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Philosophical Explorations, 2018
https://doi.org/10.1080/13869795.2017.1421697

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The touch of King Midas: Collingwood on why actions are not events

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(*Received 21 December 2017; final version received 21 December 2017*)

It is the ambition of natural science to provide complete explanations of reality. Collingwood argues that science can only explain events, not actions. The latter is the distinctive subject matter of history and can be described as actions only if they are explained historically. This paper explains Collingwood's claim that the distinctive subject matter of history is actions and why the attempt to capture this subject matter through the method of science inevitably ends in failure because science explains events, not actions. It argues that Collingwood's defence of the methodological autonomy of history vis-à-vis natural science is not based on a commitment to human exceptionalism, i.e. the exclusion of human beings and their doings from the rest of nature, but on the view that explanations which appeal to norms are different in kind from explanations which appeal to empirical regularities. Given the close relationship between the method and the subject matter of a distinct form of inquiry, actions elude any attempt to explain them through the scientific method because the application of this method entails that what is thus explained is not an action but an event.

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Keywords: actions; events; action explanation; natural past; human past; historical past; historical understanding; causal explanations; rationalizing explanations

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At the heart of Collingwood's philosophy of history there lies the claim that actions are the distinctive subject matter of history and that history differs from natural science because the latter is concerned not with actions but with events. This might seem a rather surprising claim to make since it is customary to think of history not as the study of actions but as the study of the past: what makes a subject matter historical, on a familiar view, is that it lies in the past rather than the present or the future. This way of identifying the domain of inquiry of history, however, fails to capture a subject matter that is genuinely distinctive. Palaeontologists who trace the evolution of extinct species through the study of fossils and big-bang physicists investigating the origins of the universe also study processes and events which occurred in the past. Thus if history has a subject matter that is genuinely distinctive, the distinctive nature of its subject matter is not accounted for by its focus on the past since the past is studied by natural scientists as much as by Roman or Medieval historians. This is the context in which Collingwood's claim that actions (not the past) are the subject matter of history must be understood: history, Collingwood claimed, has a distinctive subject matter *not* because it studies the past but because it studies *actions*.

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But what does it mean to say that actions are the subject matter of history and what is the nature of the distinction between the subject matter of history (actions) and that of the natural sciences (events)? One way of understanding this claim is to assume that the distinction between the subject matter of history and that of the natural sciences can be captured by saying that whereas natural science studies events in general history studies only a subset of events (wars, revolutions, *coup d'états* rather than earthquakes, flooding and volcanic explosions), namely those events which are caused or brought about by a species of animals called human beings. While this might be an intuitive way of capturing the distinction between the subject matter of history and natural science it is not how Collingwood understood it. Why not? If actions were a subset of events, then the concept of action would relate to the concept of event in the way in which the concept of Siamese cat relates to the concept of cat: as a species to its genus. And if this were the case history would be nothing but a branch of natural science, specializing in a narrower part of the *same* reality investigated by natural science, and its subject matter would not be genuinely distinct from that of natural science.

So how should the relation between actions (as the subject matter of history) and events (as the subject matter of the natural sciences) be understood if we are to vindicate the claim that history has a domain of inquiry that is genuinely distinct from that of natural science? Collingwood's answer is that the concept of action is to be understood not as a species of the more general concept of "event", but as the correlative of a certain kind of explanation. In other words, something counts as an action, and thus as historical subject matter, if it is explained in a certain way, namely by the methods of history rather than those of science. On this view, although both historians and natural scientists study the past, they do not study it in the same way: the latter study it qua events, the former qua actions. The distinction between actions and events is, therefore, a distinction between the *explananda* corresponding to two kinds of inferences.[1] Events are explained nomologically by appealing to observed regularities or patterns while actions are explained by locating them in an intensional context or "context of thought". The behaviour of medieval peasants, for example, is not explained by historians in the same way as the freezing of the water in a bucket left out at night is explained by natural scientists, i.e. by appealing to the empirical generalization that water freezes at 0°C and the antecedent condition that the temperature dropped below that temperature threshold. This is not because there are no observable behaviour patterns in the history of human beings, but because regularities in the human past are understood historically by invoking the idea of compliance with norms, rather than by subsuming behaviour under psychological generalizations or laws of human conduct which are assumed to be the same in all times and places. As Collingwood puts it,

> Types of behaviour do, no doubt, recur, so long as minds of the same kind are placed in the same kinds of situations. The behaviour-patterns characteristic of a feudal baron were no doubt fairly constant so long as there were feudal barons living in a feudal society, but they will be sought in vain (except by an enquirer content with the loosest and most fanciful analogies) in a world whose social structure is of another kind … a positive science of mind will, no doubt, be able to establish uniformities and recurrences, but it can have no guarantee that the laws it establishes will hold good beyond the historical period from which its facts are drawn. (1944, 223–224)

The norms which govern the relation between the lord and the serf rationalize why the serf behaves submissively towards his or her lord; the subservience of medieval peasants toward their lord is, therefore, not explained in the same way as one explains why the sunflower turns towards the sun or why the tides rise. Were the inference which is invoked to

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account for the behaviour of the serf towards his or her lord of a nomological nature, then the serf's behaviour would be explained causally and understood in a different sense of "understand". To explain the behaviour of the medieval serf *historically* – as an action – requires explaining it by invoking norms of behaviour to which the serf responds in the way in which, for example, one might explain the behaviour of a driver who stops at a red traffic light by invoking a traffic regulation. Just as the driver's action must be understood as a response to a traffic regulation for it to be understood as an action so it is by invoking a norm of conduct that the behaviour of the serf is understood in a way that genuinely differs from that in which a tidologist explains the attraction that the moon exerts upon the tides. The point here is not that there are no empirical patterns to be observed in the domain of human affairs, as opposed to that of nature (it is an empirical observation that drivers stop at red traffic lights and that serfs are subservient to their lords), but that if the behaviour of the serf, much as that of the driver, is explained by appeal to an empirical generalization, it is shown to be something that happens as a matter of routine, rather than understood as a response to a command. Understanding patterns of actions in terms of compliance with norms rather than instances of general laws will enable historians to be sensitive to historical variations in behaviour patterns in a way in which a positivistic science of human nature cannot be because the empirical study of human nature must operate under the presupposition of the uniformity of nature and therefore assume that the psychological laws under which it subsumes human behaviour apply at all times and places. Invoking the norms that guide the conduct of past agents may enable historians to make predictions in the domain of human affairs. If we understand the traffic regulations, for example, then we will be able to predict fairly effectively that drivers will stop at red traffic lights. Predictions based on norms which are sensitive to cultural differences will even be more precise than those that can be achieved by a positive science of the mind because, as Collingwood points out, the behaviour patterns characteristic of feudal barons "will be sought in vain in a world whose social structure is of a different kind". But while predictions based on an understanding of the norms which underpin actions are possible, they should not be confused with the predictions one finds in natural science because the former are future-projected rationalizations which are not based on inductive inferences. Predictions in natural science are based on the observation of constant conjunctions in the past; predictions in history are based on an understanding of how an agent ought to act if she follows a rule. While predictions based on future-projected rationalizations may coincide with those arrived at by using the inductive method, the logical form of these explanations is not the same: the former involves a rationalization, the latter an inductive generalization.

The conception of action explanation that Collingwood sought to undermine by denying that actions are events is the view which was advanced by Mill (1843) in his *System of Logic*.[2] On Mill's view psychology studies human actions, and to this extent its subject matter differs from that of the natural sciences. Yet (for Mill) the method by which the psychologist investigates the actions of human beings is the same method of observation and inductive generalization employed by the natural sciences: the psychologist predicts and retrodicts human actions in the same way in which the astronomer predicts a solar eclipse, namely by inferring them from certain antecedent conditions and general laws. The laws at work in psychology, unlike those of physics, appeal to human beliefs and desires in order to anticipate how humans will react to certain conditions; they are psychological laws rather than, say, astronomical laws; but the inferences which they make are not different in kind from those one finds in the natural sciences. For Mill all explanations appeal to laws. His only concession to the human sciences is that they, unlike physics, are unable to make precise predictions. In this respect they are in the

same position as inexact natural sciences, such as tidology and meteorology whose laws are not strict but merely probabilistic. Since all sciences explain by subsuming the phenomenon to be explained under empirical laws, psychology does not make reality intelligible in a way that is significantly different from the way in which it is explained in the natural sciences and Mill’s concession to the human sciences confirms rather than denies the thesis for methodological unity.

The study of action, for Collingwood, differs from that of events, not because the generalizations which are used in the explanation of action are probabilistic rather than strictly universal, but because empirical laws, whether they are strict or probabilistic ones, have no role to play in the explanation of action. While the norms which are invoked to explain human behaviour in the context of historical explanations allow for exceptions (the serf can rebel against the ethical code that requires subservience to the lord, and the driver disregard the red light), this does not entail that the norms of conduct which are invoked in the (historical) explanation of action can be likened to the probabilistic laws one finds in imprecise natural sciences such as tidology and meteorology. When an action is explained by invoking a norm it is not subsumed under an empirical generalization: compliance with a norm is not the same as conformity with an empirical regularity. Any instance of behaviour can be subsumed under an empirical law and therefore explained as an event. The fact that this can be done, is *not* what is at stake. Collingwood’s claim that actions are not events does not entail that human behaviour cannot be explained nomologically, only that when this is done it is no longer explained as an action.

The *explanandum* of history, for Collingwood, is, therefore, not a small segment of the same reality investigated by the methods of natural science (as if actions were a subclass of events) but is reality brought under a different categorial description: qua action. The close relation which holds between method and subject matter in specific forms of inquiry entails that any attempt to account for the subject matter of one form of inquiry by adopting the method of another is doomed to fail since, just as the touch of King Midas transformed everything into gold, so the application of the method of a form of inquiry determines its explanandum. The application of the scientific method will ensure that what is explained is an event much as the application of the historical method will ensure that what is explained is an action. Actions, understood as the subject matter of history, are, therefore, not an empirical class that expands over time as more human beings wake up, walk, stage revolutions and so on, and history is not a long catalogue of wars, plots and revolutions, but rather a way of comprehending and explaining what happens qua actions. Likewise, the category of events is not an empirical class that grows with time as more hurricanes, tornadoes and flooding occur, and natural science is a way of comprehending what happens qua events. There is an important distinction between the natural and the historical past, because even if science and history study the past, they study it in a different way by bringing it under different categorial descriptions. Natural science investigates what occurs as a manifestation of empirical laws. History studies what occurs as an expression of the cultural norms that were predominant in different periods of time. History tends to be focused on the domain of human affairs because it is human beings who developed the cultures and codes of conduct by which they led their lives. But the distinction between the historical and the natural past is premised *not* on a commitment to human exceptionalism – the exclusion of a biological species from the rest of nature – but on the view that explanations which appeal to norms are different in kind from explanations which appeal to empirical regularities. History does not study past *human* actions; when history studies human beings it studies what they do only in so far as what they do is an expression of thought. As Collingwood puts it,

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> … a great many things which deeply concern human beings are not, and never have been, traditionally included in the subject-matter of history. People are born, eat and breathe and sleep, and beget children and become ill and recover again, and die; and these things interest them, most of them at any rate, far more than art and science, industry and politics and war. Yet none of these things have been traditionally regarded as possessing historical interest. Most of them have given rise to institutions like dining and marrying and the various rituals that surround birth and death, sickness and recovery; and of these rituals and institutions people write histories; but the history of dining is not the history of eating, and the history of death-rituals is not the history of death. (1999, 46).

The distinction between the historical past and the natural past, as Collingwood draws it, does not follow the contours of the distinction between the human and the non-human past since there is a great deal that human beings did which does not provide appropriate subject matter for historical inquiry. The question that should be asked in determining whether the past of any given species is appropriate subject matter for history is not "are they human?" but "are they civilized?" There is nothing anthropocentric about this way (Collingwood's way) of drawing the distinction between actions and events. His claim is not that actions are a subset of events (human doings) which are explained by subsuming them under psychological rather than, say, meteorological generalizations, but that there is a distinctive subject matter of historical inquiry that is captured by a very specific meaning of the term "action". In this specific sense the term denotes

> not the actions, in the widest sense of that word, which are done by animals of the species called human; they are actions in another sense of the same word, equally familiar but narrower, actions done by reasonable agents in pursuit of ends determined by their reason (1999, 46).

In this narrower sense of the term, action is a category sui generis that is genuinely distinct from the concept of event. It is this narrower sense of the term that, for Collingwood, needs to be invoked to articulate a defence of the methodological autonomy of history. In this very specific sense of the term action, actions are not events because they cannot be explained nomologically without changing the subject matter in question.

In sum: if history really has a distinctive subject matter, it must have its own form of intelligibility, a method that is irreducible to the causal/nomological method of the natural sciences. Only if the method of history is genuinely different from the causal/nomological method of the natural sciences does history have an *explanandum* of its own and thus a subject matter that is not shared by natural science. History for Collingwood is, therefore, not the story of kings and queens, plots and revolutions as opposed to that of solar eclipses, tornadoes or dinosaurs; it is a way of making things intelligible or a form of understanding with its own distinctive and irreducible form of inference, and actions are that which is known historically.

At times Collingwood illustrates the distinction between actions and events by saying that actions have an inside which events lack and thus cannot be explained by the same method used to account for the latter (1944, 213–214). This way of describing the nature of the distinction has unfortunately led many to conclude that what distinguishes an action from an event is the presence of a hidden psychological process that cannot be observed from the outside. What *can* be seen from the outside is mere behaviour; this can be explained by the method of observation and inductive generalization. What *cannot* be seen from the outside is an inner psychological process; accessing this inner psychological process requires a method distinctive to history: the method of re-enactment. Considerations such as these have led to the standard interpretation of Collingwood's defence of the methodological autonomy of history according to which a) the distinctive

subject matter of history is inner psychological processes and b) these inner processes are recovered through empathetic identification with the agent.[3] While it is easy to see what has led to this reading of Collingwood's defence of the methodological autonomy of history, the standard interpretation distorts the account of action explanation that lies at the heart of Collingwood's claim that actions are the distinctive subject matter of history and that, as such, they are not a species of the concept of event. As we have seen, central to Collingwood's critique of Mill's claim for methodological unity in the sciences is the view that actions are rationalized by norms rather than subsumed under empirical generalizations. Thus, for example, the medieval historian rationalizes the behaviour of plague stricken individuals who rubbed live chicken against their swollen lymph nodes in the light of what were taken to be "cures" for the disease. Interpreting the action in this light enables historians to distinguish bizarre forms of behaviour such as this from plain madness by showing it to be a comprehensible way of acting in the light of certain medical beliefs, however misguided these beliefs might be. The explanation of action, understood as a form of rationalization just described, does not rely on any problematic distinction between an observable outside and an unobservable inside. There is no need for the historian to identify with the agent (to feel their pain, to believe what they believed) to understand that they were in pain and that they had certain beliefs. Nor is there any need to assume that the agent silently recited a train of thought to themselves to understand their action as a response to a norm. The standard interpretation of re-enactment creates a mystery (how can we understand the unobservable thoughts of other agents?) and then condemns Collingwood for devising a method (re-enactment) that can solve such a mystery at the price of introducing the outrageous methodological suggestion that historians have a special intuitive way of accessing the thoughts of other agents (empathetic identification). But there is no need to empathetically identify with the thoughts of past agents in order to understand their actions: if we asked an Egyptologist why the ancient Egyptians had such elaborate burial rituals, she is likely to tell us about how central the idea of an afterlife was to their culture and she will find this information not in the head of Tutankhamun, but in the documents which that civilization left behind, documents which enable historians to understand reality as the Egyptians did. The claim that actions cannot be understood by the method of observation and inductive generalization does not entail that they are dubious transcendent metaphysical entities that can be accessed through some form of psychic intuition. Actions lie beyond the reach of empirical investigation not because the thoughts which they express are transcendent metaphysical entities that are inaccessible to the experimental method of observation and inductive generalization but because the questions that are asked in the context of historical inquiry are different from the kind of questions that are asked by natural scientists and cannot, therefore, be answered by their methods. Unfortunately, the interpretation of Collingwood as endorsing the Cartesian myth of the ghost in the machine has been so pervasive as to obscure repeated attempts to show that, misleading as it might be, his talk of actions having an inside as well as an outside is just a highly metaphorical way of expressing the point that there are different forms of explanations that are called for in different contexts of inquiry.[4] The fundamental distinction between the subject matters of history and natural science is not the distinction between processes which are not, and those which are, accessible to observation, but between the kind of answers that are sought in the domains of science and history. As Collingwood puts it,

> When a scientist asks "why did that piece of litmus paper turn pink?" he means "on what kind of occasions do pieces of litmus turn pink?" When an historian asks: "why did Brutus stab Caesar?" he means "what did Brutus think, which made him decide to stab Caesar?" (1944, 214)

To the different explanatory interests of historians and natural scientists there correspond different conceptions of explanation.[5] Nomological explanations which appeal to general laws and antecedent conditions are responsive to the desideratum of science to predict and control the natural environment. The questions asked in this explanatory context are questions such as "how can we predict nature in order to harness it at the service of human ends?" This goal is served by detecting empirical regularities which enable natural science to either predict or retrodict what will or did happen. Explanations which appeal to norms are responsive to a different desideratum, namely that of making sense of apparently puzzling behaviour by making explicit the norms which underpin it. Consider the question: "Why were the bodies in the priory's cemetery buried with their heads facing down?" And then consider the kind of answer which would satisfy the curiosity of a historian: "to atone for their sins". The goal of this explanation is not to establish how sinners should be buried to atone for their transgressions. The historian is not concerned with discovering which antecedent conditions must hold for a certain effect (atonement) to come about in the way in which, say, a structural engineer needs to know what kind of building material is adequate to support the weight of a roof. The goal, for the historian, is to find out the significance or meaning of that practice for the people concerned. And this goal is not served well by the conception of explanation at work in the natural sciences because the question (of the historian) is not asking which antecedent conditions should be manipulated to bring about a certain effect.

In the decades after Collingwood's death Hempel sought to revitalize Mill's claim for methodological unity in the sciences. In his influential 1942 paper, "The Functions of General Laws in History" he argued that the rationalizing inferences which Collingwood took to be the distinctive mark of the explanation of action are not different in kind from the nomological inferences found in natural science and used to explain natural events causally; they are just nomological explanations with a suppressed general premise. Using the famous example of the dustbowl farmers Hempel argued that the migration of the farmers to areas offering better living conditions is explained by inferring it from certain antecedent conditions (the deterioration of living standards) together with the general law "populations will tend to migrate to areas offering better living conditions". Nomological explanation, Hempel argues, can be applied to the past as well as the future. When applied to the future they yield predictions, when applied to the past they yield retrodictions. Historical explanations retrodict past occurrences rather than predict future ones. The fact that an explanation is backward looking does not change its logical form. On this last point Collingwood would have agreed. It is not enough for historical explanation to be backward looking for it to have a distinctive explanandum. He would have no quarrel with the claim that if the migration of the dustbowl farmers were inferred from certain antecedent conditions together with a general law then indeed it would not be explained any differently than the movement of the tides or the migration of the birds. That the migration of the dustbowl farmers can be so explained is not something Collingwood would deny, for he would concede one can observe constant conjunctions between events of a certain type such as the traffic light turning red and cars stopping. But what he would deny is that when the behaviour of the dust bowl farmers is so explained it is explained historically (as an action). To explain it historically requires seeing it as a response to a hypothetical imperative or a command of instrumental reason (do what survival requires!) rather than as an instance of a general law extrapolated inductively from past experience, just as historically to explain why drivers stop at red traffic lights would require invoking traffic regulations rather than appeal to past observations of constant conjunctions. Action explanations are *not* incomplete explanations of a nomological kind; they are complete explanations of a

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different kind. Once the historian has explained the behaviour of the serf by invoking an ethical code which enjoins respect for the feudal lord she has no need to subsume the behaviour under a general law (stating that this is how feudal serfs behave towards their lord) to understand it. She has already understood it, *historically*. And if she does discuss the behaviour of the serf as shared by individuals with the same social standing in that society she will not account for the similarities in the behaviour of the serfs inductively. For the historian the generalization that serfs behave in such and such a way towards their lord rests on a prior *historical* inference which explains their actions as a response to norms. For Collingwood, we can understand what happens in different ways depending on whether we bring it under the category of event and explain it nomologically/causally or whether we bring it under the category of action and rationalize it. What we cannot do is to conjoin the description of what happens as an action and the description of what happens as an event because the presuppositions which underpin the study of action (history) and of events (science) are not the same. The presupposition which governs the inductive sciences is that nature is uniform, and the future will resemble the past: the principle of the uniformity of nature is the precondition for making predictions based on inductive inferences. The presupposition which governs history, on the other hand, is that agents are responsive to norms which change according to time and place. Since it cannot be presupposed both that reality is uniform and that it is not, the presuppositions of history and natural science are not compatible, and it is, therefore, not possible to conjoin the predicates "is an action" and "is an event" as it is to conjoin the predicates "is red" and "is woollen". While it is possible (by switching from one set of presuppositions to another) to describe something *either* as an action or as an event, it is not possible to describe it *both* as an action and as an event. Some descriptions complement each other, as in the description of the jumper as being both red and woollen, but some do not, such as the description of something as being both an action and an event, because the historical and scientific investigation of reality rest on incompatible presuppositions.

We now have a full explanation of why Collingwood claimed that actions are not events. Actions and events, as we have seen, are not empirical classes that grow in extent over time as more human beings stage revolutions and coups d'état, or as more hurricanes and volcanic explosions occur. They are ways of explaining what happens either as a response to norms or as a manifestation of natural laws. Since the presuppositions that underlie the explanation of reality as either actions or events are mutually incompatible, it is not possible to describe one and the same thing both as an action and as an event, although it is possible to describe it, without any inconsistency, *either* as an action *or* as an event within different contexts of inquiry. Collingwood's defence of the sui generis nature of actions and the methodological autonomy of action explanations is based on a pragmatics of explanation developed against the background of the metaphilosophical view that metaphysics is not the study of the most general structures of reality but of the presuppositions that govern forms of inquiry.[6] The presuppositions of a form of inquiry, Collingwood argues, give rise to the questions that are characteristic of its way of exploring reality as, for example, either norm or law-governed. Such presuppositions are not causally responsible for the existence of a distinctive subject matter: the presuppositions of history and of natural science do not make their distinctive domains of inquiry possible in the sense in which the presence of water is essential for the existence of life. Since the presuppositions of history and natural science are not causally responsible for existence of actions and events, but for the way in which reality is conceptualized, Collingwood's explanatory pluralism does not lead to ontological proliferation; it entails only that historical and scientific explanations provide answers to different kinds of questions and that, given the tight

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relation which holds between the method and subject matter in any form of inquiry, it is not possible to answer the questions asked by history by adopting the methods of science any more than it is possible to answer scientific questions by adopting the methods of history. The very attempt to do so simply leads to a change in subject matter since actions are the correlative of historical explanation and events are the correlative of nomological explanation. The ambition of natural science to provide answers to all possible questions will, therefore, not deliver the complete explanation of reality that it hopes for, but will involve the curse of King Midas: the universal application of its method will ensure that nothing will ever be encountered as an action since everything that is explained by the method of science is an event. To lift the curse of King Midas science will have to renounce the ambition to answer all questions and thus allow some things to be known in a different way and thus to be encountered as actions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. W. H. Dray, who mobilized Collingwood's distinction between actions and events at the service of an argument against methodological unity in the sciences in the 1950s and 1960s referred to historical inferences as "rational" and to historical explanations as "rational explanations" (see Dray 1957, 1958, 1963, 1964, 1980, 1995).
2. See Mill (1843) book VI, chapters III and IV.
3. For the standard reading see Gardiner (1952).
4. For an account of re-enactment which does not ascribe the historian supernatural psychic powers mind see: Saari (1989), van der Dussen (1995), Ahlskog (2017), and Retz (2017).
5. Collingwood speaks of different conceptions of causation. But "causation" for him is essentially an explanatory relation that must be understood in the context of his conception of metaphysics as a science of absolute presuppositions. See his *An Essay on Metaphysics*, part III.
6. On this see D'Oro (2002, 2015, 2017).

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