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Introduction

The best known and most discussed part of Collingwood’s *oeuvre* is undoubtedly his contribution to the philosophy of history. During the past half century, thousands of scholarly works both inside and outside professional philosophy have assessed Collingwood’s key concepts concerning historical knowledge and experience. *The Idea of History* (1946) is one of the most influential books of the 20th century. In addition to being the most studied of his works, Collingwood himself also considered the philosophy of history to be the focal point of his intellectual legacy. The importance Collingwood attached to the philosophy of history is unmistakable when he speaks about his unfinished “masterpiece” on the subject, *The Principles of History*, as the work “which my whole life has been spent in preparing to write. If I can finish that, I shall have nothing to grumble at.”¹ Unfortunately, Collingwood did not live to finish *The Principles of History*, and his plans for that book was to deal in detail

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precisely with the topics of the present essay. This topic is the metaphilosophical import of Collingwood’s philosophy of history considered not only as an elucidation of history as a distinctive form of knowledge and thought, but addressing also issues about the ways in which philosophy of history matters for our understanding of philosophy as a whole. Given that Collingwood did not completely spell out the metaphilosophical aspect of his philosophy of history, the following essay requires both rethinking and extending Collingwood’s trajectory of thought.²

This essay examines Collingwood’s philosophy of history and its relation to philosophical analysis.³ Firstly, it is shown that Collingwood offers a unique and important account of the philosophy of history as an independent branch of philosophical inquiry with its own aims, questions and subject

¹ 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), lviii.

² For Collingwood’s plans to write about the metaphilosophical dimension of the philosophy of history, see *Principles of History*, xix.

³ My general understanding of this topic is much indebted to the systematic accounts of Collingwood’s philosophy by scholars such as W. H. Dray, Giuseppina D’Oro, Jan van der Dussen, Rex Martin, Heikki Saari, James Connelly and Louis Mink.

matter. For Collingwood, the philosophy of history is essentially a philosophical inquiry concerning the fundamental concepts and principles that govern history as a form of knowledge and thought. Subsequently, I will situate Collingwood in relation to contemporary alternatives and argue that Collingwood's account must have an essential role in any forthcoming philosophy of history. In the latter part of the essay, it is argued that Collingwood's ideas have a far-reaching metaphilosophical import to the extent that his philosophy of history is *not merely* about the principles of historical research. On the one hand, it is correct to describe Collingwood's philosophy of history as an elucidation of the *a priori* concepts that guide history as a first order science. However, it is equally important to understand that Collingwood's philosophy of history is also an effort to clarify the relation between historical and philosophical thinking by delineating the basic historical nature of human experience and understanding. I will argue that only by appreciating the interconnectedness of these aspects will it become clear how Collingwood provides an account that shows both (i) how philosophy of history is a distinctive branch of philosophical inquiry, and (ii) that the philosophy of history has metaphilosophical relevance beyond the sphere of historical research.

The Subject Matter of Collingwood's Philosophy of History

Collingwood's elusive concept of history is the needle's eye through which every proper understanding of his philosophy of history must pass. Contrary to colloquial usage of the term, Collingwood's philosophical deployment of 'history' does not designate a position in time – the

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past – but a distinctive way of understanding reality. To understand a phenomenon historically, for Collingwood, is to understand that phenomenon as belonging to the category of human agency. As Collingwood makes abundantly clear on numerous occasions, the subject matter of history is *Res Gestae*, 'things done', and human actions are only properly so called if they are embodiments of thought. The characteristic feature of history does not reveal itself in the contrast between past and present, but rather in the conceptual distinction between the categories of action (history) and nomological event (natural science). Making human reality intelligible in terms of action is the quintessential feature of history, and it is, for Collingwood, a contingent matter whether the actions in question happened two seconds or two thousand years ago.⁴

Given that, for Collingwood, history is not synonymous with the past, it follows that 'historical explanation' is a term of art in his philosophy. Ordinarily, to speak of historical explanation or understanding means something like locating X in the spirit of the times, or viewing the significance of X in relation to subsequent developments. In everyday language, to explain historically means situating actions and events in a temporal context. Such contextualizing is also central for Collingwood, but it is only the means and not the end of historical explanation. To explain an action historically is, essentially, to connect in our understanding the action with the reasons for its performance. It is only possible to establish that connection if we are able to trace, or *re-enact* as Collingwood famously argues, the practical argument involved in the action based on the epistemic and motivational premises of the agent. This practical argument *is* the thought that the action embodies, and it is a thought that serves both as an explanation and as an identification of the action in question. For example, the actions of 'murder' and 'manslaughter' are distinguished and identified by the thoughts embodied in the action, not by physical descriptions of the material event. Equally,

⁴ Cf. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, ed. J. van der Dussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 219.

the reasons for an action are often a sufficient explanation of the action: ‘- why did you cross the street? - I bought today’s paper.’⁵

A much-debated issue is the extension of Collingwood’s concept of action. On several occasions, Collingwood seems to restrict history to a specific kind of action: “*Res Gestae* are [...] actions done by reasonable agents in pursuit of ends determined by their reason.”⁶ Several interpreters have used such passages to claim that Collingwood’s ideas are relevant only for the narrow domains of rational actions in political and intellectual history. However, the significant distinction to be made is not

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between different kinds of action, but between actions and something else, such as impulse and knee-jerk reactions.⁷ Rationality is not, contrary to ‘selfishness’, a predicate that actions may or may not possess, but a regulative idea that runs through *all* actions to a higher or lower degree. For Collingwood, to call something rational does not presuppose a fixed standard of desirable behavior, but involves only minimal conditions of intelligibility. This condition of intelligibility is set by our own ability to make sense of human behavior *as action* by making connections with the reasons for its performance. Something that lacks every form of reasonableness, meaning that its performance does not in any way follow from the epistemic and motivational premises of the agent, is not something that we would call ‘action’ but rather try to explain in causal terms through psychology, neurology or biology. On this reading, the concept of rationality is internal to the historical mode of understanding and thus comparable with the role of the concept of nomological cause in (Newtonian) natural science.

Collingwood’s (in)famous claim that all history is the history of thought has also created much puzzlement. In order to understand his claim one must keep in mind that ‘thought’ does not necessarily mean ‘deliberation’. In a narrow sense, all history is the history of thought simply by virtue of the fact that all history is about action, and an ‘action’ is by definition an expression of thought. However, this stipulation would certainly not be sufficient for claiming that history in the normal sense, i.e. as an investigation of human affairs in the past, must be the history of thought. Historical research is, after all, often about aspects of human reality that were not the objects of deliberate action. For instance, historians may study economic trends to explain phenomena that were entirely opaque to the agents themselves. This is true, but it does not follow that such investigations could do without access to the ‘thoughts’ of the agents in a wider sense of the term. If a historian wants to understand the difference economic trends made to the lived experience of the historical agents, then this understanding will be dependent on an understanding of the thoughts of the agents themselves. This dependence follows from the fact that their thoughts, and the internal relations between them, are an integral part of the lived experience under examination.⁸

Naturally, Collingwood’s idea of a philosophy of history relates directly to his distinctive understanding of the concept of history. In philosophy, our aim is to discover what exactly it is that

⁵ This is connected with Collingwood’s controversial claim that when we know what happened we also know why it happened. This claim is not as problematic as it is often made out to be. Problems arise only if we, erroneously, assume that Collingwood is claiming that any statement of ‘what’ is also always a sufficient answer to every ‘why’ question we may possibly pose.

⁶ Collingwood, *Principles of History*, 46.

⁷ In this sense, Collingwood introduces a technical concept of action. Cf. Giuseppina D’Oro, “Collingwood’s Idealist Metaontology: Between Therapy and Armchair Science,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Philosophical Methodology*, ed. Giuseppina D’Oro and Søren Overgaard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 220.

⁸ Cf. Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 317.

we are doing when we are engaging with thought of the first order, such as history, natural science, art or

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religion respectively. Philosophy is thought of the second order and this means that it reflects on the relation between subject and object in first order forms of thought. The task of a philosophy of history is, therefore, to make explicit the *a priori* concepts, principles and categories that are implicit in historical knowledge and understanding. Centrally, this task involves the explication of some of the notions just mentioned, such as 'action', 're-enactment' and 'thought', but also concepts with direct methodological relevance for history as a professional discipline, such as 'evidence' and 'inference'. The aim of this philosophy is to clarify the concepts that make history as a form of experience and knowledge possible. For Collingwood, the philosophy of history is a branch of descriptive metaphysics and comparable to his conceptual clarification of other modes of experience and knowledge, such as art, religion and science.⁹

Considering that Collingwood equates history with human agency, it should be obvious that philosophy of history will not be relevant only for professional historians. Rather, making reality intelligible in terms of action is, as Collingwood puts it, a necessary and universal aspect of the human mind.¹⁰ Thus, the fundamental concepts of history as a science are continuous with our ordinary ways of understanding human behavior as the performance of different kinds of actions. This means that a philosophical clarification of the basic concepts of the science of history will, at the same time, serve as a clarification of the concepts belonging to the domain of agency in human life, and vice versa. Given that 'action' is already part of human existence, the philosophy of history will have an irreducible subject matter as long as human beings continue to make sense of their lives in terms of the concepts of human agency, such as motive, reason, purpose, meaning and so forth. Philosophy of history is, therefore, not important only for those who want to understand the practice of professional history, but for anyone wanting to understand the different ways in which reality is intelligible to us.

The Fundamental Role of Collingwood's Philosophy of History

In contemporary philosophy of history, Collingwood is often assumed to be somewhat outdated. The main goal for Collingwood was to distinguish the principles of history from natural science, and this is no longer a central concern for contemporary philosophy of history. Collingwood's philosophy, however, did have an important role to play in the philosophical debates

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following the publication of C. G. Hempel's classic paper, "The Function of General Laws in History", in 1942. In this paper, Hempel forcefully challenged the idea that historical explanation, or historical thinking as such, was in any way conceptually or logically distinct from the law-based explanatory model of natural science. In these debates, Collingwood's arguments for the autonomy of history served as a firewall against the attempt to reduce historical understanding to nomological forms of explanation. These debates abated abruptly already in the 1970s, at which time the philosophy of

⁹ Giuseppina D'Oro has argued for this interpretation in her *Collingwood and the Metaphysics of Experience* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁰ Cf. Jan van Der Dussen, *History as a Science: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (The Hague, Netherlands: Nijhoff, 1981), 311.

history took a distinctively new direction. This new direction was a 'linguistic turn' in which the historian's uses of language was placed at the centre of attention.¹¹ The key concepts for this new philosophy of history were no longer explanation and understanding, but narrative and linguistic representation.¹²

In fact, Collingwood writes comparatively very little about narrative and linguistic representation in his works on the philosophy of history. This is not, I believe, an accidental feature, but a choice motivated by Collingwood's idea of a philosophical subject matter. If 'narrative' simply means a linguistic tool for making temporal connections between events, then it is certainly a tool that may be used regardless of whether the subject matter is history, planetary motions or the nesting behavior of migratory birds. In addition, the use of narrative is not a necessary element in historical research since historians may use other, non-diachronic, forms of explanation to get their points across.¹³ Not all history is written in narrative form, so neither should the philosophy of history center on the concept of narrative. Hence, narrowly construed, Collingwood's 'neglect' of questions about narration is entirely justified since literary representation is primarily a contingent methodological question, and not a (transcendental) philosophical one about what history universally and necessarily is.¹⁴

However, if 'narrative' is used in a very broad sense, as it often is, then it can indeed become what Collingwood calls a philosophical concept – meaning a concept belonging to the necessary and universal features of a particular mode of understanding. In this philosophical usage, 'narrative' does not denote merely a linguistic tool, but the general process of sense making relevant for every kind of historical research. For instance, the concept of narrative would denote the processes by which we understand one action as an intelligible response to an earlier action, or the principles underpinning the fact that we can make sense of an event in light of earlier developments. However, if 'narrative' is used to denote this generic ability

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to understand coherence and continuation, then it should be clear that Collingwood is actually the 'narrativist' philosopher of history *par excellence* – questions about such basic forms of sense making are indeed what his fundamental concepts, from re-enactment to the historical imagination, centrally address. Thus, if 'narrative' is construed broadly, then Collingwood is certainly not outdated but the philosopher everyone in contemporary narrativist philosophy of history should read.

Still, there is no denying that Collingwood's main ideas are in conflict with the general direction of post-Hempelian philosophy of history. In contemporary scholarship, it is the idea of *retrospective description* that serves as the distinguishing feature of history, not action.¹⁵ The main supposition behind this idea is, roughly, that the specificity of historical understanding is rooted in the use of 'narrative sentences' – a classical example of such a sentence is: "The Thirty Years War began in

¹¹ During the past decades, there are clear signs of a change away from narrativism. For a discussion, see my "The Idea of a Philosophy of History," *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 22, no. 1 (2018).

¹² A testimony to the contemporary vitality of narrativist philosophy of history is *The Sage Handbook of Historical Theory*, eds. Nancy Partner and Sarah Foot (London: Sage Publications, 2013).

¹³ This has lately been emphasized by Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen in his *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

¹⁴ Cf. Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 349–352.

¹⁵ Arguably, narrativists and postnarrativists alike share this paradigmatic idea. Cf. Paul Roth, "The Philosophy of History," in *The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Social Science*, eds. Alex Rosenberg and Lee McIntyre (New York: Routledge, 2016).

1618".¹⁶ Centrally, narrative sentences reveal truths about the significance of an earlier event in light of later events. Thus, historical knowledge contains elements that were not (logically) available to the agents themselves since truths about the significance of an event continue to accrue after it has happened. A 'historical event' is something that exists only under a certain description, and the availability of descriptions alter with our position in time. This entails that, with the passage of time, historians can use narrative sentences to create new events and novel descriptions in order to explain the past reality that is unfolding itself. Hence, contrary to Collingwood's ideas, the concept of temporality is placed center stage in history. As Arthur Danto tellingly wrote: "the whole point of history is *not* to know about actions as witnesses might, but as historians do, in connection with later actions and as parts of temporal wholes."¹⁷

It is a common but erroneous assumption that narrative sentences are specific to history. However, every past phenomenon, natural or human made, is the possible object of a description that assigns significance to earlier events in light of later ones. A natural scientist may say: 'the retreat of the glaciers since 1850 was the beginning of global warming' or 'The mosquito bite of John Doe in 1923 was the start of a pandemic'. Hence, it is simply wrong to suppose that retrospectivity is peculiar to the subject matter of historians. However, a more interesting fact is that every retrospective description in history will have to presuppose the form of re-enactive understanding that Collingwood places at the core of historical knowledge. The reason is that there can be no *purely* retrospective description of historical events. This is due to the fact that retrospective descriptions are created by

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linking together two temporally separated events, and for a linking to be possible there must already be an understanding of the separate events in themselves.

Obviously, the retrospective significance of the *assassination* of Archduke Franz Ferdinand was not available to contemporary witnesses in 1914. However, assigning retrospective significance to this event is certainly dependent on first identifying Gavrilo Princip's action for what it was, and this requires re-enactive understanding. Similarly, the much-discussed process of colligation in historical research must equally presuppose re-enactive understanding. For example, the application of the colligatory concept of 'thaw' in Soviet history is dependent on the fact that we can already understand the significance of certain actions for the agents involved.¹⁸ The idea of a 'thaw' is closely associated with the relaxation of state control, and one can meaningfully apply the concept only to the extent that one is able to identify such a process in the lives of the agents themselves – whether they were aware of it or not. In fact, the literal meaning of 'thaw' denotes a process of softening of what was once frozen stiff, and this very meaning makes it an appropriate metaphor for describing the softening of state control. However, understanding the actual events in question as 'relaxation' or 'softening' must certainly be dependent on the fact that we can identify that actions were at a later date being performed that were previously considered to be prohibited by the state and, equally, that acts of reprisal did not follow from state officials. There was a change in conduct, and such changes are discernable only through the identification of action by re-enactment.

¹⁶ Arthur Danto introduced this concept in his *Analytic Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

¹⁷ Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, 183.

¹⁸ For an extensive discussion of colligation using the example of 'thaw', see Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, 97-130.

Retrospectivity is not the whole point of history, as Danto believed, but a perspective that is parasitic on re-enactive understanding and thereby knowing “about actions as witnesses might”. Without the latter, there would simply be no events to describe in retrospective and colligatory terms. Without re-enactive understanding, our retrospective descriptions can never be more than arbitrary projections on the blank screen of an unknown past. However, it is equally wrong to claim that there is such a thing as a *purely* horizontal, and thereby non-retrospective, understanding of action in history. This is also contrary to Collingwood’s main doctrine: retrospectivity is, in fact, a central element in re-enactment itself. To engage in re-enactment *is* to re-think the thought that past actions embody from one’s own position in time. As Collingwood often emphasizes, this is a critical process and historians can know the past only if they are “firmly rooted in the present”.¹⁹ Historical knowledge, for Collingwood,

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is knowledge of the past in the present, not telepathic time travel.²⁰ The integral element in this form of knowledge, re-enactment, is a process in which we re-think past thoughts and thereby give them a new quality as one element “within a whole of thought that goes beyond it.”²¹ Thus, the accusation that Collingwood neglects the retrospective element in historical thought stems from the misconstrual of a key concept in his philosophy of history.²²

Collingwood’s ideas must have a fundamental role for any philosophy of history that aims to do justice to human agency in our understanding of history. This role is often not appreciated from failure to comprehend how deep Collingwood’s ideas about history actually go. Collingwood does not simply offer a standard for the explanation of action, but a delineation of the concepts and principles that make historical knowledge and experience possible. To illustrate, the reality of the human past is *not* available to the historian as ready-made actions to be explained by whatever standard she chooses. In that case, re-enactment would be qualitatively on a par with the application of biological or psychological models for the explanation of action. This is simply not the case. For it is only by re-enactive understanding that we are able to view human reality under the aspect of human agency at all. The meaning of an action is not separable from the reasons for its performance, and this entails that the reality of the human past is accessible to us *as action* only as far as our re-enactments are able to reach. On this score, Collingwood’s ideas are directly relevant for some of the most hotly debated themes in contemporary philosophy of history, namely questions about the accessibility of the past and the ontology of historical objects.²³

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¹⁹ Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 60.

²⁰ Cf. Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 175.

²¹ Cf. Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 448. See also *Principles of History*, 223: “History means not re-thinking what has been thought before, but thinking of yourself as re-thinking it.”

²² For a discussion of such accusations, see William Herbert Dray, *History as Re-enactment: R. G. Collingwood’s Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 308–9.

²³ Chris Lorenz has argued that these are the main themes in the theory of history since the 1990s. See, Chris Lorenz, “History and Theory,” in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Historical Writing Since 1945*, eds. Axel Schneider and Daniel Wolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). For a discussion of Collingwood’s relevance for such themes, see my “R. G. Collingwood and the Presence of the Past,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 11, no. 3 (2017): 289–305.

As previously outlined, Collingwood offers a descriptive metaphysics concerning the concepts, principles and subject matter that make history, in his special sense of the word, specific and possible. Collingwood is thereby one among several seminal 20th century philosophers to engage with the project of distinguishing the human from the natural sciences. In this respect, there is clearly a connection between Collingwood's philosophy of history and the works of continental thinkers such as Wilhelm Dilthey and Hans-Georg Gadamer. However, perhaps the closest parallel in this respect is to Georg Henrik von Wright's arguments for separating the human from the natural sciences. Like Collingwood, von Wright attended

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to the logical distinction between different models of explanation, and identified the human sciences with the practical syllogism and the natural sciences with the covering law model.²⁴ Still, Collingwood's philosophy of history is essentially also *more* than an effort to demarcate 'history' on the map of human knowledge and experience. For Collingwood, the philosophy of history is important not only for understanding history, but also for philosophy as a whole. The rest of this essay is devoted to understanding this issue.

If Collingwood's philosophy of history were merely one branch of his descriptive metaphysics, then there would be no reason for giving any special status to history in comparison with, say, art or natural science. Still, it is a fact that Collingwood *does* give a special status to history. This special status has two distinguishable but connected aspects. One the one hand, the special status of history is a product of the development of human thought. Collingwood claims, famously, that the chief business of 20th century philosophy is to reckon with 20th century history.²⁵ The sense of this claim hails from Collingwood's idea that, sometime in the past centuries, historical thinking has gone through a Copernican revolution comparable to the revolutionary changes in man's thought about nature in the times of Newton and Descartes. Of course, this is not to claim that human beings started to make sense of reality in terms of action only quite recently. Rather, Collingwood's claim is that it is not until modern times that human beings began to understand their entire social world as a product of human actions in the past, rather than the result of divine forces, fate or some other non-human factor. In addition, a Copernican revolution came about with the insight that we can understand our past through a process of critical examination of evidence in which subject and object are internally related.²⁶ The primary expression of this revolution was, for Collingwood, the spectacular advance of historical research methods in the 19th century. In this sense, the metaphysical branch of 'history' has a special status as a ubiquitous but philosophically underexplored mode of understanding.

On the other hand, somehow connected with the above development, history gets a special status since Collingwood argues for a transformation of the very concept of philosophy in light of the progress of historical thinking. This is what Collingwood described as the need for a *rapprochement* between history and philosophy, and, at other times, as the creation of a new philosophy conceived from a historical point of view. In the *Idea of History*, Collingwood aimed at a philosophy of history in the narrow

²⁴ Georg Henrik von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971).

²⁵ R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography and Other Writings*, ed. David Boucher and Teresa Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 79.

²⁶ This internal relation, however, is not finally understood until the development of scientific history based on re-enactment.

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sense, meaning a philosophical delineation of the concepts and principles internal to history as a form of knowledge and experience. In contrast, the goal he set for the future was “a general overhauling of all philosophical questions in the light of the results reached by the philosophy of history in the narrower sense.”²⁷ This would produce a philosophy of history in the wide sense, which I take to be Collingwood’s label for a philosophical delineation of history that makes clear its relation to, and transformation of, traditional philosophy.

One can quite easily state what Collingwood did *not* mean by a philosophy of history in the wide sense. The above quotes, coupled with others in Collingwood’s typically pointed style of writing, such as “all philosophy is the philosophy of history”; “philosophy is liquidated into history” or “[a]ll metaphysical questions are historical questions”, have supported interpretations to the effect that the later Collingwood historicized philosophy into oblivion.²⁸ This amounts to the supposition that Collingwood’s new ‘philosophy’ reduces to historical examinations of different ways of thinking peculiar to different times. However, this interpretation is wide off the mark given the fact that, for Collingwood, philosophy was always a critical conceptual investigation with the aim of making explicit what we in some sense already implicitly know.²⁹ What could it mean to “liquidate” philosophy as conceptual analysis? Surely, anyone attempting any such thing is dragged right back into conceptual analysis, and thereby philosophy, by the obvious response: ‘what do you mean by liquidate?’ Collingwood attempted no such suffocation of thought, and it is telling that his last writings constitute a *philosophical* defence of the idea of civilization. Thus, the important question is not whether Collingwood was a radical historicist, for he was not, but it is about how he thought philosophy should change in light of the development of historical thinking.

Collingwood wanted to liquidate a particular conception of philosophy.³⁰ The target was the idea that philosophy is a search for timeless essences, and that logic is an external and universal standard applied as a corrective to cases of actual human thought. In a seldom-quoted passage, Collingwood writes that the philosopher who engages with human life must accept human life, and that philosophers “can only find in [human life] the reason which is in it already.”³¹ However, this is not to deny that human thought is analyzable in terms of logical relations, such as truth, falsity, negation, implication and so forth. The idea is rather that the correct application of logical concepts to any actual case of human

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thought depends on discerning the sense of those thoughts in the historical context of their employment. The opposite of this conception, Collingwood labels “Aristotelian logic” and it is a form of thinking which assumes that one can assess the validity of any actual case of reasoning by merely attending to its form.³²

²⁷ Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 6–7.

²⁸ Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 425; *Principles of History*, 238 and R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics*, ed. Rex Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 49.

²⁹ The Socratic spirit of Collingwood’s idea of philosophy is prevalent throughout his writings. For a particularly clear expression, see R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945), 59–60.

³⁰ The enemy was what Collingwood called Realism. Cf. *An Autobiography*, 147–8.

³¹ Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 495. There is no support for interpreting this as an argument for uncritical acceptance. As Collingwood writes, the acceptance should be in the spirit that Margaret Fuller expressed in saying “I accept the universe”, *Idea of History*, 494–495.

³² Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 253–4.

Collingwood's self-proclaimed revolution in logic, which was to show that the sense of propositions depends on historically situated question and answer complexes, aimed at exposing the flaws of Aristotelian formalism. Collingwood argued for a Socratic conception of logic in which the validity of judgments, propositions and thought are dependent on their function as instruments in human dialogue. The aim was not to do away with formal logical relations, which would be nonsensical, but to show that every assessment of formal validity is parasitic upon grasping the sense of the relevant propositions and thoughts in the lived experience of actual human beings. However, this does not simply mean that history provides the raw material for logical analysis. Rather, more profoundly, Collingwood argues that the authority and sense of logical compulsion itself is a function of the historically specific reactions and responses of human beings in dialogue.³³ Philosophy, therefore, requires historical understanding if it is ever to discern the actuality of logical relations in human life.³⁴

Collingwood's revolution in logic does not signal the invention of a new logic, whatever that could mean, but the detection of what Bernard Williams would call an "impurity" at the heart of philosophical analysis. As Williams writes, if philosophy is to have anything important to say, then it must "address a lot more than philosophy."³⁵ Philosophy, thus, should never become the analysis of pure logical form, but must remain 'impure' from the fact that every philosophical analysis depends on understanding forms of knowledge and experience external to any *a priori* self-definition of philosophy's proper aims and methods.³⁶

It is possible to unpack this notion of impurity further by considering how Collingwood views the relation between philosophy and the subject matter of history. Arguably, a central aim in any philosophical analysis will be to gain a reflective understanding of our own ideas and motivations. Philosophy is, at least since the days of Socrates, inextricably linked with the quest for a knowledge of self that makes explicit what we in some sense already implicitly know. It is beyond doubt that Collingwood shared this idea of philosophy. However, self-knowledge is not only an aim in philosophy, it is also, as Collingwood argued, the condition without which other

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forms of knowledge cannot be critically justified and securely based.³⁷ Yet, in the quest for self-knowledge, philosophy cannot fend for itself and Collingwood claims "history is the only way in which man can know himself."³⁸ This interdependence of philosophy and history in the search for self-knowledge relates directly to Collingwood's ideas about the subject matter of history. Collingwood writes:

Nature consists of things distributed in space, whose intelligibility consists merely in the way in which they are distributed, or in the regular and

³³ I take this to follow from Collingwood's idea of the logical efficacy of a question being dependent on a question-answer complex and absolute presuppositions. See *An Autobiography*, 37–39 and *Essay on Metaphysics*, 26–33.

³⁴ Peter Winch later developed this conception of logic and reasoning. Cf. Peter Winch, *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972).

³⁵ Bernard Williams, *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 148.

³⁶ Cf. Richard Moran, "Williams, History, and 'the Impurity of Philosophy'," *European Journal of Philosophy* 24, no. 2 (2016), 317. The following elaboration is indebted to Moran's article.

³⁷ Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 205. This follows from the fact that knowledge is a two-way relation dependent on the clear understanding of both subject and object.

³⁸ R. G. Collingwood, *The Philosophy of Enchantment: Studies in Folktales, Cultural Criticism, and Anthropology*, eds. David Boucher, Wendy James and Phillip Smallwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 180.

determinate relations between them. History consists of the thoughts and actions of minds, which are not only intelligible but intelligent, intelligible to themselves, not merely to something other than themselves [...] because they contain in themselves both sides of the knowledge-relation, they are subject as well as object.³⁹

This states an idea about the subject matter of history that goes well beyond the concept of *Res Gestae* and the necessity of re-enactment for the understanding of individual action previously discussed. Crucially, Collingwood makes a distinction between the constitutive features of two different kinds of objects of understanding: (i) phenomena explicable from an outside perspective and (ii) phenomena that are already forms of intelligence and embody an understanding of themselves as part of their very identity. The latter phenomena include not only the narrow domains of individual human action but also collective social phenomena at large. Unlike planetary motions or the atoms of nuclear physics, human practices and institutions, such as the family, property, science, art, philosophy etc. enter the world with a conception of themselves as part of their very constitution.

For example, the practices and institutions of 'trade', 'money' or 'family' are what they are in virtue of the concepts and forms of thoughts shared by the participants. The practice of 'trade' involves understanding the specific relations of buyer and seller, the use of money involves thoughts about the relation between price and value, and the sense of the notion of a 'family' is not separable from particular, and historically specific, ideas about relations of responsibility between parent and child. The shared nature of the relevant concepts and thoughts contained in human institutions and practices are themselves constituted by the agreement in responses and reactions in the interaction among the agents involved. Thus, human practices and institutions contain an internal understanding without which they would not be the kind of human phenomena that they are. This internal understanding is often not explicit to the participants

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themselves, and historians can go beyond it in reflective interpretations of the phenomena in question, but any study that completely abandons the participant's internal understanding would simultaneously abandon the phenomena and turn into a study of something else.⁴⁰ In Collingwood's language, this is to say that 'mind' is an irreducible element in every part of the subject matter of history, from actions to institutions and cultural practices.

The human condition necessarily involves the inheritance of historically constructed practices and institutions from previous generations. In other words, history is, as Collingwood claims, an integral part of human experience itself.⁴¹ Most importantly, the starting point for anyone within this human condition is not one in which the meaning of our inherited practices and institutions, including their essential relations of power, will be transparent to the individual subject. In Collingwoodian terms, we enter the human world without knowing the ways in which the past is already included in the present.⁴² Consequently, history *is* self-knowledge for Collingwood from the fact that it is only

³⁹ Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 112. In this passage, Collingwood is alluding to and agreeing with Schiller.

⁴⁰ The most well-known and penetrating discussion of these issues is to be found in Peter Winch's work which is, in this respect, a direct continuation of Collingwood's philosophy of history.

⁴¹ Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 158.

⁴² The continental equivalent of this is the contention that the *They* (das Man) permeates the human condition. Cf. Charles Guignon, 'Self-Knowledge in Hermeneutic Philosophy,' in *Self-Knowledge: A History*, ed. Ursula Renz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

through historical understanding that we will be able to disentangle the past from the present, and thereby gain a more transparent understanding of the human condition to which our self-understanding already belongs.

The possibility of self-knowledge stems from our ability, in the process of historical understanding, to make discoveries in the realm of meaning. By discovering the distinct meaning of concepts and thoughts belonging to the actions and practices of people in other times and cultures, we also gain an understanding of the limits and shapes of our own ways of thinking. Such discoveries in the realm of meaning are, in turn, for Collingwood, ultimately secured by the logical possibility of critically re-thinking the same thoughts that the practices and actions of others embody.⁴³ Consequently, Collingwood's idea of history *as* self-knowledge is not based on an empirical hypothesis – 'people who know more about their past tend to know more about themselves' – but should be read as a conceptual point about the historical nature of human thought. History is the only way to self-knowledge because our present understanding of ourselves is already a historical product.

We have now articulated at least two related senses in which the philosophical delineation of history matters for philosophy. Firstly, it is only by doing philosophy of history that we can recognize that our own thinking, philosophical or empirical, is the product of historically given institutions and practices. What philosophy gains from historical

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thinking, in this sense, is not raw material for the application of timeless philosophical thought, but an understanding of the concepts and procedures beyond which we cannot seem to get.⁴⁴ Historical thinking can unveil the ideas that are absolutely presupposed as conditions for going on as we do; and show why this is also subject to change. Secondly, a philosophical delineation of the subject matter of history will also be required for understanding *in what way* philosophical thought relates to its own historical context. If one assumes that this relation is causal, meaning that thought is merely a function of its context, then determinism and historicism follows. However, as Collingwood wanted to show with his extensive arguments for the possibility of re-enactment, human thought *can* reach beyond the confines of its own historical context. The philosophy of history, thus, enables us to understand the ways in which human thought is simultaneously both free and subject to the historical framework of our common human condition. In other words, history gives to philosophy an understanding of its own impurity.

Conclusion

Collingwood's philosophy of history has two closely related sides. On the one hand, Collingwood's philosophy of history constitutes a branch of his descriptive metaphysics. The main aim for Collingwood in this respect is to answer the question: how is historical knowledge possible? His answer is provided by a philosophical delineation of the fundamental *a priori* principles and concepts that govern history as a form of knowledge and experience. In the earlier part of this essay, I showed how Collingwood gives an account of the philosophy of history as an independent branch of

⁴³ A clear contrast is Michael Oakeshott's constructivist philosophy in which the possibility of such discoveries is not clear. For an in-depth discussion of Collingwood's idea of re-thinking the same thoughts, see Giuseppina D'Oro, "Collingwood on the Re-enactment and Identity of Thought," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 38, no. 1 (2000).

⁴⁴ Cf. Bernard Williams, "Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline," in *Philosophy as A Humanistic Discipline*, ed. A. W. Moore (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 195–6.

philosophical inquiry with its own aims, questions and subject matter. In order to appreciate his account, it is crucial to recognize that Collingwood's philosophy of history is essentially a philosophy about human agency, not a philosophy about 'the past' *per se*. This particular subject matter does not mean that Collingwood's account is outdated in relation to the main concerns of contemporary philosophy of history. On the contrary, as I argued, Collingwood's philosophy has direct relevance for current debates concerning the role of narrative, retrospectivity and ontology in historical research. In addition, Collingwood's main concepts will be very useful for constructing a radical critique of many philosophical assumptions that underpin contemporary positions in the philosophy of history.

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On the other hand, Collingwood's philosophy of history also constitutes a critique of traditional conceptions of philosophy. Collingwood's aim was not only to delineate 'history' as an independent branch of knowledge, but also to show how the development of historical thinking should transform the very idea of philosophy itself. This would constitute a philosophy of history in the wide sense. The aim of such a philosophy of history is to improve philosophy in light of the progress of historical thinking, not to reduce philosophy to a branch of the history of ideas. Rather, Collingwood wanted to deconstruct the idea that philosophy deals with timeless essences and show that there is historical 'impurity' at the very heart of philosophical thought. However, an impure philosophy is still philosophy and not history.

In the last part of the essay, I have wanted to show that there is a *rapprochement* between philosophy and history exemplified in Collingwood's concept of self-knowledge. The main question for Collingwood's philosophy of history in the narrow sense – how is historical knowledge possible? – is necessarily tied to an even more fundamental inquiry: how is it possible for mind to know itself? The metaphilosophical role of Collingwood's delineation of history is most obvious in his answer to this question. History is the only way to self-knowledge since it is only by doing history that we may discover the historical nature our own ways of thinking. Thus, it is only by historical thinking that philosophy can attain a reflective attitude towards its own concepts and motivations. However, as Collingwood makes clear, the *rapprochement* between history and philosophy is a bilateral affair: "of all forms of thought, history is that which stands nearest to philosophy and most shares its spirit."⁴⁵ As I read him, Collingwood meant that historical research is never a mere inquiry about external objects and events but must necessarily involve a process in which we make explicit what we in some sense already know. History properly understood includes reflection upon itself, and in this way is like philosophy.

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⁴⁵ Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 424.

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