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Robin George Collingwood on Understanding the Historical Past

Abstract: In this paper, we aim to demonstrate that Robin George Collingwood's thesis on understanding the past through rethinking has hermeneutical consequences that can be instrumental in approaching and understanding philosophical texts. We are concerned not only with understanding the historical past, but also with understanding the wider context in which certain philosophical writings were thought and penned. Therefore, the hermeneutic dimension of Collingwood's thought leads to some methodological principles, which are contrary to constructivist or deconstructivist assumptions of approaching written texts. Consequently, proceeding from the assumption that for Collingwood history itself is hermeneutic, we try to fulfill our intended objectives by supplementing the phenomenological method with hermeneutic analysis. The findings of the following study are hermeneutically relevant in that the past is incapsulated within the present and this implies the cancellation of the past-present divide and at the same time the actuality of (past) philosophical texts. We therefore propose the ruling principle that we rather understand the past from the perspective of the present than the present from the perspective of the past.

Keywords: Robin George Collingwood, hermeneutics of history, theory of interpretation, anthropological reconstruction, philosophy of history.

1. Introduction

The problem of understanding the past concerns historians and philosophers alike. And although there have often been disputes in the history of thought, it is evident that a privileged position in this particular debate is given to the contributions of Robin George Collingwood. Accordingly, starting from the assumption that for the British thinker

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philosophy of history is a hermeneutics in itself (McIntyre 2008), we will attempt to address the following issues: 1) that Collingwood's theses on understanding the past through rethinking, as well as the thesis of encapsulating the past in the present, have hermeneutical consequences and 2) that these hermeneutical consequences entail a corresponding hermeneutics or, in other words, a methodology of understanding philosophical writings. At the same time, demonstrating these points nullifies the temporal divide between past and present (Kobayashi and Marion 2011). Furthermore, Collingwood's views that the past is still present in the present represent a hermeneutic alternative to constructivist or deconstructivist attempts at approaching history (Ahlskog 2017). In the present course we will leave aside the discussion concerning Collingwood's place in the philosophical tradition (Fell 1991), just as we will omit the Gadamerian reception of the British philosopher (Vardoulakis 2004). In order to demonstrate our set goals, our methodology will focus on the hermeneutical analysis and phenomenological description of Collingwoodian writings.

2. Understanding the Past through Re-enactment or Re-thinking

The historical-philosophical method proposed by Robin George Collingwood provides the answer to the question "how is historical knowledge and understanding possible?". However, it must not be forgotten that for the British thinker, history and philosophy, and in particular history and metaphysics, are intimately related. Indeed, his life's endeavor was to bring about a *rapprochement* between philosophy and history (Collingwood 1939). For Collingwood, history is thinking about thought. And historical thinking is as valuable a way of reasoning as perception.

The object of history consists of concluded events that happened in the past without existing in the present. This is the reason Collingwood writes about them that only when they are no longer perceptible or, in other words, when we can no longer approach them directly through perception, do they become objects for historical thinking (Collingwood and van der Dussen 2005). Hence his rebellion against the history of common sense, which he refers to as "scissors-and-paste history" (Collingwood 1939).

In this latter version of history, the past is a dead past, about which we only know what the authorities in the relevant field have recorded. For example, in this manner of rendering history, we know the history of the Roman Empire only from what certain, prominent historians have told us, without attempting to rethink the events recounted by them. As such, the British philosopher proposes two methods of "shaping" what the

authorities have proposed as history. The first method regards critical history as proposed by Bradley (1969), that is, a history based on historical analysis. The second method regards history as a construction of historical facts from historical sources (Collingwood and van der Dussen 2005). To construct in history means to discriminate over historical claims, to interpolate between claims borrowed from authorities other information that the former imply. Collingwood exemplifies this by pointing out that if historical authorities record that, for example, Caesar was in Rome one day and the next day was seen in Gaul, without mentioning any journey that took him there, then the reader can interpolate the observation that this is impossible (Collingwood and van der Dussen 2005). This interpolation of another event between the two events reported by the authorities is possible with the help of an *a priori historical imagination*. In the example given above by Collingwood, in order to make the connection between the two events, a first step would be to assume the connection between the two and also to establish their succession. For Caesar could not be in Rome and in Gaul at the same time. And between these two moments it is clear that Caesar had to have done something. For example, to travel from Rome to Gaul. Secondly, this conclusion must make sense in the context of the historical construction we are discussing. And ultimately, this interpolation ends up becoming the very re-enactment of those events, or their re-thinking (Rubinoff 1996).

The historian must keep in mind, Collingwood writes, the following three underlying principles of the method: 1) his picture of the past must be well framed in space and time; 2) the entirety of history must be self-consistent, in the sense that there is only one history of the world, and therefore any event that has occurred must be in relation to all the others, even if it is only a topographical or chronological relationship; 3) the historian's image of the past must stand in a particular relationship to what Collingwood calls *testimony* or *evidence* (Collingwood and van der Dussen 2005). Regarding this testimony, he writes that it is a testimony only when one meditates on it from a historical point of view. Thus, we can speak of evidence when we say that historical thinking is an original and fundamental activity of the human mind or, in a Cartesian manner of thinking, that the idea of the past is an innate idea (Collingwood and van der Dussen 2005).

Therefore, thinking about past events based on present sources requires what Collingwood calls an *a priori historical imagination*. In other words, the historical fact, that is, the object of historical hermeneutics, is constituted through this historical imagination. This imagination is not of a psychological nature, but rather, the British thinker believes, it is an idea that everyone possesses, as something inherent in human thought and which is discovered once it is consciously perceived. Moreover, this idea of

the historical imagination as a form of thought is self-determining, independent and self-justifying (Collingwood and van der Dussen 2005). As we have seen already, history for Collingwood means the construction of historical facts “in the sense that the historian does not carry out an arbitrary construction of historical fact, but employs historical sources as the starting point of his construction” (Tabrea 2012, 256). Thus, the past is entirely reconstructed using historical imagination. In fact, this a priori imagination can be considered the condition of possibility of scientific, in this case historical, knowledge.

It remains for us to show how this historical-philosophical method can be applied and to observe to what results we can arrive at when interpreting historical sources as such. Let us first look at historical sources and see in what context they appear in Collingwood’s works. When discussing historical sources, the British philosopher is referring both written sources: historical documents, “authorities”; but also to unwritten sources and material evidence: archaeological ruins, fragments of found objects, coins, and so forth. The value of the sources is given only after the hermeneut-historian interprets them. These sources only begin to exist when the hermeneut-historian adopts a hermeneutic attitude (Collingwood and van der Dussen 2005) towards them, seeking to provide them with meaning. Thinking history in this manner, we see that history is hermeneutic and, moreover, the philosophy of history as thought by Collingwood is not concerned with structures, trends or explanatory theories, but is instead a critical approach or, in other words, a hermeneutics (Hogan 1989).

The second stage of the historical-philosophical method constructed by Collingwood consists in the re-enactment of the past. The British philosopher first spoke of this in his 1928 lectures (Dray 1995). Thus, historical knowledge is the re-enactment of past thought through our present thinking. And this is possible with the help of the a priori imagination we have discussed earlier. Moreover, Collingwood asks “how and under what conditions can the historian know the past?” (Collingwood and van der Dussen 2005). And “what should a historian do to know the past?” (Collingwood and van der Dussen 2005). The philosophy of history, according to him, is nothing more than an attempt to answer these questions. The only answer given by the philosopher was that the historian has to re-enact the past in his own mind.

Collingwood provides numerous examples of this. Euclid discovered, among other things, that the angles at the base of an isosceles triangle are equal. The ancient mathematician discussed this problem about 2300 years ago. With this the question arises: when we rethink the fact that the angles at the base of an isosceles triangle are equal, are we meeting our

own thinking or are we re-enacting Euclid's thoughts? Of course, we can repeat after him, but that doesn't mean we understand that those angles are equal. And if we don't understand, it means we're not rethinking; as such, we're not making history in Collingwood's terms. Incidentally, the British philosopher explains that between the act of thinking now that "the angles are equal" and the act of having had that thought five minutes ago is a relationship of numerical difference and specific identity. Both acts are different, but they are of the same type, which means that there is something remaining from the act that took place five minutes ago in the present one. The same is true of Euclid's thought (Collingwood and van der Dussen 2005). For Collingwood, one thinks historically when one can say: "I see what the person who made this (wrote this, used this, designed this, and so on.) was thinking" (Collingwood 1939, 110). Moreover, the historian must rethink the same thought he is dealing with, and not a similar one.

Historical knowledge is therefore the re-constitution, in the mind of the historian, of the thought whose history is being studied (Collingwood 1939). Similarly, in another work Collingwood writes that history is thinking about thinking (Collingwood and van der Dussen 2005). The past is thought that has been re-enacted. Hence, when we speak of self-knowledge, we must by no means invoke something like memory. Self-knowledge is, in fact, historical knowledge (Collingwood and van der Dussen 2005). Here the British philosopher has in mind a kind of autobiography when he speaks of self-knowledge. In order to re-constitute things we have experienced or learned we must first recollect them. And to do this the first task is to recall what happened, using our memory. However, this memory must be assisted. To stimulate memory, Collingwood writes, we need to use several different methods. For example, re-reading letters or books, revisiting places we have been to, and which we associate with certain events, and so on. When a politician writes his autobiography and proceeds in this way, he has in his mind a display of the relevant parts of his own earlier life. He sees a young man going through those experiences and knows that the young man was himself (Collingwood and van der Dussen 2005). This latter task is the second aspect of recollecting. The old politician not only has to know that the young man was him, but also has to try to rediscover the thoughts of that young man. This is what the re-constitution of past thought would involve. To be sure that twenty years ago a thought about something was in his mind, he must have proof/evidence of this thought. Only by having these things beforehand and interpreting them appropriately, can he prove that he was thinking as such. And after he does all these, after he rediscovers his past self and revisits those thoughts, he can judge them better than he could have in the past (Collingwood and van der Dussen 2005).

Dana Tabrea (2012) proposes two directions of interpretation of the problem of re-enacting past thought. The first of these refers to re-enactment as re-thinking, and the second sees re-enactment as a fusion. Specifically, when dealing with an older philosophical text or anything which belongs to the past, in order to update these objects the first step would be to re-think them. Therefore, “to understand the meaning of something (text, historical event, work of art) means to place oneself in a foreign situation as if it were one’s own (to put oneself, for example, in the same situation as the one who did, said, wrote, in short, thought this or that thing)” (Tabrea 2012, 267-268). Basically, in order to understand a text, one has to travel backwards up to that text, in other words, starting from what exists in the present and arriving at the first version of that text as it appeared in the past. However, this is precisely what the British philosopher leaves unclear: how does this re-enactment actually take place? For what Collingwood does is to have the hermeneut-historian appeal to a kind of empathy that puts him in the position of the author of the text. This claim has been strongly disputed by various commentators. In fact, Collingwood criticizes Dilthey (2013), accusing him of psychologism. But by stating his own thesis as such he falls to the same criticism he had leveled against Dilthey (van der Dussen 1981).

Therefore, is the thought of the hermeneut following the interpretation of the sources his own thought or is it the thought of the historical agent or the author of a text? Collingwood apparently accepts the hypothesis that the re-enacted thought is identical to the original thought (Collingwood and van der Dussen 2005). In his *Autobiography* (Collingwood 1939) we find an example where this problem is clarified. Discussing Nelson and the Battle of Trafalgar, one may wonder what must have been in Nelson’s mind when he prepared such a strategy. In other words, if we were to try to re-constitute the Admiral’s thoughts we would have some difficulties. Collingwood notes this problem and writes that: “[the] re-enactment of Nelson’s thought is a reenactment with a difference. Nelson’s thought, as Nelson thought it and as I re-think it, is certainly one and the same thought; and yet in some way there is not one thought, there are two different thoughts. What was the difference? [...] The difference is one of context. To Nelson, that thought was a present thought; to me, it is a past thought living in the present but (as I have elsewhere put it) encapsulated, not free” (Collingwood 1939, 112-113).

This context of which the philosopher speaks represents a set of questions and answers specific to the different discursive universe in which the hermeneut-historian and the historical agent respectively are inscribed. What Collingwood means is that the same thought is re-enacted, but in a different system of questions and answers. For example, if Nelson thought

up a strategy because there was a real need for it; a historian, to understand that strategy, must first realize that there was a need for it. That is, to reconstruct that original context in which those thoughts arose. Of course, this doctrine of re-enacting the past has been widely challenged. But what seems relevant to us is that we can understand it, rather, as a transcendental theory of historical knowledge than as a theory of how this knowledge is obtained. In other words, it should not be seen as a methodological device for obtaining historical knowledge, as many interpreters have considered it (van der Dussen 2016). At least this is the new hypothesis regarding the re-enactment of the past in the present. We therefore note that a particular historical event subject to interpretation is not only a matter of the past. It is encapsulated in the present, in the testimonies left to the present. In this way, the meaning of re-enactment would be constituted by the encounter or, in a Gadamerian sense (Gadamer 1975), the fusion of the present and the past (Hogan 1989).

3. The Thesis of Incapsulating the Past in the Present

In order to overcome a possible criticism of the above theory, Collingwood formulates his thesis that the past is not a dead past, as one might think, but a living past. The historian is a person who asks many questions about the past, but can only answer these questions when he has evidence. And such evidence can only be found in the world of the present, in the current world of the historian. If there is no trace of a past event in the present, then no historian could know anything about it. Therefore, for a trace of a past event to constitute evidence for history, it must be something more than a material thing or a state of such a thing. Collingwood offers as an example that we study the Middle Ages because we have access to some of its traces: “[t]o take only one of these things, the knowledge of Latin survives. [...] If the habit of reading and understanding Latin had not survived among ‘clerkly’ persons from the Middle Ages to the present day, the parchment could never have told the historian what in fact it does tell him. In general terms, the modern historian can study the Middle Ages, in the way in which he actually does study them, only because they are not dead” (Collingwood 1939, 97).

In doing so, Collingwood shows that not only have these traces of the medieval period been preserved, but also their underlying patterns of thought. People still think as they did in medieval times. Which means that the past is not a dead past, but a living past that continues to ‘live’ in the present. These things were discovered by Collingwood around 1920. Only that at the time what we have referred to above as “event”, he called “process”. And he also noted that these processes have neither a beginning

nor an end, but are in constant motion or “transformation”. He states that “[i]f P1, has left traces of itself in P2, so that an historian living in P2, can discover by the interpretation of evidence that what is now P2, was once P1, it follows that the ‘traces’ of P1, in the present are not, so to speak, the corpse of a dead P1, but rather the real P1, itself, living and active though incapsulated within the other form of itself P2. And P2 is not opaque, it is transparent, so that P1 shines through it and their colors combine into one” (Collingwood 1939, 98). These things led the British philosopher to assert that there are no beginnings or endings in history. History is a continuous form of thought. Of course, history books end, but the events described by a book are without end.

In other words, if the symbol P1 would characterize a certain historical period, and the symbol P2 would characterize the period immediately following it, then P2 cannot simply describe that period. P2 characterizes that period, but without rejecting the remnants of the P1 period. This, on careful reflection, is as pertinent as can be. If we were to talk now about a war, the period immediately following its end is not entirely free of the “imprint” of that war. This overlap can continue. In the same way, when we speak of a philosopher’s work, we cannot speak of it without finding in it the ‘traces’ of other works from before. Of course, some authors recognize these traces, others do not. For example, Kant (2006) recognized that David Hume, through the way he explained the causal relationship, led him to create a monumental philosophical work. However, we can also think that there is a part of the past which is dead to us. Of which we cannot find any evidence in the present. It is possible, for example, that at one time there was a great philosopher whose books have, over time, disappeared. But if he was an important thinker, surely his name would have been preserved in the writings of others. For instance, Aristotle mentions Thales’ name in his *Metaphysics*. But it is possible that there was another philosopher from the same period as Thales whose work was not as significant. His name was not recorded by immediate posterity and, over the years, was lost. For someone in our age, that philosopher of the past whom we do not even know existed is dead. In this sense, the past is indeed dead when traces of an event are non-existent, or inaccessible to us. Of course, we can “imagine” and put forward our own hypotheses about the past, but nothing can confirm the “reality” of that past.

At this point in our research it is appropriate to point out the connection between the thesis of re-enacting past thoughts and the thesis that the past is alive, incapsulated in the present. As we have seen, historical knowledge consists in the re-constitution, in the mind of the hermeneut-historian, of the thought whose history is being studied. Basically, by re-constituting these thoughts, the past is thus re-enacted. The problem here

was that the hermeneut-historian relates to past events by appealing to a kind of empathy, and this goes beyond, and also goes against, the principles of the philosophy of history constituted by Collingwood himself. This is the reason the British philosopher proposes the thesis of the living past, incapsulated in the present. So far things seem clear, except one: what is an incapsulated thought? To this question, Collingwood (1939) points out that such a thought does not pertain to what people often call 'real life'. Therefore, an incapsulated thought does not belong to the complex of questions and answers; in other words, it is neither an answer nor a question. The thought incapsulated in the present is the "bridge" that connects the present to the past. Starting from such incapsulated thoughts, using the method of questions and answers, the hermeneut-historian succeeds in re-enacting the past.

Finally, by clarifying this, Collingwood arrives at his third principle concerning the philosophy of history: "[h]istorical knowledge is the re-enactment of a past thought incapsulated in a context of present thoughts which, by contradicting it, confine it to a plane different from theirs" (Collingwood 1939, 114). Thus, a historian thinks by himself when he re-thinks what someone else has thought. What a historian knows are past thoughts, incapsulated in the present. Studying them, that is, re-thinking them, is not knowledge in contradiction with self-knowledge. Knowledge by re-thinking the past is, for the historian, knowledge of himself. In other words, a historian's self-knowledge is at the same time his entire knowledge of the world.

4. Conclusions and Implications

So, why are Robin George Collingwood's theses on the hermeneutics of philosophical texts important? As we can see, since the past is still alive, it is incapsulated in the present, the first consequence is that the texts of the past are still current; in other words, we cannot remain indifferent to their meaning. Given that in the history of hermeneutics there is the idea of understanding an author better than he understood himself (Schleiermacher 1998). A second consequence of the above thesis is that, unlike Schleiermacher's assumptions, Collingwood proposes a methodological approach to get this surplus of meaning involved in the act of understanding; the novelty here being that we understand the past from the present, as a kind of retrospective view. Therefore, the thesis proposed and defended in the present paper provides a useful 'tool' for working through, understanding and rethinking past (philosophical) texts.

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