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*Prefatory Note
to Saul Kripke 'History
and Idealism: The Theory
of R.G. Collingwood'*

Collingwood and British Idealism Studies is very pleased to publish Saul Kripke's paper on Collingwood. The paper was written in 1960 when he was a third year undergraduate at Harvard, at a time when the philosophy of history was going through a phase of popularity. Following the publication of Collingwood's *The Idea of History* in 1946, the nineteen fifties saw the publication of important books by W.H. Walsh (1951) and Patrick Gardiner (1952) culminating in the publication in 1959 of two important anthologies on the topic (Meyerhoff 1959 and Gardiner 1959). 1960 was also the year in which the journal *History and Theory* (one of whose founding editors, Richard Vann, was Kripke's tutor), was launched. It is clear from reading such a fluent undergraduate paper that it was written at a time when the philosophy of history was an important part of the undergraduate curriculum and considerations

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concerning the methodologies at work in the human and natural sciences were central to the philosophical agenda in a way in which, regrettably, they are no longer.

Kripke's paper offers a critical assessment of Collingwood's philosophy of history which is very prescient in fending off some of the standard misunderstandings of Collingwood's defence of the methodological autonomy of history. One such misunderstanding concerns Collingwood's claim that whereas the natural sciences investigate events, history is concerned with actions, and the latter have an inside, which the former lack. Much ink has been spilled on this claim since Kripke's undergraduate paper, but now something resembling a consensus has been reached, and today many would agree that Collingwood's inside/outside distinction was a highly metaphorical (and possibly misleading) way of expressing the much less controversial claim that actions (unlike events) are best explained by establishing meaningful conceptual conceptions rather than inductively, by extrapolating general laws from empirical observations. But at the time at which Kripke was writing many considered Collingwood's talk of an inside/outside distinction to be clear evidence of a commitment to a Cartesian theory of the mind. The philosopher most associated with this view was Gilbert Ryle. Even though Ryle did not mention Collingwood by name in *The Concept of Mind*, many took him to be directly criticizing Collingwood. This led to the view (by those influenced by, or sympathetic to, Ryle) that Collingwood believed in some sort of direct intuition or mystical union between historian and subject. One of these critics, Patrick Gardiner, many years later recanted, saying that that he had been 'unduly influenced by Collingwood's metaphorical terminology, as well as taking for methodological precepts what are more plausibly interpreted as conceptual claims regarding the implications of the notions of histori-

cal knowledge and understanding' (Gardiner, 1996: 112). But by then the interpretative damage was done.

Since the reading of the inside/outside distinction as entailing a commitment to a Cartesian view of the mind was part of the philosophical background to the interpretation of Collingwood's thought, it would have been easy for Kripke to have followed suit. Instead, he rightly identifies Collingwood's main concern, namely defending the autonomy of historical explanation from the natural sciences. It is greatly to Kripke's credit that he saw clearly that such criticisms amounted to a caricature of Collingwood's inside/outside distinction. He raises the question of whether the passages from *The Concept of Mind* to which he refers were in fact a critique of Collingwood, given that Ryle does not mention Collingwood by name. He is undoubtedly right to identify Collingwood as the intended target of Ryle's critique.³ And equally perceptive in rejecting this misleading interpretation.

While dismissive of criticisms premised on overly literal readings of the inside/outside distinction, Kripke's paper is also very critical of Collingwood's alternative to the positivistic model of explanation, in particular of the claim that 'all history is the history of thought' and of the re-enactment doctrine. The dictum 'all history is the history of thought' is said to be obviously false because too restrictive of the concerns of practicing historians. The re-enactment doctrine, on the other hand, comes under fire for over-rationalizing actions and for presupposing the untenable view that historical agents recite arguments

3 We now know that Ryle wrote notes on *The Idea of History*, was unimpressed by Collingwood's concerns about the autonomy of history and his account of the historical imagination, but found something of interest in the notion of re-enactment. He interprets Collingwood as saying that in order to 'understand men we must and can in a certain way get inside their skins - think their thoughts and walk in their shoes. Science deals with the outsides, history with the insides. Science describes, history re-enacts or revives' and states that 'this is an interesting question.' However, he was not persuaded by Collingwood's approach (Ryle, n.d.).

in their own head which are then re-thought or re-enacted by historians. It would be inappropriate here to take issue with these claims. It is important to note, however, that whatever view one might take on these matters, Kripke puts his finger on a number of sore spots where reading Collingwood in a positive light requires making distinctions which are perhaps only implicit in his work. It could be (and it has been) argued that when speaking about history Collingwood is not referring to the discipline taught in academic departments but to the study of the mind, and that the contrast he was primarily concerned with was not that between the past and the present but between mind and nature. It is qua *Geisteswissenschaft* that history enjoys genuine methodological autonomy from, for example, palaeontology or natural history more generally. Kripke is certainly not alone in thinking that the re-enactment doctrine over-rationalizes actions, and much has been written on this. But this objection may not be so damaging if it is acknowledged that the reasons which explain actions are, for Collingwood, reasons only in a very anaemic sense of the term, since they do not require the agent to have true beliefs or morally laudable goals. Nor would the objection be damaging were one to hold the view that 're-thinking' and 're-enacting' are, like the outside/inside distinction, highly metaphorical ways of expressing the claim that to understand actions, in a way that acknowledges them to be different in kind from events, requires *ex post facto* rationalizations which do not presuppose the prior occurrence of conscious psychological processes in the mind of the agent. Kripke considers this possibility as it was defended by Walsh at the time but rejects it as modification which is not in the spirit of Collingwood's re-enactment doctrine. One cannot help wonder what conclusion he might have reached had he been exposed to the work of W.H. Dray, whose articles on Collingwood's philosophy of history had started to appear in the late 1950s and were more sym-

pathetic to Collingwood's position (Dray 1957a, 1957b, 1958, 1960). But whether or not he would have been swayed by the more sympathetic reconstructions of Collingwood's work offered by Dray, it is to Kripke's credit that, as an undergraduate, he acknowledged the existence of two interpretations of Collingwood's doctrine of re-enactment: the first implying that he was recommending a particular method in the historian's approach to historical research, and the second that rather than offering a method he was seeking to identify the conditions of historical understanding and provide an account of what it means to explain historically. Although Kripke sees merit in the latter view, he is convinced that Collingwood is committed to the former and argues against Gardiner's defence of the methodological interpretation that this was 'not all that Collingwood intended'. Here Kripke touches on a live issue in contemporary debates about the proper interpretation of Collingwood's philosophy of history, a discussion given fresh life by the publication of Margit Hurup Nielsen (1981) and subsequently examined by Marnie Hughes-Warrington (2004), Stein Helgeby (2004), William Dray (2005), Stephen Leach (2009) and the editor of the revised edition of *The Idea of History*, Jan van der Dussen (2012, 2016).⁴ One could argue, of course, that Collingwood never really clearly distinguished the two interpretations and, in that sense, intended to argue in favour of both. In that case we are not necessarily obliged to choose between the two, although we are obliged to ask about the cogency of each and of their relationship to each other.

Having correctly identified Collingwood's goal, and anticipated an important distinction between methodological and conceptual readings, Kripke's paper falls short of taking the interpretative route suggested by Dray

4 The authors of this preface also both reject the methodological interpretation, see D'Oro, 2002, 2015 and Connelly 2016.

and others who argued that history has a distinctive methodology that is irreducible to that of the natural sciences because the explanation of action has a normative dimension that (as Davidson would later put it) has no echo in the natural world. One reason for this is that, although he clearly understood, as noted earlier, that Collingwood was concerned with defending the autonomy of historical explanation from the natural sciences, he overlooked the further point that Collingwood was as interested in the distinction between nature and mind as he was in the past as such. The methodological readings tend to overlook this for they read him as being primarily interested with the past and consequently construe him epistemologically as answering the challenge of scepticism rather than as addressing the question 'what does it mean to understand something as an action?'

Although written nearly sixty years ago, whilst still a university student, Kripke's paper is a valuable contribution to the discussion of Collingwood's philosophy of history and offers a fascinating window onto the scholarly debates of the time.

That it is incomplete and needs updating is no criticism; that it is fair, critical, prescient and enticingly written is the point. Kripke writes much more sensitively than other contemporaries and puts his finger on a number of points of continuing debate. For these reasons alone it is worth publishing.

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