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History as Self-Knowledge: Towards Understanding the Existential and Ethical Dimension of the Historical Past

História como autoconhecimento: para uma compreensão da dimensão existencial e ética do passado histórico

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the existential and ethical dimension of the historical past from two different perspectives. In the first part, the essay approaches the issue by examining the personal dimension of the historical past from the perspective of the individual subject. This examination elaborates the individual's perspective by literary illustrations from W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*. In the second part, the essay approaches the issue from a conceptual perspective in order to articulate the ways in which the idea of a historical past connects with the concept of history as self-knowledge. The essay engages with R. G. Collingwood's philosophy of history to show that there are significant ethical and existential aspects of the concept of historical past. In conclusion, the essay argues that, from both the perspective of the individual and conceptually, there is an important personal dimension residing within and not only beyond the historical past.

KEYWORDS

History; Historical understanding; Historiography

RESUMO

Este ensaio explora a dimensão existencial e ética do passado histórico a partir de duas perspectivas diferentes. Na primeira parte, o ensaio aborda a questão, examinando a dimensão pessoal do passado histórico a partir da perspectiva do sujeito, elaborando a essa perspectiva por meio de ilustrações literárias de *Austerlitz*, de W. G. Sebald. Na segunda parte, o ensaio aborda a questão sob uma perspectiva conceitual, a fim de articular as maneiras pelas quais a ideia de um passado histórico se conecta ao conceito de história como autoconhecimento. O ensaio se articula com a filosofia da história de R. G. Collingwood, a fim de mostrar que existem aspectos éticos e existenciais que são significativos para o conceito de passado histórico. Por fim, o ensaio argumenta que, tanto da perspectiva individual quanto conceitual, existe uma importante dimensão pessoal que reside dentro e não apenas além do passado histórico.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

História; Compreensão histórica; Historiografia

Introduction

The historical past *is* the past understood by the methods of historical research. What makes the historical past personal? There are at least two distinct ways of understanding this question. On the one hand, one may read the question as being about the relation between the historical past and individual human beings living at particular times and places. In this sense, the question will be about investigating, from the outside so to speak, the ways in which it *can* be an existential and ethical concern for individuals to understand the past by the methods of historical research. On the other hand, one may read the question as being about the general relation between the sense-making processes internal to the historical method and the very possibility of human self-understanding. If one reads the question in the latter sense, then one is interested in conceptual relations and not merely the contingent, empirical overlaps between the personal and the historical. The investigation in this case will be about the ways in which the concept of historical understanding necessarily connects with the (logical) possibility of self-understanding for historically-situated subjects.

In the following essay, I will explore the existential and ethical dimension of the historical past. I will argue that the root of the personal dimension of the historical is the unavoidable entanglement between our historical and practical relations to the past. In this respect, my essay opposes several influential accounts that tend to construe history as an inherently disengaged, alienated and objectivist discourse. It is this idea of history that serves as a central motivating factor for the recent turn towards 'historical experience', 'presence' and 'practical past' among key contemporary historical theorists (ANKERSMIT 2005; RUNIA 2014; WHITE 2014). In fact, these concepts were launched as instruments for exploring personal relations to the past that history, by its very nature, allegedly lacks. In opposition, this essay argues that the personal resides *within* and not only beyond historical relations to the past.

The first part of the essay engages this issue from the individual subject's perspective, whereas the second part engages the issue on a conceptual level by examining interconnections between the concept of historical past and the idea of history as self-knowledge.

I explore the perspective of the individual by revisiting themes from W. G. Sebald's book *Austerlitz*. This is the same book that both White and Runia use for illustrating their own theoretical claims; namely, that the past becomes personal only in the form of 'practical past' or 'presence' (WHITE 2014, p. 8; RUNIA 2014, p. 62). I will offer an alternative reading in order to show that *Austerlitz* elaborates not only the workings of 'practical past' or 'presence', but illustrates vividly the view expressed in this essay; that there is an unavoidable entanglement between our historical and practical relations to the past. I argue that *Austerlitz* makes palpable personal dimensions *within* the historical past from the perspective of the individual, and this feature of history takes shape through the historically displaced protagonist of Sebald's book. In the second part of the essay, I will address questions about whether there is also a personal dimension of history that can be unfolded by examining conceptual connections between historical past and the pursuit of human self-knowledge. The essay explores this dimension of the personal through a philosophical elucidation of the ways in which the very concept of historical understanding necessarily connects with ethical and existential dimensions of the self-understanding of historically-situated subjects. For this purpose, I will clarify Collingwood's idea of history as self-knowledge in order to show that there is a personal dimension within the basic processes of rendering actions and events intelligible in history. In conclusion, I will argue that both of these explorations support the main claim of the essay: the personal resides within and not only beyond the historical past.

Personal historical past from the perspective of the individual

In his book *Austerlitz*, Sebald writes:

[I]f I am walking through the city and look into one of those quiet courtyards where nothing has changed for decades, I feel, almost physically, the current of time slowing down in the gravitational field of oblivion. It seems to me then as if all the moments of our life occupy the same space, as if future events already existed and were only waiting for us to find our way to them at last, just as when we have accepted an invitation we duly arrive in a certain house at a given time. And might it not be [...] that we also have appointments to keep in the past, in what has gone before and is for the most part extinguished, and must go there in search for places and people who have some connection with us on the far side of time, so to speak? (SEBALD 2011, p. 257-258).

This voice belongs to the evasive and anxious main character of the book. He grew up in a small town in Wales with foster parents and later at a boarding school due to his foster mother's depression. During his upbringing, he felt a constant concern that something obvious was kept hidden from him. In his teenage years, the headmaster of his school summons him and tells him that his name is not, despite what he himself believes, Dafydd Elias, but Jacques Austerlitz. When he has been told his real name, the young Jacques asks: "Excuse me, sir, but what does it mean?" To which the headmaster gives a laconic reply: "I think you will find it is a small place in Moravia, site of a famous battle, you know." (SEBALD 2011, p. 68-69).

Jacques Austerlitz carries on with his real name, but forgetful of the history of his own life. He excels in school, receives a scholarship for university studies and will later become a lecturer and researcher in the history of art. Successively, his studies develop towards manic investigations of the architectural history of monumental public buildings such as prisons, mental hospitals and train stations. Jacques Austerlitz is conducting a

far-ranging trip to research the family resemblances between monumental buildings when he meets the narrator of the book. This research, which was meant to become his doctoral dissertation, had already swollen beyond reason and consisted now of endless preliminary notes from the study of details. He did not remember any longer, why he had chosen such a comprehensive subject matter, but he said it was probably due to insufficient supervision from the start.

When he is about 50 years of age, in the context of an investigation of the waiting room in London's Liverpool Street Station, Austerlitz's past begins to reveal itself through a sudden memory flash. Standing in the waiting room, he is paralyzed by a vision in which he sees himself and the foster parents that have come to meet him. Jacques Austerlitz realizes that he must have traveled through this very station almost half a century ago. Somewhat later, he listens to a radio program in which two women are discussing how they came to England in 1939 by a so called Kindertransport, out of harm's way from the war on the continent. At that moment, Austerlitz said he knew beyond doubt that those memories were part of his own life as well.

Austerlitz investigates, by testimony, archive research and visits to important sites, how his own life is entangled with the tragic history of 20th century Europe. Austerlitz finds out that his father, Maximilian, fled from his hometown, Prague, to Paris shortly before the arrival of the Nazis. He learns that Maximilian was in hiding for a long time, but later arrested and then disappeared in the prison camps of the war. Jacques mother, Agáta, chose to remain in Prague – unrealistically confident in her own prospects – and persevered until a raid in 1942 when she was sent to the ghetto in Theresienstadt. Austerlitz never finds definitive information about the final fate of his parents, but he is told that in 1944 Agáta is sent east from Theresienstadt.

One can pinpoint the overlap between history and practice in the simple yet profound question that Sebald poses for the

young Jacques: what does Austerlitz mean? By this question, Sebald is brilliantly bringing together two different relations to the past that are constantly in friction throughout his book. There is, on the one hand, the relation to the past expressed by the headmaster of the school: Austerlitz, the Battle of the Three Emperors on December 2, 1805. A decisive victory for Napoleon that would lead to the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire. An official, dead past, the events of which any school pupil will be able indifferently to recite like a fairy tale about witches and trolls. In other words, a historical past that is of no concern to Jacques in his individuality. If history never has the potential to go beyond the headmaster's stories of 'great men', then it is certainly doubtful that such 'history' would ever become a personal concern for Jacques Austerlitz.

What does Austerlitz mean? It is possible to recast this as a question that is both personal and historical simultaneously. When answering to such a question, the headmaster might instead have told Jacques about a relation to the past that he is unable to escape, a history that gets, so to speak, under his skin. He may start by telling him that Austerlitz is a Jewish name, that Jacques is a refugee from the Nazis. That at the time the place, Austerlitz, situated close to Brno in what was then Czechoslovakia, had a flourishing Jewish community, and that maybe his family had gotten their name from that community. That the Nazis built a ghetto nearby in Theresienstadt, at the north of Prague, that the Jews of Austerlitz were sent there and later to Auschwitz; that it is unlikely that his parents are still alive. In brief, the headmaster could have described a past with decisive relevance for how Jacques would think about himself and his own place in the world.

How should one understand the relation between, on the one hand, the past that is an inevitable part of our self-understanding, and, on the other hand, the picture of our past produced according to the methods of professional historical research? In the words of the British philosopher Michael Oakeshott, the issues at hand can be conceptualized as a distinction between

the practical and the historical past. Oakeshott illustrates the essence of his distinction by an example from his childhood. During walks in difficult country with his father, the young Oakeshott would get tired, become inclined to lag and perhaps rest in the grass. On such occasions, his father would encourage him to go further by half-seriously appealing to past record: this, Oakeshott's father would say, "is not what Trojans would do" (OAKESHOTT 1983, p. 38). In this colloquial setting, the Trojans were for the young Oakeshott "not a long-perished people, the intricacies of whose lives, performances and fortunes only a critical enquiry could resuscitate from record; they were living and to us familiar emblems of intrepidity" (OAKESHOTT 1983, p. 38). In Oakeshott's vocabulary, the Trojans belonged to the practical past. They were part of that "accumulation of symbolic persons, actions, utterances, situations and artifacts' which is an indispensable ingredient of an articulate civilized life" (OAKESHOTT 1983, p. 44).

Oakeshott's concept of the practical past is very useful for highlighting that our concerns with the past are often not historical. On the contrary, our everyday approach *is* to see the past in relation to practical concerns in the present. The past thus regarded is, by definition, a past that is not thought of as worth knowing for its own sake but only "in relation to ourselves and our current activities" (OAKESHOTT 1991, p. 162). We use this kind of past "to make valid practical beliefs about the present and the future" (OAKESHOTT 1933, p. 105). By contrast, the historical past is a past that is thought to exist independently of our own concerns. The past of history is studied for its own sake and deserves investigation in its own right. To understand something historically is to be "exclusively concerned with the past" (OAKESHOTT 1983, p. 27). The consequence of Oakeshott's distinction is a dichotomy between a practical past that is always with us, even during walks in heavy terrain, and an alienated historical past that is only to be found in history books.

How does the story of Austerlitz relate to the distinction between historical and practical past? As I already stated, both

White and Runia claim that Austerlitz illustrates the ways in which the past matters for an individual beyond history. White claims that the story of Austerlitz can be read as “as an allegory of the impossibility of – or to cite Nietzsche – the disadvantage (*Nachteil*) of history “für das leben” (WHITE 2014, p. 6). White comes to this conclusion by interpreting the story of Austerlitz as an illustration showing that “knowledge of ‘history’ raises more problems than it solves” and that, for Austerlitz, it turns out that history is “less than helpful when it is a matter of seeking meaning for an individual life or existence” (WHITE 2014, p. 6). In support of this reading, White cites the fact that Jacques Austerlitz’s historical inquiries seems to reveal the ways in which those who “made history” after the war were, through monumentalizing, just as keen to hide significant truths about the past as the Nazi regime was. Thus, White concludes that the lesson to be drawn from the Austerlitz story is that there is no such thing as “history” against which “anti-history” or “mythifications” could be measured and assessed (WHITE 2014, p. 6).

Runia, on the other hand, claims that Sebald was “obsessed with what I have called presence” and interprets Sebald’s entire authorship as a project for translating time into space (RUNIA 2014, p. 61, 67). The story of the book is accordingly cast as being about getting in contact with the past that made Jacques Austerlitz into the person that he is, and the channel for such contact is the unrepresented presence stored in the material remains of the past. Centrally, for Runia, the story of Austerlitz shows the ways in which the past, despite the intentions of the subject, gets in touch with Jacques Austerlitz through the artifacts, buildings, photographs and monuments of the past that somehow remembers him. According to Runia, Sebald presents a story about how Jacques Austerlitz is moved by the presence of the past through material things that “telescope” unrepresented meaning from the past into Austerlitz’s present, and this is a “subterranean” process of the unconscious beyond the meaning-making process of history (RUNIA 2014, p. 101-105).

Both White and Runia deliver interpretations that reveal important aspects of the existential depth in Sebald's work. Of course, given the fact that *Austerlitz* is a multifaceted work of art, it would be absurd simply to claim that their readings are somehow wrong or incorrect. Still, their readings are one-sided to the extent that they completely neglect important tensions between historical and practical relations to the past in *Austerlitz*. The most significant blind spot is that neither White nor Runia give any existential or ethical role, except in negative terms, to Jacques Austerlitz's efforts, as an art historian, to explore the troubled architectural history of 20th century Europe. I argue that it is this important story line in the book that offers the possibility of uncovering alternative and existential aspects of *Austerlitz*, which White and Runia have neglected. The predicament of Jacques Austerlitz, the art historian, provides an illustration of the entanglement of historical and practical past from the perspective of the individual subject.

In the life of Jacques Austerlitz, there can be no clean separation between 'the past in relation to ourselves' and 'the past for its own sake'. For this distinction neglects the fact that exploring the past for its own sake may have consequences for how we think about the past in relation to ourselves. The basic problem of the distinction becomes very clear from the perspective of the individual subject: Jacques Austerlitz, the art historian, is after all not another person but Jacques Austerlitz himself. This entangled predicament of the subject is clearly manifest in Sebald's descriptions of Jacques Austerlitz's research in the history of architecture. As Jacques Austerlitz reflects on the subject matter of his investigations, he pertinently observes that:

As far as I was concerned the world ended in the late nineteenth century. I dared go no further than that, although in fact the whole history of the architecture and civilization of the bourgeois age, the subject of my research, pointed in the direction of the catastrophic events already casting their shadows before them at the time. [...] And if some dangerous piece of information came my way despite all my precautions, as it inevitably did, I

was clearly capable of closing my eyes and ears to it, of simply forgetting it like any other unpleasantness. (SEBALD 2011, p. 141).

The inability of Austerlitz to investigate the historical past links directly and unavoidably with his inability to come to terms with a personal and practical past. In order not to expose his repression, and by that exploding his self-image, Austerlitz must self-censure his own historical research. This censorship concerns no matters of detail: an entire century in the history of Europe must be plunged into darkness. In this respect, there is truth to one of White's central claims – that history raises more problems than it solves. Nevertheless, the fact that history has the possibility of creating problems at the personal level for Jacques Austerlitz is a perfect example of the point I am arguing for: that historical investigations are entangled with practical relations to the past. If there were no such entanglement, then history could never become as much as a personal problem to begin with. Although White is certainly right, that history, by itself, cannot solve personal problems.

Sebald wrote in my first quote:

might it not be [...] that we also have appointments to keep in the past, in what has gone before and is for the most part extinguished, and must go there in search for places and people who have some connection with us on the far side of time, so to speak? (SEBALD 2011, p. 258).

The idea of an ethical imperative, Jacques Austerlitz's 'must', expressed in this excerpt by Sebald, shows us how the issue about the interconnection between the historical past and the practical past should be posed. We are not here dealing with the relationship between two logically independent phenomena – as when we are investigating whether the rain this morning was the cause of the wet asphalt. On the contrary, conceptions and repressions about our past are already part of our own

practical self-understanding, and this is shown by the fact that Jacques Austerlitz's image of himself could not survive a truthful, historical investigation of 20th century European history. Our self-understanding, and the practical past internal to it, is always already a product of our present historical situation, and this means that investigations of our historical situation 'for its own sake' can have dire consequences for the practical images of the past that shape our self-understanding. The reason is, of course, the overlap in subject matter: we may explore historically exactly that which connects directly with what we repress in our practical image of the past.

Undoubtedly, *Austerlitz* demonstrates a sense in which knowledge produced by the methods of historical research, may have a deep personal relevance for the individual subject. However, one obvious objection to this way of elucidating the personal dimension of history would be: how representative is the case of Jacques Austerlitz? Clearly, everyone's life is not as tightly connected with traumatic events of 20th century as Jacques Austerlitz's. Someone else may be able to explore the history of the 20th century without any dire consequences for the practical past of their self-understanding at all. Still, the best way of thinking about this contingency is probably to view it as scale without either of the extremes – there is neither complete lack nor necessary connections with a personal dimension from the perspective of the individual. For the extremes one would have to, on the one hand, imagine cases of history as *pure* escapism, or, on the other, history that dealt *only* with matters that directly connect with the personal life of the individual subject. I leave it up to the reader to consider whether it is possible to imagine such cases coherently. What requires further exploration is, instead, the ways in which there is a necessary connection between existential and ethical concerns for the subject's self-understanding and the sense-making processes internal to the very idea of a historical past.

Conceptual connections between historical past and the personal

What is the starting point of every attempt to make sense of the past in historical research? Answering this question properly is crucial for understanding conceptual connections between historical past and the pursuit of human self-knowledge. The reason is, as I will argue, that the existential and ethical relevance of engaging in historical research resides in the potential for such research to change the self-understanding of the historian. So, what is the starting point of historical research? The answer is, I believe, uncontroversial and clearly articulated already by G. W. F. Hegel in his *Introduction to Philosophy of History*:

As the first condition to be observed, we could [...] declare that we must apprehend the historical faithfully. But with such general terms as "apprehend" and "faithfully" there lies an ambiguity. Even the ordinary, average historian, who believes and says that he is merely receptive to the data, is not passive in his thinking; he brings his own categories along with him, and sees his data through them. In every treatise that is to be scientific, Reason must not slumber, and reflection must be actively applied. (HEGEL 1998, p. 14).

Hegel's fundamental point is that history starts from contemporary categories of intelligibility. In addition, historical research is, by necessity, reflective and the reasons are, on the one hand, that history aspires to be a science, and, on the other hand, that events and actions in the past may strike the contemporary person as utterly unintelligible. Hence, history is the active employment of our own categories to render intelligible what may seem, on the face of it, as incomprehensible actions and events in the past. However, the fact that the historian brings his own categories along with him, does not imply that the historian merely forces that which is foreign to fit with his present categories. Rather, the application of Reason, so to speak, must be conducted in ways that both render the foreign

intelligible and preserves its otherness. Naturally, this goal will place certain demands on revising the current categories of the historian in order to make room for otherness. In other words, to render what is foreign intelligible involves a two-way relation. This relation involves, on the one hand, re-describing the objects in order to make them fit with our own categories, and, on the other hand, openness towards changes in current categories through confrontation with foreign categories of intelligibility. In relation to this two-way relation of cultural understanding, Peter Winch wrote:

We are not seeking a state in which things will appear to us just as they do to members of *S* [= the alien society], and perhaps such a state is unattainable anyway. But we *are* seeking a way of looking at things which goes beyond our previous way in that it has in some way taken account of and incorporated the other way that members of *S* have of looking at things. Seriously to study another way is necessarily to seek to extend our own – not simply to bring the other way within the already existing boundaries of our own. (WINCH 1972, p. 33)

Still, this obviously raises the question: how are the contemporary categories of the historian to be understood – are they not also products of the historical process? In addition, are those categories completely transparent to the historian, or are the categories themselves only articulated and unfolded in and through the activity of sense-making which may show their limited application for rendering the foreign intelligible? Questions like these led Collingwood to formulate his ideas about history as a form of self-knowledge.

The most basic premise of Collingwood's idea of history as self-knowledge is the contention that the human condition necessarily involves the inheritance of historically-constructed ideas, practices and institutions from previous generations. History is an integral part of human experience itself (COLLINGWOOD 1993, p. 158). Crucially, the starting point for anyone within this human condition is not one in which the meaning of inherited ideas, 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. Hence, for Collingwood, the historical subject does not first understand herself and her own time, and then other subjects and times. Rather, our understanding of the present and the past is uncovered in the same movement of thought.

According to Collingwood, history is crucial for the reflective self-understanding of the subject. The reason is that historical research offers the possibility of understanding other ways of thought and life, or in Hegel's terms the 'categories' of others, and it is only in the light of such historical contrasts that we gain access to a deeper understanding of the characteristics of categories and ways of thinking peculiar to our own time and place. It is also within the same movement of historical thought that we discern to what extent our own ideas and practices derive from earlier epochs. The historian, so to speak, disentangles the past from the present in which it was already embedded (COLLINGWOOD 1926, p. 150). Historical understanding is thus effective at both ends: our self-understanding is created in the moment that the subject understands the historical object as an Other. This means that the starting point for Collingwood is non-Cartesian: human beings do not start from a transparent self-understanding, but understand themselves only through activities directed towards other people. In other words, self-understanding is not a thing, but rather a relation that presupposes the contrasts created by historical understanding.

The rest of this essay is dedicated to exploring the existential relevance of historical understanding from the perspective of Collingwood's philosophy of history. By exploring Collingwood's idea of history, I hope to provide an alternative, but a necessarily somewhat tentative account of the relation between existential concerns for reflective self-understanding and the sense-making process in historical research. The purpose of this account is to serve as a thought-provoking alternative to the

contemporary theories that leave little or no room for personal dimensions *within* historical ways of understanding the past, i.e. the historical past. However, the existential relevance of historical understanding is an integral part of Collingwood's general idea of history and his comprehensive vision concerning the proper subject matter and practice of historical research. Naturally, it will not be possible to defend Collingwood's entire idea of history within the confines of this essay. Within the realms of the possible is, instead, to show that questions about the existential relevance of historical research connects necessarily with perhaps the grandest question of all in this field – what is history?

The historical past of thought

Contrary to much classical work in hermeneutics, Collingwood is rather optimistic about the possibility of understanding otherness in history.¹ Collingwood claims that understanding otherness is, in principle, always possible. So, why this optimism? Collingwood's ideas about the subject matter of history provides the answer. According to Collingwood, the historical past is accessible to our understanding because the subject matter of the historical past is human "thought". Now, Collingwood's concept of thought has a much broader meaning than our ordinary understanding of that term. The best contemporary comparison would probably be the concept of historical sense recently developed by Jeffrey Andrew Barash in his book *Collective Memory and the Historical Past* (2016). The key point, for Collingwood, is that we can think of the human world as different forms of embodiment of thoughts in a wide sense. The pertinence of this idea shows itself in a very wide range of examples.

For instance, actions embody thoughts, and if we want to understand action in the past, then we must think through the reasons and epistemic premises for the action from the agent's perspective. Events also embody thoughts, and if we want to understand the general character of an event in the past,

1 - For a detailed assessment of the difference between Collingwood, Ricoeur and Gadamer on this issue, see (KOBAYASHI & MARION 2011).

then we must also reconstruct the contemporary significance of the event for the agents themselves. Equally, artifacts also embody thoughts, and if we want to understand an artifact – say Hadrian's wall running through England, which Collingwood examined for thousands of hours through archaeological field work – then we must reconstruct the purpose that this artifact served for contemporary agents. In other words, human phenomena have a constitutive relationship to "thought", and this is expressed by Collingwood through an allusion to F. W. J. Schelling. 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 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. (COLLINGWOOD 1993, p. 112).

Crucially, Collingwood is here making 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.

According to Collingwood, collective human phenomena are as closely tied to thoughts as individual action is. 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 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 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.² 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 elaboration above should clarify the meaning in Collingwood's famous claim, that all history is the history of thought. However, that claim will naturally lead to another question: what does it mean to understand thought? On Collingwood's account, such understanding is only possible by re-thinking past thoughts for oneself: "one can only apprehend a thought by thinking it, and apprehend a past thought by re-thinking it." (COLLINGWOOD 1999, p. 223). As the quote implies, Collingwood does not assume that there is any peculiar problem in understanding past thought in contrast to present thought. Collingwood writes:

If it is by historical thinking that we re-think and so rediscover the thought of Hammurabi or Solon, it is in the same way that we discover the thought of a friend who writes us a letter, or a stranger who crosses the street. (COLLINGWOOD 1993, p. 219).

2 - 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.

Collingwood puts great emphasis on the idea that we must re-think the very same thought of the agent and not merely something similar, our re-thought thought cannot simply be a good copy. This might sound very contradictory: for is not my thought always embedded in my own historical condition, i.e. tied to a specific context of other thoughts and emotions, even if I may do my utmost to reconstruct the historical world of thoughts in which the original thought belongs. Furthermore, can it really be the very same thought if I am the one thinking it? For unless I literally become someone else, then it seems that our thoughts must at least be numerically distinct. I cannot become Hammurabi merely through mind power, so to speak.

Still, these very objections are addressed by Collingwood as examples of a misunderstanding of the question at issue. To clarify his argument, Collingwood distinguishes between the immediacy of thought and thought in mediation. In its immediacy, thought is individual and idiosyncratic; it occurs “at a certain time, and in a certain context of other acts of thought, emotions, sensations, and so forth.” (COLLINGWOOD 1993, p. 297). Thought in this sense cannot be re-enacted, but Collingwood also argues: “an act of thought, in addition to actually happening, is capable of sustaining itself and being revived or repeated without loss of its identity.” (COLLINGWOOD 1993, p. 300). This aspect of thought is its propositional content, which is what Collingwood calls thought in mediation, and viewed under this aspect thought is not confined within time. The mediacy of past thought can, therefore, be re-thought without loss of identity in the mind of the historian.

Unsurprisingly, this is the most controversial part of Collingwood’s concept of understanding thought.³ However, I do think there is a rather simple way of explaining the basic point Collingwood wants to express. Collingwood’s basic claim is that historical research has the possibility to uncover conceptual relations in the past without at the same time altering these relations merely by understanding them. For instance, using Collingwood’s example, which was very typical for his time:

3 - For discussions and refutations of the usual critique, see (D’ORO 2000; SARI 1984; VAN DER DUSSEN 2016).

Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon (COLLINGWOOD 1993, p. 213). What did the crossing mean? Well, the basic thought embodied in the event is that the Crossing the Rubicon with troops constituted an infringement of Republican law in the days of Caesar. This thought is accessible to us in virtue of our ability to understand what Roman republican law involved. There is a conceptual relation between 'crossing the Rubicon with troops' and 'violating republican law' that it is possible for us to understand in the same sense as contemporary witnesses did.

If one thinks Collingwood's example of Caesar is hopelessly dated, then consider Russia's seizing of three Ukrainian vessels in the Kerch Strait on November 25th 2018.⁴ The Ukrainian and the UN condemned Russia's attack as a violation of Ukrainian waters. It is possible that this event will be interpreted, by future historians, as the cause of a third world conflict. But that the seizing of the boats on Ukrainian territorial waters constitutes a violation of an agreement is not the kind of consideration that needs to await the verdict of time and retrospective interpretation. For it is entailed by the terms of the Russian-Ukrainian treaty that the seizing of the boats constitutes an act of aggression. This is a conceptual claim that is true come what may and cannot be empirically verified or falsified by the future course of events. Collingwood's claim is that re-thinking such conceptual relations is possible from whatever time and place we now happen to occupy, and that when historians engage in such rethinking they also come to understand the conceptual relations – or "thought" – in the same sense that contemporary agents did. For Collingwood, understanding conceptual relations from the perspective of historical agents *is* to uncover the historical past.

*4 - I owe this example to
Giuseppina D'Oro.*

Still, what if the critic now objects: rethinking cannot apprehend the conceptual relations of the target actions or events as they always were for the agents, for the objects of understanding are inevitably transformed by the historian's own categories and ways of thinking. Collingwood would partly

agree with this objection and he stresses that rethinking is a critical reflection from the historian's own position in time. Collingwood also acknowledges that this critical aspect means that "to re-enact [conceptual relations or 'thought' in] the past in the present is to re-enact it in a context which gives it a new quality." (COLLINGWOOD 1993, p. 447). However, Collingwood still claims that apprehending conceptual relations through re-thinking is not merely the creation of meaning through the historian's own categories, but a process that apprehends qualities belonging to the conceptual relations or thoughts themselves. Why? Why not simply say that historical understanding is an endlessly creative process in which whatever meaning we 'discover' is merely the product of our own concepts and standards of intelligibility. Well, sometimes this is indeed the case, for instance in 'Whig History', but the important question is whether there is even the logical possibility of apprehending conceptual relations as they appeared for the agents themselves. Collingwood's argument for this is a negative one: he does not offer proof for the existence of such a possibility. Instead, Collingwood invites us to imagine what denying that possibility would involve for the prospect of interpersonal communication in general.

Denying the possibility of having the same thoughts as others will get us, according to Collingwood, into severe problems about the very possibility of understanding the speech and action of other people at a very basic level. Because to deny that our thoughts can be the same implies the supposition that even the content of thought is always only a function of its context. Such a denial would, for example, also mean that we cannot really argue or discuss with each other at all. For what would I "agree with" or "oppose" if the thought that you are expressing in a discussion is always actually different from my understanding of what you are saying? After all, your thought is a mere product of your own particular context, and your context can never be mine as long as I am not you. Alas, we are doomed by the contextuality of thought to forever talk past each other. This is the reason why Collingwood claimed that

the possibility of having identical thoughts could be denied only at the cost of solipsism. (COLLINGWOOD 1993, p. 288-289).

According to Collingwood, the identity of thought is a logical demand for the very possibility of understanding human actions and events. If our re-thought thought is not the same but different, then this means that we have not succeed in identifying what kind of human phenomenon we are dealing with. For think about how we understand movements and behavior as expressions of action. One action is, by definition, differentiated from another on the basis of the thought it embodies, so it is simply nonsense to claim that I understand what someone is doing or saying without also understanding what thoughts they are expressing. For example: how do we differentiate in lecture halls between a person who wants to pose a question and the person who is pointing at a broken light bulb, if we can never have access to the same thoughts that their movements embody? Differently put: without rethinking the same thought, we will not able to discriminate between actions. Such discrimination and rethinking is, of course, something that we constantly do both in our everyday lives and in historical research. A testimony to its success is the fact that we do not have constant and insoluble problems with understanding what other people say and do.

5 - Those that doubt the critical potential of such historical questions should, for example, read Jason Tebbe's (2016) short piece on "Twenty-First Century Victorians".

Historical understanding as work on oneself

What does all of this mean for the idea of history as self-knowledge? Well, it means, for Collingwood, that reflective self-knowledge from history will only be possible if re-enactment is possible. For it is only by rethinking the thought embodied in past actions, institutions and traditions, that we will be able to investigate whether the ideals of previous epochs are still with us. Are the morals or the family ideals of the Victorians' still shaping our present ways of being together with other people?⁵ Nothing but re-enactive understanding will possibly tell us the answer. For it is only through re-enactment that we will be able to identify the "thought" or historical sense of past

human phenomena, which is the identity of the historical past. In addition, every question about whether ways of thinking in the past are still part of our self-understanding today, must presuppose that we can identify what kind of thoughts we are dealing with. Otherwise, we would not even be able to discriminate between the kinds of concepts and ways of thinking that we consider foreign and those that we consider integral to our own time and place.

This idea comes with clear practical consequences. By rethinking past thought we will be able to discover the ways in which the past lives on, and only by this discovery can our lives, as Collingwood solemnly puts it: be “raised to a higher potential.” (COLLINGWOOD 2013, p. 106). This is Collingwood’s way of saying that the historical past that historical research articulates is necessary for living a responsible life. The past is included in the present and this entails that our entire form of life – all of our distinct ways of acting, thinking, reacting, behaving and so forth – are already products of a historical process. Human beings do not merely have a history, they *are* their history. However, engaging with historical research is, of course, no guarantee that we are discovering the living past and not merely perpetuating our own prejudices.

Jacques Austerlitz studies in the history of architecture display the ever-present possibility of self-deception. This was evident to Austerlitz himself when he confessed that: “if some dangerous piece of information came my way despite all my precautions, as it inevitably did, I was clearly capable of closing my eyes and ears to it, of simply forgetting it like any other unpleasantness.” (SEBALD 2011, p. 141). This tells us, in philosophical terms, that the relation between historical understanding and self-knowledge is necessary, but not sufficient. To engage in an historical investigation does not automatically entail that one is challenging one’s own self-understanding. On the contrary, as Austerlitz himself later observes, his research into the history of architecture functioned as kind of surrogate, a compensatory memory,

for the knowledge that he was hiding from himself. We may deceive ourselves in historical research as much as in any form of human activity.

However, one thing is certain: it is only by doing history, in the Collingwoodian sense of that term, that there is even the possibility of becoming aware of how we are conditioned and moved by the past. This necessity stems from the fact that it is only through a conscientious historical investigation that one is given as much as the opportunity to analyze the ways in which our past conditions the self-knowledge we think that we have. Collingwood, therefore, rightly stresses that his idea of history is a form of self-knowledge. As Collingwood writes:

If what the historian knows is past thoughts, and if he knows them by re-thinking them himself, it follows that the knowledge he achieves by historical inquiry is not knowledge of his situation as opposed to knowledge of himself, it is knowledge of his situation which is at the same time knowledge of himself. In re-thinking what somebody else thought, he thinks it himself. In knowing that somebody else thought it, he knows that he himself is able to think it. And finding out what he is able to do is finding out what kind of man he is. (COLLINGWOOD 2013, p. 114-115).

In this quote, Collingwood offers a picture of historical understanding as work on oneself about what one can render intelligible. From this perspective, it is not difficult to see that historical understanding will be indispensable for anyone who cares to have an honest and responsible understanding of themselves. In contrast, many forms of knowledge do not have a necessary relation to our self-understanding – I may live responsibly and honestly without, say, knowledge about physics, mechanics or biology. This is not the case with inquiries relating to self-knowledge, because without self-knowledge I will never know if my ideas about, say, the ‘true’ and the ‘good’ are mere products of my own fears, pettiness or selfish interests. Similarly, without historical understanding I will never know whether I am living responsibly or merely following habits of thought and action inherited from previous generations.

Discovering the living past through the re-enactment of past thought is, therefore, a precondition for anything worthy of the name of self-knowledge. In relation to these issues, Collingwood speaks of his idea of history as standing “in the closest possible relation to practical life.” (COLLINGWOOD 2013, p. 106).

It should also be clear that Collingwood neither wants, nor can, develop a method for solving problems of historical understanding. Re-enactment is *not* a universal method for discovering the past as it always was. The reason is, of course, that re-enactment within historical understanding, similar to interpersonal understanding in general, is a process in which the individual subject *tries out* whether they can indeed rethink, and thereby discover, the thoughts that other human phenomena embody. In other words, the sense-making processes of historical research are inherently personal. Given that the individual subject itself features as an integral part of the process, there can naturally be no general methodological solutions for untangling seemingly incomprehensible human phenomena. On the other hand, our failures to understand will equally provide material for analysis: for what we after self-scrutiny still consider incomprehensible will show us as much about where we stand as cases in which understanding runs smoothly.

History is, therefore, as Collingwood famously claimed, “the only way in which man can know himself.” (COLLINGWOOD 2005, p. 180). The reason should now be clear: one can only achieve a reflective self-understanding through contrasts with the forms of otherness created through historical research. As my discussion has shown, Collingwood thought that it is, in principle, always possible to discover otherness in the realm of meaning. Yet, we may often shun away from doing so, which Austerlitz also did for most of his life, due to the fact that discovering otherness may tell us things about ourselves that we do not want to know. But it is still only this realization, about the interconnectedness of reflective self-understanding and the discovery of otherness in history, that

will, according to Collingwood, put us in “a position to obey the oracular precept ‘know thyself’, and to reap the benefits that only such obedience could confer.” (COLLINGWOOD 2013, p. 116).

Still, even if we grant that history is existentially relevant as a form of self-knowledge, then this does not mean that we have reached a stable resting place for the subject. Quite the contrary, the examined life of historical research involves the subject in a spiral towards depths without ever touching unmovable ground. This was also how the story of Austerlitz ends. Sebald writes:

When we took leave of each other outside the railway station, Austerlitz gave me an envelope which he had with him and which contained the photograph from the theatrical archives in Prague, as a memento, he said, for he told me that he was now about to go to Paris to search for traces of his father’s last movements, and to transport himself back to the time when he too had lived there, in one way feeling liberated from the false pretences of his English life, but in another oppressed by the vague sense that he did not belong in this city either, or indeed anywhere else in the world. (SEBALD 2011, p. 253-254).

The most important pointer of this quote is that the self-knowledge of history tells the subject *not* who they always were. Instead, the process of research is one in which the subject is constantly made and re-made in relation to the questions that they pose and the results that they achieve. This gives more currency to Hayden White’s well-known dictum that historical knowledge is a form of “maker’s knowledge”, as he calls it. White writes:

Historical knowledge, in short, is human self-knowledge and especially knowledge of how human beings make themselves through knowing themselves and come to know themselves in the process of making themselves. (WHITE 2010, p. 266).

I agree, but this claim cannot stand by itself. For as I showed in this essay, history can only be coherently imagined as a form of self-knowledge if we also allow for an essentially Collingwoodian idea of historical understanding, and this idea is centrally premised on the (logical) possibility of rethinking conceptual relations in the past as they appeared from the agent's perspective. In other words, historical understanding and self-understanding are two sides of a coin, so there is no way of having one without the other. Nonetheless, the issue of history and self-knowledge points towards underexplored similarities between White and Collingwood that would deserve further attention. In contrast with the recent turn towards 'experience' and 'presence', both Collingwood and White claim that history can only be understood within and not beyond human realms of meaning.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have explored the personal dimension of the historical past from two different perspectives. Firstly, I addressed questions about whether there is a personal dimension to the historical past from the perspective of the individual. This is a question about the personal that highlights the existential and ethical relevance of understanding the past by the methods of history. I articulated the personal dimension of history by revisiting the problematic of the historical past in Sebald's *Austerlitz*. The purpose of this literary illustration was showing that, for Jacques Austerlitz, the distinction between practical and the historical past collapsed in his efforts to understand the history of 20th century European architecture. This entanglement was explained by the potential overlap between practice and history from the perspective of the individual subject: one may explore historically exactly that which connects directly with what one represses in one's practical image of the past. This entanglement is, as I argued, an important existential aspect of *Austerlitz* that both Runia and White neglect in their respective interpretations of that book.

However, I argued that the entanglement between historical and practical past, from the perspective of the individual, is not necessary but contingent upon the interests and situations of particular, historically placed or displaced subjects. In other words, from the perspective of the individual, the historical past is only contingently personal.

Secondly, the essay explored conceptual connections between the idea of a historical past and the pursuit of human self-knowledge. In this part of the essay, I was interested in conceptual relations between historical understanding on the one hand, and the possibility of self-understanding for historically-situated subjects on the other. In contrast with the first part of the essay, these sections address not merely contingent, empirical overlaps between the personal and the historical past, but logical questions about whether there is a personal dimension included in the very idea of historical understanding. For answering this question about conceptual relations, I revisited Collingwood's idea of history as self-knowledge through a detailed elaboration of the ways in which Collingwood's idea connects with a comprehensive view about the nature of historical research. The presentation of Collingwood's view aimed to offer an account of the ways in which even the most basic efforts to render actions and events intelligible in historical research involves a personal dimension. However, I showed that Collingwood's view presupposes the logical possibility of rethinking conceptual relations in the past without at the same time altering them. I offered a brief defense of Collingwood by showing the consequences of denying the possibility of such rethinking for the possibility of interpersonal communication. The aim of the latter part of the essay was *not* to demonstrate that Collingwood's view is right, but to elucidate the conceptual connection between historical understanding and reflective self-understanding.

What is the connection between the two parts of the essay? The most significant connection is one about the delineation of different kinds of possibilities of personal relevance for

the historical past. The first part of the essay shows that the potential for the historical past to inform an individual person's self-understanding, and thereby have personal relevance, is dependent on the will. This is not a matter of simple choice, but a question about resoluteness in the face of uncomfortable historical subject matters. Thus, it is a matter for the will in the sense that one must struggle against one's own inclinations to avoid historical investigations that are in conflict with one's present self-image – this inclination defeated Jacques Austerlitz. In the second part of the essay, the delineation of possibilities for personal relevance went beyond issues pertaining to the will in order to articulate the sense in which there is, so to speak, an existential dimension built into the very idea of understanding the past historically, i.e. the historical past. This conceptual dimension was articulated by an assessment of how historical understanding offers a self-reflective understanding of the contemporary categories and standards of intelligibility of the historian.

The central conclusion of my conceptual discussion is one about the ways in which the idea of history as self-knowledge, and thereby as a certain kind of personal relevance, is dependent on the possibility of re-enactment, which Collingwood saw as the core of the idea of a historical past. If re-enactment of the "thought" or sense of historical actions and events was impossible, then there can be no historical contrasts against which historically-situated subjects can achieve a critical and reflective self-understanding. However, I also showed that the very idea of re-enactment relates to Collingwood's comprehensive views about the proper subject matter of historical research. In this respect, the essay shows that the personal dimension of the historical past is not an isolated issue, but connects inevitably with one's general account of the nature of history and the conditions of possibility for historical understanding. Thus, the essay tells the reader not what kind of conception of history they should choose, but articulates the kinds of existential relevance that the different views of history can possibly have. If historical understanding consists

merely of arbitrary projections of our present categories on the blank screen of an unknown past, then history can only be existentially relevant as a peculiar psychological phenomenon. However, if historical understanding has the possibility of discovering otherness in the past, as Collingwood thought, then the historical past will be existentially relevant for anyone who cares to have an honest and reflective self-understanding.

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