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Continuity of the Rational: Naturalism and Historical Understanding in Collingwood

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Abstract

It is sometimes suggested that Collingwood's philosophy of history is decidedly anti-naturalist and argues for a complete separation between history and the natural sciences. The purpose of this paper is to examine this suggestion and to argue that Collingwood's conception of the relationship between history and natural sciences is much more subtle and nuanced than such a view would allow for. In fact, there is little in Collingwood to offend contemporary naturalistic sensibilities reasonably construed. The impression that Collingwood's views are incompatible with naturalism stems, in part, from an overly Kantian interpretation of the idea of rationality, as applied to historical agents, in terms of transcendently fixed norms. This difficulty, however, does not arise if we opt for a more Hegelian interpretation of rationality in terms of continuity in thought, which Collingwood himself seemed to favor. Examining Collingwood's pronouncements on these topics leads one to the conclusion that, while objecting to the excesses of early naturalism, Collingwood saw no insurmountable obstacles to the reconciliation of science and history and their potential collaboration in some areas.

Keywords

continuity, rationality, normativity, naturalism, history

1

The problem of the relationship between naturalism¹ and historicity of human experience remains today largely in the same state in which it had

¹) Naturalism can be understood broadly as the commitment to treating the human as a part of the natural world. However, historically, naturalist commitment often gave rise to

first emerged more than one hundred years ago. Although some genuine dialectical possibilities have been advanced in the interim,² the chief currents of the philosophical tradition tended to favor the more radical, more polarizing visions, suggesting that the best way of solving the problem is to dissolve it altogether. Thus, the naturalists were inclined to endorse a priori some form of reductionism or eliminativism, with a promissory note to work out the details once the developing natural sciences catch up to the complexities of the human nature; whereas their “continental” counterparts argued for the principled inadequacy of the methods of natural science when applied to human affairs and, consequently, advocated a complete autonomy for the historically inflected disciplines.³

Insofar as Collingwood was truly a historian’s philosopher, as well as an early committed critic of the emerging naturalism, one would reasonably expect him to be amongst the champions of the latter camp. In fact, D’Oro, who features the relationship with naturalism – past and present – as one of the key points in her discussion of Collingwood’s metaphysics, arrives at precisely this conclusion: Collingwood’s philosophy, she argues, holds a genuine promise for the “the strong-minded anti-naturalists,”⁴ separating the method “appropriate to an investigation of mind from the method appropriate to the investigation of nature,”⁵ insofar as the former investigation, unlike the latter, concerns itself with “explaining what occurs as an expression of rational processes rather than as a manifestation of empirical laws.”⁶ Hence, on D’Oro’s view, Collingwood must be read as a proponent of a clear demarcation between the spheres of applicability of what she calls the “rationalist” and “empiricist” methods, corresponding to the traditional division of labor between natural sciences and humanities.⁷

the radical visions of somehow reducing or eliminating the common-sense vocabularies used to describe human action and thought in favor of a vocabulary used by/modeled on/continuous with the idiom of the physical science. For the purposes of this paper, it is essential to emphasize that naturalist commitment by itself does not entail the affirmation of such radical possibilities.

² By Ernst Cassirer, for example.

³ Gadamer’s “Truth and Method” affords an example of this kind of argument.

⁴ G. D’Oro, *Collingwood and the Metaphysics of Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 139.

⁵ G. D’Oro, “In Defense of the Agent-Centered Perspective”, *Metaphilosophy*, 36 (2005), 662 & 666; *Metaphysics of Experience*, 19 & 33.

⁶ *ibid.* 105.

⁷ D’Oro, “In Defense of the Agent-Centered Perspective”, 657.

D'Oro opposes naturalism, then, on methodological grounds. She does not intend to portray Collingwood as contesting the view that human beings are a part of nature – the same nature which is studied by the natural sciences. Instead, what is denied is the lesson that a naturalist feels obliged to draw from this common-sense observation: namely, that, in accounting for the features of our mental life, we cannot lay claim to any transcendental sources of cognitive privilege, nor resort to explanations drawing on the resources which exceed those that can, in principle, be recognized by the suitably amplified natural sciences.⁸ Naturalism thus minimally construed does not restrict our epistemic resources to the vocabulary of natural sciences, as some naturalists have done in the past; yet it is stringent enough to rule out certain conceptual possibilities, including the strong normative vocabulary of rationality favored by D'Oro. She, therefore, opposes her Kantian interpretation of Collingwood to this weak version of naturalism, describing it negatively as “a critique of transcendentalism or as the denial of any form of transcendence.”⁹ The status of her challenge, then, must depend on distinguishing carefully between the implications of the minimal naturalism described above and the specific additional commitments of the different naturalistic programs.

D'Oro's starting question is “how should we construe the science of understanding in order not to conflate it with natural science?”¹⁰ She answers it by distinguishing between the normative and teleological framework of the historical sciences and the descriptive and explanatory framework of the natural ones.¹¹ She then goes on to argue that the normative element in historical sciences derives from the normativity of the rational, and that “historians are in a position to explain what real human beings do, to the extent that what real, imperfectly rational beings do, reflects the

⁸) Most recognized versions of naturalism would not stop at such a stance; yet one cannot deny it and still remain a naturalist. Thus, it is a necessary but not always a sufficient condition for a doctrine that claims naturalist status.

⁹) D'Oro, *Metaphysics of Experience*, 53.

¹⁰) G. D'Oro, “Re-enactment and Radical Interpretation”, *History and Theory*, 43 (2004), 200.

¹¹) D'Oro, “In Defense of the Agent-Centered Perspective”, 662 & 666; *Metaphysics of Experience*, 19 & 33; D'Oro, Giuseppina, “Collingwood and Philosophical Knowledge and the Enduring Nature of Philosophical Problems”, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 12 (2004), 107.

way in which ideally rational agents would deliberate.”¹² Historical thinking, then, constitutes the proper approach to the study of mind, while the methods of sciences are restricted to the mindless nature. The conclusion, of course, is hardly surprising since the radical division between natural and historical sciences is already presupposed in D’Oro’s opening question. On this point, she believes herself to be following Collingwood who adopted Kant’s transcendental method of inquiry to establish the a-priori conditions of the possibility of knowledge in the different domains of inquiry.¹³ Yet, there are good reasons to think that, despite having used the Kantian strategy, Collingwood did not arrive at the conclusions suggested. In his criticism of *Geisteswissenschaften*, for instance, he appears to be recommending a rather different view:

According to this doctrine, historicity was peculiar to the mind; nature had no history; thinking historically was therefore right and proper when we were thinking about mind, but about nature it was right to think scientifically as distinct from historically. This conception had an advantage – a political advantage...¹⁴

This advantage, on Collingwood’s view, consisted in shielding the fledgling historical sciences from excessive demands of the naturalistically minded, and would lose its significance once historical sciences have matured. On the other hand:

The scientific attitude is thus no less natural, no less adequate, when we think about human beings and their actions than when we think about anything else. There is, therefore, no such division as was suggested by the theorists of *Geisteswissenschaft*, between mind as the proper object of historical thought and nature as that of scientific. In both cases, scientific thought is the way in which we understand why a thing of a certain kind is of that kind and not of another; historical thought is the way in which we understand why this thing is the thing it is and not anything else¹⁵

¹² D’Oro, *Metaphysics of Experience*, 131.

¹³ *ibid.* 2 & 135.

¹⁴ R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of History and Other Writings in Philosophy of History* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1999), 179.

¹⁵ *ibid.* 182–3.

There is no indication here of the view that sciences and history have little to learn from one other. On the contrary, Collingwood is suggesting a nuanced and articulate way of conceiving the relationship between the two: between the natural sciences, concerned with subsuming things as particulars under explicit universal categories, and history, concerned with grasping concrete individuals, with universality implicit as the ground of their intelligibility. History and science, then, emerge as complimentary moments of a dialectical relationship, insofar as grasping a thing in its intelligible individuality precedes the abstraction of the universal element in it, which renders it intelligible as a particular instance of a rule; yet, its individuation in the first place must take place against the backdrop of the already comprehended abstract generalities.

2

Collingwood explicitly qualifies his polemic against the naturalists by acknowledging that he has in mind “a very old-fashioned attempt at subordinating history to natural science, in which the implied theory about the methods of natural science was very likely as false as that about history.”¹⁶ His criticism, then, would not apply to the broad sense of naturalism indicated above but was directed instead at the early positivistic attempts to make out of history an empirical science deriving binding causal laws from observed facts.¹⁷ Since the subject-matter of history is human action, the success of such a positivistically-minded naturalistic program would imply a reduction of history to a branch of empirical psychology, which Collingwood held in low esteem.¹⁸ He perceived in the psychology of his time an illegitimate attempt to import the methods of natural science into the domain where they did not belong;¹⁹ and with respect to history this meant abandoning the criteriological perspective²⁰ that entitled one to treat human beings as rational creatures capable of

¹⁶ Collingwood, *Principles of History*, 81.

¹⁷ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 176 & 475.

¹⁸ Collingwood, *Principles of History*, 89 & 175.

¹⁹ *ibid.* 92.

²⁰ *ibid.* 108.

self-evaluation and criticism. In the place of rational deliberation a proponent of such psychological naturalism would install an empirically derived abstraction called “human nature” which compels individuals at all times to act in accordance with its dictates. And where one is naturally compelled there is no place for self-criticism and weighing of the alternatives.

Collingwood, of course, believed that the idea of unchanging human nature was a myth, and to discredit it he invoked the authority of none other than the sciences. According to Collingwood, in fact, “modern psychology, modern biology, and modern genetics” are all committed to the “historical view of man.”²¹ The a-historical view of human nature, on which the program of psychologizing history depended, had become untenable, in his eyes, following Darwin who made it clear that “if there is anywhere a non-historical reality, we must not seek it anywhere in the kingdom of biology.”²² Collingwood, it now appears, was right to anticipate that in the wake of Darwin’s theory the prospects of a reconciliation between science and history would become more promising;²³ especially, since the later developments in the philosophy of science confirmed Collingwood’s early suspicion that the positivists’ conception of the natural sciences was itself naïve and misleading.

In fact, one could say that these developments have answered some of Collingwood’s own deepest concerns with regard to science. Thus, Collingwood had often pointed out that one of the key differences between science and history consists in the fact that a scientist is not aware of the ideality of his theoretical constructions.²⁴ Yet, in the years to follow, even hardcore naturalists such as Quine would repeatedly draw attention to the underdetermination of theory by data, and most would concede that the data themselves are neither neutral nor theory-independent. Science, then, came to be seen as a working-out of the structured conceptual possibilities that square well with the empirical input, not a discovery of pre-existing truths. The conception of natural science as a construct-oriented problem-solving enterprise, in turn, has fostered the recognition that scientists employ essentially historical methods in reconstructing and understanding

²¹⁾ *ibid.* 197.

²²⁾ *ibid.* 199.

²³⁾ Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 128–129.

²⁴⁾ *ibid.* 423.

the problems that had occupied their predecessors. Collingwood's insistence on this point,²⁵ for example, is virtually matched by Popper's well-known view that scientists discover their problems in the logically structured space of the previously articulated cultural contents.²⁶ Moreover, if we trust Quine's indeterminacy of translation thesis, the use of rational reconstruction of the kind employed by historians to grasp the meaning of our theories cannot in principle be supplanted by a naturalistic account, since there can be no naturalistic method for determining meanings, even if we knew all there is to know about nature and its laws.²⁷

Such innovations within the larger naturalistic paradigm itself suggest that, far from being inconceivable, a close relationship between the sciences and history may have an important role to play in the formation of our present epistemological outlook. Furthermore, from the perspective of historically maturing naturalism, Collingwood's reservations with regard to its earlier stages signal not hostility but a fine-tuned appreciation of the challenges facing the fledgling naturalistic enterprise. Naturalism, of course, has a history, including the history of overcoming its old misconceptions.

Unfortunately, even a cursory sketch of Collingwood's view of the relationship between science and history would demand more than can be reasonably accomplished in the space of this essay. Instead, I would like to return to D'Oro's contention that Collingwood's theory is anti-naturalist and to consider her reasons for maintaining this. Several of her points will take us straight to the heart of the matter; but many others, concerned with naturalism, are difficult to accept. Thus, she often discusses naturalism as if it were a monolithic tradition with a well-defined set of core commitments, and she features Davidson as a representative member of that tradition. But there is no established consensus on what naturalism must mean,²⁸ and Davidson – if he is to be counted as a naturalist – is hardly

²⁵ *ibid.* 333; also, R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 87; for discussion, see N. Andersen, "Repetition and Re-enactment: Collingwood on the Relation between Natural Science and History", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 42 (2004), 293–295.

²⁶ For a standard account of Popper's theory of the world of cultural products, see K. Popper, *Objective Knowledge: an Evolutionary Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972).

²⁷ W.V. Quine, "Reply to Chomsky" in D. Davidson & J. Hintikka (eds.), *Words and Objections: Essays on the Work of W.V. Quine* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1969), 303.

²⁸ Beyond the very minimal conditions named in the previous section.

a typical one; in fact, some recent interpreters suggest reading him as a Kantian.²⁹

Thus, when D'Oro criticizes Davidson (and naturalism) for identifying reasons with causes³⁰ and for conflating truth and meaning,³¹ many of the most hardened naturalists would actually be on her side.³² Similarly, externalism and psychologism, which she cites as additional causes for disagreement,³³ are Davidson's commitments which are not shared by every self-proclaimed naturalist. Chomsky, for example, is both an internalist and a naturalist; as for psychologism, it is not clear what naturalistic meaning the term could have without a satisfactory and commonly accepted solution to the mind-body problem. Finally, the contention that, unlike Collingwood, naturalists do not recognize their technical concepts as mere epistemic tools³⁴ is simply belied by Quine's famous declaration that he would appeal to the Olympic gods, had such vocabulary enabled him to make more accurate empirical predictions.³⁵ The marks of naturalism featured by D'Oro's analysis, then, are contingent insofar as they arise within the context of specific naturalistic programs but do not follow necessarily from the minimal naturalistic commitments and are not shared by all naturalistic approaches.

²⁹ See, for example, W. Maker, "Davidson's Transcendental Arguments", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 51 (1991), 345–360 and C. Rovane, "The Metaphysics of Interpretation" in E. Lepore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). Such interpretations gain in plausibility given the tone of Davidson's later publications, such as "Could there be a science of rationality?" in M. De Caro & D. Macarthur (eds.), *Naturalism in Question* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

³⁰ D'Oro, "In Defense of the Agent-Centered Perspective", 665.

³¹ D'Oro, "Re-enactment and Radical Interpretation", 202–3.

³² On the first of these points, see J. Kim, "Can Supervenience Save Anomalous Monism?" and B. McLaughlin, "Davidson's Response to Epiphenomenalism" in J. Heil & A. Mele (eds.), *Mental Causation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993); and for the second, see W.V. Quine, *Theories and Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 39 and W.V. Quine, "Comment on Harman" in R. Barrett & R. Gibson (eds.), *Perspectives on Quine* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 158.

³³ G. D'Oro, "Collingwood, Psychologism and Internalism", *European Journal of Philosophy*, 12 (2004), 164.

³⁴ D'Oro, *Metaphysics of Experience*, 58.

³⁵ W.V. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 44.

Something more, however, needs to be said on the issue of causality. Most if not all contemporary naturalists subscribe to the ‘causal closure’ thesis which stipulates that all physical effects can be accounted for by physical causes. Given this commitment, fitting the mental into the picture becomes a challenge which Davidson, amongst others, attempted to address. The challenge, of course, is inherited by anyone who attempts to explain human actions and behavior by appeal to mental states. The advantage of Collingwood’s approach, from this perspective, would consist precisely in the fact that it requires no such appeal. Historical explanation of actions, on his view, calls for an imaginative reconstruction of the thoughts of historical agents: it is not concerned with states, but with intelligible contents. The only mental states that could enter the equation are those of the historian; but that would be a subject matter for another discipline, such as psychology of research, not history proper.

In fact, instead of interpreting Collingwood’s philosophy as a challenge to naturalism, we could read it as an attempt to extend the mode of inquiry that earned the natural sciences their good reputation into a domain of inquiry with which natural science is not concerned. Unlike a natural science, history is not preoccupied with human behavior as such, in its universal aspects; instead it aims to reconstruct the behavior of particular humans which had occurred at specific points in space and time. The difference between science and history, then, is not so much a difference of method but a difference in the areas of interest: for, as Collingwood explains, history is after “abstract individualities,” while science restricts its search to “abstract generalities.”³⁶ As to the general method, Collingwood seems to favor, all around, the Baconian model which he regards as the “true theory of experimental science” and also the “true theory of historical method.”³⁷ As Van Der Dussen has already pointed out, when it comes to the questioning activity, Collingwood holds a “unitarian” view of science.³⁸

³⁶ Collingwood, *Principles of History*, 137.

³⁷ Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 269.

³⁸ W. Van Der Dussen, *History as a Science: the Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 298.

3

Summarizing Collingwood's view about the differences between history and nature, Van Der Dussen lists the following three considerations: "1) nature consists of events, while history consists of (human) actions; 2) natural events are seen from the outside, actions essentially from the inside; 3) the past of a natural process is dead, while the past of an historical process is living in the present."³⁹ D'Oro's focuses her attention on the first two conditions, while I am primarily intrigued by the third. This may be one of the reasons why D'Oro's Collingwood comes out to be a determined Kantian, opposed to naturalism, while mine is a Hegelian who never loses sight of the underlying continuity of all forms of human knowledge. Historical Collingwood, of course, had strong Hegelian sympathies, and even described himself as a "neo-Hegelian."⁴⁰ He also criticized Kant for failing to recognize the historicity of human nature,⁴¹ and confusing the conditions of experience "enjoyed by men of his own age and civilization" for a universal standard of rationality.⁴² Yet, Kant's influence on Collingwood is also undeniable.⁴³

D'Oro's emphasis on the Kantian strain in Collingwood's thought prompts her to foreground the problems of normativity and rationality, which seemingly brings Collingwood into a direct confrontation with naturalism. In fact, the "horror of the normative" was singled out by Putnam as the key trait that unites the otherwise disparate naturalistic approaches.⁴⁴ D'Oro herself defines naturalism as resistance to any form of transcendence.⁴⁵ Combining the two definitions, we arrive at the idea of naturalism as a programmatic opposition to any form of transcendental normativity, ruling out the Kantian appeal to transcendental rational norms. D'Oro highlights this point by stating that, while Collingwood is interested in a normative inquiry, naturalism can only allow for genetic approaches.⁴⁶

³⁹ *ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁰ See citations from Collingwood in Van Der Dussen, *History as Science*, 13–4 & 129.

⁴¹ Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 82–85.

⁴² *ibid.*, 224.

⁴³ Van Der Dussen, *History as Science*, 133.

⁴⁴ H. Putnam, "The Content and Appeal of 'Naturalism'" in M. De Caro & D. Macarthur (eds.), *Naturalism in Question*, 70.

⁴⁵ D'Oro, *Collingwood and the Metaphysics of Experience* 53.

⁴⁶ D'Oro, "Collingwood and Philosophical Knowledge", 88.

However, Collingwood himself also favored the genetic approach. For him, history was the history of the *coming into existence* of human rationality,⁴⁷ and historical understanding comprised understanding how a thing had come to be what it is, i.e. understanding the story of its genesis.⁴⁸ In fact, it is difficult to see Collingwood's account in *The Idea of History* as anything but a genetic reconstruction of the present state of historical thought. Meanwhile, his alleged commitment to the sui generis transcendental norms of rationality, which would pit him against the naturalist tradition, is anything but certain. His actual stance is best described by Van Der Dussen when he says that, for Collingwood, rationality and historicity stand on par, and both are understood to be matters of degree.⁴⁹ In other words, there are no set criteria for determining whether something is rational or not or, as Collingwood put it, "any formula in which we try to define the minimum that we mean by thinking must be altogether arbitrary."⁵⁰

What makes rational thought stand out, in Collingwood's view, is the capacity for self-criticism, wherein thoughts can contradict or corroborate one another.⁵¹ However, this does not amount to equating rationality with the formal validity of practical inferences, as D'Oro proposes.⁵² Her concern is with the logical structure of the arguments, independent of the context in which these arguments are made;⁵³ internal consistency of the argument supplying a direct measure of its intelligibility.⁵⁴ Collingwood's account, on the other hand, is less abstract and more context-sensitive, since he equates the agent's rationality with the compulsion to face the facts of her own situation.⁵⁵ Unreason for him is associated not with a

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 98.

⁴⁸ Collingwood, *Principles of History*, 121 & 178.

⁴⁹ Van Der Dussen, *History as Science*, 175.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Van Der Dussen, *History as Science*, 176.

⁵¹ R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), 158 and *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 107–8.

⁵² G. D'Oro, "Collingwood, Psychologism and Internalism", *European Journal of Philosophy*, 12 (2004), 165–166; D'Oro, "Re-enactment and Radical Interpretation", 201.

⁵³ G. D'Oro, "Collingwood, Metaphysics, and Historicism", *Dialogue*, 41 (2002), 82 and "Re-enactment and Radical Interpretation", 91.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 206.

⁵⁵ Collingwood, *Principles of History*, 99.

breakdown of reasoning but with using bad reasons;⁵⁶ and reasons can be bad on both logical and extra-logical grounds. As for the formal criteria of validity, his judgment is unequivocal: “It is idly fancied that validity in thought is at all times one and the same, no matter how people are at various times actually in the habit of thinking . . . all that any logician has ever done, or tried to do, is to expound the principles of what in his own day passed for valid thought among those whom he regarded as reputable thinkers.”⁵⁷ D’Oro, then, appeals to a much stronger standard of rationality than anything Collingwood himself would be inclined to favor.

According to Collingwood, all human action is “tentative and experimental”⁵⁸ and “it is only by fits and starts, in a flickering and dubious manner, that human beings are rational at all.”⁵⁹ All human beings, according to Collingwood, ultimately subscribe to the basic principles of rationality, but it is only occasionally that they actually manage to act on those principles.⁶⁰ Therefore, if we chose to restrict intelligibility only to actions and thoughts that conform to the classical criteria of proceeding to a valid inference, most of history would turn out to be either incomprehensible or in need of a rationalizing surgery. At the same time, in our everyday experience, the deficiency of logical structure seldom results in a severe impairment to intelligibility. Thus, we have no trouble making sense of common logical fallacies because the rationally flawed strategy is available to us as a conceptual possibility, accessible in virtue of the continuity between our own thought and the ordinary mental habits of our cultural milieu.

Stressing logical validity at the expense of the genetic aspects of Collingwood’s thought has an additional disadvantage of draining the life from Collingwood’s theory of re-enactment, reducing it, as D’Oro does, to the view that “historical explanations are rational rather than causal.”⁶¹ Such an interpretation can only give us a partial view of what Collingwood intends because it misses the central role that re-enactment is supposed to play in self-knowledge. According to Collingwood, history is a form of self-conscious reflection that enables us to find in the past solutions to our

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 47.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 242.

⁵⁸ Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 42.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 227.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 476.

⁶¹ D’Oro, *Metaphysics of Experience*, 6.

present practical conundrums,⁶² revealing to us the powers of our own mind by tracing a conceptual genealogy of how we had come to be what we are.⁶³ The specificity of re-enactment, then, consists precisely in being the only mode in which we become present to ourselves qua rational subjects. It is through historical re-enactment that we get in touch with *our own* past thoughts, enabling us to learn from our past experience and actions.⁶⁴ More importantly, perhaps, it is in the relationship of re-enactment to self-knowledge that one finds the key to the possibility of understanding and sharing thoughts which stands in no need of appeal to the transcendental arguments. For, if I read Collingwood correctly, our ability to understand others is modeled on our ability to understand our own past, and our ability to understand the past is premised on our continuity with the past.⁶⁵

4

According to Collingwood, we can only know the past insofar as it continues to live in the present, insofar as the present is that into which the past has turned.⁶⁶ Thus, in order for the past to be known, traces of it must continue to survive. These traces can be of two kinds. First of all, some material fragments of the past must survive in the present, to serve as evidence.⁶⁷ But secondly, the very ways of thinking that animated the will of the rational agents in the past must be living and potentially available to the historian.⁶⁸ Thus, for example, Middle Ages are not dead precisely insofar as “their ways of thinking are still in existence as ways in which people still think.”⁶⁹ This, however, does not imply that these ways of thinking are accorded the same status in our time as they were in the

⁶² Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, 114.

⁶³ Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 10 & 218.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 219.

⁶⁵ As later discussion will make clear, we must guard against understanding this continuity in psychological terms or in terms of logical identity.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 187 & 405; Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, 97.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 96. This is true, even in the case of one’s own actions and thoughts from the remote past (see Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 296).

⁶⁸ Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 169, 174–5.

⁶⁹ Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, 97.

Middle Ages; for by ways of thinking Collingwood does not seem to mean, say, logical thinking which is just as good now as it was then. The past ways of thinking, according to him, are “incapsulated” in the present – meaning that they survive as distinctive conceptual possibilities although, perhaps, not as possibilities that we would be prepared to take up. Thus, a former smoker never forgets the pleasure of the first drag, although he can never experience it in the same way again: “a man who changes his habits, thoughts, etc.,” says Collingwood, “retains in the second phase some residue of the first.”⁷⁰ Continuity, in smoking as in thought, is maintained in virtue of the lingering habits that constitute the character of a rational agent.

Insofar as the character of a rational agent (whether an individual or a people) is constituted by habits, this character is not, so to speak, set in stone like the biologically constituted characteristics.⁷¹ It does not determine the present but only the possibilities available to it.⁷² Thus, to understand the agent’s action or thought requires reconstructing the possibilities from which the agent had to choose; and grasping these possibilities requires understanding the present action as continuous with the agent’s character, with his past. “What makes a succession intelligible,” says Collingwood, “is its continuity. And to understand, in the most general sense, is simply to see continuities. Scientific understanding is one way of doing this: it is seeing general types of continuity, the continuity between anything of one general kind with something of another general kind. Historical understanding is another way of doing it: seeing the continuity of this individual thing with this other individual thing.”⁷³

It is the business of science then, not of history, to occupy itself with continuities between abstract kinds. But basing the study of history on a Kantian transcendental approach to rationality would provide us just that – a study of the relationships between abstract logical patterns, wherein each individual historical decision would exemplify a certain pattern of reasoning qua a particular of a kind. On Collingwood’s terms, this seems to imply that history would be encroaching upon the domain of science,

⁷⁰) *ibid.*, 141.

⁷¹) Collingwood, *Principles of History*, 194.

⁷²) *ibid.*, 142.

⁷³) *ibid.*, 184.

while forgetting its proper business of attending to individuals. Instead of history, we may end up with a rationalistic psychology that scavenges the historical record for its data – hardly an appealing prospect for everyone involved.

As Van Der Dussen points out, a historian must be able to reproduce the act of the agent's thought, not merely its logical content.⁷⁴ A historian, according to Collingwood, supplies the continuity between the events in the past by drawing on her own experience of the world and the way that things are usually connected therein.⁷⁵ So, in order to understand a particular historical episode, she must be a certain kind of person, with her character formed by experiences that are in some way continuous with the experiences of the people she studies.⁷⁶ The reason for this is that a historian is not at all interested in the formal content of the agent's utterances and actions but rather in the way that these utterances had transformed the agent's historical situation.⁷⁷ Thus, to understand the Theodosian Code, we require more than the grasp of its logical structure; instead, we need to see it as one of the many possible solutions to a problem situation: as a solution that configures this situation in a certain way.⁷⁸ Political experience would be a much more valuable asset in this case than logical acumen.

While logic is an indispensable aide to every inquiry into the nature of understanding, it is not sufficient, nor always necessary, for a historical investigation – logical criteria may help us analyze a situation, yet they do not help us grasp what the situation consists in. To understand the actions of a historical agent, in Collingwood's opinion, we need to mentally place ourselves into an analogous situation – a situation from our own present. Thus, to understand Plato's arguments against his philosophical opponents, we must begin by thinking about the issues in contemporary philosophy concerned with similar matters.⁷⁹ Therefore, the ability to reconstruct the situation in a new context depends on the continuity of the modes of thinking, of the modes of grouping together aspects of the world according to categories of intrinsic relatedness and significance. Collingwood calls this

⁷⁴ Van Der Dussen, *History as Science*, 318–9.

⁷⁵ Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 241.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 275.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, 283 & 312–13.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 301.

ability “the historical imagination” and describes it as “a self-dependent, self-determining and self-justifying form of thought.”⁸⁰

It is true that premising intelligibility on the continuity of experience implies that the historical imagination operates differently depending on the historian’s background. That, however, is hardly a problem. If we asked an economist and a philosopher to each write a history of the 18th century England we would no doubt end up with two very different accounts. Yet, this difference should not in any way compromise their objectivity; in fact, we must be grateful to each specialist for sticking to things that he or she understands best. That one’s intellectual background determines what one is capable of understanding is not a relativistic speculation but an empirical fact. Thus, nobody doubts that having had the exact same kind of experience improves our chances of understanding the other. What the continuity thesis requires is simply extending this point to say that having had experiences that are somehow (however weakly) connected to the experience in question improves our chances of understanding as well and renders the experience intelligible in principle.

The main difficulty, here, is to avoid the suggestiveness of the term “continuity” itself. For the emphasis on continuity should not mislead us into endorsing what may be called a “strong view” of Collingwood’s re-enactment, whereby understanding is premised on thought possessing “a somewhat transcendent quality,”⁸¹ enabling it to be mystically grasped or literally re-lived in some other way. In fact, we can read Collingwood’s relatively late conception of continuity as offering us a strong and plausible alternative to this interpretation. On this reading, understanding between a historian and his subject is premised on a recognized similarity of the individual historically conditioned developmental paths – a similarity made possible in part by the kinship of the relevant underlying syntactic structures. Also, more often than not, this similarity would itself be due not to a mere coincidence but to the underlying genetic relationships, historical as well as biological, between the individual historical careers. The notion of continuity, therefore, enables us to replace the problematic

⁸⁰) Collingwood, *Principles of History*, 166.

⁸¹) See M. Bevir, “Universality and Particularity in the Philosophy of E.B. Bax and R.G. Collingwood”, *History of the Human Sciences*, 55 (1999), 61. Bevir also criticizes Collingwood’s view, thus construed, in M. Bevir, *Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 157.

notion of identity between recurrent thoughts with the idea of similar responses typically arising in ubiquitous scenarios. Thus, instead of treating thoughts as particular instantiations of a kind or, even stronger, talking about literal recurrence of the same thought, we are opening up a possibility of talking about re-enactment in terms of a (much weaker) relationship between individual thoughts which exemplify the same general type.

Collingwood's conception of continuity, then, greatly amplifies the field of the potentially intelligible and, correspondingly, weakens the requirements on the notion of rationality understood as the pre-condition of intelligibility, leaving us in a good place to address the strongest point in favor of a Kantian interpretation: namely, the idea that historicity and rationality go hand in hand, and that rationality is inevitably normative, whereas a naturalist approach denies the existence of a priori sui generis rational norms. The problem, however, is merely apparent, since interpreting rationality in terms of continuity and the endurance of the past modes of thinking in the present allows us to get around the transcendental derivation of the normative and the rational. There are no prima facie reasons why our cognitive norms should be thought of as transcendent or, for that matter, unchanging – and therefore at odds with the naturalistically defined properties of our species.

For example, Ruth Millikan suggests that we could consider rationality a biological norm for our species, where biological norm is understood as the mode of functioning that enables a species to operate optimally under the conditions imposed by its living environment.⁸² Rationality, here, functions in a normative fashion because it is not abstracted from the empirical behavior of specific populations – in fact, Millikan emphasizes that rationality, thus understood, would be “neither necessary nor statistically average”⁸³ nor “necessitated by special causal laws of human psychology.”⁸⁴ At the same time, it has nothing transcendental about it since what counts as rational would vary with the changing conditions in the environment. If we then take, for instance, Collingwood's idea that rational behavior is the behavior that can be re-enacted, and therefore learned from,

⁸² R. Millikan, “Explanation in Biopsychology” in Heil & Mele, *Mental Causation*, 211–232.

⁸³ *ibid.*, 222.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 225.

first of all by the individual herself and, secondly, by others, we could immediately think of a sense in which rationality, thus defined, could be a biological norm for our species – since the ability to learn from the actions of one’s own or those of others is advantageous under any circumstances. We could also admit, then, that the specific content of what it is to be rational and, hence, intelligible changes with time: in fact, Collingwood tells us that what a historian can understand in the past changes so much that a new generation may find much of interest and relevance where the previous one saw only “dry bones, signifying nothing.”⁸⁵

Proposals of this kind are certainly worth looking into because they suggest new and exciting lines of research both in history and in natural sciences. It is true, as Collingwood said, that a historian is not interested “in the fact that men eat and sleep, and make love and thus satisfy their natural appetites”; but “he is interested in the social customs they create by their thought as a framework within which these appetites find satisfaction.”⁸⁶ We construct our world and ourselves after a manner of our own choosing, but we fashion both from the materials provided by nature, and it rarely pays to go against its grain. The attempt to make a natural science out of history was a mistake, a philosophical chimera; but that does not preclude a possibility of a fruitful collaboration between history and certain strands of naturalistic research. An ethologist and a particle physicist work in very different ways and with different subjects, but neither is appalled by the idea of learning something from the other. It is not clear why the same should not hold for a historian and a biologist. We should welcome the opportunities to work together when we can. Collingwood’s account of intelligibility based on the notion of continuity suggests a general direction in which we could look for the intersecting areas of interest. Moreover, Collingwood himself considered this part of his work to be of prime importance. In discussing the relationship between history and science, he wrote: “The principle of historical understanding in the widest sense, then, as a form of understanding distinct from scientific, is that the flux of things in itself and as it actually flows is intelligible.”⁸⁷ Presenting things as intelligible in virtue of their connectedness, then, is the task for a historian. But

⁸⁵ Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 305.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 216.

⁸⁷ Collingwood, *Principles of History*, 185.

it is also a task that needs to be completed before a scientist, with his penchant for recurrent regularities, can set to work: for “unintelligible does not become any more intelligible for being repeated, whereas if something is intrinsically intelligible we may very well come to understand it better for seeing it, or something like it, again.”⁸⁸

⁸⁸) *ibid.*, 186.