

# A Critical Analysis of Collingwood's Conception of History

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**Abstract :** Robin George Collingwood was a British philosopher. He described history as a discipline in which one relives the past in one's own mind. His attempt to integrate history and philosophy is a scholarly contribution. The Book, "The Idea of History" (1946), is a posthumously compiled collection of Collingwood's lectures on the issues - Thoughts and reflections about history, the philosophy of history, the use of historical imagination and evidence. The issues that occupied Collingwood's attention was the need to carve out a separate sphere for historical knowledge, distinct from theology, mathematics and the natural sciences. Such a separation of spheres was necessary since history concerned itself with issues and questions that none of the others considered. As a distinct branch of knowledge, a philosophy of history is also required, because one must take into account not only interpretations about the past but also the thought behind interpreting the event.

**Index Terms – Reflection, Imagination, Sphere, Philosophy, Theology.**

## Introduction

R. G. Collingwood's thoughts and reflections about history, the philosophy of history, the use of historical imagination and evidence, the methodology and the subject of historical Inquiry are given in the book, "The Idea of History", which is a posthumously compiled

collection of his lectures on these issues. Drawing mainly from this work, in this paper I hope to lay out the broad themes of what constituted Collingwood's conception of history.

An attempt will also be made to analyze some of the implications that follow from Collingwood's arguments.

Among the important issues that occupied Collingwood's attention was the need to carve out a separate sphere for historical knowledge, distinct from theology, mathematics and the natural sciences. Such a separation of spheres was necessary since history concerned itself with issues and questions that none of the others considered or addressed themselves to. As a distinct branch of knowledge a philosophy of history is also required, because one must take into account not only interpretations about the past also how we interpret the past: why we do it the way we do it. It is a second order thought, concerned not only with interpreting an event but also the thought behind interpreting the event.

### **History is a Kind of Research or Enquiry**

Even as he seeks an independent space for historical knowledge, the similarities with other sciences are pointed out. Collingwood argues that, "History is a kind of research or enquiry" (Collingwood, *Idea of History*, p. 9). It proceeds by our asking questions and try to find answers to the questions we ask. It arises not only out of ignorance but also more importantly, a realization of ignorance. Since science is a mode of enquiry, history too is a science. The object of history is to answer questions posed about human actions in the past. It's method involve the use and interpretation of evidence, sources, documents etc. to find answers to the questions that are posed. And its objective is human self knowledge. It teach us what man has done and what man is" (Collingwood, *Idea of History*, p. 91). At the same time history is distinct from the natural sciences. It is a special kind of science and a body of knowledge. It is organized differently from the natural sciences. The latter studies the processes of becoming and change in fixed types, how they evolve into these specific forms and change after that. In history there are no fixed forms or types, which are themselves not undergoing processes of becoming or change all the time. The past in history is a living past unlike the past in natural sciences which dies when one type or form replaces another. This

past is kept alive by historical thought. Here Collingwood criticizes the Positivist notion of history as the study of the dead past that can be generalized, classified and laws derived from it. This arises, he says, from a false analogy of historical processes with natural processes which practitioners of the Positivist school confused.

## History is the Study of Human Affairs

History is the study of human affairs. The historian is concerned with the study of human actions which involves the conjoining of an actual act and thought that goes behind it. The attempt to human self knowledge through a process analogous to the natural sciences was, to Collinwood, a false attempt and one doomed to failure. The methodology to be adopted was not one of the natural sciences but the historical method. The enquiry of the thought that goes behind an event is what distinguishes the historian from the natural scientist. The event is explained one the thought is explained. And thereafter to Collingwood, “all history is the history of thought”. (Collingwood, Idea of History, p. 215)

What did Collingwood mean by this historian unlike the natural scientist, cannot directly or empirically perceive the past. At best it is mediated through inference. Nor can be depend on testimony to add to knowledge. To know the past, therefore, the historian must reenact the past in his own mind. He must try to discern the thoughts behind the events. He must try to retraced the same process or path of thought whose outside manifestation is the event. The historian in effect tries to put himself into the shoes of the historical agent and tries to discover by thinking for himself why did the agent acted in the manner he did.

### Reenactment of the Past

This reenactment is an active process on the part of the historian who brings to bear upon it all his powers of reasoning and knowledge that is already acquired. This process of historical thinking is a “critical thinking”. While, by its very process it seems subjective. Collingwood argues that objectivity could not be denied to it for when “one is aware that one is performing an act of knowing” (Collingwood, Idea of History, p. 291) the act is also objective i.e. the awareness of one’s subjectivity qualifies it to be objective.

Related to this reenactment of the past experience in the mind of the historian, was the importance he placed on the autonomy of the historian. The autonomous role envisaged for the historian comes out especially with regard to the questions he poses and the evidence he uses. The historical method of acquiring knowledge follows the Baconian practice of framing the question first and devising methods to obtain an answer for it. In this method the scientific historian “tortures” the evidence to say what he wants it to say. The questions he

asks must be methodical and in the right sequence. They must also be “answerable” and to answer the questions he asks, the historian makes use of evidence.

Collingwood makes a distinction between source, testimony and authority on the one hand and evidence on other. The former does not involve the exercise of any autonomy on the part of the historian while the latter does. Collingwood’s positivist (which he calls “common sense theory of history” ) notion that historians should accept, the fact as stated by the authority and that they could not construct their own interpretation. Collingwood denies the independent existence of a fact outside the construct of the historian.

### **Construction of History**

A source to him is not an authority but only evidence. Deriving evidence out of the source is the task of the historian. The latter always adds, deducts, ignores, interprets, rejects and modifies what his authority/source tells him. It is the authority that has to conform to the historian and not the other way round. A certain or large amount of construction is always present. He thus attributes the faculty of autonomy to the historian in being able to accept, reject or construct what an authority tells him according to criteria laid down by the historian himself. Statements made by so called “authorities” are for the scientific historian only evidence. They must be examined and interrogated by the historian to derive the answers that serve his purpose.

This construction of history involves interpolation and filling in the gaps with statements that are logically consistent with the whole. It thus involves the use of “historical imagination “. It is the historical imagination which helps the historian constructs a

consistent and coherent picture of the past. The data he uses must be whetted by the same historical imagination, accepted if it fits with his construction, rejected if it is at variance. There is no data but that which is constructed by historical thought. It is also verified by historical thought.

### **History as a Science**

It is the duty of the historian to be autonomous. To decide for himself both the veracity of the evidence and the conclusions he draws thereupon. Testimony of an authority is

inadmissible as historical knowledge unless it is based on evidence. An evidence becomes one only because the historian chooses to use it as such whether it is justified or not depends on how it fits into the construction of the past. Historical inference can compel the historian to make conclusions, if the process of thought is carried to its logical outcome. History is as exact as any other science which obliges the practitioner to acknowledge the conclusions implicit in his argument. "Nothing matter to him except that his decision when he reaches it, shall be right: which means, for him, that it shall follow inevitably from the evidence" (Collingwood, *Idea of History*, p. 268). Therefore choosing evidence and selecting the right kind of evidence is an important function of the autonomy of the historian.

The validity of the construct of the historian depends on its location in time and space, its consistency and logical strength and its relation to evidence - in other words the framework chosen by the historian. This involves both the competence as well as subjectivity of the historian. The latter is reflected in the epoch the historian is situated in and the one he chooses for his field of enquiry, the questions he poses, the quantum of knowledge he brings to bear upon the question, the methods he uses, and the mentalite of the society of which he is a member.

### **Historical Thought**

If historical knowledge was indeed distinct, what then constituted its domain? This was another of the issues that Collingwood sought to answer. Whatever can be reenacted in the

historian's mind, he argued, can be the basis of historical knowledge. Man is the only animal whose actions are constantly, continuously and effectively determined by thought.

All human actions therefore which have their origins that is the framework of thought are considered worthy of study. Thought that is the subject matter of historical study must however be universal and transcend the local, or its specific context. The immediate aspect of thought cannot be reenacted. Only that thought which can "sustain itself through a change of context and revive in a different one" (Collingwood, *Idea of History*, p. 297) can be reenacted and thus be amenable to historical study. Actions that are purposive, reflective acts also form the subject matter of history. Historical knowledge increases by the expansion of

thought, by finding new ways of thought directed both at the set of old questions as well as questions that were not previously addressed.

On the other hand, he was critical of looking for patterns and laws in history which can be extrapolated to the past and be used for prediction in the future. Such tendencies had resulted from the desire of Positivist historians to make history conform to the natural sciences. Schematic history, historical stages etc. are outcomes of this kind. Any generalization to hold good can do so only under a specific given set of conditions. They cannot “transcend” this social structure. But because these conditions are always changing a generalization based on these cannot hold good for any other period.

Related to this was Collingwood’s criticism of the positivist notions of progress. Both the notion of progress as a law of nature and of human historical process being subject to such a law of progress were decided by Collingwood as example of “confused thinking”. Historical processes he reiterates are different from natural processes. Labelling of epochs dark, barbarous etc. at best shows the paucity of evidence and at worst the incompetence of the historian to reenact that period in his mind. The only notion of progress that Collingwood allowed was if new societies were able to deal with new questions and find solutions for them without losing grip over the solutions of older problems. Otherwise, each epoch must be judged by own standards and its success or failures in addressing issues that were integral to that society.

### **Collingwood’s Conception of History**

Collingwood’s conception of history is that of the construct of the historian. The truth and falsity of this construct depend not in its comparison with a real past which Collingwood said was inaccessible but the logic and consistency of the arguments and the framework of the historian. A fact is a fact only within the construction of the historian. It has no independent existence and whether it is true or not depends on how well it can be made to fit into the framework adopted by the historian. One of the implications of this would be that once the logical and consistency problems of a historical argument are taken care of, it cannot be proved untrue. One could therefore have different versions of the same event which thought contradicting each other can co-exist as long as the internal structures of their argument are correct. E.H. Carr criticizes Collingwood’s conception as leading to a sceptical

view of history. It not only loses its claim to objectivity but in being “spun from the historian’s mind” almost comes close to actively embracing multiple truths.

There are other problems with “truth” besides this. In such an approach as Collingwood’s, the conclusion is inherent in the framework, even in the questions that the historian sets out to work with. Can this not lead to an ahistorical reasoning backwards and ex-poste rationalizations? With the primacy given to the framework, only that evidence is chosen that fits into the framework. Material that lies at odds with the argument is ignored or discarded since the historian has the autonomy to decide on what constitutes evidence. But do constructs of such sort retain their validity for all time? Cannot new techniques and new evidence invalidate earlier constructs however cogent and consistent they happen to be?

The methodology of the historian according to Collingwood is to reenact the thought in his mind. It is true if the same logic is reproduced in the mind of the historian. The examples Collingwood cites of such reenactments are from mathematics (especially Euclid). But can the historian reenact the thoughts, society or its institutions? Are not the ways of thinking also conditioned by the society of that individual? Here I am talking about the mentalite of a society. Can a historian of another epoch and another society reenact such conditioned thoughts or internalize the mentalite of a bygone era?

### **Conclusion**

Collingwood's approach can also easily lead to teleological interpretations of history. The present is used as a guide to examine and interpret the past and this in turn leads to the past being used to explain the present. For instance he says, "every present has a past of its own, and any imaginative reconstructon of the past aims at reconstructing the past of this present, the present in which the act of imagination is going on, as here and now perceived" (Collingwood, Idea of History, p.247).

Collingwood does make a strong case for treating historical knowledge as a separate and legitimate sphere of its own. Collingwood is also successful in separating the subject matter of history from the natural sciences and in delineating the domain and spheres of historical inquiry. But while the conception of history may represent a more sophisticated approach from that of the early naivete of the Positivists, when one considers some of the implications of his approach, one cannot absolve it from its deficiencies and adopt it unreservedly.

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