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Collingwood, Scientism and Historicism: Introduction

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Abstract

The philosophy of history is undergoing something of a revival. Much has happened since its heydays in the 1960s when methodological discussions concerning the structure of explanation in history and the natural sciences were central to the philosophical agenda. This introduction revisits Collingwood's contribution to the philosophy of history, his views on the relation between science and history, and the possibility of historical knowledge suggesting his work is of enduring relevance to contemporary debates. It locates his contribution in the context of the hermeneutic tradition and locates his defence of the methodological autonomy of history in the context of recent debates concerning the relation between science and the history of the philosophy of science.

Keywords

explanatory pluralism – historical relativism – scientism – pragmatics of explanation

In *The Idea of History*¹ Collingwood set out to defend the claim that history is a *Geisteswissenschaft* or a science of the mind and that, as such, it is methodologically autonomous with respect to natural science. The claims that a) history is the study of mind and that b) it is methodologically autonomous with respect to natural science are closely connected because the consideration that historians, unlike natural scientists, are concerned with the past rather than the future, is insufficient to show that history has a subject matter of its own. After all, the past is the concern of many other forms of inquiry, such as palaeontology, forensic archaeology, and big-bang physics. For history to be autonomous it must have a subject matter that is not shared by natural science. History, Collingwood claims, does have its own distinctive subject matter, but it is its focus on actions, *not* the past, that accounts for its autonomous status. Actions constitute a genuinely distinctive historical subject matter because they cannot be understood by the methods of natural science. They are understood, not when they are subsumed under empirical laws, but when they are rationalized and thus comprehended as an expression of thought. Nomological explanations are suited to the investigation of events which, Collingwood claims, are the subject matter of the natural sciences, but actions must be understood in a different way, namely as expressions of thought, if they are to be understood at all. What makes history distinctive, therefore, is not that it studies the past *per se*, but that it studies it *in a different way*, as an expression of thought/mind. History is therefore a science of mind or *Geisteswissenschaft* and its distinctive method and subject matter are brought to the fore when they are contrasted with the method and subject matter of natural science.

The distinction between the subject matters of history and natural science (actions and events) is primarily a distinction between the forms of inference at work in the sciences of mind and nature. "Mind" or "action" is that which is investigated rationally by establishing conceptual rather than empirical connections. "Nature" or "events" is that which is studied empirically, by the method of observation and inductive generalization. Biology, chemistry and physics are *natural* sciences to the extent that they operate in this way, notwithstanding the many other differences between them. The distinction between the rationalizing and nomological inferences at work in the sciences of mind and nature respectively should not be hypostatized. The subject matter of history, for Collingwood, is not the human being strictly speaking, but human beings in so far as what they do is understood as actions or expressions of thought, through the deployment of rationalizing explanations. The distinction between the

1 Collingwood, R. G., *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944); revised edition, with an introduction by Jan Van der Dussen (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993). Abbreviated as IH.

study of mind and nature as Collingwood understands it runs deeper than the distinction between academic disciplines or subjects. In Collingwood's view, for example, what would determine whether an archaeologist is a historian (in his sense of the term "history") or a natural scientist, is the kind of questions which she is seeking answers to and the kind of inferences which are used to answer those questions. A forensic archaeologist making use of carbon-dating techniques would not be a historian, but a humanistically oriented archaeologist looking for rationalizing answers to a certain kind of (teleological) why-question, would be. History understood as a *Geisteswissenschaft* or science of the mind cannot therefore be straightforwardly identified with the academic discipline taught in university departments. A subject matter is historical when it is understood through rationalizing rather than nomological inferences. In this sense "history" is found wherever rationalizing inferences are made.

Collingwood's argument for the methodological autonomy of history, understood as the study of mind, has its roots in the view that explanation must be fit for purpose. Since the kind of questions asked by historians tend to be teleological in nature, why-questions, deployed in historical inquiry, instigate a search for goals which, when ascribed to agents, rationalize what happened and, in so doing, show what the point of their action was. The concept of explanation with which historians work captures a distinctive sense of explanation according to which to make sense of an action requires ascribing the agent a practical argument in which the epistemic premise (the *causa quod*) and the motivational premise (the *causa ut*) rationalize (in a fairly anaemic sense of rationalize) what the agent did by showing it to be instrumental to the achievement of certain goals. (EM, 292). Answering the why-questions typically asked by historians, therefore, requires deploying explanations that are different in kind from the explanations which answer the sort of "why-questions" asked by scientists:

When a scientist asks "why did that piece of litmus paper turn pink?" he means "on what kind of occasions do pieces of litmus turn pink?" When an historian asks: "why did Brutus stab Caesar?" he means "what did Brutus think, which made him decide to stab Caesar?"

IH, 214

Different types of why-questions have their own corresponding sort of causal/ becauseal answers or, in other words, their own kind of explanation.² When an

² Collingwood, R. G. 1940. *An Essay on Metaphysics*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), part III. Revised edition, with an introduction by Rex Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Abbreviated as EM.

engineer or car-mechanic wonders why an engine failed, they expect a certain type of answer, one which points out what can be changed to fix the problem. The kind of questions asked by engineers and car mechanics are the kind of why-questions that are answered by appealing to a conception of causation as a handle, which takes a cause to be “an event by producing or preventing which one can produce or prevent that whose cause it is said to be”.³ This manipulability conception of causation, which Collingwood refers to as cause in sense II, is at work in the practical sciences of nature but is on the other hand absent from purely theoretical sciences, such as physics, which ask a different kind of why-question, questions which deploy a different conception of causation that Collingwood refers to as sense III. Explanations which appeal to causation in sense III appeal to laws which are exceptionless and which, unlike the generalizations at work in the practical sciences of nature, are not hedged by *ceteris paribus* clauses. To illustrate: the heat will cause (in sense II) the plants to die *unless they are watered*, or dehydration will cause (in sense II) a headache *unless headache tablets are ingested*. By contrast tidal currents are caused (in sense III) by gravitational forces: given the gravitational pull of the Moon, water will rise on Earth. The rising of the water is not conditional upon everything else being equal in the way in which the wilting of the plants is caused by the heat but is conditional upon their not being watered.

To satisfy the curiosity of the person who asks a question, the answer must be of the right kind, that is, it must match the “because” in the answer to the “why” in the question. Failure to do so, Collingwood claims, simply leaves the question unanswered:

If my car fails to climb up a steep hill, and I wonder why, I shall not consider my problem solved by a passer-by who tells me that the top of the hill is farther away from the earth's centre than its bottom, and that consequently more power is needed to take the car uphill than to take her along the level ... All this is quite true; what the passer-by has described is one of the conditions which together form ... what I call the cause in sense III ... But suppose an AA man comes along, opens the bonnet, holds up a loose high-tension lead and says: ‘Look here sir, you're running on

3 For an account of Collingwood's conception of causation in the context of contemporary manipulability accounts of causation see Popa, E., “Collingwood and Manipulability-based Approaches to Causation: Methodological Issues”. *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies* 22 /1 (2016), 139–166. Special issue on Collingwood and Philosophical Methodology guest edited by Giuseppina D'Oro and James Connelly.

three cylinders'. My problem is now solved ... If I had been a person who could flatten out hills by stamping on them the passer-by would have been right in calling to the hill as the cause of the stoppage; not because the hill was a hill, but because I was able to flatten it out.

EM, 302–3

There are, Collingwood claims, different senses of causation (or of explanation) that are at work in history, in the practical, and in the theoretical sciences of nature. These different senses of causation/explanation are fit to answer the kind of questions asked by historians, practical and theoretical scientists respectively. Just as the driver's question in Collingwood's example is not answered by the physicist's consideration that the top of the hill is further removed from the centre of the Earth than its base, so the curiosity of the historian who seeks an explanation for president Kennedy's death will not be satisfied by consulting his medical file and discovering his death was caused by two bullets which fractured his cranium. For the historian, unlike the physician, is concerned with Kennedy's death as an assassination, not as a biological phenomenon and to describe it as an assassination requires explaining it teleologically as a (goal-directed) action by appealing to what Collingwood calls "sense I" of causation. In the historical sense of causation (sense I) to explain is to supply a motive, not to subsume the explanandum under an empirical law. There is a reciprocal relation holding between the kind of explanation one uses (or the sense of causation that governs a form of inquiry) and the nature of one's *explanandum*: method determines subject matter.

The reciprocal relation holding between method and subject matter entails that explanations of different forms or kinds do not compete because they are not meant as answers to the same why-questions. The claim that a) JFK died because of a fatal brain injury, and the claim that b) JFK died because he was the victim of a carefully orchestrated political conspiracy, do not compete in the way in which the claim that b) JFK was the victim of a political conspiracy and that c) JFK was the target of a lone killer, do: b) and c) answer the same question by providing different explanations of the same kind; a) and b) do not answer the same question. They are not just *different explanations*, they are rather *explanations of a different kind*. As such they have a different *explanandum*. The upshot of Collingwood's discussion of the different senses of causation is that there are different kinds of explanation which are invoked in different contexts of inquiry and answer different kinds of why-questions. The divide between history as a science of mind and the natural sciences is a divide between the different kinds of because-answers they give to different kinds of why-questions.

Both history and natural science presuppose a conception of explanation that gives rise to certain kinds of questions and determines what can count as an answer to their own kind of questions. Natural science is therefore not a purely descriptive/value-neutral form of inquiry because it can only discover what is knowable through its methods and it can only answer questions which require invoking a nomological conception of explanation. Collingwood is not alone in claiming that science is not a purely descriptive, value-neutral enquiry. But his views that all forms of investigation are norm-governed and thus not purely descriptive or value-neutral should not be conflated with the claim that science is not value-neutral because scientific theories do not describe facts which are independent of the historical context in which the theories were developed. To understand Collingwood's denial of the value-neutrality of natural science it may be useful to contrast his view that science is norm governed with a slightly different approach to the view that science is not a value-neutral activity. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* Kuhn argued that scientific terms must be understood in the historical context of the theory in which they are embedded. In this sense, the meaning of scientific terms is not historically invariant. The term "Earth", for example, changes its meaning in the transition from a Ptolemaic or geocentric conception to a Copernican or heliocentric conception of the universe.⁴ Kuhn's denial of the value-neutrality of scientific facts implies a commitment to meaning variance over time. Since comparability across scientific paradigms presupposes semantic equivalence, and since meaning equivalence is precisely what is put into question by denying that the reference of scientific terms can be fixed independently of the historical context in which the theory was developed, Kuhn's philosophy of science threatens the possibility of making meaningful comparisons between scientific paradigms and thus the very notion of scientific progress.

Collingwood's denial of the value-neutrality of science is grounded in a commitment to explanatory pluralism rather than to historical relativism (or meaning variance over time and place). His claim is that since the goals of history are different from those of natural science, they are better served by different explanatory methods. His denial of the value-neutrality of science arises out of his conception of metaphysics as a science of absolute presuppositions, according to which the task of philosophical analysis is to make explicit the norms which govern explanations in different forms of inquiry. Metaphysics, he claims, is not an ontological enquiry into "pure being", but a logical inquiry into the presuppositions which govern the special sciences. It is the failure to

4 Kuhn, T., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago University Press, 1970). See pp. 148–149.

see that all questions are governed by presuppositions (and that different kinds of why-questions are answered by different kinds of causal/because answers) that gives rise to the illusion that there is only one kind of knowledge, scientific knowledge. The task of metaphysics is to disentangle different senses of causation by showing that they rely on different kinds of inference which suit different explanatory purposes. The methodological imperialism of natural science is based on the mistaken assumption that the sort of inferences which characterise natural science are suited to answer the questions asked by historians. The task of metaphysics, understood as an enquiry into the presuppositions that govern explanation in different forms of inquiry, precisely is to prevent any one of the special sciences from gaining the explanatory upper hand and claiming for themselves the role of the 'first' or primary science traditionally reserved to metaphysics understood as an ontological enquiry into pure being. Collingwood argues that the original Latin sense of the word *scientia* (a body of knowledge with a distinctive method and subject matter), has given way to a much narrower conception of what knowledge is (knowledge that is achieved through the methods of natural science). In the original Latin sense of the term *scientia*, history is a science because it has a method and subject matter of its own. But as the presuppositions which govern natural science recede into the background, and knowledge comes to be identified with scientific knowledge in the narrow sense, natural science easily mistakes its *explanandum* for the object of metaphysics traditionally conceived: pure being. On Collingwood's view, what natural science investigates is not nature in itself (as a replacement for the metaphysical study of pure being), but the *explanandum* characteristic of its form of inquiry. Whilst scientists may think that their explanations capture real causal relations which hold between events independently of the investigative goals of their form of inquiry, what they really establish is intentional/explanatory relations which hold between the *explanans* and the *explanandum* characteristic of their form of knowledge.

Natural science, just like history, presupposes a conception of explanation that serves its investigative goals and is thus not a value-neutral activity, but Collingwood's defence of the methodological autonomy of history with respect to natural science derives from an argument for explanatory pluralism, *not* for historical relativism. All knowledge for Collingwood (in the broad sense of *scientia*) is relative to presuppositions, but this is not the same as saying that it is relative to time and place.⁵ History differs from natural science because historical knowing relies on a different set of presuppositions about what it means to provide an explanation. Collingwood's critique of scientism is not

5 See D'Oro, G., "The Myth of Collingwood's Historicism", *Inquiry* 53/6 (2010), 627–641.

motivated by a desire to replace one “ism” with another by endorsing a form of historicism which denies science methodological autonomy as something distinct from history, as some readings of his work as historicist appear to imply. Collingwood clearly is an historicist if by “historicism” one means a commitment to the methodological autonomy of history qua *Geisteswissenschaft* or science of the mind. Much of the work of W. H. Dray⁶ sought to establish that Collingwood's work was a life-time effort to tease apart the rationalizing inferences required to explain actions as expressions of thought from the inductive inferences required to explain events as law-like. But the claim that historical explanations are *sui generis* and irreducible to nomological explanations does not entail historical relativism or the view that knowledge is relative to time and place.

We have argued that Collingwood's argument for methodological pluralism is part and parcel of a conception of metaphysics as a science of presuppositions whose task is to make explicit the norms or principles which govern explanation in different forms of inquiry. An important presupposition of historical inquiry is that mind, unlike nature, is not uniform over time and place and that historians cannot presuppose that the agents whose actions they investigate hold the same belief system as they do. By contrast, a key presupposition of scientific explanation is that nature does not change relative to time and place, that water froze at 0°C in the middle ages just as it did in Victorian times. The principle of the uniformity of nature is a presupposition for the inductive generalizations on which empirical science rests. While historians must be open to the possibility that the object of their inquiry changes in accordance with time and place (and they would fail to do their job properly if they assumed that the belief system of feudal barons was the same as that of a twentieth century New Yorker), natural scientists must presuppose the very opposite, namely that the reality they investigate is unchanging. Neither of these claims, namely a) that reality changes, and b) that reality is unchanging, is an ontological claim concerning the nature of reality; both claims capture

6 Dray, W. H., “Historical Understanding as Rethinking”, *University of Toronto Quarterly* 27 (1958), 200–215; Dray, W. H., *Laws and Explanation in History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957); Dray, W. H., “The Historical Explanation of Actions Reconsidered” in S. Hook (ed) *Philosophy and History*, (New York: New York University Press, 1963); Dray, W. H., *Philosophy of History* (London: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1964); Dray, W. H. (ed.) *Philosophical Analysis and History* (New York and London: Harper and Row, 1966); Dray, W. H., “R. G. Collingwood and the Understanding of Actions in History” in *Perspectives on History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 9–26; Dray, W. H., *History as Re-enactment: R. G. Collingwood's Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

presuppositions which govern forms of inquiry. As such they belong to metaphysics understood as a study of presuppositions rather than as the study of pure being.

The claim that “nature does not change”, understood as a presupposition which governs explanation in the natural sciences, should not be confused with a commitment to reference invariance of the kind found in the causal theory of meaning as articulated in the works of Kripke⁷ and Putnam.⁸ Reference invariance as defended by Putnam and Kripke has been invoked to counteract the view that since the meaning of scientific terms changes across paradigms, it is not possible to compare scientific theories which belong to different historical contexts.⁹ Natural science, for Collingwood, must presuppose reference invariance; it must presuppose that nature is uniform and thus that all scientific theories describe (in different ways) the same invariant object. But according to Collingwood, the commitment to the principle of the uniformity of nature is a presupposition of scientific inquiry and as such a claim that belongs to metaphysics as a science of presuppositions. It is not a claim about the nature or essence of objects per se, but about how they must be thought of within a form of inquiry. Collingwood does claim that explanations in both history and the natural sciences are norm-governed and as such provide answers to questions that reflect the investigative goals of historians and natural scientists respectively, rather than inquiry-independent truths. But his argument for the methodological autonomy of history with respect to natural science does not entail a topsy-turvy dissolution of science into history and the subsequent replacement of one *ism* (as in *historicism*) with another (*scientism*). From a historical point of view nature is like a cultural artefact that must be understood in the context of thought, if it is to be understood historically. The history of the philosophy of science is an historical inquiry concerned with *the idea of nature*, how nature was conceptualized in different times and places, because the historian of science (just like historians in general) works under the presupposition that the context of thought is not unchanging. For the practicing scientist, on the other hand, nature is an invariant object and different scientific paradigms reflect not the historically changing idea of nature but progressively more sophisticated descriptions of an invariant reality investigated under the presupposition of the uniformity of nature. Once the switch

7 Kripke, S., *Naming and Necessity*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980)

8 Putnam, H., *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers* Vol. 2, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

9 On this see Kuukkanen, J.-M., “Meaning Change in the Context of Thomas S. Kuhn’s Philosophy”, (PhD Dissertation. University of Edinburgh, 2006).

in presuppositions is properly recognized, there is no deep ontological conflict between the history of the philosophy of science and science itself, as there is indeed no conflict between science and history more generally. The failure to integrate science and the history of the philosophy of science (or science and history more generally) is thus rooted not in the fact that they imply incompatible ontologies, but in the fact that they are governed by incompatible presuppositions.¹⁰ Within a traditional conception of metaphysics one would have to choose between the scientific and the historical conception of reality since they could not both be true of an inquiry-independent reality or of pure being. Within Collingwood's conception of metaphysics as uncovering the presuppositions which govern different forms of inquiry the choice between the two is determined more pragmatically by the ability of any one of these explanatory frameworks to answer the questions one is concerned with.

Collingwood's explanatory pluralism denies both the view that history is reducible to natural science *and* its antithesis, i.e., the view that science is reducible to history (or to the history of science). His explanatory pluralism, therefore, does not give rise to the counter-intuitive implications that arise when science is dissolved into the history/sociology/anthropology of science. Latour¹¹ for example rejected the claim that pharaoh Rameses II died of tuberculosis, on the grounds that the tubercle bacillus was not discovered until 1882 and hence bacilli are not the sort of things that can be invoked to explain the pharaoh's death or indeed any deaths prior to the arrival of microbiology.¹² The kind of explanatory pluralism endorsed by Collingwood does not give rise to the counter-intuitive claim that deaths pre and post 1882 have to be explained in a different way because there were no bacilli before 1882. What Collingwood's explanatory pluralism would lead him to say is not that Koch's bacilli cannot be invoked to explain why Rameses II died, but only that, when Rameses' death is so explained, it is not explained historically. Much as an archaeologist who uses carbon dating techniques switches from historical to naturalistic explanations, so a historian who explains the pharaoh's death by

10 For the view that history and science rest on incompatible ontologies see Kuukkanen, J.-M., "Historicism and the Failure of HPS" in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* xxx (2015), 1–9.

11 Latour, B. (2000). On the partial existence of existing and non-existing objects. In L. Daston (ed.), *Biographies of Scientific Objects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 247–269.

12 For a discussion of the counter-intuitive implications of dissolving science into the history of the philosophy of science see Tosh, N., "Science, Truth and History, part II. Metaphysical Bolt-holes for the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge?" *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 38 (2007), 185–209.

citing bacilli that had not been discovered at the time of the ancient Egyptians has changed her explanatory hat and is now operating under the presupposition of the uniformity of nature. Philosophy takes note of the presuppositions which govern different forms of inquiry and in doing so it shows not only that history cannot be reduced to science but also that scientific enquiry cannot be reduced to a form of historical knowing. A historicism which denies science its autonomous domain of inquiry just is an inverted scientism.¹³ This is not what Collingwood would have wished for. But seeing why he would not have wanted to replace one 'ism' with another requires being very clear about his conception of the role of philosophical analysis in patrolling the borders between domains of inquiry.

Once the role of metaphysics in making explicit the presuppositions that govern forms of inquiry is clarified the goal of a philosophy of history, as Collingwood saw it, can be properly understood not as an attempt to recover the past in the way in which a natural scientist would be interested in knowing it, that is by retrodicting what had to happen in accordance to the most up-to-date scientific knowledge, but as an attempt to view the world through the lens of the belief system of past agents as expressed in their actions. Collingwood is clear that when the fundamental presupposition which governs historical inquiry (that unlike nature, human nature changes from time to place) is disregarded, the historian will fail to understand its subject matter historically,

13 Unfortunately it is precisely this kind of historicism that Collingwood has been traditionally associated with. See for example: Rotenstreich, N., "Metaphysics and Historicism" in Krausz, M. (ed.), *Critical Essays on the Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 179–200; Toulmin, S., "Conceptual Change and the Problem of Relativity", in Krausz, M. (ed.) *Critical Essays on the Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972); Donagan, A., *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962); Harrison, R., "Atemporal Necessities of Thought; or, How Not to Bury Philosophy by History" in E. Schaper and W. Vossenkuhl (eds.) *Reading Kant: New Perspectives on Transcendental Arguments and Critical Philosophy*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 43–54. For the opposite view see Connelly, J. "Metaphysics and Method: A Necessary Unity in the Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood", *Storia, Antropologia e Scienze del Linguaggio* 5/1–2 (1990), 36–156; Modood, T., "The Later Collingwood's Alleged Historicism and Relativism" in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 27 (1989), 101–125; Oldfield, A., "Metaphysics and History in Collingwood's Thought" in D. Boucher, J. Connelly and T. Modood (eds.), *Philosophy, History and Civilization: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on R. G. Collingwood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995); D'Oro, G., *Collingwood and the Metaphysics of Experience* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); D'Oro, G., "The Myth of Collingwood's Historicism", *Inquiry* 53/6 (2010), 627–641; D'Oro, G., "History and Idealism: Collingwood and Oakeshott", in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*, edited by Jeff Malpas, (Routledge, 2015), 191–204.

because she will look at the past like a natural scientist. While the presupposition which governs natural science (the principle of the uniformity of nature) entails that scientific theories which belong to the history of the philosophy of science must be deemed to be false if they do not conform to current scientific knowledge, the presupposition which governs history (that human nature is subject to change) requires the historian to abstain from any such comparisons and interpret past actions in the light of the historical agents' own beliefs. Collingwood's account of re-enactment aims to show precisely how it is possible to view the world from the point of view of past agents by interpreting their actions as expressions of their own epistemic, aesthetic and moral norms, rather than those of the historian. A cornerstone of his account of re-enactment is that a historian can rethink the very same thoughts of historical agents from a very distant past, provided the historian immerses herself in the thought context of the agent.¹⁴ While Collingwood would not deny that there may be some value in writing historical narratives which look at the past from the perspective of the present, he explicitly rejected the view that this is how the historian inevitably or necessarily must look at the past. He argued that there is no barrier in principle to understanding the world as the Greeks or as the Romans did. The belief that this is a logical impossibility stems from the misidentification of the propositional content of thought with the token act of thinking which, unlike the content, is by its very nature, unique to the thinker.¹⁵ Re-enactment is clearly not a magic wand; the historian is fallible and misinterpretations can occur. Documents which were not previously available may be discovered at a later stage and cast a different light on the past. But while knowledge of the historical past may be hard to achieve, and while we may sometime only think we have achieved it, it is in principle achievable. The fundamental message of Collingwood's philosophy of history is that historical knowledge is possible, that the historian is not necessarily trapped within her own zeitgeist. What is required for such knowledge to be possible is a conscious attempt to read the actions of others from the perspectives of their own cultural norms. Understanding the past is therefore not fundamentally different from understanding other cultures which are contemporaneous with the historian. Collingwood's account of re-enactment conveys a very positive message concerning the possibility of historical knowing, one which sharply contrasts with the kind of epistemic scepticism one finds in much postmodern philosophy of history.

14 For Collingwood's account of re-enactment see IH, Epilegomena §4.

15 See D'Oro, G., "Collingwood on Re-enactment and the Identity of Thought", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 38:1 (2000), 87–101.

Once Collingwood's philosophy of history is read as premised on the assumption that there is a distinctive kind of non-nomological inference which is at work in historical explanations, it also becomes evident that Collingwood's articulation and defence of the *Natur/Geisteswissenschaft* distinction is unique. His account of historical understanding sets him apart both from neo-Kantians such as Windelband¹⁶ and Rickert,¹⁷ whose defence of the methodological autonomy of the human sciences rests on a distinction between nomothetic and ideographic sciences, and from the hermeneutic tradition of Dilthey, which associated understanding in the human sciences with empathy.¹⁸ Historical understanding, for Collingwood, differs from scientific knowledge not because it is concerned with unique events, such as the French Revolution (which cannot be reproduced under laboratory conditions) but because historical explanations establish rational rather than nomological connections. Since the ability to re-enact or rethink the thoughts of historical agents requires the ascription to the agent of a practical argument (which makes the action intelligible by showing it to be instrumentally conducive to the realization of certain ends), re-enactment does not require that the historian should identify with the agent in the sense of believing what the historical agents believed or desiring what the agents desired. Although Collingwood's account of re-enactment has often been associated with the notion of empathetic understanding¹⁹ one finds in Dilthey and has, more recently, been hailed as a predecessor of simulation theory,²⁰ such interpretations run against the grain of Collingwood's claim that explaining actions requires rationalizing them. The latter claim shows that the historian would have no trouble understanding agents with whom she does not empathize since understanding does not require experiencing the agents' desires (or believing as they did) but rather the ability to rationalize their actions by seeing them as conducive to the realizations of certain goals, which the historian need not share with the agent. It is not the historian's wanting to

16 Windelband, W. 'Rectoral Address, Strasbourg, 1894', *History and Theory*, 19/2 (1980), 169–85.

17 Rickert, H. *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Science*, Translated by G. Oakes, (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

18 Dilthey, W. *Selected Writings* edited and introduced by H.P. Rickman, (Cambridge University Press, 1976).

19 For readings which resist the association of re-enactment with empathy see Saari, H. 'R. G. Collingwood on the Identity of Thought', *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review* 28 (1989): 77–89 and van der Dussen, J. "The Philosophical Context of Collingwood's Re-enactment Theory", *International Studies in Philosophy*, 27/2 (1995), 81–99.

20 Stueber, K., *Rediscovering Empathy: Agency, Folk Psychology, and the Human Sciences*. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).

φ that enables her to understand why an agent φed. While we do use the term “understand” in this way (I “understand” in this way why you want a cup of coffee because I so desperately want one myself), this is not how Collingwood thought of “understanding”.

The contributions in this special issue address and rectify certain rather prevalent interpretations of Collingwood that have tended to obscure how distinctive his contribution to the philosophy of history is. Jonas Ahlskog (R. G. Collingwood and the presence of the past) argues that Collingwood's account of re-enactment rejects both the postmodern view that the past in-itself is irretrievable because it is a projection from the present which is re-interpreted anew from different historical standpoints, and the criticism of this view more recently articulated by presence theorists who have defended the claim that it is possible to make contact with a pristine past by appealing to the idea of aesthetic intuition. Tyson Retz (Why Re-enactment is not empathy, once and for all) locates Collingwood's account of re-enactment in the wider context of his metaphysics to undermine the standard identification of this doctrine with the psychologistic accounts of understanding typical of the post-Kantian hermeneutic tradition, which looked to empathy as a distinctive methodology for the human sciences. Sophie Marcotte-Chenard (Is Collingwood a historicist? Remarks on Leo Strauss's Critique of Collingwood's Philosophy of History) defends Collingwood's philosophy of history from Strauss' accusation of historicism and argues that both philosophers defend the possibility of understanding past agents in their own terms and Timothy Lord (Collingwood, idealism, realism, and the possibility of historical knowledge) defends his philosophy of history from the accusation that Collingwood's idealism leads to a form of historical constructivism that is indistinguishable from post-modernism. Parysa Clare Mostajir (Reading *The Idea of History* through *The Principles of Art: Collingwood on Communication and Emotions*) draws on *The Principles of Art* to develop an interpretation of Collingwood's philosophy of history that does not exclude emotionally driven actions from its subject matter. Robert F. DeVall, Jr (Collingwood, Bradley, and Critical History) revisits Collingwood's engagement with Bradley's critical history and Stephen Leach (L. S. Klejn and R. G. Collingwood on History, Archaeology, and Detection) explores the relations between history and archaeology in Collingwood through a comparison with the Russian Archaeologist L. S. Klein. Finally, Christopher Fear (Was he right? R. G. Collingwood's *rapprochement* between philosophy and history) explores the relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy and how to juggle historical understanding with the question of truth.