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Collingwood, History,and Evidence

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Robin George Collingwood believed that a misguided view of historiography was prevalent in Western culture and that the cause of this unfortunate confusion lay in a misapplication of the methods of exact science to history. This misunderstanding could be remedied by attending to the notion of evidence, and, to this end, he devoted great periods of his academic and professional life. What follows is a sympathetic investigation of his call for a revision of the notion of evidence.

R.G. Collingwood spent most of his life at Oxford University, first as student, then as Fellow, and subsequently as professor of philosophy until his death in 1943. What helps to make him memorable is his unique academic stance, one where archaeology, science, history and philosophy intersected and cooperated. Not confined within one discipline, he labored singlemindedly on what he considered most important for human history.

This labor for history emerged from several sources. Archaeology was his earliest love. All through his childhood and youth he worked on excavation sites with his father's crews working various digs into England's Roman past. Archaeology taught him a question-and-answer method that became central to his mature work. In college he pursued philosophy energetically, yet rejected Oxford's then-prevailing idealism. Not being a traditional realist either, he refused to hold, contra the university's realist minority, that knower and known are independent of each other. From the sharply-dichotomized philosophy department at Oxford he learned that he would have to find his own way. World War I was a third great influence and surely the most compelling. It was, he wrote in his Autobiography, "...a war of unprecedented ferocity closed in a peace-settlement of unprecedented folly..." It was this war, this "unprecedented disgrace to the human intellect," that gave him the governing task of his academic and intellectual life. [1] Coming to terms with twentieth-century history would be his task, as it should be everyone's task, in his view. History should become a school of political wisdom, laying down a foundation for the future. Rhetorically he asked, "Was it possible that men should come to a better understanding of human affairs by studying history?...Was history the thing which in future might play a part in civilized life analogous to that of natural science in the past?" (A, p.95) He considered this task eminently worth doing and thereafter bent all his energies toward this ambitious intellectual effort.

Conventional history has been compromised, having degenerated to "scissors and paste" history. This term is Collingwood's favorite expression for alluding to varied European historians of the modern period. This inferior approach to historical research and thinking is constructed by "...excerpting and combining the testimonies of different authorities...reporting statements that other people have made before..." (IH, pp.257, 274) Such history relies on written testimony left by figures in the past, figures who are the historian's sources, whose credibility and authenticity he will critique. But, how can the historian carry out such critique, except by comparing his sources with still another source, and the latter with still another. This approach creates an infinite regress that does not satisfy. At best, belief results but not knowledge. Testimony offered by such sources never makes the leap from belief to knowledge. It is not history but merely a chronicle.

Scissors and paste history had indeed tried to imitate the sciences. Just as science collects facts and goes on to construct theories and generalizations about its facts, such historians put together as many facts as possible handed down to them and looked for patterns, schemes and periods in history—each period having its own pervading spirit or character. As scientific theory follows on facts gathered, so a naming and characterization of historical patterns or periods is made to follow on historical facts gleaned from trusted sources. Having seen and/or created such patterns and periods, historians accordingly

believed that they were doing scientific history. Admittedly, for Collingwood, history should be scientific, but science itself has been a blind guide for history, both being misled by a flawed understanding of evidence. A new concept of evidence was needed.

A broadening of what counts as *sources* is basic to Collingwood's reform of historiography. While relying on written sources for our knowledge of the past may be necessary, and while we may still wish to privilege written sources, the past has left physical remnants of itself. In the future, we should expect to locate ever more of these remnants and become ever better at learning to read them. Pottery shards and petrified bones, as well as diaries and tax rolls, have their stories to tell. Though we must read both kinds of sources, nothing comes to us labeled "evidence," whether in written or in physical sources. The conventional word *data*, coming from the Latin participle for *given,* is misleading. There is no pure datum, and we must not hope to rest our knowledge on some purported indubitable foundation constituted by so-called raw data. Still, while nothing is given, or nothing that we passively receive, we are not hallucinating when we experience a physical reality other than ourselves. Our beliefs about an external world, relying as they do on sense perception, are inductively justified and always open to revision. 'Beliefs' is a suitable word, when we consider his idea of matter.

> "Matter is not that which we sensate, the visible, tangible, and so forth, but that which in its indifferent self-identity underlies all immediate objects of sense. Matter is in fact, as Berkeley once for all pointed out, simply the abstract concept, the substantiality or reality of objects conceived as transcendent with regard to the objects themselves. " (SM, pp.166-7)

Whether from written or non-written sources, evidence is not found, not given, and not discovered. What will qualify as evidence is a function of the thinking process of the human subject, a qualitative leap that Collingwood explains as a question-and-answer method, a *Logic of Questioning.* Everything in reality is potential evidence, as long as the researcher has questions. What is key is not to read the term 'evidence' as meaning a physical item, whether written or not, but to treat 'evidence' as an inference. 'Evidence' is more clearly expressed, he argues, as 'evidential relation' or 'evidential connection.' The intellectual move, or inference, from question to answer is this evidential relation. A researcher selects his question and, simultaneously, in his question, is deciding what will count as an adequate answer. In locating some physical item, whether pottery shard or written document, he selects this one or that as satisfying the requirements of his question. What had been meaningless, mute, and blank 'stuff' now is raised to a higher status, i.e. that of evidence.

> "...every time the historian asks a question, he asks it because he thinks he can answer it: that is to say, he has already in his mind a preliminary and tentative idea of the evidence he will be able to use...question and evidence, in history, are correlative. Anything is evidence which enables you to answer your question." (IH, p.281)

All perception, though, rests on past experience, for perception is, after all, never 'raw', and past experience comprises everything contained in the researcher's personal and cultural past. What characterizes all sense perception, a fortiori, characterizes the researcher's question-answer approach to knowledge. This past is an accumulation of beliefs, theories, generalizations, values, semantic preferences, varied observations, traits, capacities, et al. All these come to bear on the question raised and the answer anticipated. The unique stamp is not accidental and merely to be tolerated; it provides a

framework within which the question has significance, and within which the kind of answer to be accepted is given both meaning and value.

Inferential thinking as a process of inquiry begins with a question or problem. The question may be concerned with a phenomenon present to the researcher and such that it arouses his curiosity, or, it may be about a phenomenon which, being past, lies outside the researcher's experience. In the former case, a researcher in the natural sciences begins with a supposition/hypothesis which, were it true, would answer his question. An object in science is some presently-existing phenomenon:

> "The object which the scientist cognises is not a
> universal, but always particular fact, a fact which
> but for the existence of his generalizing activity
> would be blank, meaningless sense-data." (EPH, p.28)

The scientist uses his accumulated knowledge, generalizations, etc. to interpret this individual phenomenon or form a framework with which to address it, his own experience providing him material with which to form his new supposition. The supposition is neither true nor false, has no truth value, and should be characterized as procedural only. The words of the supposition do not have meaning in the usual sense but serve instead to invent or re-invent a critical experiment. He is guided by logical principles and by warranted assumptions. Experiments find well-attested cases of the supposition. He is highly selective of those instances that he will consider as evidence attesting to his supposition, ignoring any and all phenomena which are irrelevant or anomalous.

Research concludes when the initial supposition has been demonstrated satisfactorily—the criteria for 'satisfactory' lying on a continuum of community consensus. The conclusion is a probabilistic demonstration of what was initially a supposition. Collingwood describes scientific research most generally as a move from the possible to the probable. (EPM, p.165)

A second group of researchers is curious about phenomena which no longer exist, archaeologists and historians being Collingwood's favorite examples. Unlike scientific phenomena which are present, historical phenomena are past and non-existent, but are such that they have left some traces of themselves, e.g. documents, so-called data, objects, physical remains. An object in science is present to the scientist and indefinitely manipulable, whereas an object in history is some residue left by a now-non-existing phenomenon. In science, a question concerning a present and perceptible phenomenon is being asked, but in history the question is distinct from the present and perceptible physical remnant. In the latter case, a researcher can hope to approach his question only by making what he can out of an existing remnant of a non-existing past. This difference re-aligns the initial question of the researcher. The question of the scientist emerges from a presently-existing phenomenon, and so the question never has temporal priority over this phenomenon. Contrariwise, the question of the historian may have temporal priority over the physical remains of the past, the question sometimes becoming an impetus to search out such remains. Other differences are familiar and need be only mentioned here. One who researches the past can never invent his sources as a scientist may invent experiments; neither can he repeat any past phenomena at will in a laboratory.

In the case of science, the question *concerns* what is present and perceptible; in the case of history, the question only *uses* what is present and perceptible. "...evidence is something present, something now existing, regarded as a relic or trace left by the past." (EPH, p.99) The status of the question, as raised in historical research, urges a re-thinking of the notion of evidence. "You can't collect your evidence before you begin thinking...because thinking means asking questions...and nothing is evidence except in relation to some definite question." (IH, p.281)

We can summarize what we have so far on the notion of evidence: that everything and anything is potential evidence, that evidence is an inference, that it is a connection between question and answer, that it is a movement from question to answer, that what is potential evidence becomes actual evidence only to the degree that it answers the researcher's question. In light of this, I take it that a researcher's question is an *a priori.* By this I mean such traits as these: the question inaugurates the research; it

makes it possible; it gives it its character; it eventually determines whether or not the conclusion is successful, and even when the conclusion has been reached. Without a definite question, there is no research; there is no intellectual place to go; no number of physical remains, documents, etc. ever become evidence of anything at all, and there can be no conclusion to research because research never began. A definite question raised by a researcher should be seen as Kantian, in that it is the ground of the possibility of there being any research, any evidence, any answer, and any knowledge. The researcher's question is the necessary condition without which nothing receives definition as evidence.

We have here a unique understanding of the question-answer relation. These are in mutual dependence or mutual action. A sentence is a question only if an answer is possible, and a sentence is an answer only if it is intended as such by the researcher for his question. One could raise serious questions here about the truth of such an answer: one might object that the researcher's satisfaction with his answer, while it may satisfy, may still be wrong. A corollary of Collingwood's question-answer method is apparent here, viz., that truth is not a characteristic of individual propositions.

> "...you cannot tell whether a proposition is 'true' or
> 'false' until you know what question it was intended
> to answer...and any one who wishes to know whether
> a given proposition is true or false, significant or
> meaningless, must find out what question it was meant
> to answer." (A, pp.38-9)

Truth and falsity are characteristics of what he calls a "question-answer complex" and, if we need corroboration, we must be satisfied with the coherence internal to the complex, rather than seek a correspondence with reality. Since the reality in this context is a state-of-affairs that no longer exists, perhaps he can get away with truth-as-coherence.

If and when we accept the mutuality of his question-answer relation, we see Collingwood's position on evidence more clearly, viz., that evidence is a relation. It is the mutual defining of the question and the answer. The term *a priori* can be used for knowledge as intended here. C.I. Lewis once offered what he called a "pragmatic conception of the *a priori*," and it is helpful, I believe, for reading Collingwood sympathetically. Lewis writes: "Mind contributes to experience the element of order, of classification, categories, and definition. Without such, experience would be unintelligible." He describes such knowledge as stipulative of our subsequent experience, or shaping "...the commerce between our categorical ways of acting, our pragmatic interests, and the particular character of experience..."[2] Knowledge that achieves goals such as meaning, clarity and simplicity is knowledge that works. I will not take time to argue here that a pragmatic notion of the *a priori* is preferable to traditional definitions thereof, but, if we take Lewis' definition as at least plausible and arguable, then it offers support to Collingwood's notion of evidence. In a coherence test for truth, which Collingwood himself adopted, they would support one another.

There is significance for both history and philosophy in Collingwood's creative endeavors.

While historians may have unwisely adopted an empiricism from the natural sciences, science is not hereby repudiated. History must be scientific. There is no contradiction here, but a straightforward injunction. "Science is finding things out: and in that sense history is a science." (IH,p.9) This "finding out" is key to good history, a requirement which can never be satisfied by scissors-and-paste-history, in their repetition and regurgitation of still-earlier writers. "History...is 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. "(IH, p.251)

Sciences differ in the knowledge sought and the strategies adopted. What the historian seeks to know, i.e. the past, can be known only inferentially, and these inferences have their point of origin in something which is presently accessible and is called 'evidence.' The difference between scientist and historian lies here. The object of the scientist is present, not past, and, while he too moves inferentially, his inferential thinking originates in the present and concludes with a theory and/or covering law about this object/phenomenon.

Given that the historical object is some feature of the past and that the thinking of the historian works inferentially from his evidence, that feature of the past to which he has access can only be the thinking or the reasons of an historical agent. What is being studied is historical action, not merely historical events. "...by a mere event I mean one which has only an outside and no inside...and an action is the unity of the outside and inside of an event." (IH, p.213) The thinking of the agent is this metaphorical 'inside.' By thus requiring 'action' rather than 'events', Collingwood is insisting that human agents are free and that they act for reasons. This rejection of determinism makes history feasible to him, because, not only does subjectivity permeate the whole historical project, it is also the case that free action has to be assumed by anyone who would seek to learn from history. Collingwood consistently argued that history should be a school in which to prepare our future. We learn from history only if the reasons of free agents can be recovered.

His new definition of 'history' is that it is a re-enactment of past experience: "...the historian must re-enact the past in his own mind...this means discovering the thought...to discover what this thought was, the historian must think it again for himself." (IH, pp.282-3) Without exploring any of the metaphysics or psychology that may be assumed or implied here, we can only say at this point that the task of history is made more challenging, that the historian, as Dray expresses it, engages in "...a piece of vicarious practical reasoning." [3]This defining of present thinking as a re-enactment of past thinking is a signal that revisionism in historical writing is no longer the occasional exception or embarrassment. No one fact is ever completely ascertained but is progressively more ascertainable to the degree that the various researchers bring their growing body of beliefs, theories, generalizations, values, semantic preferences, et al to an individual fact. "...the actual object of historical thinking is an object which is not 'given' but perpetually in process of being given." (EPH, p.44) Revisionism has become a stable characteristic of historiography.

We can summarize the significance of the changes in the following points: that history is a science whose object is the past, that the past is understood by means of a re-enactment, in the historian's thinking, of the thinking of historical agents, and that revisionism is a necessary feature of history.

The significance of a Collingwoodian theory of evidence for philosophizing is best seen in epistemology. Collingwood becomes a participant in the great conversation on theories of knowledge that was inaugurated by Descartes. The historian seeks to understand what no longer is present, what is, to that extent, non-existent, i.e. the past. His ability to draw inferences concerning this past is a function of a whole mélange of what he himself is and knows. Knowledge is unabashedly subjective. "All perception depends on past experience," (EPH, p.50) Herein too is a clear rejection of empiricism. There is no datum or given, since the human subject's interpretation permeates his own experience. Collingwood claimed that he was not an idealist, though Dray labels him as such and Patrick Gardiner wrote that Collingwood's sympathy lay with idealism. [4]Perhaps we should avoid labels altogether, just as Collingwood himself would reject what Hempel called "general laws" or "covering laws." As a philosopher, Collingwood would have to give epistemology priority of place over metaphysics, for how can we seek to question or characterize reality without some decision as to our human abilities both to experience reality and to draw our unique inferences about it? Similarly, our ability to understand philosophies of the past would require some understanding of the historical context within which the questions of the past emerged and the responses were offered. His revision of evidence places him squarely into the discussions about justification, as justification has become increasingly more central to contemporary epistemology, this being especially the case since the famous Gettier challenge in 1963. Evidence is justification. The conventional definition of 'knowledge' as 'justified true belief' is stable to

the degree that evidence has a plausible understanding. I suggest that Collingwood unknowingly anticipated, in the 1920's and 1930's, many of the questions and tentative responses of our own day and suspect that such connections could and should be made. The burden of today's work in epistemology continues with the question of evidence and justification.

ENDNOTES

1 An Autobiography, p.90. Hereafter I cite his writings within the body of the text and use these initials: A, Autobiography; EPM, An Essay on Philosophical Method; EPH, Essays in the Philosophy of History; IH, The Idea of History; SM, Speculum Mentis.

2 "A Pragmatic Conception of the *A Priori*" Journal of Philosophy Vol. XX, No.7 (March 29, 1923), p.177.

3 Philosophy of History, p.18.

4 Dray, p.12. Patrick Gardiner, Theories of History, p.249.

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