

# 5



## Idealism in History



## 5.1 Questions

1. Explain the main features of either Wilhelm Dilthey's or R. G. Collingwood's historical idealism.
2. Evaluating Collingwood's view that "All history is History of thought."
3. "History is re-enhancement of past events." Discuss.

## 5.2 R. G. Collingwood

### 5.2.1 Historical Imagination and Re-enactment

Analytical of critical philosophers of historical study history in the sense of the study of the past, that is, they interest themselves in what historians count as evidence or explanations in whether or not their conclusions are capable of objective truth, in whether or not it belongs to the historians role to pass moral judgments on historical figures.

Analytical philosophers of history include: Benedetto Croce, R. G. Collingwood, Karl Popper and William Dray. Croce and Collingwood were idealists in their philosophical orientation. Collingwood is unstable for stressing that historical statements, report past actions, which have to be understood in terms of their agents motive and social conventions of their day.

According to Collingwood, the concern of history is the actions of man that affords it can advantage to natural science. Historians, being themselves people, can imaginatively identify with past people, sharing their thoughts (including motives and intentions) even it not their feelings.

Collingwood was mainly concerned to insist that history involve “thought”, the framing and treating of imaginative hypotheses, and history was not simply the compilation of chronicles (scissors and paste).

According to Collingwood, the historical thought is the re enhancement of past thought is the re enactment of past thoughts in historians own mind. The historian not only rte enact past thoughts but he reenacted it in the contest of his own knowledge. When re enacting thoughts of the agent, he criticizes it, forms his own judgment or its values and corrects whatever errors he can discern in it.

Historical process according to Collingwood is a process of thought and that’s why man is regarded as the only subject of historical process for man is the only animal that thinks enough to render his actions the expressions of thought.

Collingwood argues that history is concerned with what man had done in the light of their conception of the nature and their world. The historians’ task was to re enact the thought of the agent. Faced with a puzzling piece of evidence, he had to establish what man in particular circumstances would logically be up to. His solution to the dilemma would be an inference from the documents at his disposal. And historical knowledge would be demonstrable because the historian could shower each stage of his argument how he would lead to relate questions to answers as intentions to actions.

The historian investigating any event in the past according to Collinwood makes a distinction between what may be called the outside and the inside of an event.

The outside is simply a description of behavioral particulars while the inside is the thought that finds expression in just those bodily movements. When the

historian asks himself why an event occurred, it is the “inside” view which he seeks to reconstruct.

### **5.2.2 Collingwood’s Contribution to History**

Collingwood’s contributions to history can be meaningfully discussed by gleaning from his works which include: the philosophy of History. An Autobiography, the principles of Art and the idea of History, the answers he gives to the following questions: what is knowledge? What is history and what constitutes knowledge in history? How do we arrive at historical knowledge?

### **5.2.3 What is Knowledge?**

Collingwood’s conception of knowledge is holistic and ideational. He sees knowledge as divided into art, religion, science and philosophy. All these branches of knowledge exist in a dialectical relationship. One points towards the essential character of the rest, for each, at the same time, possess its own internal dynamics. All possess an inextricable unity with the mind. All knowledge is intellectual knowledge. Hence, we can speak about the idea of art, the idea of religion, the idea of science, the idea of history and philosophy. To grasp the real nature of phenomena – artistic, religious, scientific, historical and philosophical it is necessary to penetrate the inside of what constitutes it, its internal essence and characteristics.

### **5.2.4 What is History?**

This conception about knowledge forms Collingwood’s idea of history. Collingwood defines history as “the knowledge of the infinite world of facts”, as essentially universal, as a “whole in which every fact is included.” The word

history is used both in reference to what is supposed to have happened in the course of human existence and experience and to the written accounts of these. History is a unique type of knowledge for, unlike science, its subject matter is man's conscious/rational actions, which are motivated by ideas. All history is therefore a history of ideas.

### 5.2.5 What Constitutes Knowledge in History?

The following points emerge from Collingwood's definition of history. First, the centrality of man's action in historical process. Collingwood's idea of history is therefore humanist. This makes him different from some of positivists whose eruditions/ genetic reflections led them to attribute historical events to divine and or natural process. But this was not an original idea. Before Collingwood various philosophers had developed the humanistic conception of history. What Collingwood did was to add a rationalist dimension to the humanism, which already existed.

Second, Collingwood's view that history is an infinite while in which the knowledge of every fact is included differs from earlier thought which confined history to the actions of national, leaders and heroes which were divinely inspired. But Collingwood's view that history is infinite imposes limitation in its sheer extensiveness. The positivists believed that it was possible to write as it really happened. By denying the validity of this positivist stance Collingwood stands out as a relativist.

Collingwood rationalism overstretched the limits accepted by modern psychology. Collingwood believes that human actions that are the motor of historical processes are a product of conscious or rational ideas. Modern psychology attributes to the subconscious irrationality/emotions a higher percentage of the human mind than reason, consciousness and rationality.

Collingwood's idea of history does not even consider the role of accidents in historical causation. It does not even have a place for what modern historians call "covering laws" his argument that the techniques of the historian are completely different from those of a natural scientist is belied by modern techniques of historical inquiry. But this takes us to the third part of our discussion, namely how historians arrive at historical knowledge.

### **5.2.6 Methodology**

Collingwood confined history to thought proper. Thought is seen not only as the force behind the action of individuals in history, but also as the fundamental concept of historical inquiry. Since history is a product of thoughtful human action, grasp the real nature of particular historical happenings it is necessary to penetrate the inside of events and to discern the thoughts of the historical agents concerned. According to Collingwood, the historian has to re think these thoughts in his own mind. This entails reconstructing for himself the situation in which the agents were placed and the way in which they envisage it. Hence, Collingwood's re enactment doctrine variously called re-thinking, re-creation, reconstruction, had been termed a methodology in historical inquiry.

What does this methodology constitute? According to Collingwood, the past events which the historian brings to light are only revealed by his thought in his attempt to understand the present in his sense, a past which has left no trace on the perceptible world.

In his own words he says "Historical thinking means nothing else than interpreting all the available evidence with the maximum degree of critical skill. It does not mean discovering what really happened, or what really happened is anything rather than what the evidence indicates. If there once happened, an event which no shred of evidence now, survives, the event is not part of

historical evidence. It is no historians business to discover it, since it is no gap in any historian's knowledge that he does know it"

In the above citation it is obvious Collingwood emphasizes the role of evidence in confirming historical facts. This is done mainly through thought, about which Collingwood has the following to say "ideally, historical thought is the apprehension of a word of fact. Actually, if the presentation of thought to itself of a world of half ascertained facts, a world in which truth and error are at any given moment inextricably are confused together." Thus the actual object of historical thinking is an object which is not 'given' but perpetually in a process of being given.

Like E. H Carr after him, Collingwood was arguing that historical knowledge is inquired by a constant dialogue between the historian and his facts. According to Collinwood the know ability of past events is only relative. It depends on perception, memory and authority of the historical agent or actor and the historian inquiry interpreter facts/events by re enacting the thought if the people who produced the events. This is re-enactment or inquiring into the past. The historian thought of imagination.

The historian understands what transpires when he is able to re think, re live the thought and action of the historical actor he is dealing with. The actors and the historians thought should become identical this, according to Collingwood is important since.

For history, the object to be discovered is not the mere event but the thought expressed in it. After the historian has ascertained the facts there is not further process of inquiring into their causes. When he knows is what happened, he already knows why it happened.

It is not, however, possible to know the past as it really happened. Here, Collingwood argues “if we hope we can come to know the past exactly as it happened, our hope is in vain... We cannot know the past, because it is not there to be known. There are no past facts except so far as we reconstruct them in historical thought. The past, which we reconstruct in historical thought, is not the real past; it is the past that can be disentangled from the present objective world by the present act of thinking. The re-enactment of the past on the present is the past itself so far as that is knowable to the historian.”

Like Croce who was his mentor and whose ideas he elaborated in his work Collingwood believes that “all history is contemporary history” it constitutes what the historian thinks in the present.

A number of points emerge from Collingwood’s methodology of historical inquiry. First there is a strong link between the historian historical events and thought about them according to Collingwood, historical facts/events in themselves in themselves do not constitute historical knowledge. Inferences based on imaginative thought must be drawn from them. Collingwood’s re-enactment methodology can be constructed thus the historian, question, evidence, answers, reconstruction and the historical past without the historians there are no questions. Without questions, there is no evidence without evidence there are not answers. Without answers we have no reconstructions and without reconstructions we have no historical past, no history.

Second, Collingwood’s re enactment methodology is based in the historian’s intuition. The historian, according to him, cannot re enact the thoughts of historical actors unless he has direct intuitive access to mental workings of the people whose actions he tries to understand and explain. He must intuitively ask relevant questions to get good evidence and answers on which to base his reconstruction or re enactment of the past. Critics have argued that this is not



really possible and that if anything, it relegates historical inquiry to empathy/telepathy which is a mystical and unscientific mental process. But those whose views tend to support Collingwood have argued that historical writings is based not only on source based knowledge but also on knowledge which is non source based, that is knowledge which is dependent on his personal experiences.

Third, it is apparent from Collingwood's views that it is now possible to arrive at objectivity in historical writing. For the result of the historians work will be tampered by the historians won psychological frame of mind, his fields of inquiry, the answers he gleans from the questions he poses and the evidence he gets to validate his findings.

From the foregoing it can be concluded that Collingwood has contributed to our knowledge of what history is and how we can arrive at historical cognition. His idea of history may not be quite original but it is obvious that through his amplification of pre existing ideas he opened up new vistas which have interested and influenced both his critics and admirers in the second half of this century and will continue to do so well into the future.

### 5.3 Collingwood's Critics

Question: is it possible, to perform an act of thought resembling the agent's thought? The answer is:

1. Few actions of historical agents had a thought side in the sense of being done for reasons consciously entertained.
2. Some actions are a product of irrationality or unconscious thought for examples are might act for foolish goals.

3. There are situations whereby the agent has a rational understanding of an action, but the action is done contrary to good reasons known to the agents, of one in which the agent who is so confused that it is impossible to follow the connection between what he believed and what he did.
4. The notion that the historian re-enacts the thought of the agent is fallacious. He mistakes a psychological fact for a methodological principle. Is it possible for one to put himself at the standpoint of a Roman emperor?
5. Does it possible to perform an act that thought resemble the agent's thoughts? The historians would then be dealing with copies of past thoughts and not past thoughts themselves.
6. No person can rethink a past thought in each act of thinking represents an individual experience and not two experiences can literally be identical.
7. One has to re-argue the agent's arguments in his mind and therefore it is thought in its mediation.
8. Experience is not the object of historical knowledge but particular details or general characteristics can be satisfied by thought in as far as we are remembering experiences of our own or entering with sympathy and imagination of others but in such cases we do so in which we sympathize we are merely contemplating them as objects of external to our present.
9. If I see someone showing all the signs of pain, I am immediately pained myself. I know what is like to be the main in question because my mental state corresponds exactly to his. It is true it is possible to misread people's thoughts and feelings could not be demanded. If we can get off the actual

experience which gave rise to a certain expression – how do we know that our experience is precisely like it?

10. To say that all history of thought is to suggest at least men make their own history, free of determination by nature forces.
11. Its assumption that an action is a production of thought assumes that human action is deliberate when so many of them are not deliberate clear. Most actions studied by historians were down on the spur of the moment in respect to a sudden impulse.
12. This type of history that Collingwood suggest deals with biography, political history and military but cannot fit in economic history, e.g. history of prices can we rethink the thought of the agent who fixed them.
13. His approach will work only if the thoughts spoken of are embodied in deliberate acts of thinking occurring in the deliberate acts of thinking occurring in minds of single agent. The actions which the economic historian deal with is a completed series of actions carried on by different persons over a long time stretches of time, if any of whom are aware of the directions of the whole movement.
14. There is difference between what a person has in turned with what he was before his mind. When we say that historians have to penetrate to the thoughts behind men's own actions, we imply that every action has his parts, fresh thinking and then historical doing. The historian has certainty to do more than re-thinking the thoughts which explicable before the minds of those whose actions were deliberate. This is because as illegal pointed out human action offer accomplish more than they know, and this must be allowed for as any tenable account of historical thinking.

15. To some extent it might be possible to grasp the thoughts of Julia's Caesar or Napoleon I but it might be difficult to understand the actions of a witchdoctor, the understand him we need something more than sympathetic understanding of ways in which they find themselves.
16. To suggest that a historian can do his job by putting himself in the place of the person he studies while appearing to answer to the facts is not ultimately illuminating for the process of putting oneself on another's place is itself susceptible of frills analysis.

## **5.4 Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911)**

### **5.4.1 Human and Scientific Explanation in History**

In 1882, Wilhelm Dilthey in his main book introduction to human studies argues that the historian no less than the physicist, employs precise and rigorous methods in his enquiries, but the way in which inferences are drawn and theories tested, the assumptions that inform observation, measurement and production in the natural science, precede the wholesale adoption of such methods in the human studies.

Dilthey was aware from his experience in history of ideas, that the organizing criteria employed in historical research had no foundation in the standard empiricist theory of knowledge.

According to Dilthey human actions were not simply occurrence but manifestations of attitudes of mind or a life expressions, the meaning of actions for agents became an organizing concept embracing, in addition to the deliberate attempt to say or do something, the manifold gestures and facial

expressions which through they are not intended to signify anything betray an attitude of mind.

Dilthey contention was that the historian could understand actions performed in the past because, like actions performed in the present they could be subsumed under categories like purport, violation and feeling.

He argues that the historian, in other words, could re experience the attitudes of historical agent because his experience as a practical agent had provided him with categories which might by imaginative extension be used to interpret evidence of human conduct.

Dilthey argues that his sort of emphatic understanding was only deemed possible because of a basic identity btw the historian and his subject matter which did not obtain in the world of natural science.

Dilthey argues that both human and systematic studies are interdependent, for history provides the systematic disciplines with evidence in such form as case histories and records of economic developments.

The systematic disciplines, together with common sense generalizations and the findings to physical science, provide the law in terms of which the connections btw individual events in history can be explained.

He formulated three principles that form an important aspect of what has come to be known as historicism.

1. All human manifestations are part of a historical process and should be explained in historical terms. The state, the family, even man himself cannot be adequately defined abstractly because they have different characteristics in different ages.

2. Different ages and different individuals can only be understood by entering imaginatively into their specific point of view what the age or the individual thought relevant must be taken into account by the historian.
3. The historian himself is bound by the horizons of his own age. How the past present itself to him in the perspectives of his own concerns becomes a legitimate aspect of the meaning of the past.

Dilthey further argues that in all human studies, general intellectual procedures and methods shared with all the sciences or borrowed from particular ones are employed. These include observation, description, generalization comparison the use of models and the framing and testing of hypotheses achieve the knowledge they are seeking.

Dilthey had three conditions that make understanding something possible.

1. He argued we must be familiar with the mental processes through which meaning is experienced and conveyed: if we do not know who it was to love or abhor something, to have an intention or to express something we could not begin to understand anything.
2. An action could be understood, in the situation gave rise to it for this condition Dilthey derived the methodological principle that to understand an expression, we must systematically explore the context in which it stands.
3. To understand a sentence we must know the language to understand chess move the rules of the game.

Thus according to Dilthey, understanding and interpretation, used systematically in the human studies disclose to historians the feature of life.

## 5.5 Benedetto Croce (1866-1952)

### 5.5.1 The Theory of Expression and Contemporary History

In 1892 when Croce was 26yrs old, he says “I soon wearied of filling my mind with lifeless and disconnected facts at the expense of much trial and with no constructive result... in trying to find my way out of the difficulties which beset me as to the best method of; pursuing... historical studies at large, I found myself unconsciously brought by degrees face to face with the problem of the nature of history and knowledge.”

Every true history is contemporary history in the sense that the historian must vivify the documents and artifacts from which he fashions his accounts. The historian is distinguished from the antiquarian in terms of “the capacity for living again” (rather than merely classifying) the remnants of the past. Consequently, the relics of the past “do not answer to a past interest but to a present interest, in so far as it is unified with an interest of the present life.”

For Croce, then, the past (as we know it) consists of the individual judgments which historians make on the basis of the evidence at their disposal. There can be no criterion outside historical thought to serve as independent standard in the appraisal of a particular historical thesis. Nor are there any general lessons to be learnt beyond the detailed narrative which the historian is enabled to construct.

Croce emphasizes the contention that an interest in the past would always (and should always) reflect historian’s contemporary concerns. Croce argued in his philosophical works that all history is “contemporary history” that we could only understand past acts by imaginatively re-enacting them in order to recover the intentions and meaning they had for the persons concerned.

History which lacked this understanding was “chronicle” the historian was not fallen upon to criticize the past “historical judgment” entailed simply recording the role played by individuals in determinate circumstances and learning moral appraisal to the turn of events.

This argument seemed to countenance passive acquiescence and the belief that might is right, and indeed Croce had an almost religious faith in the ultimate benevolence of history, an attitude forcefully expressed during the First World War.

However, fascism led him to revise this thesis by stressing the distinction between ethical actions, which aim to increase the liberty of human action through the transformation of nature and society and economic actions, this have largely a utilitarian character.

Croce’s historical writing inspired a large following in Italy, although perhaps only his British follower R. G. Collingwood could emulate his command of both philosophy and history.