

WAS R.G. COLLINGWOOD AN UNDERCOVER PRAGMATIST?

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The early R.G. Collingwood is well known for his Hegelian idealism. In his book *Speculum Mentis*,¹ for example, he subscribed to Hegel's dialectical method, according to which forms of knowledge develop from implicitness to explicitness, or abstractness to concreteness, within a hierarchical structure of mind, whose aim is philosophical self-knowledge.

There is also broad agreement amongst scholars that in his later work Collingwood held strong historicist views. The historicist interpretation was introduced by T.M. Knox (*IH*, Preface). It was questioned by Mink,² Rubinoff,³ and Donagan,⁴ and Rotenstreich attempted to show how Collingwood eventually overcame historicism.⁵

My contention is that Collingwood's philosophy of history not only underwent a development from idealism to historicism, but from historicism to a version of pragmatism which includes idealist elements.

The term "historicism" involves a cluster of different meanings. We shall briefly recapitulate what Collingwood himself understood by it and

¹ For detailed reference, see at the end, under "Abbreviations".

² L. O. Mink: *Mind, History, and Dialectic. The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969.

³ L. Rubinoff: "Collingwood's Theory of the Relation between Philosophy and History: A New Interpretation." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 6 (1968), 363-380.

⁴ Donagan rejects Knox's division into Collingwood's non-historicist and historicist works. Cf. *The Later Philosophy of Collingwood*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962, p. 6.

⁵ N. Rotenstreich: "Historicism and Philosophy: Reflections on R.G. Collingwood", *Revue internationale de philosophie* 11 (1957), 401-419; "History and Time". *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, Studies in Philosophy. Jerusalem: Publications of The Hebrew University, Vol. 6, 1960, 41-103; *Philosophy, History and Politics*. Studies in Contemporary English Philosophy of History. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976.

what his critics found disagreeable. This will bring us into a position to understand how his historicist views eventually gave way to a kind of pragmatist philosophy of history.

Collingwood in fact uses the term "historicism" very rarely. He labels Ruskin an "historicist", and contrasts Ruskin's "historicism" with, what he calls, "logicism". He argues that the "old scholastic logic of formal correctness, consistency, clarity and definiteness in thinking inhibits an historical view",⁶ and proposes the creation of a new logic that is grounded in history. Such an explicit approval of historicism does not recur in his later work, but there are features of historicism. For instance, his strong emphasis on historical knowledge as being "the only form of knowledge the mind can have of itself" (*IH*, p. 220), signifies an historicist attitude.

Generally speaking, historicism is the view that the historical perspective is the only way of understanding the human world. In Collingwood's late work, logic, metaphysics and the philosophy of mind are all couched in historical knowledge. Those formerly autonomous compartments of philosophy become absorbed by history, and this is what critics found disagreeable. The statement, 'philosophy as a separate discipline is liquidated by being converted into history', expresses for Knox Collingwood's historicism.⁷ Collingwood bases his historicist claims, that philosophical questions are ultimately questions of intellectual history, on his logic of question and answer. I want to argue that it is precisely this method which underlies Collingwood's historicist turn, that also introduces a pragmatist element into his philosophy. The real grounds for finding pragmatist elements in Collingwood's account of history are implicit in agreements between Collingwood and the American pragmatists.

There have been reservations to a pragmatist interpretation of Collingwood's work. His repudiation of William James's *Varieties of*

⁶ R.G. Collingwood: "Ruskin's Philosophy." In: *Essays in the Philosophy of Art*. A. Donagan (ed.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966, p. 16.

⁷ Compare also *IH*, XIV-XVII. The quote is from a manuscript, written by Collingwood in 1939 for *The Principles of History*. "Notes on Historiography, written on a Voyage to the East Indies", 1939, p. 11. DEP 13. Under the heading "That History is the only kind of knowledge", Collingwood says: "I have already shown that metaphysics is what I have called an historical science, i.e. that the problems of metaphysics are without exception historical problems. It is easy to show...that this is true of every so-called philosophical science. Thus philosophy as a separate discipline is liquidated by being converted into history" (*Ibid.*).

Religious Experience,⁸ for example, seems to have discouraged critics from identifying Collingwood with pragmatism.⁹ Yet there are exceptions. L. O. Mink,¹⁰ N. Rotenstreich,¹¹ and L.J. Goldstein¹² found some pragmatist aspects in Collingwood but they are rare. More recently, E. Wolf-Gazo has explored several views in Collingwood which correspond to Peirce's.¹³

In what follows we will try to find out whether Collingwood was a clandestine pragmatist.

To begin with a remark about their intellectual biography, Collingwood and the American pragmatists shared the educational background of the nineteenth century. They were equally dissatisfied with the abstract principles of the Enlightenment, dividing the human mind into thought and sensation, knowledge and action etc. Both, Collingwood and Dewey, found the solution to the dualisms of Rationalism first in Hegel's Absolute Idealism, and they started as Hegelians. But later they found Hegelianism unsatisfying for rather similar reasons. Hegel's philosophy was no longer seen as providing an adequate answer to the problems that emerged with modern science and scientific thinking.

I shall therefore argue that the problems agitating Collingwood were also the problems agitating the American pragmatists, and they reached similar solutions. Let us begin by describing the pragmatist concerns. Next we shall consider Collingwood's remarks about pragmatism, and, as there are not many, we shall discover the implicit agreements between Collingwood and the pragmatists.

⁸ Cf. *An Autobiography* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 93. (First published by the Clarendon Press in 1939). Abbr. *Aut*.

⁹ Cf. e.g. W.M. Johnston: "It seems invidious to defend Collingwood's achievement on the grounds of pragmatism which was one of his least favourite varieties of philosophy." *The Formative Years of R. G. Collingwood*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967, p. 132.

¹⁰ Cf. L.O. Mink, *Mind, History, and Dialectic*, op. cit. in ref. 2, pp. 7ff.

¹¹ Cf. N. Rotenstreich, who interprets Collingwood's understanding of philosophical activity as purposive as a "pragmatic activity". *Philosophy, History and Politics*, op. cit. in ref. 5, p. 47.

¹² Cf. L.J. Goldstein, Review of Mink and Rubinoff. *Man and World* 6 (1973), 83-99. Goldstein sees an agreement between Collingwood and Dewey in their "experience-inquiry" orientation. *Ibid.*, pp. 84 ff.

¹³ See E. Wolf-Gazo, "Zur Geschichtsphilosophie R.G. Collingwoods." In *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 93 (1986), 354-365.

Pragmatism has commonly been understood as an attitude, emphasizing action, practice, in brief, a concern with the workableness and usefulness of ideas in practice rather than with a philosophical theory.¹⁴ This crude understanding of pragmatism derives from James's conception of truth. To James, the truth of an idea means its workings. The agreement with reality means truth as workableness of ideas. Truth thus assumes a relative character. The truth of ideas and beliefs is relative to the situations in which ideas and beliefs occur. Truth, for James, is a characteristic of the performance of an idea in a situation. James propounds an instrumental conception of ideas and beliefs by characterizing them as "plans of action" and thought, concepts and theories as "instruments" or "modes of adaption to reality". Yet the other pragmatists, in particular Peirce, were not concerned with an immediate transition from theory into practice but aimed at a conceptualized synthesis of the theoretical and the practical. Peirce argued that thought may ultimately apply to action, but it will be to "conceived action" (CP 5.403n). He wanted to rid pragmatism of associations with the practical, or with actions, but James remarked that pragmatism is "derived from the same Greek word $\pi\rho\acute{\alpha}\gamma\mu\alpha$, meaning action, from which our words 'practice' and 'practical' come".¹⁵ However, they all agreed on elaborating a doctrine of meaning according to which our conceptions are to be analyzed in terms of the consequences for action. A theory of meaning, explicating what we have described as a conceptualized synthesis between the theoretical and the practical, presupposes that the concepts used bear practical implications. Such concepts serve therefore in the reflective regulation of our conduct. As Peirce puts it: "the meaning of a concept...lies in the manner in which it could conceivably modify purposive action..."¹⁶

In interpreting Collingwood's philosophy as pragmatist, we first need to ask, what evidence there is in his work that justifies our argument. On the face of it, not much. Long before the American pragmatists became a self-conscious school, there has been a kind of pragmatic understanding

¹⁴ Cf. e.g. W. James: "What you want is a philosophy that will not only exercise your powers of intellectual abstraction, but that will make some positive connection with this actual world of finite lives." (*Pragmatism. A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, p. 20. (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1907. Enlarged edn., New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1943. Repr. New York: Meridian Books, 1955).

¹⁵ *Pragmatism*, op. cit. in ref. 14, p. 46.

¹⁶ Quoted by C. Ladd-Franklin in her article in the Peirce commemorative issue of the *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Method* XII (1916), 715-722. P. 718.

of the human past, taking history as a storehouse of examples for guiding our actions in the present. This is the only kind of pragmatism in history Collingwood ever mentions explicitly, and he criticizes it sharply. In *An Autobiography* he refers to Hegel's criticism of pragmatic history, finding it as useless as did Hegel in its intent to make history "a school of moral and political wisdom" (cf. *Aut* 99). Collingwood agrees with Hegel that we cannot receive any direct guidance from history for our actions in the present, because history never exactly repeats itself (*Aut* 100). Both, Collingwood and Hegel, reject moral pragmatism. Hegel ridicules moral pragmatism, arguing, what history teaches us is "that nations and governments have never learned anything from history or acted upon any lessons they might have drawn from it."¹⁷ Although Hegel considered moral pragmatism as futile (ibid.), he distinguished it from another kind of pragmatism which involves the activity of the historian's mind and thereby raises the past event into the present.¹⁸ Hegel here comes very close to Collingwood's conception of re-enactment, though in Hegel pragmatic history is metaphysical or speculative re-enactment, whereas in Collingwood it is preeminently epistemological.

In Collingwood's view, moral pragmatism took history for a "scissors-and-paste" affair. By "scissors-and-paste" Collingwood means a kind of history which deals with a dead past and repeats only "what the authorities say about it" (*Aut* 99). By contrast with "scissors-and-paste" history the re-enactment of the past in the present brings to mind that the past, though "incapsulated", lives on in the present (*Aut* 100). The past is an element in the present.

Collingwood himself gives us one hint, the only direct one in all his writings, that he could identify himself with a pragmatic view of history.

Our knowledge, so called, of the past, is therefore not knowledge of the past as of an actual object and therefore not true knowledge; it is only the reconstruction of an ideal object in the interests of knowing the present. The purpose of history is to enable us to know (and therefore to act relatively to) the present. That is the truth contained in the

¹⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. (H.B. Nisbet, ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 21.

¹⁸ "The second variety of reflective history, then, is the pragmatic one. When we study the past and occupy ourselves with a remote world, a present opens up before the mind, a present created out of the mind's own activity and bestowed upon it as a reward for its exertions. The events are various, but their general significance, their inner quality and coherence, are one." Op. cit. in ref. 18, p. 20.

pragmatic view of history. But the knowledge of the past must not be misconceived as knowledge of one object, the past, which when achieved serves as means to the knowledge of another object, the present. That is the error of the pragmatic view. The past and the present are not two objects: the past is an element in the present, and in studying the past we are actually coming to know the present, not coming to know something else which will lead us on to know or to manipulate the present.

(*LecPhHis* 53-54.)

To summarize, what Collingwood considers to be an acceptable feature of pragmatic history, is conceiving of the past as an “element in the present”, or, as he says elsewhere, as a “living past” (*Aut* 98).

How does the past become a “living past”? Collingwood establishes his conception of a viable kind of pragmatic history by his theory of re-enactment. Pragmatism, in James’s understanding, being concerned with the workableness or usefulness of ideas in action, can be applied to Collingwood’s view of history in the following way: For Collingwood, the historian makes the evidence work by re-enacting the problem situation. If the evidence works in terms of his solution, then the historian has an understanding of past action. Re-enactment proceeds on the “logic of question and answer”, and here I agree with Cebik, who has argued that it is in this method that the pragmatic character of evidence emerges.¹⁹ What is it that confers a pragmatist character upon evidence?

I want to argue that the logic of question and answer demands an experimental attitude to evidence. Re-enactment, defined as the re-thinking of past thoughts in the historian’s mind, does not require, as has been suggested, an “introspective acquaintance” with other persons’ minds.²⁰ It is a kind of thought-experiment by means of which the historian tries to find out whether the evidence answers the terms of his problem. Let us expound the concept of experimentalism .

Philosophy leaves its Ivory Tower of pure thought in acquiring an experimental attitude towards its object. In both its subject-matter and its method, philosophical history becomes pragmatic. And what I mean by “pragmatism” here is that outlined by Mead who argued that thought by

¹⁹ Cf. L. B. Cebik, “Collingwood: Action, Re-enactment, and Evidence,” p. 72. In *Philosophical Forum* 2 (1970-71), 68-90.

²⁰ Cf. P. Gardiner: “The “Objects” of Historical Knowledge,” pp. 214, 216. In *Philosophy* 27 (1952), 211-220.

its experimental attitude annihilates the difference between “theory” and “practice”. Mead regarded the idea of pure contemplation of an object as outmoded by the modern concept of knowledge which is that of activity as against receptivity. By the concept of receptivity he presumably refers to Locke’s empiricist idea of a “passive mind” as merely receiving sense-data. In Mead’s active conception of experience the world is continually reconstructed as to how it reacts to our experiments. Mead suggested that we should take up the same attitude to history as that with which science deals with nature, i.e. that of experimentalism.²¹

What Mead understands by “experimentalism” is the attitude of approaching the object with a question. It is the Baconian theory of experimental science, praised so highly by Collingwood, that, firstly, “the scientist has to decide exactly what it is that he wants to know”, and, secondly, “that he must find means of compelling nature to answer” (*Aut*, 81; *IH*, 269).

The experiment is successful if the object has complied with or answered the terms of the problem. By thus dissolving the subject-object relation into a complex of problems and solutions or questions and answers the old dichotomy between them becomes meaningless. As Ernst Cassirer has pointed out, modern science replaces the concept of substance by that of function.²²

Given that experimentalism and the dissolution of substantial entities into functions constitute the working epistemology of the sciences, could the same epistemology underlie the humanities?

Collingwood insists on the difference between the object in science and in history for mainly two reasons. Firstly, there is no direct access to the historical object. Secondly, the subject-matter of history is actions which express a thought, an intention or a purpose. The historical object is therefore as much an act as the subject’s activity of re-enacting. Collingwood with Locke renounces “all ‘science of substance’”. A study of mind “does not ask what mind is; it asks only what mind does” (*NL*, 9.16). Both, subject and object, form parts of a function. They are con-

²¹ G.H. Mead, *The Philosophy of the Act*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938. See esp. “Experimentalism as a Philosophy of History”, *ibid.*, 494-519.

²² E. Cassirer, *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff*. Untersuchungen über die Grundfragen der Erkenntniskritik. Berlin, 1910.

sidered as an activity, both changing in relation to each other.²³ Collingwood takes the same view as Cassirer about desubstantialisation in modern science. In applying the functional conception of mind to history, Collingwood furthermore understands the activity within a function as self-reflective. He thus combines the concept of mind as function with the traditional concept of self-knowledge. The theory of re-enactment understands the subject-object relation in terms of a function.

The other aspect of modern epistemology, that of experimentalism, is realised in Collingwood's logic of question and answer. His experimentalism originated in archaeology about which he says that he found himself "experimenting in a laboratory of knowledge" (*Aut* 24).²⁴ We take this expression as a justification for interpreting re-enactment as a "thought-experiment". Collingwood employs these two aspects, functionalism and experimentalism, in his philosophy of history without adapting the historical to the scientific method.

Collingwood takes the same view as Dewey on replacing formal logic by a conception of logic as a theory of inquiry. The logic of propositions is superseded by a theory of meaning, involving a relation between problem and solution, question and answer.

As Collingwood describes historical inquiry:

Every actual inquiry starts from a certain problem, and the purpose of the inquiry is to solve that problem; the plan of that discovery, there-

²³ Compare to this N. Rotenstreich, who, after quoting *NL*, 9.16, says: "This functional approach to Mind leads actually to the idea that there is nothing permanent in thought. The realm of thought becomes atomized and thus nothing remains which is meaningful for all sets of peoples" ("Historicism and Philosophy", op. cit. in ref. 5, p. 413). The functional concept of mind thus can imply a relativism of philosophical principles. Collingwood's monistic concept of mind saves him from scepticism as regards the realm of thought because mind understands mind over the ages.

²⁴ Collingwood says about archaeology as a laboratory of knowledge: "...at first asking myself a quite vague question, such as: 'was there a Flavian occupation on this site?' then dividing that question into various heads and putting the first in some such form as this: 'are these Flavian sherds and coins mere strays, or were they deposited in the period to which they belong?' and then considering all the possible ways in which light could be thrown on this new question, and putting them into practice one by one, until at last I could say, 'There was a Flavian occupation; an earth and timber fort of such and such plan was built here in the year a+/-b and abandoned for such and such reason in the year x+/-y.' Experience soon taught me that under these laboratory conditions one found out nothing at all except in answer to a question; and not a vague question either, but a definite one." *Ibid.*

fore, is already known and formulated by saying that, whatever the discovery may be, it must be such as to satisfy the terms of the problem.

(*IH*, 312)

In *IH* Collingwood explicates his theory of re-enactment. He conceives of it as the questioning method (*IH* 269-274, 278-282). The working of the “logic of question and answer” as a method of solving historical problems is described extensively in *Aut*, where it assumes an additional pragmatic feature by being connected with a theory of action:

We study history in order to see more clearly into the situation in which we are called upon to act. Hence the plane on which, ultimately, all problems arise, is the plane of ‘real’ life: that to which they are referred for their solution is history.

(*Aut* 114)

By means of the pragmatic method, as Mead understands it, we reconstruct our world and our history.²⁵ We cannot grasp the meaning of the present by studying the history of the past because we need to reconstruct our history by studying the present (*ibid.*). Collingwood takes the same view as Mead, who links the pragmatic understanding of evidence explicitly up with the relevance that a certain problem has for conduct:

It is, after all, in the problem that he [i.e. the historian] finds the definition of his data, and in its solution the test of his sufficiency. Have those problems any other residence than in the need to better comprehend the society of which we are a part, and is the comprehension of that society anything but the considerate effort to face conduct in that society intelligibly? I do not think so.²⁶

Peirce, like Mead, contends that any conception has its meaning exclusively in relation to conduct and nothing that does not result from experiment has a direct relation to conduct (*CP* 5.412). Peirce defines pragmatism as a doctrine, according to which any conception is a “conception of its conceivable practical effects”. This doctrine makes the

²⁵ “Back of our Minds.” In *The Philosophy of the Act*, op. cit. in ref. 21, p. 488.

²⁶ G.H. Mead, “History and the Experimental Method.” In *The Philosophy of the Act*, op. cit. in ref. 21, pp. 98-99.

conception "reach far beyond the practical".²⁷ The practical in turn releases a new "theory", i.e. new meanings.

In which respect does Collingwood agree with the American pragmatists Mead and Peirce, that would entitle us to characterize his philosophy of history as pragmatist?

Collingwood's concept of re-enactment stands in the centre of his philosophy of history. He takes it to be the task of the historian to re-think exactly the same thought of the historical agent in his own mind (cf. *IH* 282 ff.). It is only by re-enacting past thoughts that the past is known to be an element in the present or a "living past". To contrast "re-enactment" with "reconstruction", the concept of reconstruction still bears with it the realist idea of a past that is "there", external to the mind of the historian.²⁸ Although, for Collingwood, re-enactment implies reconstruction, the concept of re-enactment highlights much more the active and creative aspect, which consists in re-enacting a past thought, than it would be possible by reconstruction. Re-enactment is grounded in the logic of question and answer which proceeds experimentally. The "logic" receives its experimental character from the complex of question and answer which is synonym with the complex of problems and solutions. Solutions obtain their verification by the interpretation of evidence. It is this experimental aspect in re-enactment that makes Collingwood agree with Peirce that only a concept or knowledge achieved by the experimental method will stand in direct relation to practical life. For Collingwood, the synthesis between theory and practice is brought about by the re-enactment of past action. The historian is acting in the present by re-enacting the past.

All of the American pragmatists agree on the practical implications of concepts. This view presupposes that the concept has in itself the structure of the practical, which is the same as its referring to a purpose. For Collingwood this pragmatic view is implied in his concept of re-enacting a past action. An action must be based on reflective, intentional acts of thought. Collingwood claims that only acts which we do on purpose, can

²⁷ "...if pragmatism is the doctrine that every conception is a conception of conceivable practical effects, it makes the conception reach far beyond the practical" (*CP*, 5.196).

²⁸ Cf. G.H. Mead, "The Present as the Locus of Reality." In *The Philosophy of the Present*. Chicago & London, 1932, pp. 29f.

be re-enacted.²⁹ In this way, thought itself is taken to be purposive. To develop this idea further, let us remind ourselves of Collingwood's arguing for a merging of philosophical and historical thought in re-enactment. Commonly they are taken to be apart: Philosophical thought is a theoretical reflection, while historical thought in terms of the historical agent is a purposive activity. How, then, does philosophical thought assume the character of purposiveness? The historian in re-thinking exactly the same thought of the past agent that is both, reflective and purposive, merges the past enactment with his philosophical, i.e. reflective re-enactment.³⁰ Rotenstreich has therefore argued that we need to understand "philosophical activity itself as a purposive or pragmatic activity".³¹ Collingwood himself subscribes to the concept of pragmatic self-knowledge.³² The purposiveness of knowing is in fact one of the chief definitions of pragmatism.³³

In order to know a thought and its meaning, the thought must have been expressed, either in language, or in any other form of utterance (*Aut* 111). Collingwood, like Peirce,³⁴ conceives of language in its wide

²⁹ "Reflective acts may be roughly described as the acts which we do on purpose and these are the only acts which can become the subject-matter of history" (*IH* 309).

³⁰ To give Collingwood's example: "[The historian] is reading the Theodosian Code, and has before him a certain edict of an emperor. Merely reading the words and being able to translate them does not amount to knowing their historical significance. In order to do that he must envisage the situation with which the emperor envisaged it. The he must see for himself, just as if the emperor's situation were his own, how such a situation might be dealt with; he must see the possible alternatives, and the reasons for choosing one rather than another; and thus he must go through the process which the emperor went through in deciding on this particular course. Thus he is re-enacting in his own mind the experience of the emperor" (*IH* 283)

³¹ Cf. N. Rotenstreich: "History and Time." *Loc. cit.* in ref. 5, p. 55.

³² "Part, indeed the first part, of knowing yourself is knowing what you want. This is not only the first thing a man can know about himself, it is the first thing he knows at all." *The New Leviathan or Man, Society, Civilization and Barbarism*, 11.39. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947. [First published in 1942]. Abbr. *NL*.

³³ Cf. F.C.S. Schiller (*Studies in Humanism*. London: Macmillan, 1907): "Hence the most essential feature of Pragmatism may well seem its insistence on the fact that...all mental life is purposive" (p. 10). Pragmatism be further "a systematic protest against all ignoring of the purposiveness of actual knowing." (p. 11).

³⁴ "...all thought whatsoever is a sign, and is mostly of the nature of language" (*CP* 5.421).

sense as a system of signs. Language comprises those activities by which we “mean” or “signify” something.³⁵

Both, Collingwood and Peirce, reject the idea that language merely corresponds with the world. Language is not just an utterance, being true or false, but consists of words which have meanings.

Meanings are transferred in, what came to be called “speech acts” which cannot be classified at all. Language does therefore not just correspond with the world but creates a world. In Peirce’s semiotic terminology, language is a sign that is introduced by an interpreter, in order to stand for something. Collingwood, in developing his theory of language, is moving towards problems which were called on later by philosophers. He argues that in “discourse”; language becomes “concrete”. Explaining,

It is the activity of meaning something (a) by something else (b), where meaning a is an act of theoretical consciousness, and b is a practical activity, the production in oneself or others of a flow of sounds or the like which serve you as the vehicle of that meaning.

(NL 6.19)

History as understanding of the present, to Collingwood as to Mead, improves on the understanding of the society in which we live. Once we have accomplished a clear concept of a situation by virtue of historical knowledge, we should be able to apply our historical knowledge in clarifying issues in current political and social affairs. If our theory of action is false and confused, the world in which we act will similarly be a reflection of this confusion: “the mind having formed a false conception of itself, tries to live up to that conception” (SM 250). When Collingwood in *Speculum Mentis* says that “all thought exists for the sake of action” (SM 15), this phrase is not to be misunderstood as a call to blind activism, but must be understood pragmatically: It is not the task of theory, and in particular history, to set up rules for action³⁶ but to clarify

³⁵ “By ‘language’ I mean not only speech, that is, language consisting of movements in the mouth-cavity producing sound; I mean that chiefly, because that is the most highly developed kind of language men possess: but I also mean any system of bodily movements, not necessarily vocal, whereby the men who make them *mean* or *signify* anything” (NL 6.1).

³⁶ Collingwood rejected the old pragmatic idea that historical study can provide us with a set of rules for human conduct. Although he considers action according to rule to be an important kind of action, to Collingwood a higher kind of action is one in which the agent has knowledge of the situation. In subsuming actions under rules, he

misunderstandings which are a hinderance in solving practical problems.³⁷ What thus mediates between a past action and our own action in a present situation is the knowledge gained from historical study. It is the practical aspect of thought in an action as purposive or intentional that, in being re-enacted, links the self-knowledge thus gained to practice. This does not mean that thinking in itself is already practice.³⁸ Self-knowledge accomplished by historical study provides a person with an historical understanding of the present. The historically educated person knows how the present emerged from the past and thus will comprehend a situation in the present within its historical context. Collingwood then argues that this historical knowledge will assist a person in executing an action according to his or her knowledge of the situation. As Collingwood says, "what history can bring to moral and political life is a trained eye for the situation in which one has to act" (*Aut* 100). He shares, though not explicitly, Peirce's Cartesian-pragmatic view, that only a clear cognition will help us to act better. Collingwood also finds himself in implicit agreement with Mead who says about history that it is "trying to restate the past so as to make our present situation intelligible". Mead further argues:

Greek and Roman histories are always written from the standpoint of interpreting an immediate situation in which the Greek and Roman communities found themselves - bringing those situations up to date, so to speak, so that present problems may be accurately defined. That is what the persons who write history are interested in doing.³⁹

History thus will not in an immediate way, as suggested by moral pragmatism, become an instruction for action but by mediation of the

argues, "you are not dealing with a situation but only with a certain type of situation under which you class it" (*Aut* 104).

³⁷ "Political Action," p. 158. In *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 29 (1928-29), 155-176; "The Present Need of a Philosophy," p. 263. In *Philosophy* 9 (1934), 262-265.

³⁸ Thus Rotenstreich argues: "Collingwood deviating from the Socratic idea does not think that knowledge as such is already practice. Knowledge is the precondition for solving the practical problems which demand for their solution the decision which commits us. Decision carries us beyond the sheer contemplative understanding and places us in the realm of shaping the actual course of life. Reflection is for the sake of action and action in its very nature cannot be historicist" ("Historism and Philosophy," op. cit. in ref. 5, p. 418).

³⁹ G.H. Mead: "Fragments on the Process of Reflection." In: *The Philosophy of the Act*, op. cit. in ref. 21, p. 81.

theory of re-enactment, that consists in an experimental re-thinking of reflective, intentional acts of thought. It will combine “theory” and “practice”, intentional thinking and reflective action. Such was the main feature of the new theory of pragmatism, to recognize an “inseparable connection between rational cognition and rational purpose” (Peirce, *CP* 5.412), with which we find Collingwood’s theory of re-enactment in agreement.

Let us next discover some other features of pragmatism in Collingwood’s work. They are to be found in his conception of history as inquiry and in his theory of truth.

In his early work Collingwood had considered history in a realist way, depicting the historian as merely collecting and asserting historical facts. Such a view could neither convince the working historian, nor was it a satisfactory theory to the historian Collingwood himself. As a practising archaeologist, it must have been obvious to Collingwood very early on (and so he in fact later conceded in *An Autobiography*) that history or archaeology, when practiced, were more than the assertion of positive knowledge. In the actual practice of history it was not already possessed positive knowledge, but the activity of achieving knowledge, not a receptive attitude of collecting facts but the activity of questioning and inquiring. By the time he composed *The Idea of History*, Collingwood took history to be the active, self-reflective, questioning and critical effort of philosophy; indeed, history had taken over from philosophy the aim of achieving self-knowledge. Finally, with the application of the method of questioning and answering, history had become a field of inquiry or research. It was an autonomous discipline, with a subject-matter of its own and with methods proper to itself.

In *IH* Collingwood takes the statement that history is “a kind of research or inquiry” (*IH*, 9) as his starting point. Generally speaking, inquiry means a form of thought “whereby we ask questions and try to answer them”. Science consists in “fastening upon something we do not know, and trying to discover it”, rather than “collecting what we already know and arranging it in this or that kind of pattern” (*IH*, 9). With allegiance to Socrates, scientific thought emerges from our own ignorance, though not an ignorance of everything but of some definite thing and trying to find out what it is. Collingwood defines history as the “science of *res gestae*, the attempt to answer questions about human actions done in the past” (*IH*, 9).

It has been remarked by Goldstein that idealism and pragmatism share, what he calls, the "experience-inquiry orientation".⁴⁰ Goldstein is certainly right in what he holds about the experience oriented point of view, but it may be doubted whether idealism is really concerned with inquiry. Certainly Dewey thought that it was not: he began as a Hegelian, and it was precisely the lack of inquiry in idealism that made him turn towards pragmatism. He was dissatisfied with viewing development as a passage from "contradictions" to "syntheses" and replaced those notions by the evolutionary and biologically conceived concept of growth. "Growth" he understood as a process of "conflicts" and "resolutions". Hegelian idealism gave way to, what Dewey called, "experimental idealism". In Collingwood's *New Leviathan* we discover a similar development, i.e. a break with Hegelianism and an elaboration of a kind of social behaviourism.

However much they differ, idealism and pragmatism agree that experience is activity. They maintain that the nature of our experience changes the world of that experience, diverging thus from empirical realism. Traditional empiricism conceived the testing of ideas to consist of an introspective process in which the ideas were matched against their origins. Kant understood the concept of experience in a new way: Experience was no longer the stuff from which ideas are derived, but became a way in which ideas assume a regulative and constitutive function. Experience is no longer substance, but becomes process. In pragmatism, experience is not what we know, nor the cause of ideas, but the process of how we know certain kinds of objects and a method of controlling and assessing ideas. In brief, experience becomes experimentation. Pragmatism propounds an experimental and observational approach to the environment.

The difficulty of applying the pragmatic concept of experimentation to history lies in the peculiarity of history as having its object in the past. The pastness of an event makes it therefore impossible to use the observational method that is solely recognized by science as scientific. Furthermore, present evidence, which is about the past, cannot be tested against, what some call, the reality of the past. Explains Walsh:

The past as it actually was is not open to our observation, and there is no reason to think that any remains we now have of it constitute in

⁴⁰ L.J. Goldstein, Review in *Man and World* 6 (1973), p. 84.

themselves what might be termed unvarnished transcripts of past reality. Historical conclusions must accord with the evidence; but evidence, too, is not something which is fixed, finished, and uncontroversial in its meaning and implications. Evidence has to be authenticated, and again evidence has to be assessed.⁴¹

For these reasons the past has to be reconstructed, and Walsh suggests the coherence theory as the only working procedure in historical inquiry.

Given that the criterion for scientific inquiry is the observational test of an hypothesis, how can history on these grounds become a science? Collingwood argues that the scientific criterion for history consists in its inferential procedure:

History, then, is a science, but a science of a special kind. It is a science whose business is to study events not accessible to our observation, and to study these events inferentially, arguing to them from something else which is accessible to our observation, and which the historian calls "evidence" for the events in which he is interested.

(*IH* 251-52)

The scientific test of present evidence against past "reality" works thus quite different from science.

At first sight, Collingwood's description of history as research and inquiry suggests that the work is done in isolation. We observe that Collingwood, in nearly all his writings, speaks of the historian, rather than, as would be more appropriate, of the community of historians. In *NA*⁴² this presupposition of regarding the historian as an isolated individual misleads him to a monadic view of the historian's work. The historian is depicted as collecting an endless amount of facts, supposedly without knowing, what can only be known from a philosophical point of view, that those allegedly hard facts are implicitly the expression of mind. We shall not repeat Collingwood's later solution to this aporetic result here, but rather consider Collingwood's view of historical research in *IH* and related manuscripts. Indeed, in *IH* when history had finally risen to the

⁴¹ W.H. Walsh, "Truth and Fact in History Reconsidered," p. 54. *History and Theory*, Beiheft 16, 53-71.

⁴² "The Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History". In *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 25 (1924-25), 151-174. Repr. in W. Debbins (ed.), *Essays in the Philosophy of History by R.G. Collingwood*. Austin, 1965, 34-56.

level of philosophical reflection, the historian is no longer seen as facing facts but as re-enacting thoughts. At first sight, such re-enactment again seems to be done individually and isolated. Indeed, the historian precisely is an historian because he agrees to using certain methods and procedures which constitute a community. The so-called facts he deals with are for the greater part histories previously written:

...the only past we can know and need to know is the past that has preserved recognisable traces in the present, so people must come to see more and more that all history is really history of history, that in stating what we take to be past facts we are really only and always re-counting and summarizing our own and other people's investigations concerning the past.

(LecPhHis 57)

In re-enacting the thought of past agents the historian criticizes former accounts of certain actions once performed. Says Collingwood:

Throughout the course of his work the historian is selecting, constructing, and criticizing; it is only by doing these things that he maintains his thought upon the *sichere Gang einer Wissenschaft* [Kant].

(IH 236)

By thus applying historical methods and criticizing the histories written, his results can never be idiosyncratic. He belongs to a scientific community. Despite Collingwood's use of the formula "the historian", in *IH* and later writings, what Collingwood means is in fact the community of historians. The social and experimental conception of science as the effort, not of an individual, but of a "community of investigators", is an idea that Collingwood shares with American pragmatism. But he developed this view independently of Peirce.

Lastly, let us consider Collingwood's conception of truth, in which we will also detect a pragmatic character.

When history is conceived of as research, it is an on-going activity, a search for historical truth that, in Collingwood's view is not to be found in statements converging with historical facts, but facts, nay, evidence, answering an historical problem. What the historian has to aim at is not a coherence of facts but an historical reconstruction. As Collingwood explains the difference:

Confronted with a ready-made statement about the subject he is studying, the scientific historian never asks himself: 'Is this statement true or false?', in other words 'Shall I incorporate it in my history of that subject or not?' The question he asks himself is: 'What does this statement mean?' And this is not equivalent to the question 'What did the person who made it mean by it?', although that is doubtless a question that the historian must ask, and must be able to answer. It is equivalent, rather, to the question 'What light is thrown on the subject in which I am interested by the fact that this person made this statement, meaning by it what he did mean?' This might be expressed by saying that the scientific historian does not treat statements as statements but as evidence: not as true or false accounts of the facts of which they profess to be accounts, but as other facts which, if he knows the right questions to ask about them, may throw light on those facts.

(IH 275)

Reconstruction, pursued by the interpretation of evidence, to some critics entails relativism.⁴³ To the objections of historical realism Collingwood remarks that even a relatively true judgement, established by the historical method of interpreting evidence, does not just replace one interpretation by another, but a worse for a better, i.e. more convincing, because more coherent reconstruction of an historical event. Thus singular, relatively true, judgements do not abolish the aim of truth but further the reconstruction of a more coherent account of an event.

What, then, is the "test" for truth in the constructionist thesis? Different from the scientist, the historian cannot verify his statements observationally but has as his only "test" the available evidence. Collingwood claims that the scientific historian in writing his account is his own authority. When asking a question, he already has a tentative idea of the evidence he will be able to use. Question and evidence, in history, are therefore correlative (IH 281). In writing his account he does not merely repeat other historians' statements, but makes his own autonomous statements on his own authority (IH 275-76). This scientific procedure of using evidence clearly involves criticism. The idea of carrying out research by criticism agrees with the pragmatist view of processes of scientific investigation. For Collingwood, historical truth "emerges out of criticism and can withstand criticism" (*LecPhHis* 15).

⁴³ Cf. esp. M. Mandelbaum, *The Problem of Historical Knowledge*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1938.

Similarly, for Peirce, scientific investigations tend to weed out the false beliefs and bring scientists to converge on the true. Truth, in Peirce's pragmatism, would be such ultimate and ideal convergence (*CP* 5.565). By contrast with Collingwood, Peirce propounded a new realism that is based on a theory of representation. Thinking is caused by our sensations which, in turn, are influenced by "the real". Peirce's realist theory of representation is directed towards a final conclusion to which every scientist would agree "in the long run". Whatever is believed to exist in the final conclusion is conceived of as being independent of anyone's thought and hence real. Peirce also calls this one general agreement the "one catholic consent" (*CP* 8.12). Yet this final conclusion is not plainly corresponding to or depicting reality. We are not required, as in the correspondence theory, to vacate our minds in order to judge the correspondence of an idea with reality. On the contrary, the representation is by conceptual interpretation, so that, pragmatically, the real is what, in the final conclusion, thought represents it to be. In Peirce's words:

The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed upon by all who investigate is what we mean by truth, and the object represented by this opinion is real.

(*CP* 5.407)

Peirce has been criticized for using the word "fated" which has been associated with an occult power behind the process of scientific investigation. But what he meant by "fated" was that "which is sure to happen" (*CP* 5.407, note I). Yet Peirce's definition of ultimate truth is rather, in Kantian terms, a regulative idea. It does not commit him to believing that there will in fact ever be a final opinion at all. If such a final opinion were ever be reached, it would put an end to inquiry and research in general. Peirce, at least, has thus not abandoned the idea of absolute truth as the ideal aim of research. Besides, his pragmatism is a far cry from the popular idea, often associated with pragmatism, of determining the meaning and truth of thought by criteria of their practical usefulness. Despite the ideal of absolute truth, for Peirce and James no less than for Collingwood, preliminarily scientific research should aim at a concept of relative truth that is a function of particular verifications; applied to history, of relatively true judgements. Collingwood argues:

Because final and complete truth, with regard even to quite a small historical problem, is unattainable, it does not follow that there can be no solid advance in historical knowledge...clinging to the obvious fact that we can and do substitute one narrative for another, not on grounds of personal preference but on wholly objective grounds...

(*LecPbHis* 36)

Putting the goal of final truth aside, historical constructionism is likely to end up in scepticism. It is precisely scepticism as regards absolute truth in history that, for example, in Mandelbaum's view, relativism involves. For Mandelbaum, scepticism can only be avoided by the realist view of truth. Collingwood counters the objections of the sceptic differently:

...it is a scepticism which only affects the absolute truth of our historical thinking, and does not touch its relative truth, that is to say, the truth of the judgment that this historical narrative is preferable to that. And if it is argued that without absolute truth this relative truth cannot exist, we shall reply, on the contrary, unless this relative truth were certain, the argument against absolute truth would fall to the ground... For this argument depends on the principle that historical theories admit of refutation, that is on the principle that criticism may be effective. But if criticism is effective, it results in the replacement of the refuted view by a less inadequate view, that is one relatively true. For the only way in which an historical theory can be refuted is by reinterpreting the evidence on which it rests and showing that the evidence really points in a different direction. The only certainty that we can ever have in historical thinking is the certainty of having made a definite advance on previous theories. If we want more than that, we cannot have it. If we hope that by pursuing our inquiries we can come to know the past exactly as it happened, our hope is vain.

(*LecPbHis* 37)

Furthermore, relativism enters historical judgements because, in the pragmatic understanding, history is written from the point of view of the present. Mead, for example, views history as the attempt "to restate the past so as to make our present situation intelligible".⁴⁴ "In actual literary history", Mead concludes, we "are really getting the past so far as that enters into the present problems" (*ibid.*). There is in this way no possi-

⁴⁴ G.H. Mead, "Fragments on the Process of Reflection," loc. cit. in ref. 39, p. 81.

bility of getting a final history. Collingwood also rejects the idea of finality in history:

'When we have found and interpreted our evidence, the result is history as a finished product, or narrative.' I say as a finished product, but it must be remembered that the product is never actually finished. The work of collecting sources is as endless as is the work of interpreting them, and therefore every narrative that we can at any given moment put forward is only an interim report on the progress of our historical inquiries. Finality in such a matter is absolutely impossible.

(*LecPhHis* 36)

Another reason for truth as being relative to the present is to be found in Collingwood's as well as Mead's view that each generation has to rewrite history.⁴⁵ As Mead states: "Each generation and often different minds within a generation have discovered different pasts."⁴⁶ Yet it may be objected that there is a continuity in the course of human events that make up the framework of historical accounts. For Mead, this view of history as a process of inevitable events is beside the point, if one is to identify historical knowledge with scientific research.

One past displaces and abrogates another as inexorably as the rising generation buries the old. How many different Ceasars have crossed the Rubicon since 1800? But, you say, there must be identical events in each, else the new past could not displace the old and occupy its field. Yes, there are coincidences of events that are relatively permanent, and which make possible translation from one historic account to another. But coincidences of events are not the objects of our knowledge.⁴⁷

Collingwood answers this problem of diverging accounts of the past in a similar way to Mead. After the historian has studied the different views of A, B, C, D, he says: "I, having diligently studied their views, think it was thus.' Hence the history of history culminates where it ought to culminate, in the present" (*LecPhHis* 58). Historical truth is thus relative to the present.

⁴⁵ *IH* 248; G.H. Mead, "A Pragmatic Theory of Truth", p. 335; in *Selected Writings*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964.

⁴⁶ G.H. Mead, "History and the Experimental Method," p. 95. In *The Philosophy of the Act*, op. cit. in ref. 21.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*.

Truth in history is therefore not something that is found or discovered, but, as James emphasizes, made in the process of scientific research.⁴⁸ “Making”, in this context, highlights the activity, creativity, in general, the experimental attitude in historical inquiry. We find Collingwood in agreement with this pragmatist idea of “making” history, when he distinguishes dogmatic from critical history:

It is to be observed that the transition from dogmatic to critical history involves an immense widening of the field of evidence. Whereas dogmatic history recognizes no sources but only authorities, which must consist of ready-made narrative, critical history treats these narratives not as authorities, or history ready-made, but as sources, or evidence *to be made* into history by interpreting it...

(*LecPhHis* 29; my italics)

At first sight, the idea of “making” truth seems to be irreconcilable with the correspondence theory. It stands for just the opposite approach to evidence than the coherence theory. In fact, a reconciliation is possible, if, as suggested by Dewey, correspondence is taken in an “operational” sense:

My own view takes correspondence in the operational sense it bears in all cases except the unique epistemological case of an alleged relation between a “subject” and an “object”: the meaning, namely, of answering, as a key answers to conditions imposed by a lock, or as two correspondences “answer” each other; or, in general, as a reply in an adequate answer to a question or a criticism—as, in short, a solution answers the requirements of a problem. On this view, both partners in “correspondence” are open and above board, instead of one of them being forever out of experience and the other in it by way of a “percept” or whatever.⁴⁹

The “operational” correspondence theory allows for an experimental and functional relation between, to put it in traditional terminology,

⁴⁸ “The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process, the process namely of its verifying itself, its *verification*. Its validity is the process of its *valid-ation*” (*Pragmatism*, p. 201).

⁴⁹ J. Dewey, “Propositions, Warranted Assertibility and Truth,” in *Problems of Man*, pp. 343-344 (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946, pp. 331-353; originally published in *Journal of Philosophy* **38**, (1946), 169-186).

“subject” and “object”. If we try to apply Dewey’s suggestion to Collingwood’s theory of re-enactment, we noticed already that the re-enactor and the past actor enter a functional, on both parts self-reflective, relationship. In this way, a past action becomes the answer to a problem posed by the historian. The relation is not one between statements corresponding with facts but a thought process being re-enacted in present thought. Both parts correspond in an operational way and become thus, as Collingwood claims, one identical thought.

I venture to argue that Dewey’s suggestion of an operational correspondence theory could describe and solve the puzzle of an identical thought being re-enacted.

Dewey holds that truth characterizes the conditions that correspond as a solution answers a problem. Mead also defined truth as “synonymous with the solution of the problem”.⁵⁰ What it is that corresponds, Dewey claims, is a whole coordinated set of activities. The correspondence relation in Dewey’s theory is one holding among “situations”. What does Dewey understand by “situation”? He defines the term as follows:

What is designated by the word ‘situation’ is not a single object or set of objects and events. For we never experience nor form judgments about objects and events in isolation but only in connection with a contextual whole...In actual experience there is never any such isolated singular object or event; an object or event is always a special part, a phase, or aspect, of an environing experienced world—a situation.⁵¹

The “operational” correspondence theory covers what is traditionally understood by the coherence theory. If we try to transfer Dewey’s idea of a “contextual whole” to Collingwood’s theory of re-enactment, we find the agreement in Collingwood’s theory of imagination which holds that thought is never re-enacted in isolation but within the context of the effects of an action and the surrounding conditions under which it was executed. To put it in Dewey’s terms, re-enactment is the re-thinking of thoughts within a “contextual whole”. Collingwood would have agreed.

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⁵⁰ “A Pragmatic Theory of Truth”. In *Selected Writings*, op. cit. in ref. 45, p. 328.

⁵¹ J. Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, pp. 66-67. New York: Holt, 1938.

ABBREVIATIONS

Works by R.G. Collingwood:

- Aut* *An Autobiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970. (First published by the Clarendon Press in 1939).
- IH* *The Idea of History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970. (First published by the Clarendon Press in 1946).
- LecPhHis* *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. Manuscript written in 1926. Bodleian Library. DEP 14.
- NL* *The New Leviathan or Man, Society, Civilization and Barbarism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947. [First published in 1942].
- SM* *Speculum Mentis or The Map of Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946. (First published in 1924).

Works by C.S. Peirce:

- CP* Charles Saunders Peirce, *Collected Papers*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934. (Numbers indicate volume and paragraph).