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Saul A. Kripke

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History and Idealism: The Theory of R. G. Collingwood¹

Saul A. Kripke

In this essay, the phrase, “the idealist theory of history,” will denote the idealist *cultural* philosophy of history, as proposed by Collingwood and others, not the idealist speculative philosophy, as adumbrated by Hegel and various kindred spirits. The distinction between a speculative and cultural philosophy of history, as formulated by Walsh (1951: 13-15), contrasts the philosopher’s “speculative” task (or alleged task) of formulating the teleology or ultimate meaning of history with the “cultural” task of investigating the epistemological foundations of historical research.² A speculative idealist theory of history will attempt to show, as Hegel has done, that history progresses according to dialectical laws of “thought” or “world spirit,”³ but a critical (or cultural) idealist view of history need make no such commitment.⁴

¹ This paper was written for an undergraduate history course at Harvard, in my third (junior) year of college (1960-1; second term). My teacher, Richard T. Vann, urged me to publish it even then. Since a couple of Collingwood scholars expressed interest in this paper, I have finally followed Vann’s advice.

I have kept the paper pretty much as it was, with very minor stylistic revisions (such as replacing the then conventional use of ‘he’ by an alternation of ‘he’ and ‘she’). I have not rechecked assertions I made then, based on references given in the footnotes.

The reader should bear in mind that this paper was not intended for publication but for a college course. Thus sometimes I plead lack of space in discussing a view, more than one might do in a paper intended for publication.

I occasionally have added some new footnotes, indicating this by using current dates.

² I don’t myself see why they used the term “cultural” rather than “epistemology of historiography,” or something similar. (Added in 2015.)

³ See Hegel (1953).

⁴ See especially Croce (1929), who adopts the idealist critical theory of history, but emphatically denounces the “philosophy of history,” by which he means teleological or dialectical historical theories like Hegel’s. Collingwood (1946: 113-122) was much more sympathetic to Hegel’s view, though discriminately critical of it. In my opinion, even Croce, despite his attack on speculative philosophy of history, comes close to a Hegelian viewpoint when he identifies (in some obscure sense) philosophy with history.

The idealist view we are examining, thus, concerns itself with the epistemology of history, not with its teleology. However, for the sympathetic understanding of the theory, a difficulty presents itself at once – for some portions of the theory are so implausible that it is hard to believe that their advocates really intended them. What are we to make of doctrines that all history is contemporary history (or perhaps, that it is timeless), that the historian’s knowledge is as certain as the mathematician’s (hence, more certain than the empirical scientist’s), that *all* history is history of thought?

The theory that history consists solely of the present reenactment of past thoughts seems so implausible on its face as hardly to be worth considering. But a list of those who have held the doctrine to be discussed shows that our examination of it cannot end here. Dilthey, Oakeshott, Croce, and Collingwood were all practicing historians, as well as philosophers of history,⁵ and, in the case of the latter two, it has been alleged that they came to their conclusions independently,⁶ a good indication that their ideas have some intrinsic compelling force. One might reply that although the thinkers mentioned were indeed practitioners of the historical discipline, their view of their practice became warped by their idealist philosophical spectacles, that a common philosophical training or bias suffices to account for their views. Echoes of the idealist theory appear, however, in practicing historians without pretensions as systematic philosophers, historians who seemed to have derived such views from their own practice. Witness Carl Becker,⁷ who declares, “In truth the actual past is gone; and the world of history is an intangible world, recreated imaginatively, and present in our

⁵ Walsh (1951: 56). Gardiner (1959: 250).

⁶ See Knox’s preface to Collingwood (1946: vii).

⁷ Although much of Becker’s fame derives from his work in the *history of ideas* (especially *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers*), I doubt that anyone would claim that he contributed any substantial ideas as a philosopher.

minds ... The past (our imagined picture of it) is the product of all the present.”⁸ This view Becker illustrates from his own experience, recalling how, as preparation for a historical lecture, he imaginatively recreates the Congress of Berlin.⁹ Let us first discover, then (and before criticizing the idealist theory), what motives impelled both philosophers and historians to adopt it.

The idealist theory can best be understood against the background of a contrasting theory – the positivistic. Scientific historiography, so argued the positivistic historian, must proceed on the basis of the same methods as any natural science – empirical generalization or hypothesis, on the basis of empirically ascertained facts. In the words of Taine, “*Après la collection des faits, la recherche des causes*” (Quoted by Croce 1929: 65).¹⁰ So conceived, the historian’s activity, like that of the scientist, consists in two steps: first, empirical data are collected; second, hypotheses are tested by reference to such data.

This model is misleading not only as applied to the historian, but even as applied to the empirical scientist. The two steps which are separated by the model are rarely separated in fact, nor is the recommended sequence ordinarily followed. Lee and Yang, on the basis of purely theoretical considerations, found the accepted physical law of conservation of parity untenable; *later*, their hypothesis was confirmed by the experimental work of Wu, *et. al.*¹¹ This example not only inverts Taine’s recommended sequence, it also refutes the separation of “fact” from theory which Taine presupposes. Wu and her associates, in order to refute the parity conservation

⁸ Becker (1959: 128 and 133).

⁹ Becker (1959:128).

¹⁰ Exactly why I called this view, quoted from Taine, “positivistic,” is not clear to me today (Added 2015).

¹¹ See Lee and Yang (1956) and Wu *et. al.* (1957).

law, did not simply observe particles with left-handed asymmetry; such an observation, according to modern quantum physics, is in principle impossible. Rather, they were forced to make use of readings on instruments, readings which were meaningless in themselves, but, when taken in conjunction with accepted *theories* of particle physics, *implied* the desired asymmetry. A similar point applies to most experimental “data” collected in the modern scientific laboratory. *Mutatis mutandis*, the positivistic theory is false for history as it is false for science.

A major portion of the historian’s task consists in the *evaluation* of data, not the mere collection; and an evaluation may have recourse to the more general statements which Taine relegates to the second stage of historical explanation. Assume, to take a trivial example, that a historian is confronted with a supposed Lenin letter praising the philanthropic disposition of Andrew Carnegie, or stating that individuals have a great influence on history. He rejects the alleged fact, for his knowledge of Marxism shows that *this is the sort of statement a Marxist would never make* (general statement) and Lenin was a Marxist (actually, also a general statement, based on numerous instances of Lenin’s behavior and writings). The inapplicability of the model to science is paralleled by its inapplicability to history.¹²

The idealists, however, have tended to view the matter from a different vantage point. Rather than emphasizing the falsity of the positivist model as applied to science, they have drawn, from the falsity of this model as applied to history, the conclusion that the methods of history possess a unique character radically disparate from those of natural science. Thus Collingwood, who in this paper will be the chosen

¹² Actually, while this example shows that in history, as in science, there is an interaction of data and theory, it is probably too quick to warrant a sweeping parallel of the interaction in history to that in physics. Probably the statement quoted from Taine is less objectionable than the corresponding statement about physics. (Added in 2015.)

representative of the idealist view of the epistemology of historiography, complains that contemporary British epistemologies “based as they seem to be primarily on the study of perception and of scientific thinking, not only ignore historical thinking but are actually inconsistent with there being such a thing.” (1946: 233)

This view, which emphasizes the differences between historical and scientific methodology, certainly has some merit. Let us survey some of the differences Collingwood proposes:

1) The scientist, when “collecting the facts” upon which she bases her hypotheses, can at least in principle observe them for herself, if necessary by repeating past experiments; the historian must rely entirely on documentary or other evidence from the past. “Only when they (the objects of historical study) are no longer perceptible do they become objects for historical thought.” (1946: 233) It is this peculiar situation which gives the historian the special problem of the criticism and evaluation of evidence and authority, a situation which Collingwood never tires of emphasizing. Collingwood devotes much exposition to the autonomy of historical thought, “the power of the historian” to reject something his authorities explicitly told him and to substitute something else (see Collingwood 1946: 237). Further, Collingwood never ceases to emphasize that actual history is far more than the mere pasting together of statements of authorities (“scissors-and-paste history”), and apparently he believes that many misconceptions of the nature of historical thought have arisen from a concentration upon the scissors-and-paste method (see 1946: 278ff).¹³

¹³ Note that Becker (1959) also introduces his idealist or quasi-idealist view in the context of a discussion of the nature of historical facts.

2) Historical explanations appear to differ greatly from scientific causal explanations. Whereas scientific explanations deal primarily with phenomena that can be subsumed under general laws (“litmus paper, when dipped in acid, turns red”), historical explanations deal with particular, unrepeatable events, whose causal connection cannot apparently be subsumed under general laws. As Collingwood puts it, “whereas science lives in a world of abstract universals ... the things about which the historian reasons are not abstract but concrete, not universal but individual” (1946: 234). If we ascribe Cortez’s explorations to his cupidity, the explanation cannot be an instance of a more general law, “Greedy individuals will explore distant continents to gain gold,” since the latter generalization is plainly false. And if we attempt to modify the generalization to indicate what impelled Cortez to take an action other gold-seekers might have shunned, we soon find that so many clauses must be added that our generalization is applicable only to Cortez himself (see Scriven 1959: 454-455).¹⁴

3) The historian is faced with a peculiar problem of selection and interpretation that affects the scientist either not at all or to a much lesser degree. Surely the respective political and religious leanings of a Marxist and a Catholic historian may influence their respective interpretations of the fall of medieval society; and it seems dubious whether such prejudices can ever wholly be eradicated from historical writing.

The three difficulties (*i.e.*, contrasts with science) mentioned in the preceding paragraph are surely not exhaustive, but they constitute an adequate sampling of the

¹⁴ Note that this is precisely Hempel’s view (see discussion below) that is being opposed, whether or not Collingwood had Hempel in mind, or even was aware of his paper.

special problems to which an epistemology of history must address itself. Now, what solution does Collingwood propose? What accounts for these differences between historical and scientific methodology? Collingwood finds the clue to the distinction to be in the following fact. The scientist, once she has investigated the “outside” of an event, “everything belonging to it which can be described in terms of bodies and their movements,” has concluded her investigation, while the historian needs also to examine the “inside” of the event, “that in it which can only be described in terms of thought” (1946: 213).

A scientist investigating falling bodies need not penetrate to a thought behind the behavior of those bodies, but a historian investigating Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon will want to know why Caesar made the crossing, a fact which can be described in terms of thought. This is why, as Collingwood emphasizes, history has been confined to the history of human affairs; for only in the latter do we find complex events analyzable not only in terms of bodily motion but also in terms of thought (1946: 216). Since the determination of the thought behind an action is the peculiar task of the historian, “all history is the history of thought” (1946: 218).

Now, is thought here to be construed as including sensation, emotion, feeling, as Dilthey would have it (Walsh 1951: 50-51), or should it be restricted to reasoning proper? The answer to this question can be deduced from Collingwood’s concept of historical method:

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 ... The history of thought, and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian’s own mind.

This reenactment ... is not a passive surrender to the spell of another's mind; it is a labour of active and therefore critical thinking ... in reenacting it [the past thought], [the historian] criticizes it, forms his own judgment of its value ... (1946: 215)

Thus, the historian investigating Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon attempts to put himself in Caesar's place and tries to discover thereby what went on in Caesar's mind. Since the historian could not really be said to understand the event of Caesar's crossing unless she has some idea why the crossing took place, it is (strictly speaking) a mistake to regard the historical process as one of inferring the inner thought from the outer event; rather the process of reenactment is more direct:

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. (1946: 214)

Hence, Collingwood argues, history is a discipline often *more exact* than science, possessing a "compulsive" character analogous to mathematics, not the permissive, probabilistic character of inductive science. (1946: 261-3)

Finally, it is now clear why Collingwood believed the historian must confine himself to thought in the narrow sense of reasoning, not the wider sense including emotion, sensation, and the like. For although the historian can rethink Caesar's thoughts, he can never feel the same emotions that Caesar felt. For example, in the case of anger, when the emotion is recollected in tranquility, "the actual past anger ... is past and gone;" (1946: 293) we can recall it, but we cannot reenact it.

The answers to the problems mentioned above are now apparent; let us examine them, using the same numbering as before.

1) The historian's use of evidence from the past differs from the scientist's use of empirical data. In the former case, the scientist wants to *infer* her empirical generalizations or hypotheses from the data gathered. The historian, on the other hand, uses his evidence as the basis for an imaginative reenactment of past thought; evidence is to be accepted only as long as it coheres with the picture re-enacted by the historian. Since one cannot expect all the evidence to cohere in a single imaginative picture, the historian must often reject or criticize his authorities; in this fact lies the origin of his special problem of the interpretation of data.

2) The reason why historical explanations differ from those of natural science is now evident, for the historical use of the terms "cause" and "explanation" differs radically from the scientific use:

When a scientist asks, 'Why did that piece of litmus paper turn pink?' he means 'On what kinds of occasions do pieces of litmus paper turn pink?' When an historian asks, 'Why did Brutus stab Caesar?' he means 'What did Brutus think, which made him decide to stab Caesar?' The cause of the event, for him, means the thought in the mind of the person by whose agency the event came about, and this is not something other than the event, it is the inside of the event itself. (1946: 214-215)

Since in history fact and cause are not separate but are related as outside and inside, the historian penetrates to the inner event and does not find it necessary to subsume each instance of causation under a testable, repeatable generalization.

3) Since the historian re-enacts the past imaginatively in his own mind, his interpretation of the past is inevitably shaped by his own view of the present; so the phenomenon of varying interpretations of history is readily explicable. Collingwood's own statements on the problem of historical objectivity are difficult to reconcile with each other;¹⁵ but his later views seem to have tended in the direction of radical historical relativism, a tendency readily explained by the notion of the contemporaneity of all history.

The idealist theory has been shown to provide answers to all questions thus far addressed to it; our suspicion is that this theory in fact arose as an answer to just questions such as these. Before we launch upon a criticism of the theory, one point related to the third problem considered (historical relativism) ought to be mentioned. This is Croce's view that "every true history is contemporary history," for "the condition of its existence is that the deed of which the history is told must vibrate in the soul of the historian" (Croce 1929: 12). Michael Oakeshott, concurring with this view, remarks that:

... a fixed and finished past ... is a past divorced from evidence (for evidence is always present) and is consequently nothing and unknowable. The fact is ... that the past in history varies with the present, rests upon the present, is the present (Oakeshott 1933: 107).

Although Collingwood has sometimes been identified with this view, and even though it was held by thinkers closely related to him, he actually tried to avoid this consequence. In a rather difficult argument which can only be summarized here,

¹⁵ See Knox's preface to Collingwood (1946: xii).

Collingwood declares the act of thought to be timeless, so that in re-enacting Caesar's thought the historian thinks the *very same* thought, just as she can revive one of her own thoughts.

At the same time, the historian is *aware* that his present act of thought is the same as that performed by Caesar many years ago, so that in this sense he can know (in the present) an act performed in the past, and this idealist conception is supposed to solve the problem of contemporary knowledge of past events. Caesar's set of thoughts, though past, can be revived and held up to contemporary view in the present; so the past is no longer irrevocably past; yet, on the other hand, history is not reduced to mere present experiences. (See Collingwood 1946: 282-302.)

Now, despite our efforts to bring Collingwood's view to some level of plausibility, one may well fear that it is in many respects as implausible as before. How can this view be criticized? Before venturing upon our own attempt, let us examine some alternative avenues that have been traveled by others. First, we have seen how the idealist history arose as a reaction against positivistic history; perhaps by a somewhat more sophisticated revival of the latter we can destroy the former. This seems to be the position of Hempel (1942), who thinks that a historical explanation of an event A in terms of its cause B must consist of two components: first, a verification of the occurrence of B; second, a *law* stating that events of a kind exemplified by B must be followed by events of a kind exemplified by A. Hempel remarks that his thesis, which assimilates history to science, "is clearly in contrast with the familiar view that genuine explanation in history is obtained by ... *the method of empathetic understanding*" (Hempel 1942: 352, his emphasis), by which he means the method we have been discussing.

Although, as we shall see below, Hempel is correct in asserting that empathetic understanding of historical figures can never displace knowledge of human action based on experience, it is dubious whether his own revival of positivism and the concept of law is the proper manner to defend this thesis. He demands that the historian who derives Cortez's explorations from his greed must give a general law, connecting cupidity with exploration, from which the particular instance in question can be deduced; but, as we have seen, any such law will either be false or lack the requisite generality (in fact, it will apply only to the given instance). Hempel's conception of the matter must be rejected.¹⁶

Leaving Hempel's view, we find a very different critique of Collingwood in Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*.¹⁷ Although once again we must plead lack of space, the central thesis of Ryle's work can be stated thus: "Overt intelligent performances are not clues to the workings of minds; they are these workings." (Ryle 1949: 58). Thus the division of human events into an "inner" and an "outer" aspect is incorrect; the "inner" is subsumed under the "outer." Ryle derives Collingwood's theory from what he takes to be the false dilemma of the traditional problem of "other minds," which asks how we can even know inner thoughts on the basis of outer behavior. This false problem, Ryle contends, is solved by a spurious re-enactment of past thoughts. When the matter is correctly understood, however, problem and solution vanish together.

¹⁶ Our criticism is, admittedly, somewhat over-simple and ignores Hempel's distinction between explanation and explanation-sketch, as well as his statement that the laws could be probabilistic; but here we are examining Collingwood, not Hempel. For a fuller critique of Hempel's classic article, see Scriven (1959) and Donagan (1959).

¹⁷ See Ryle (1949). What I take to be the critique of Collingwood appears in pp. 56-58, though Ryle does not explicitly name his sometime Oxford colleague. I will simply assume here that he is criticizing Collingwood's views.

Although below we shall see that many of Ryle's concepts are useful by way of criticism of Collingwood, we believe the core of Ryle's reply to be mistaken; and even if not mistaken, unnecessary. Ryle has shown that mental conduct terminology bears a closer relation to dispositional statements about overt behavior than Cartesian dualists had supposed; but it seems to me that he has not wholly succeeded in reducing terminology of the former type to the latter type. If Ryle's view were correct, it would make no sense to speak of disembodied spirits, since the latter can exhibit no overt performances and hence their minds disappear with their bodies; yet, in fact, we use such terminology and understand it. (I have not space to argue this matter further. We understand because we understand.)

Further, assuming Ryle's view, it would follow that the idealist theory is *wholly* incorrect; that is to say, the historian need have *no* ability to relive the ideas, feelings, and sensations of his subjects, since he needs *only* to observe their overt performances. But this is simply false. If all historians were deaf, they might make *some* sense of the overt behavior of hearing figures of history, but an ability to hear is certainly an advantage; a historian who never felt pain might realize (on a behavioral basis) that *something* was bothering soldiers wounded in a battle, but he would have trouble understanding what it really was. Similarly in the intellectual realm emphasized by Collingwood; a historian might learn every detail of the "overt behavior" of Napoleon and his army at the battle of Jena; but if he himself knows nothing of military tactics, and thus cannot rethink Napoleon's battle plans, he will fail to understand the event. Even if these requirements of rethinking could be circumvented, the abilities described are certainly helpful; and this fact, on a literal reading of Ryle's theory, would be inexplicable.

More important than the falsity of Ryle's theory is its irrelevance and needlessness as applied to Collingwood. Ryle supposes that Collingwood's view is derived from the traditional (dualistic) philosophical notion of the relation of the mind to the body (which throughout the book he stigmatizes as "the ghost in the machine"):

Adhering without question to the dogma of the ghost in the machine, those philosophers were naturally perplexed by the pretensions of historians to interpret ... actions ... as expressions of their actual thoughts, feelings, and intentions (Ryle 1949: 56).

He thinks that Collingwood supposes minds to be "impenetrable to one another," and that we must rethink Plato's mental processes in order to surmount such impenetrability. Finally, he paraphrases Collingwood as asserting:

Understanding must be imperfect ... I cannot literally share your experiences, but some of our experiences may somehow chime together, though we cannot be aware of their doing so. (Ryle 1949: 57).

The only trouble with this description of Collingwood's view¹⁸ is that it contradicts Collingwood's explicit statements at every point. First, Ryle thinks that Collingwood believes "thoughts, feelings and intentions are the objects of historical re-enactment;" and this would surely be true on Ryle's interpretation of Collingwood, since all three are equally private to the ghost in the machine. Actually, of course, we have seen that Collingwood emphasizes that *only* rational thoughts, not feelings and intentions, are

¹⁸ Caution: recall that Ryle never explicitly mentions Collingwood (see footnote 17). But if he isn't refuting Collingwood, who in the Sam Hill ...?

amenable to this method. Second, Ryle attributes to Collingwood the view that thoughts are private to an individual mind, that experiences cannot be shared, and that we cannot even be aware of the fact that experiences may chime together. Actually, as we have seen, a central core of Collingwood's theory is that we *can* share thoughts; in his own words:

If he [Euclid] thought ['the angles are equal'] and I now think 'the angles are equal,' [...] is the difference between Euclid and myself ground for denying it [that the acts are the same]? There is no tenable theory of personal identity that would justify such a doctrine. (1946: 287)

When Ryle asserts that Collingwood believes we can never be aware of the correspondence between our thought and that of someone else, one should simply ask Ryle to read pages 289-293 of *The Idea of History*, which is devoted to a denial and refutation of this doctrine. In my opinion, Ryle refutes not Collingwood, but an imaginary view of his own. The genesis of Collingwood's view lies, not in the ghost-in-the-machine dogma, which he rarely mentions, but in the sources I have proposed above. And if Ryle's thesis regarding mental conduct language were wrong, would it really follow that all history is the history of thoughts, etc.? I think Collingwood can be rebutted by far more elementary and obvious considerations, while any element of truth in his theory would remain the same whether Ryle's view, or Cartesian dualism, or any other philosophy of mind were true.

Let us, finally, having rejected the deep epistemological refutations by Hempel and Ryle as overshooting the mark, consider why history, after all, is clearly *not* solely the history of thought. We all know that this is not the case – e.g., when Pirenne asserts

that Carolingian economic stagnation was produced by Arab control of the Western Mediterranean, what “thoughts” was he discovering or re-enacting? Yet, surely, this is a genuine piece of historical explanation. Collingwood has in no way shown that his “rethinking,” even if it plays a role in historical writing, is *the* unique historical method.

Let us take a case to which, presumably, Collingwood’s method would be more directly applicable. Suppose a historian wishes to penetrate the mind of Adolf Hitler. Does he re-think Hitler’s thoughts, in the coldly rational sense of thought intended by Collingwood? If so, he gets nowhere; for example, he rethinks, “The Jews have produced Germany’s present decline,” and perhaps (since Collingwood believes that the historian must rethink *critically*) observes that actually Hitler was quite mistaken on this count. But the real question lies within the sphere of emotion, which Collingwood denies to history: what motivated Hitler’s anti-Semitism, where was its popular appeal? The answers to this question are not intellectual, but largely emotional. Nor will it do to modify Collingwood’s theory by admitting emotional revivals; a historian who re-enacted Hitler’s emotions would thereby cease to be a historian and would, in a vigilant society, become a proper object of public surveillance. (To cap off the poor fellow’s fate, he would approach by this procedure not one whit closer to an understanding of the dynamics of Hitler’s personality and of Nazism as a whole; for no ardent Nazi could understand these dynamics.) And although the historian may safely “become” Becket, as Collingwood recommends (1946: 297), let him not become Hitler!¹⁹ The practice is very dangerous.²⁰

¹⁹ As against the universal indispensability of empathetic understanding, Hempel rightly says, “A historian may, for example, be incapable of feeling himself into the role of a paranoiac historic personality, and yet he may well be able to explain certain of his actions; notably by reference to the principles of abnormal psychology. Thus, whether the historian is or is not in

Nor ought we to reply, as W. H. Walsh has done, that “an idea can be persistently influential without its being continuously before anyone’s mind; it can have, as it were, a background effect, being assumed unconsciously” (Walsh 1951: 54). Walsh thinks that this explains how Collingwood’s theory can apply to economic history, and also how it applies to irrational impulsive actions (there is a method behind the madness). But notice that Walsh admits that, to interpret Collingwood in this manner, we must disregard “his emphasis on the need for re-thinking past thought” (Walsh 1951: 55). In other words, disregard Collingwood’s theory of history. But even if this (in Walsh’s opinion) “inessential” modification can be made, would it save Collingwood? Only if we were to stretch the term “idea” beyond belief. Perhaps Pirenne, as an economic historian, thought that the idea of keeping the European economy landlocked was subconsciously present in the minds of the Arabs; but I see no reason to suppose he asserted such a radically untenable hypothesis. The Pirenne thesis is controversial, but not ridiculous. And in Hitler’s case, there is indeed, no doubt, a method behind Hitler’s madness which ought to be accessible to the psychoanalyst; but no stretching of the term “idea” can destroy the fact that this “method” was an emotional pattern, not a rational thought. *Please* let us not dignify Hitler’s thoughts so much!

Nor is it correct to assume, even in the cases where we do seem to be seeking a rational aim, that we are looking for a particular thought. When we assert, “Richelieu’s policy was guided throughout by his aim to establish a centralized French monarchy,” we do not mean primarily that the thought, “I must establish a

a position to identify himself with his historical hero, is irrelevant for the correctness of his explanation [...]” (1942: 44). (Added in 2015.)

²⁰ The later writings and career of David Irving are something of a fulfillment of this expectation. See my own remarks on this case in Kripke (2011: 294, footnote 5). (Added in 2015.)

centralized monarchy,” ran constantly through Richelieu’s mind. Even if it did, this would not establish his intention unless he tended to act and think in a manner calculated to achieve this aim; and if he acted and thought in this manner, it would not matter if he rarely entertained the specific thought described.²¹ This dispositional interpretation of intention, the really relevant application of Ryle’s theory of mind to a refutation of Collingwood, applies to Collingwood’s view, though not, of course, to the modification made by Walsh.

What becomes of the peculiar problems, the contrasts between history and science, which led Collingwood to his theory? What of the uniqueness of the historical event, which, in contrast to the scientific phenomenon, defies subsumption under a general law? Here we can only reply that Collingwood’s cure is worse than the disease. It may indeed be difficult to formulate laws, of which particular historical explanations are special cases; but it is even more foolhardy to assume that a special mode of insight can displace the reliance on experience and inductive generalizations. A historian studying the rise of Nazism realizes that (to a horrifying extent) her phenomenon is *sui generis*, but nevertheless she does not simply attempt to rethink the Nazi experience, but compares it with other movements of the radical nationalistic Right, looking for analogies and suggestions of causes. Rethinking and empathy, in general, become less nearly adequate when the historical figures she studies, be they Neanderthals or Nazis, have minds radically different from that of the historian studying them. Finally, the example of Pirenne shows that Collingwood’s view at any rate fails to solve the problem of historical explanation; for although the event studied by Pirenne was in

²¹ Gardiner (1952: 122-123).

some ways unrepeatable and unique, he did not adopt the method of rethinking either Arabic or Carolingian thoughts.

The same comments apply to the problem, or alleged problem, of the irrevocable pastness of historical events and the interpretation of data. The view of Croce and Oakeshott on this point is really absurd; from the truism that our *evidence* for the past must be present, it is deduced that that past *is* somehow present. Of course (by definition), everything we are now doing is done in the present; and it is true that the epistemological skeptic may ask why the deliverances of our memory should be acceptable at all. The skeptic's questioning of memory, however, lacks relevance to the philosophy of history, which must presuppose that this problem has been solved (*i.e.*, that memory is usually veridical); while the tautology that we do everything "now" has no more significance than the tautology that we do everything "here." One might as well declare, "All astronomy is terrestrial astronomy," since the astronomer must observe the so-called distant stars from the earth (and, incidentally, in doing so he is observing events much farther in the past than those of recorded history). Worse, one might ask, "How long is the present?" Any finite time interval is divisible into an earlier and a later section; the present, then, is squeezed into an ideal mathematical time interval of zero length, hardly a long enough period in which to crowd all past history, even as it is rehearsed in the mind of the historian.

Croce and Oakeshott have proposed a spurious solution to a spurious problem, and Collingwood's modification fares little better. If Collingwood so wishes, he can merely *define* the term "act of thought" in such a way that my own counts as identical with Euclid's thousands of years ago (though such a usage may often be somewhat queer); but such a *definition* in no way provides the present with any better access to the

past than it would have had without it. There is no mystery about the fact that the historian must necessarily rest his case upon data which have survived from the past, and that in the absence of guaranteed reliability, he must criticize his sources. Since no special problem arises from these facts, no definition of acts of thought as “timeless” can provide a special connecting link between present and past to solve this problem; for there is no problem, and the definition creates no new link that did not exist without it. The fact that my thought is identical with Euclid’s, if we define our notion of identity of thought so that it is a fact, provides not one whit more evidence for the correctness of my historical analysis of Euclid than the analysis would have had without such a definition.

We have seen that the idealist epistemology of history arose, not from ghost-in-the-machine terminology, but from various special problems which distinguish historical research from its scientific counterpart. Unfortunately, the idealist theory fails to solve the legitimate problems which gave rise to it; but at the same time itself gives rise to a number of spurious problems. There remains the brief defense of Collingwood suggested by Gardiner;²² perhaps, rather than prescribing a peculiar historical method, the emphasis on rethinking should be interpreted as the statement of a necessary condition for the possibility of historical research. As an interpretation and defense of Collingwood, this suggestion fails; the analysis above shows clearly that this is *not* all that Collingwood intended.

The suggestion of a necessary condition is, however, interesting in itself, and can be formulated problematically: Given a culture whose thoughts (in some bizarre sense) are so disparate from our own that we can in no respect re-enact them, is it possible

²² Gardiner (1959: 267).

for us to write the history of this culture? The problem, though hard to formulate with precision, is surely not without interest; and a negative answer to the question might extract the kernel of truth from a theory which otherwise, we have seen, is radically untenable.²³

The City University of New York, Graduate Center

Saul A. Kripke

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