his criterion of historical truth.[13]

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[11] "The search for and the collection of documents is . . . logically the first and most important part, of the historian's craft. . . . After the collection of facts comes the search for causes" (C. V. Langlois and C. Seignobos, *Introduction to the Study of History*, New York, 1932, quoted in Oakeshott, 96).

[12] In the process of criticism, he puts his authorities to the question, in the Baconian sense, extracting from them evidence which they did not know they possessed or which they were unwilling to give. In the process of construction, his sources may seem to supply him with fixed points, but it is he who interpolates the connection between these points by means of legitimate inference. In the process of selection, it is he, and not his authorities, who decides upon what goes into his narrative and what is excluded from it.

Collingwood defines history as a science whose business is to study events which are not accessible to our observation, and to do this *inferentially*. By legitimate inference is meant inference which contains nothing which is not necessitated by the evidence. The historian may claim no piece of knowledge unless he can exhibit the grounds of his claim to anyone who is both able and willing to follow the demonstration. That (*i*) historical knowledge is not the reception of external impression, but involves inference and judgment; and (*ii*) that this is no reason for scepticism about the possibility of historical knowledge were securely established, we may suppose, by F. H. Bradley. See "The Pre-suppositions of Critical History" (in *Collected Essays*, Oxford, 1935).

[13] Cf. Oakeshott, 97. "The collection of materials is certainly not the first step in history. And the data of the historian are certainly not facts. . . . What is given in history, what is original from the standpoint of logic, is a system of postulates."

It remains to ask—"What is his criterion of historical truth?" Collingwood's answer is that given by the exercise of *a priori* imagination, in the sense of constructive imagination, or of historical thought itself. If I reject a statement of Lutz about Sir Edward Grey, it is because my reconstruction of Grey's policy, based on historical thinking about other sources, will not let me think that Lutz is correct; because what he says cannot be fitted into the coherent and continuous picture which I have formed of Grey.[14]

Nothing is admissible, then, except what is necessary, and the criterion of necessity is *a priori* imagination. The picture constructed by that imagination, however, must satisfy two conditions: it must be consistent with itself,[15] and it must stand in a certain relation to what we call evidence.

If we ask what evidence is, Collingwood replies that everything is evidence which the historian can use as such. The whole perceptible world is *potential* evidence, and it becomes *actual* evidence in so far as the historian can use it: and he can use it only if he comes to it with the right kind of historical knowledge. Evidence is only historical evidence when someone looks at it historically. Until then, it is only perceived "fact"—historically silent.

We reach, then, the affirmation, from the point of view of method, that historical knowledge can only grow out of historical knowledge, and, from the point of view of philosophy, that historical thinking is an original and fundamental activity of the human mind, and the idea of the past, an *innate idea.*[16]

Before leaving this point, for the moment, we may notice that Collingwood anticipates two ways in which his views might be construed in such a way as to give material for historical scepticism. In principle, his act of the historical imagination should use the entire perceptible present as evidence for the entire past. In practice, we can neither perceive the entire present nor envisage the entire past. To say this, however, is only to confess the gap which must exist for the historian between what is attempted in principle and what is achieved in practice. The same gap exists in science, in philosophy, and, as Collingwood adds, in the pursuit of happiness.

Secondly, it follows from Collingwood's premise that the evidence available for the solution of any question will vary with every change in historical method and with the competence of every historian. Not only do historians find new answers to old questions; they must also ask new questions, so that every generation must re-write history. But, again, this "is only the discovery of a second dimension of historical thought, the history of history: the discovery that the historian himself, together with the here-and-now which forms the total body of evidence available to him, is a part of

[14]Cf. Oakeshott, 116. "The ground . . . of a belief in an historical event is neither that . . . it is asserted by a contemporary, nor that it is attested by an eye-witness, but is an independent judgement we make, based upon . . . our entire world of experience, about the capacity of the event to enhance or decrease the coherence of our world of experience as a whole. The grounds of our historical belief are not two—conformity with our own experience and the testimony of others' experience—they are our single world of experience taken as a whole."

[15]Since there is only one historical world, and everything in it must stand in some relation to everything else, even if the relation be only one of time and place.

[16]That is, "It is not a chance product of psychological causes; it is an idea which every man possesses as part of the furniture of his mind, and discovers himself to possess in so far as he become conscious of what it is to have a mind" (p. 248). "Historical thinking is that activity of the imagination by which we endeavour to provide this innate idea with detailed content" (p. 247).

the process he is studying . . . and [that he] can see it only from the point of view which at this present moment he occupies within it" (p. 248).

III

The second achievement of Oakeshott and Collingwood which concerns us here is their vindication of history as a form of knowledge distinct from natural science. To say this implies, of course, no denigration of science. As Collingwood points out, positivism raised the methods of natural science to the level of a universal method, so that criticism of positivism could be easily misrepresented as being an attack on science, when, in truth, it was only a protest against a theory which limited the mind to the kind of thinking which was characteristic of natural science, and against the proposition that natural science was the only kind of knowledge.

While both Oakeshott and Collingwood assert history's independence of science, they do so on different grounds. As we have seen, Collingwood appeared to move from a position in which he held that philosophy and science fall outside history, to one in which philosophy is absorbed in history while science remains outside it; whereas Oakeshott holds that both science and history are defective philosophy. Collingwood marks off history from science, therefore, by distinguishing between historical process and natural process. Oakeshott marks them one from another on the ground that each is an abstract world of ideas based upon its own postulates, and so irrelevant to the other.

Collingwood finds the origin of the confusion between history and science in the period in which scientists ceased to think of Nature as a static system and began to think of it as evolutionary. Since both forms of knowledge were now held to have a subject-matter which was essentially progressive,[17] it became easier to blur, if not to abolish, the distinction between natural and historical process. This commerce was dangerous: for if the evolutionists appeared to reduce nature to history, the positivists appeared to reduce history to nature; to hold that mind was not different from nature; that historical process was in kind like natural process; and that the methods of natural science, therefore, were applicable to history.

The results of this assumption have been too manifold to be explored in this paper.[18] What we are concerned with, here, is Oakeshott's implied criticism of this assumption, in terms of an idealist philosophy, and Collingwood's direct criticism of it in terms of an historical thought which is idealist in the sense of criticizing its own principles from within.

The twin assumptions which underlay positivist history were that each "fact" is to be regarded as something to be known by a separate act of cognition, and that each "fact" is independent, not only of other "facts," but also of the knower. As we have seen, with Oakeshott, however, a "fact" is given in order to be transformed, and a more complete fact is achieved by the transformation of what is given. "To be a fact means to have found

[17]Previously, the subject-matter of history had been essentially progressive, that of natural science, essentially static.

[18]The notion that historical process is dependent on an evolutionary law of nature contributed to the unhappy idea of history as automatic progress. The double notion, first, that history could be assimilated to science, and, secondly, that what the scientist does is first to ascertain facts and then to frame laws, has been responsible for most of the anti-historical tendencies in the social sciences. See, also, Collingwood on the naturalistic science of Spengler (p. 181), and of Professor Toynbee (p. 159).

a necessary place in a world of ideas." This is the general character of fact, and historical fact conforms to it. There cannot be isolated facts in history because there are no isolated facts in experience. "An isolated fact, without world or relation, is a fact not yet made, a fact without significance, a contradiction. Whenever in history a fact is asserted, the world in which this fact is involved is asserted also . . ." (p. 112).

For both scientist and historian, then, a particular, as such, is unintelligible. Before it can serve as data, it must be understood. But whereas for the scientist, the event achieves intelligibility by being perceived from the outside, and assigned to a class,[19] for the historian, the event must be understood from the inside. When the natural scientist asks why a certain action takes place, he is, in effect, asking on what kind of occasion does the action take place. When the historian asks why Alexander I came to terms with Napoleon, he is asking: "What did Alexander think which led him to come to terms with Napoleon?" Natural process is a sequence of events; historical process is a process of thought; and, as we have seen, Collingwood holds that the historian discovers past thought by re-thinking it in his own mind in the present.[20]

It follows, first, that the actions which the historian is studying are "not spectacles to be watched, but experiences to be lived through in his own mind; they are objective, or known to him, only because they are also subjective, or activities of his own" (p. 218).

It follows, secondly, that historicity is not merely a function of time. If, as Collingwood asserts, the historian is concerned with thoughts—that is with actions only as the external expression of thought—it follows that, in one sense, these thoughts are events occurring in time, but that, in another sense (since the only way in which the historian can discover them is by re-thinking them in his own mind), they are not in time at all. They can be apprehended by historical thought at any time.

Collingwood's distinction between science and history proceeds, therefore, from his idea of history as thought. Oakeshott distinguishes them because both are, in his view, abstract worlds (that is, abstractions from the totality of experience), the character of each being dependent upon its own presuppositions.

We must recall that, with Oakeshott, a mode of experience is not a separable part of reality[21] (there are no such separable parts), but the

[19]This is Collingwood's view. Oakeshott places less emphasis on the scientific task of classification. Indeed, if the view that science is concerned with classification is also held to imply that the facts of nature dictate the classes under which they are explained, he roundly condemns it. For him, science is an attempt to find and elucidate a world of ideas which shall be stable, common, and communicable. It follows that this purpose limits science to the elucidation of a world of quantitative conceptions, "Whatever cannot be conceived quantitatively cannot belong to scientific knowledge" (p. 221).

[20]To simplify: (*a*) Natural science deals with events, and history, with actions. (*b*) Actions differ from events because they involve thought. As occurring in the physical world, actions have an "outside," and as expressions of thought, they have an "inside." (*c*) What makes historical knowledge possible is the fact that past actions have had this "inside." The historian can re-enact the thoughts which constituted this inside. (*d*) This process of re-enactment is single: it is not to be divided into the two steps of finding out what happened, and then asking, in the light of general principles, why it happened. Historical actions are unique, and in answering the question "What," the historian answers the question "Why."

[21]See Oakeshott, 66-9 for his view that experience, truth and reality are inseparable.

whole of reality from a limited standpoint, and that to say that a mode of experience is abstract, is not to say that it is a different *kind* of experience from any other, but that it is experience "arrested" at a certain point and creating, at that point, a homogeneous[22] world of ideas. Theoretically, there need be no limit to the number of such worlds, and what distinguishes each of them is the postulate on which it is constructed. Thus, scientific experience is the world *"sub specie quantitatis,"* and its differentia is the attempt to organize the world of experience as a system of measurements. Practical experience is the world *"sub specie voluntatis,"* and its differentia is the attempt to change the conditions of existence. Historical experience is the world *"sub specie praeteritorum,"* and its differentia is the attempt to organize the world of experience in the shape of past events.

It follows, from this definition of experience and of its modes, that the latter are independent of one another. On the one hand, there is the concrete world of experience, the complete world which is implied by every abstract world, and from which such abstract worlds derive their significance; and, on the other hand, there are the abstract worlds, each a separate attempt (from a limited standpoint) to give coherence to the totality of experience, each a specific organization of experience exclusive of any other organization. "No experience save that which belongs exclusively to its mode can help to elucidate the contents of an abstract world of ideas; the experience which belongs to another mode is merely irrelevant. . . ."[23]

Confusion between the worlds of historical and practical experience takes its most familiar form in the view that the aim of history is to explain the present.[24] Confusion between the worlds of historical and scientific experience[25] takes its most conspicuous form in the post-Comtean notion that the historian is to discover the facts, and that some sort of social scientist is to discover the connection between the facts by thinking "scientifically" about the same facts with which the historian is supposed to work empirically. As Collingwood points out, the results have not been science, but eschatology;[26] and universal histories constructed on such "scientist" lines have either passed into the curiosa of historiography or, where they have survived, as in the case of Marxism, have done so not because they are scientifically cogent, but because they have become the creeds of secular religions.

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[22]Homogeneous because every mode of experience is still a form of experience, and each abstract world seeks, not to escape from experience, but to be judged by the criterion of experience, that is by the principle of coherence.

[23]Oakeshott, 81. For his illustrations of the confusion which attends on the attempt to pass from one abstract world to another, see 75-7, 80-1, 100-1, 156-68.

[24]See Professor Beard's introduction to *Theory and Practice in Historical Study* (New York, n.d.).

[25]"Wherever science and history have been associated, nothing but recognisable error and confusion has followed, and in logic such a contribution is impossible. The conjunction of science and history can produce nothing but a monster, for these are abstract and separate worlds of ideas, different and exclusive modifications of experience, which can only be joined at the cost of an *ignoratio elenchi*." Oakeshott, 168.

[26]That is, (*i*) the single historical world has been split into two parts, the one determining, isolated from the temporal process, and working, not in that process, but on it; the other, which is determined, and supposed to be purely passive. (*ii*) The determining part is then elevated into a false particular, supposed to exist for and by itself, yet still thought of as determining the causes of particular events.

IV

In marking history off from natural science, we also mark it off from social science, *in so far* as this last itself confuses history and science,[27] and in so far as it models itself upon the rationalist science of the nineteenth century.

The point at which that kind of "scientism" comes most frequently, perhaps, into collision with history, is in its hankering for the "single cause."[28] As Oakeshott points out, explanation in terms of cause and effect is something of which the historian can make no use. For the scientist, the cause of an observed instance is the minimum condition which is required to bring that instance about: but if the historian tries to use "cause" in this sense, he must either limit cause to the immediate antecedent of an action, or expand it backwards in time in search of some absolute beginning. Nor will any of the single causes help him—a deity, economic cause, realization of human freedom, race, climate; they all involve either going outside history for the causes of historical events, or, as we have seen, abstracting one part of the historical world and making it the cause of what remains. "The only explanation of change relevant or possible in history," writes Oakeshott, "is simply a complete account of change. History accounts *for* change by means of a full account *of* change. The relation between events is always other events, and it is established in history by a full relation *of* the events. The conception of cause is thus replaced by the exhibition of a world of events intrinsically related to one another in which no *lacuna* is tolerated" (p. 143).

As we have seen, history pre-supposes a single world in which everything stands related to everything else, and "change in history carries with it its own explanation; the course of events is one, so far integrated, so far filled in and complete, that no external cause or reason is looked for or required in order to account for any particular event" (p. 141). It follows that explanation, for the historian, is to be sought, not in generalization,[29] but in more and greater detail. We are not very far from Stubbs and Maitland after all.[30]

[27]See Oakeshott's suggestive pages (219-33) on economics.

[28]For example, of such phenomena as war. Cf. W. G. Sumner's remark that "social science is still in the stage that chemistry was in when people believed in a philosopher's stone. . . ." Quoted in H. J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs Power Politics* (Chicago, 1946). This work is a study of the influence on social science of the rationalist assumption of a fundamental identity between physical nature and social life; physical nature being taken to be the rational, calculable universe of the older physics.

[29]The historian does notice common characters, and does use empirical concepts to express them, so that he writes of "empires," "governing classes," etc. But, as De Burgh points out, his generalizations (as when he says that all English Labour Governments have had to reckon with the Trade Union Congress) are merely enumerative; they are not the universals which natural science establishes and which social science seeks. Further, such apparent universals as he uses ("Renaissance," "manorial system," etc.) do not really express the common character in a plurality of instances; they are patterns of events, each pattern being as unique as the events which constitute it.

[30]One cannot have everything, and if the fact that Collingwood was himself a philosopher led him to draw attention to some of his fellows whom historians are apt to neglect, it also led him to treat cursorily the great post-classical historians, such as Maitland, who, nevertheless, in Collingwood's own words, "first mastered the objectively scientific critical methods of the great Germans, and learnt to study facts in all their detail with a proper apparatus of scholarship."

V

We have drawn attention to Collingwood's analysis of the nature of historical inquiry, "an analysis which puts to shame . . . all of the traditional handbooks from which graduate students are still being taught historiographical techniques."[31] We have seen that the thesis which he was most anxious to contravert was the positivist teaching that history could be reduced to natural science. We may conclude this paper by noticing, briefly, the chief difficulties which his position may seem to raise—that of the objectivity of historical judgments, and that of the relation of history to a possible science of human nature.[32]

Collingwood says that the business of the historian is to re-think the thoughts of persons long dead, a process whose difficulty he does not minimize, yet (for example, p. 262) he insists that historical inference can yield, not only probability, but demonstrable certainty.

He realized that there would be doubts as to whether these two positions are compatible with one another, and he devoted Section IV of his Epilegomena to the attempt to resolve such doubts. Therein, he argued that, although an act of thought cannot be repeated in its context of emotion, it can nevertheless be repeated. Emotion represents experience in its immediacy and cannot be revived; but thought, though it always occurs in a context of immediacy, is in its own nature mediate, and can be legitimately detached from its emotional background, and so re-thought.

We have seen that if we ask how the historian is able to re-think the thoughts of persons in the past, Collingwood replies that it is by the exercise of historical imagination, conceived not as arbitrary fancy, but as an *a priori* faculty.[33] We can admit that the perfect historian will appeal to a criterion which is *a priori* in the sense of being valid for others than himself, or even for other than his own generation, but the question still remains as to how it is possible for the actual historian to conform to this standard. For Collingwood, who saw so much as being historically-conditioned,[34] at times saw historical thinking as being itself historically-conditioned. "St. Augustine," he wrote, "looked at Roman history from the point of view of an early Christian; Tillemont, from that of a seventeenth-century Frenchman; Gibbon, from that of an eighteenth-century Englishman; Mommsen, from that of a nineteenth-century German. There is no

[31]M. Mandelbaum, in the *Journal of Philosophy,* Lancaster, Pa., XLIV, no. 7, Mar., 1947, 185.

[32]We need not stay, I hope, to refute the usual Marxist objection to any theory which treats history as history of thought. Collingwood does not deny that men are influenced by the material conditions under which they live. The thought which the historian studies is thought embodied in action, and actions, on their "outside," take place in the physical world. But the influence which that world exerts on men's actions is neither *inevitable* nor *constant,* since men respond to the same external conditions in very different ways. The mistake of the historical materialist, in spite of his fondness for the *terminology* of dialectic, is to treat causal determination as though it were constant.

[33]Since the actions which the historian studies are gone beyond possibility of observation, they have to be reached by inference, and a theory of historical knowledge must establish the rules, and legitimacy, of that inference.

[34]In his earlier work, he appeared to say that religion embodied certain ultimate pre-suppositions of thought. In his later work, he treated these pre-suppositions as being themselves historically-conditioned. See F. H. Heinemann, "Reply to Historicism" (*Philosophy,* London, XXI, no. 80, Nov., 1946).

point in asking which was the right point of view. Each was the only one possible for the man who adopted it."[35]

The significance of so complete a historicism appears when we consider what Collingwood held to be the *purpose* of history. That purpose, he says, is human self-knowledge. History exists to show man what he is by showing him what he has done: and, in this hey-day of social science, it is good to have history restored to the humanities; but does not the power of history to yield self-knowledge pre-suppose some common conception of human nature, and of the way in which human minds work? Or, to put the same point negatively, would not the view that all conceptions of human nature are entirely historically-relative, rule out that self-understanding which is history's purpose?

Now Collingwood denies that there can be any science of mind which transcends history, that there can be a science which generalizes about human nature from historical facts. He argues that patterns of behaviour only recur so long as minds of the same kind are placed in the same kind of situations, and that for such patterns to be constant, there must be a social order which recurrently produces situations of a certain kind. Such orders, however, are historical facts and subject to change, so that (says Collingwood) we can have no guarantee that a generalization about human nature will be valid for more than the historical period from which it is drawn. It follows that a science of human nature either resolves itself into history, or is claiming more than it can establish.

It will be seen that (if we are to take this in the form to which Collingwood appeared to commit himself) it would seem to deny the persistence of any "substance" of human nature which is common to more than one historical period; in which case, we might ask how the historian, who (on Collingwood's own showing) must re-enact the thought of the past, can find that past intelligible.[36] If my conception of human nature and Bolingbroke's conception of it are both *merely* the product of historical circumstances, how am I to understand Bolingbroke's thought (as Collingwood expects me to do) and use it to enrich my own?

It is true, as Collingwood insists, that the judgments of history are individual judgments, but it would still seem that, in making these, the historian assumes certain universal judgments (about human nature), and that, for these universal judgments, history supplies only a part of the material. To claim that history is all that we know of human nature, and all we need to know, seems to be to go too far; though we may agree that, if there be a science of human nature which is not history, we do not know its name. It is just possible that it is literature.

[35]Collingwood, xii.

[36]Collingwood attempts to meet this difficulty by distinguishing between natural process, in which the past dies in being replaced by the present, and historical process, in which the past, by being known, survives into the present.