Collingwood and empiricism in *The Idea of History*

by

Maurice Lagueux
Université de Montréal

I am far from being an expert of Collingwood, but *The Idea of History* was a constant inspiration in the course in philosophy of history that I gave for almost 40 years. I will limit myself to a comment on this book whose philosophical content I had the opportunity to discuss on many occasions. As many others, I presume, I was fascinated by the fact that Collingwood has so profoundly influenced several philosophers, even among those who would reject not only his "idealism," but some of his principal theses, at least as they are formulated. And paradoxically enough, it seems to be the most contestable and contested of those theses that have the most directly influenced philosophers of history.

Collingwood's views are expressed in so ambiguous wording and developed in such contradictory theses (especially if the development of these theses throughout his life is considered) that it seems reasonable to draw from his thought the most interesting ideas without necessarily aiming to propose a perfectly faithful interpretation of it. Proceeding this way allows us to find out quite important contributions in his most contested theses in spite of the fact that some other of these theses remain partially non clarified. In fact, proceeding this way is not so far from following Collingwood's own view about interpretation of a philosopher's thought: analysing it carefully, but criticising the resulting reconstruction until it is possible to make sense of this thought.

Three theses in particular, which are possibly the most well known of those concerning history, are also Collingwood's views that raise the most frequent objections. They were

pinpointed by William Dray in a paper which tends to vindicate them, namely (1) the distinction between inside and outside of actions, which at first glance may appears to be a simplistic solution to the formidable mind-body problem, (2) the pretension that once we know what something is we already know how it is explained and (3) the idea that the only way for an historian to discern the thoughts of an historical agent is to re-enact them in his (or her) own mind.

Before attempting to make sense of each of these three theses — in a way somewhat different from the one proposed by William Dray, and possibly somewhat less faithful to Collingwood's thought, but a little less demanding to contemporary philosophers than Dray's was — I will discuss a fourth thesis of Collingwood that may have contributed to increase animosity towards his thought, namely the radical distinction that he made between natural sciences and those human sciences that are reducible to history. My main point is that even though these theses are presented in the framework of an ontology that may make them hardly palatable, at least as they are formulated, there is no need to adopt this ontology to make sense of them.

But let us come back to what I just presented as the fourth contestable thesis. For Collingwood, the repeated attempts by philosophers such as Locke and Hume (*The Idea of History*, pp. 205-206) to promote the idea of applying to the study of human nature the principles and methods which were so successful in the study of natural phenomena was a mistake (p. 208). Collingwood quotes and strongly disapproves the following claim from Thomas Reid: "All that we know of the body, is owing to anatomical dissection and observation, and it must be by an anatomy of the mind that we can discover its powers and principles" (p. 206). Against these philosophers, Collingwood claims that the appropriate

methods for the investigation of human nature are *not* the "methods called scientific" but the "method of history." No doubt that this emphatic rejection of the "scientific" methods has thrown some suspicion on Collingwood's thought.

However, there is no need to adopt Collingwood's radical exclusivism and deceiving formulations to acknowledge the great interest of his epistemological analysis of the specificity of history. According to Collingwood, the historian "is interested in the crossing of the Rubicon only in its relation to Republican law, and in the spilling of Caesar's blood only in its relation to a constitutional conflict" (p. 213). Facts like the quantity of blood lost by Caesar or the type of metal from which the various daggers were made were not relevant *as such* for history, even though these details might be useful to historians. In contrast to the historian, a bio-medical scientist might consider that the spilling of Caesar's blood is relevant for an explanation of the exact wounds that have killed Caesar, but such an explanation would not be history but applied biology. In any case, as scientists, biologists and medical scientists would not be interested in the case of a specific individual such as Caesar, except if this individual was a member of a sample that is studied in order to document this point. If such scientists are interested in the individual case of Julius Caesar, it might be in order to put biology to the service of history (to contribute to an "auxiliary science of history") by specifying (usefully or not) some aspects of the facts on which history is based. Such a contribution may establish, for example, that Caesar died from a loss of blood of a certain type that normally causes unconsciousness or death after a few seconds. This information may be (moderately) helpful to an historian, for example by documenting the possibility for Caesar to have actually pronounced the famous "Tu quoque fili!" which has been attributed to him. But, for Collingwood, such auxiliary sciences are not history. Similarly, physico-chemical

tests which allow historians to date events pertain to applied physics or applied chemistry and not to history, even if they are extremely helpful to historians.

The only thing which is part of history, according to Collingwood, is what in events like Caesar's assassination concerns the thoughts (which normally command actions) of human beings (whether these thoughts be those of Caesar himself or of his assassins). One may find that conception of history too restrictive, but to defend it, there is no need to invoke Collingwood's ontological theses, it is sufficient to invoke a difference in the explanatory relevance which interest historians from those which interest natural scientists such as biologists or chemists. Various philosophical analyses of explanation and of causality, from Plato's *Phaedo* to Bas van Fraassen's theory of explanation have emphasised the fact that the treatment of a theoretical question crucially depends on what van Fraassen calls "explanatory relevance." In order to explain a road accident, to adapt an example that Edward Hallett Carr use to expose the same idea, one may consider the driver's conscious reactions to the situations, and someone else the condition of the brakes. The first explanation but not the second may be an historical one, if we agree with Collingwood, unless we have reason to think that the poor condition of the brakes was deliberately generated by people plotting against the driver.

This important difference between two types of explanation does not seem to raise problems, but why does Collingwood grant such a privilege to the history of thoughts over what other theoreticians would call history of physical and biological events. Collingwood would surely answer that it is because thoughts are the *interior* side of what we can observe from outside and that physical and biological events have no interior that their eventual historians could analyse. To avoid the cumbersome problems which are associated with this ambiguous

metaphor (corresponding to one of the three contentious theses underscored by Dray), one may interpret Collingwood's view at an epistemological rather that at an ontological level. The point is not to know whether human individuals do or do not have an interior side — in which thoughts would be more or less mysteriously developed — that, ontologically, would be radically different from their exterior body; it is that, whatever the explanation that one can give of the world of human thought, this world is structured by a rationality of his own and that, according to Collingwood, historians are interested by what result from this apparently rational (at least in a minimal sense) thought and behaviour. Now the fact that human rationality allows us to explain and predict a very large number of phenomena can hardly be contested. For example, if I look through my window at the passing cars on the street outside, I can predict with a remarkably high degree of accuracy that these cars will continue straight ahead and will not turn right or left before the next corner. I can also predict that, at this transversal street, some of them will turn right but none left, this street being one-way. Admittedly, there are no mechanical laws that exclude such events from taking place, but I am confident that the drivers are not stupid enough to drive their cars into the sidewalk or to turn the wrong way down a one-way street. It is true that this is not an absolutely reliable basis for predictions. Unfortunately, such predictions turn out to be wrong once and a while, because some drivers do stupid things, but most of the time they do not. And if I want to explain this regular behaviour, I must rely on this principle of rationality that commands human actions. In fact, this principle allows us to derive most conclusions of social sciences, but Collingwood attributes such conclusions to history and presents this reliance on the rationality principle as an incursion *inside* human thought.

Therefore finding what has guided human thoughts and consequently human actions through the centuries constitutes, for Collingwood, the essential of history. More precisely, it is when

human behaviour *does not* seems to be guided by rational thoughts that we require from historians explanations of such puzzling actions in terms of thoughts that guided them, because it is in such terms that we can really understand human actions. Why did Caesar violate Roman rule by crossing the Rubicon? Why did Brutus who loved and admired Caesar decide to kill him? Why, to use Dray's famous example, Louis XIV, who was an ambitious and intelligent conqueror, did not invade Holland when he had the chance to do it in the absence of King William? According to Collingwood, only such questions in which the "inside" (read the rationality of thoughts) can provide the solution interest the historian.

As underscored by Collingwood, "[i]n the case of nature, this distinction between the outside and the inside of an event does not arise" (p. 214). Naturally, when a stone falls down from a mountain, it would be meaningless to consider this event "in its relation to Republican law," or to any product of human thought. I may consider it in relation with gravitational law, but even though this law is a product of human thought (namely of Newton's thought), the stone is related to it in a self-evidently quite different way. Indeed, it does not contribute in any fashion to the elaboration of the piece of thought that is the Newton law, neither to its modification, but Caesar has contributed to the modification of the Republican law and Brutus to the development of the constitutional conflict. According to Collingwood, the difference is significant because history is nothing but an explanation of the way human institutions are developed through human actions and human thoughts. That does not mean that any human being plays a role in the elaboration of constitutional laws, but historical explanations are required only when some people play a role in the development of any kind of institution. The historian has evidently not to explain in relation with Republican law why the soldier X advanced his left foot when Caesar ordered to cross the Rubicon, but this historian may

possibly have to explain — if there is some reason to be puzzled by this fact, considering the personality of soldier X — why he decided to obey Caesar rather than objecting.

Collingwood claims that the historian *has not* to look for the causes of the event, but he adds a few lines below that this “does not mean that words like ‘cause’, are necessarily out of place in reference to history; it only means that they are used there in a special sense” (p. 214). For natural scientists, causes are associated with laws; for historians, they are associated with thought. This looks like the opposition of two different worlds, but here again, Collingwood’s ontologically radical language is the source of a possible confusion. The difference is not so radical if we first consider that scientists and historians have to deal with the epistemological question of explanation before dealing with the ontological question of causes. They have to answer to why-questions. For the scientist who answers the question why the stone fall on the ground, the answer invokes a cause (namely gravitation) in an ontological sense, but the only way to express this is by referring to a law: stones are always attracted by the earth and then always fall towards the ground when they are left free. It is sufficient to be aware of this law to be no longer puzzled by the fact that this stone has fallen on the ground. It would be only if we note that a stone does not fall in such circumstances that an extra explanation would be insistently required. The historian who wants to answer the question “why Brutus decided to kill Caesar who is loved and respected by him is in a comparable situation: he has also to invoke a cause (the absolute predominance of Brutus’ love for the Republican institutions) which is also a cause in an ontological sense, but which is not reached through a law, since it is not true that all those who love institutions better than a beloved person who risk to destroy them will decide to kill this person. The event (the decision to kill) needs to be explained by a cause that will not be associated with the fact that

all similar events are produced when a given cause is present, but instead to the precise states of mind (Collingwood prefers say 'thoughts') that "rationally" brings about the decision.

One may remain sceptical and ask "why should we consider that such an analysis of these thoughts provides us with an explanation?" A Collingwoodian might observe at this point that if we agree that an explanation is a satisfactory answer to a why-question, we may immediately claim that we have now an answer to the above why-question. Indeed, our need for an explanation was generated by our incapacity to understand how Brutus, a sensible and generous person, was brought to kill his beloved benefactor. Our uneasiness held in the fact that this decision looked totally irrational in the sense that we were unable to see the rationale of such an act from a person whose rationality made no doubt. Such a problem would not arise if we have considered Brutus as a perfect idiot who mechanically and without any reason was brought to join the conspirators or to do anything else. In this case, we would not look for an extra reason: a psychiatrist might attempt to explain the idiocy of this person, but the participation in the murder would not be a problem to solve by a properly historical analysis of thoughts. In contrast, the fact that *Brutus* was involved in this murder raises an historical problem for the historian, but learning the fact that Brutus was absolutely dedicated to the maintenance of the Republican Law is the key element in the answer to our question.

But has an answer based on such an analysis of thoughts any empirical value? Collingwood was frequently charged to have championed a non-empirical history, some would even say, very pejoratively, an a priori history. It is true that he has claimed that the historian's knowledge is not empirical: "his only possible knowledge of the past is mediate or inferential or indirect, never empirical" (*Idea of History*, p. 282). But any historian and any philosopher of history would admit that historical knowledge is mediate, inferential and indirect; if

Collingwood does not mean more than this by saying that it is not empirical, it would be difficult to object anything to his position. What is important is that this inferential knowledge be inferred from data that are empirical in the usual sense of the word, which in the case of history means reliable evidence. But, from this point of view, there is no serious reason to deny that Collingwood not only gave due attention and respect to all available empirical evidence, but even took all possible means to detect all hidden pieces of evidence. In the very paragraph where he defends the "method of history" and opposes it to "methods called scientific," he insists on the fact that the former allows a reconstruction of the past based on "documents written and unwritten, critically analysed and interpreted" (p. 209). It is never a question of letting this reconstruction be freely guided by the power of imagination, as testified by his many passages on evidence in the section on Historical imagination of *The Idea of History* (see, for example, pp. 237, 246, 247). As is well known, early in his career, he made respected archaeological work which was surely based on empirical facts. And in part *V*, paragraph 3 of *The Idea of History*, bearing on evidence, he develops his view about the decisive role of evidence especially in the sub-paragraph *vii* entitled "Who killed John Doe?" where historical research is compared to a Detective-Inspector inquiry. The historian cannot attribute a thought to Brutus (for example, his absolute love of the democratic institutions or the non unconditional character of his love for Caesar) without grounding these attributions on facts well documented. It is for this reason that Alan Donagan maintains that, while many reconstructions of the event to explain are possible, according to Collingwood, "a given reconstruction is established if no consequence that can be drawn from it conflicts with the evidence and if every other reconstruction has some consequence that does conflict with it" (p. 142).

Thus, if the thoughts of an historical agent whose behaviour looked problematic are now well known thanks to an empirical examination of relevant evidence, and if it is admitted to start with that this historical agent is rational — otherwise the behaviour of this agent would not be problematic from the point of view of the historian — and if these thoughts can bring about the behaviour in question in a relatively rational fashion, there is no longer any reason to be puzzled by a behaviour that looked problematic before the inquiry since, thanks to this inquiry, it is now perceived as rational after all. Therefore, we hold an explanation of the puzzling behaviour, which is as empirical as an explanation can be in such matters.

This explains why Collingwood claimed that "After the historian has ascertained the facts, there is no further process of inquiring into their causes. When he knows what happened, he already knows why it happened" (p. 214). This claim (a second controversial claim pinpointed in Dray's paper) was criticised as an expression of an abusive apriorism, but if we agree with the interpretation above and if we take account of the Collingwoodian loose way of parlance, it is rather an affirmation of the importance of a careful investigation of facts and causes. Indeed, if by "what happened" Collingwood means (as made evident by the context of this passage) the chain of thoughts that brings about the behaviour to explain, and if this chain of thought corresponding to "what happened" are facts which have been "ascertained," the causes of the behaviour to explain are nothing but the now well known chain of thoughts that bring it about.

This introduces us to the typically Collingwoodian mode of knowing "what happens", the re-enactment, which is the content of what is probably the most criticised among Collingwood's theses (the last controversial thesis mentioned by Dray). Is it possible to re-enact — which implies to reconstruct in our own mind — the exact thought that an historical agent has

developed when taking an action? Of course the power of imagination may allow a novelist to reconstruct a state of mind, but, as admitted by Collingwood (p. 246), an historian has not the same freedom. Therefore to make Collingwood's view compatible with his idea of an history based on evidence, I propose that the re-enactment, if understood as a successful reconstruction of an historical agent's thought, should not be construed as a *method* for reaching the truth concerning the state of mind of this historical agent, but rather as a *criterion* of successful knowledge.

Indeed, if, after a long (empirical) examination of evidence, I am finally able to convincingly reconstruct the (up to then non-understandable) state of mind of Brutus when he was ready to kill a beloved person, I can conclude that I was successful in my historical explanation. What was puzzling is no longer really so, because a logically and empirically satisfactory answer has been found to the why-question concerning the puzzling behaviour. And ideally this answer might be so satisfactory that I could even re-enact Brutus' thoughts and understand why they brought about the action to be explained, just as I can re-enact a thought of Euclid and understand why it implies the truth of one of his theorem. It is easy to understand that such a re-enactment is almost a necessary condition of understanding: suppose that an historian wants to understand why Hitler decided to devote immense resources to kill millions of Jews without apparent reasons, instead of concentrating them on his non conclusive efforts to win the war (let alone the more fundamental moral question concerning his decision to kill them to start with). And suppose that this historian acknowledges his total incapacity to re-enact for himself Hitler's state of mind, then this historian must conclude that his attempt fails and that a satisfactory explanation is apparently impossible, just as someone who is unable to re-enact Euclid's thought according to which the truth of a theorem cannot be denied must conclude a failure of understanding Euclid's theorem.

However, this interpretation of Collingwood's re-enactment raises a few problems among which the first one is that it seems to force Collingwood's wording when he exposes his idea in the following words: "But how does the historian discern the thoughts which he is trying to discover? There is only one way in which it can be done: by re-thinking them in his own mind" (p. 215). In this sentence, it seems clear that Collingwood proposes a "way" that allows us to "discern the thoughts" to be *discovered*. These thoughts, which apparently are not yet discovered, will be discerned with the help of this re-enactment understood as a method of discovery.

The apparent contradiction between re-enactment conceived as a criterion and re-enactment conceived as a method is due to the fact that the term "re-enactment," when used by Collingwood, must be understood as globally designating the whole process, not only the successful rethinking of the historical agent's thought, but the whole process that makes the re-enactment possible, namely finding and criticising the facts and even criticising the very thought which is re-enacted (see p. 215-216). Collingwood maintains that there is no re-enactment without a critical analysis of evidence. He comes back so often about the fundamental role of evidence that it is impossible to interpret his re-enactment as a method allowing to reconstruct an agent's thought apriori thanks to the power of imagination. However, this evidence is not pure data; it is data that is criticised and that may be accepted or rejected according to whether it makes sense or not. The historian must constantly check the quality of his data by considering "whether the picture of the past to which the evidence leads him is a coherent and continuous picture, one which makes sense" (p. 245). Therefore Collingwood claims that "the web of imaginative construction …" is "the touchstone", a "criterion", that allows the historian to decide whether alleged facts are genuine (*IH*, 244). He

emphasises that alleged facts are not all genuine and that some of them (Collingwood gives as an example what Suetone says about Nero) cannot be integrated in any reconstruction that makes sense. Thus, when Collingwood says that the re-enactment is the only way (the only method if one prefers) to discern the thought of an historical agent, he is clearly referring to this *whole* process of criticising the data, reconstructing a picture that makes sense and criticising that picture with the help of all knowledge accessible to the historian. The equivocal interpretation of his thought comes from the fact that the word "re-enactment" is usually understood by readers as designating only the *final* moment of this whole process, namely the moment in which the reconstructed picture clearly make sense of the behaviour to be explained. Since, at this point of the process, this moment is essentially kept alive by the power of imagination of the person who is re-enacting, it is normal that readers who attribute to this single moment what Collingwood attributes to the whole process are tempted to blame Collingwood for absurdly relying on pure imagination to reach knowledge. It is for this reason that I claimed that if we have in mind nothing but this final moment when we refer to Collingwood's notion of re-enactment, we should admit that the re-enactment of an agent's thought should be considered as a criterion of success but not a method by itself.

Two other points must be clarified about the exact meaning of the notion of re-enactment. Collingwood claims that Euclid's thought and the thought of one who firmly grasps one of his theorems are the *same* thought which is reactivated in various minds for more than twenty centuries. This supposes that thoughts can be identified (and isolated) as a kind of entities and that each entity of this kind can manifest itself in different instantiations. I do not think that this hardly palatable ontological thesis is necessary for making sense of Collingwood's views about historical explanations and if one of Collingwood's theses must be rejected, I suggest that it should be this one. Therefore I will not try to make sense of it, which is probably

largely responsible both for the ambiguous formulation of other theses belonging to Collingwood and for the distrust associated to his thought in different milieus.

The other point seems to me more interesting and more actual. Does the claim that I can successfully re-enact Brutus' thought imply that I would do the same thing as Brutus if I were in the same situation? If we answer yes to this question, we should be committed to the idea that an historian who succeeds to make sense of Brutus' thought (and who consequently succeeds in explaining his decision and his action this way) would be ready to kill a beloved person who seems to be on the way of destroying something to which this historian grants the greatest value. But, first, it may be useful to recall that Collingwood carefully mentions that re-enacting a thought is not re-enacting feelings and sensations that might be associated with this thought. As he suggests in order to illustrate this, one who would re-enact Archimedes' solution when taking one's bath would not promptly run nude out of this bath! More to the point, one can say that the fact that I re-enact Archimedes' solution or Euclid's theorem does not mean that I feel like a genius who could have discovered this truth if these great thinkers had not done the job before me. Consequently, this thought would not induce me to feel what they feel after thinking it for the first time, namely an extreme and legitimate pride and the impression that this thought expresses a truth which will never be challenged, an eternal truth whose knowledge will change the history of science for centuries to come. I may, on the contrary, think that this thought was a first attempt to grasp something which was challenged or trivialized after many centuries. Not only do these feelings or impressions not have to be linked with the re-enacted thought, but, as emphasised by Collingwood (p. 215) this thought itself must be criticised a bit like historians of philosophy must criticise the thought of the philosophers they are discussing and decide "whether it was true" (p. 216). As Collingwood puts it: "All thinking is critical thinking; the thought which re-enacts past thoughts, therefore,

criticizes them in re-enacting them" (216). This sounds reasonable indeed; I may re-enact Priestley's thought about phlogiston just as well as Lavoisier's thought about oxygen, but conclude that the former is wrong in contrast with the latter. For similar reason, nothing excludes that a pacifist historian, after a careful inquiry, successfully understands why a general has decided to take a military move that could be judged discussable by many and be in position to re-enact the general's thought in his own mind without being committed as a pacifist to take the same move in the same situation (in which he or she would never accept to be in any case), unless being "in the same situation" means being no longer a pacifist but rather an aggressive general since this absurd requirement would make the commitment tautologically true. The only thing that is required to make a re-enactment possible is that the derivation of the action from the thought be perfectly intelligible and that the thought itself be empirically documented. But, in a given situation, more than one thought may be legitimate and if such is the case, each of them might be in principle re-enactable without committing the historian who re-enacts it to think exactly the same way if engaged in the same situation. The point is that, in this situation, some other possible thoughts are *not* intelligible at all, and that, in this case, either the historian succeeds in making them intelligible and in re-enacting them, or the historian acknowledges that something remains unexplained in this situation.

Of course, one may disagree with this reconstruction of Collingwood's most contestable theses on history. But when a work as criticised for its loose formulations, for its ambiguous theses and for its apparently simplistic solutions to insufficiently analysed questions has exerted such an influence on generations of philosophers of history, it is worthwhile to revisit it and to reinterpret some of its contested thesis, even with the risk of some unfaithfulness to its author's views on some more or less significant points.