

Some Remarks on Collingwood and Relativism

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Introduction

Was Collingwood a relativist? This certainly was the received view. For example, in his very influential *What is History?* the historian E. H. Carr quoted the following passage:

‘St. Augustine looked at Roman history from the point of view of an early Christian; Tillemont, from that of a seventeenth-century Frenchman; Gibbon, from that of an eighteenth-century Englishman; Mommsen, from that of a nineteenth-century German. There is no point in asking which was the right point of view. Each was the only one possible.’ (Knox 1946, xii)

It was originally quoted by Collingwood’s editor, T. M. Knox, in his preface to *The Idea of History* (IH); Knox took it from a manuscript or letter, whose original is now lost. Carr commented about Collingwood’s view:

This amounts to total scepticism. (Carr, 1964, p. 27)¹

The topic of Collingwood and relativism has many ramifications, and I must limit myself to a few central points. I shall therefore merely consider in what follows what seems to me two main reasons why one should describe Collingwood as a relativist. First, the view that he was a radical historicist, put forward by Knox in his preface to *The Idea of History* on the basis of the above quotation, and, secondly, Stephen Toulmin’s influential critique of the conception of

metaphysics as the study of ‘absolute presuppositions’ in Collingwood’s *An Essay on Metaphysics* (EM).² In both cases, I shall provide what I believe to be new counterarguments. I shall also discuss in the last section Collingwood’s views concerning anthropology in relation to those of Peter Winch, who was also taken to be arguing for relativism. Again, I shall argue that Collingwood’s views do not provide support for relativism: as a matter of fact, he provided a suggestion for an anti-relativist approach that seems at first blush more promising than Winch’s.

I should say at the outset a few words about the strategy I have adopted. Whenever Collingwood becomes conscious that relativism looms near the position is he trying to articulate, he invariably takes a stance against it. For example, in ‘What Civilization Means’, he wrote:

The question with regard to any given society, then, is not how high it stands in the scale of civilization, for there is no one scale; still less whether it is just civilized or just barbarous, for every society is civilized, or it would not be a society: but in what way it is civilized. And, from the point of view of any one civilization,

² Abbreviations used:

A *An Autobiography*.
EM *An Essay on Metaphysics*.
EPH *Essays in the Philosophy of History*
IH *The Idea of History*
NL *The New Leviathan*
PA *The Principles of Art*
PE *The Philosophy of Enchantment*
PH *The Principles of History and Other Writings*

¹ Paul Hirst wrote twenty years later a fine rejoinder from a Marxist point of view (Hirst, 1985, pp. 43-56).

any other is merely one of the innumerable forms of barbarism.

This may seem a dangerous opinion. It may seem to imply that for any given society the proposition 'we are civilized' has a sense peculiar to that society; for 'civilized' has no constant meaning in such propositions; the definition of civilized conduct varies from society to society, and in any given society from time to time, in such a way that every society thinks its own present ways of behaving civilized and all others barbarous.

This is called 'historical relativism', and is rightly regarded with suspicion, because it really amounts to denying what it professes to explain. It amounts to denying that there is any such thing as an ideal of civilized conduct: not merely that there is one single ideal valid for all societies and all times, but that there are many ideals each valid for one society at one time. For if 'civilized conduct' as a phrase in the mouth of certain persons at a certain time merely means 'the way in which we behave' the ideal element in the meaning of the word 'civilized' has vanished, and only a factual element is left. In that case the verb 'to civilize' has lost all meaning; for it cannot refer to a process or act unless it implies that the process has direction and the act purpose, and these imply a distinction between fact and ideal. (NL, 489-490)

One could argue against describing Collingwood as a relativist simply by gathering similar quotations and unwinding their content. Not having directly refuted the opposite reading, one would, however, end up with two competing interpretations. Even if one could point out that there are many aspects of Collingwood's philosophy which could not be accounted for, if he had been committed to relativism, such as the very project of *The New Leviathan* of ranking civilizations on a scale ranging from barbarity to civility, an uncharitable reader could just conclude that he was inconsistent. It seems better, therefore, to undermine the

opposite case, showing that it is based on a misreading of the particular passages on which it relies or on forcing Collingwood's thought where it would not want to go.

My first point will be about the attribution to Collingwood of a radical form of historicism by Malcolm Knox. In his 'Editor's Preface' to *The Idea of History*, in 1946, Knox claimed that in the late 1930s Collingwood literally converted from a quasi-orthodox Hegelianism to historicism:

Like Croce, he came to think that 'philosophy as a separate discipline is liquidated by being converted into history'. (Knox 1946, x)³

As for the cause of this alleged 'radical' change, Knox speculates that Collingwood's mental powers were declining because of ill health:

What started to happen at some point during the following years [i.e., after the publication of *An Essay on Philosophical Method* in 1932] was that tiny blood-vessels began to burst in the brain, with the result that the small parts of the brain affected were put out of action. (Knox 1946, xxi)

With friends like this, who needs enemies?

Knox cited in support only two passages, the above sentence about philosophy being converted into history and the passage with which I opened this paper. Since the radical form of historicism attributed here to Collingwood is but a form of relativism, one must show this attribution to be incorrect. This is a very large topic that has dominated

³ This last sentence is a quotation. As Knox immediately points out, he culled it out from notes dating from 1939 for *The Principles of History*; Knox's stern judgment on that manuscript meant that it was only published in 1999. The sentence quoted occurs at PH, p. 238.

the secondary literature on Collingwood since 1946 and I am not going to summarize it. I shall not address the issue of the absorption of philosophy into history,⁴ and I am going to limit myself in section 3 to some comments on the proper understanding of our opening passage, providing what I believe to be an original and enlightening point of exegesis, while arguing that relativism contradicts the very presuppositions of Collingwood's later philosophy.

Collingwood is also routinely pictured as a relativist because of his treatment of 'absolute presuppositions' in his *Essay on Metaphysics*. Of Collingwood's many books, it is the *Essay* that attracted most attention from analytical philosophers and understandably so, since it is a reply of sorts to Alfred Ayer's critique of metaphysics in *Language, Truth, and Logic* (Ayer, 1936),⁵ but also because Collingwood's notion of a 'constellation of absolute presuppositions'⁶ is in many ways analogous, *inter alia*, to Thomas Kuhn's 'paradigms' or Nelson

Goodman's 'world versions'.⁷ Relativism looms large and here too there has been a lot of ink spilled. I shall limit my comments, in section 4, to forceful and influential argument put forth by Stephen Toulmin in his book on *Human Understanding* from 1972, and in a paper, 'Conceptual Change and the Problem of Relativity', that appeared in the same year (Toulmin 1972a, 65-85 & 1972b). My argument will simply consist in showing that Toulmin, in arguing against Collingwood, misunderstand him and actually commits the fallacy of false dichotomy.

In section 5, I shall make some comments on Collingwood's recently published manuscripts on anthropology in relation to an old debate surrounding Peter Winch's well-known paper on 'Understanding a Primitive Society' – I shall confine my comments to this paper –, where he famously criticized not only early anthropologists such as J. G. Frazer or Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, but also E. E. Evans-Pritchard, of post-war fame for his study of the Azande, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Evans-Pritchard, 1937). Collingwood's short remarks on anthropology while discussing magic in *The Principles of Art* (PA, p. 57-77) impressed Winch, who quotes him with approval (Winch, 1970, 83). As it turns out, Winch admired Collingwood. Much has been made of the influence of Wittgenstein in *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*, but one should not forget that Winch, referring now to *The Idea of History*,

⁴ This claim cannot be taken as representative of the last position at which Collingwood arrived, late in his life, without further argument. Indeed, in the same year, 1939, Collingwood published *An Autobiography* in which he argued in chapter 12 for a *rapprochement* – this is his own expression (A, 147f.) – of the two disciplines, not the absorption of one into the other. Furthermore, Collingwood's conception of 'history' is already heavily 'philosophical'.

⁵ In a nutshell, Ayer relayed to a British audience the critique of metaphysics developed by members of the Vienna Circle in the early 1930s: metaphysical propositions are just *nonsensical*, and we should get rid of them. Collingwood's reply consisted in conceding that metaphysics is the search for 'absolute presuppositions' and that these are *not* propositions, but they are not for that matter *useless*, as they are presupposed by our ordinary empirical knowledge.

⁶ The expression occurs at EM, 48n., 66, 73

⁷ Famously argued for in, respectively, Kuhn, 1970 and Goodman, 1978. There are also affinities between 'absolute presuppositions' and the propositions that serve as "a hinge on which our dispute can turn" in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1979, § 655). (For example, 'absolute presuppositions' and 'hinge propositions' do not possess the full status of propositions.)

believed the views he put forth made possible

... a new appreciation of Collingwood's conception of all human history as the history of thought. (Winch, 2008, p. 123)

Indeed, according to him

Collingwood is right if he is taken to mean that the way to understand events in human history [...] is more closely analogous to the way in which we understand expressions of ideas than it is to the way we understand physical processes. (Winch, 2008, p. 123)⁸

Unbeknownst to Winch, however, Collingwood wrote extensively on anthropology in 1936-37. Alas, these manuscripts were only very recently published, making up over 170 printed pages, within a collection of essays under the title *The Philosophy of Enchantment* (PE, pp. 115-287). Taking these into account, I shall point out that Collingwood anticipated Winch's criticisms on two counts, namely on Evans-Prichard's failure to keep at bay 'scientific' thinking, and on the more positive suggestion that understanding a so-called 'primitive' society must be built on an appropriate understanding of the role in the life of any society, therefore of our society, of some limiting concepts, such as that of death. This is not quite Collingwood's view, since he simply argued that 're-enactment' must proceed from an understanding, as one might put it, of the 'savage' within ourselves. And here, as we shall see, Collingwood puts an emphasis on emotions which is not quite Winch's.

One should recall that Wittgenstein wrote his well-known 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*' (Wittgenstein, 1993) in 1931

⁸ For a further point of contact with Collingwood, see Winch, 1972, pp. 85-86.

and 1936. This is a quite remarkable fact that shows how *avant-garde* Collingwood's thinking on these issues was, and one can only regret that his remarks were published only in 2005. But it is not too late for us to recognize his rightful historical place. At all events, before doing all this, I should begin with a few clarifying remarks concerning the use of the word 'relativism'.

Defining Relativism

The concept 'relativism' is what Germans call a '*Kampfbegriff*', i.e. a 'struggle-concept' or, adapting Ryle, an 'essentially contested expression'. It is indeed used primarily as a pejorative label attached to views one wishes to dismiss, and a good deal of the debates have automatically switched to the definition of the term.⁹ Therefore, some minimal and, I hope, uncontroversial claims are in order, in order will to steer the discussion.

The term 'relativism' covers a variety of claims that are of the form:

- (i) X is relative to Y

In what follows, I shall replace Y in the above schema by the relatively neutral expression 'epistemic system', which is meant here to be equivalent to a variety of notions such as 'conceptual scheme', 'paradigm', 'world version', or Collingwood's 'constellation of absolute presuppositions'. Of course, these notions are not equivalent to each other, but I wish

⁹ As Winch himself puts it: "The word 'relativism' is used, probably more often than not, as a term of abuse; and discussions of the issues involved are apt to be bad-tempered. Part of the reason for this is, no doubt, that certain extreme forms of relativistic position seem [...] to undermine the very possibility of honest argument" (Winch, 1987, p. 181).

simply to capture the idea of ‘relativity to a system’, i.e., to an organized body of thoughts or propositions. It is also irrelevant for what follows that such ‘epistemic systems’ might be said to be shared by one entire culture, or if one may find many alternative ‘epistemic systems’ within a given culture, e.g., at different points in time. Furthermore, it is irrelevant here if the expression is to be limited to a given scientific theory or if it meant to capture a larger set of beliefs.

Many notions have been claimed at one point or another to be ‘relative to a given epistemic system’. One such example would be ‘truth’:

(ii) What counts as ‘true’ is relative to a given epistemic system.

Other examples would be what counts as ‘rational’, what counts as ‘justified’, or what counts as ‘knowledge’. As we shall see in section 4, one can argue that Collingwood held the thesis that:

(iii) What counts as ‘true’ is relative to a constellation of absolute presuppositions.

For the moment, one should note that, merely with theses such as (ii) or (iii), we have not yet characterized relativism in any controversial sense of the word, something needs to be added. Let us call ‘universalists’ those who oppose relativism, and thus notice that it is indeed open to an universalist to agree with (ii) or (iii) since these theses simply leave open the possibility of comparing truths within various epistemic systems and reach thus some measure of ‘universality’. One could therefore distinguish here a ‘weak’ from a ‘strong’ form of relativism: commitment to (ii) or (iii) only entails a commitment to weak relativism, which would be acceptable to an open-minded universalist, but to claim that it

entails strong relativism is a *non sequitur*. To get the latter, one would need to supplement these theses with a further claim, such as an incommensurability thesis of the sort famously advanced by Thomas Kuhn:

(iv) There are radically different or incommensurable epistemic systems,

or an incommunicability thesis:

(v) There are epistemic systems that cannot comprehend each other.

I do not know of anything in Collingwood that resembles a discussion of the incommensurability thesis (iv) and I shall not mention it further. But Spengler is known for holding (v) in his *Decline of the West*, i.e. to hold the view that there cannot be any understanding between civilizations, e.g. that our Western civilization cannot understand that of the Greco-Roman world. This meant in particular that we could not understand the allegedly “essentially alien” mathematics of Ancient Greece. This claim is ‘argued’ for throughout the second chapter of *Decline of the West*, but it is obviously false unless mathematicians routinely delude themselves.¹⁰ It suffices that one reads that chapter to find claims amounting to (v), such as:

The modern mathematic [is] “true” only for the Western spirit [...] Plainly, we have almost no notion of the multitude of great ideas belonging to other cultures that we have suffered to lapse because *our* thought with its limitations has not permitted us to assimilate them, or (which comes to the same thing) has led us to reject them as false, superfluous, and nonsensical. (Spengler 1932, p. 67)

¹⁰ Spengler realizes that, so he speaks of our possessing of Greek mathematics... “not inwardly, but outwardly as a thing learnt” (Spengler 1932, 61). On this point, see Neurath, 1973, p. 185).

Collingwood wrote a scathing review of Spengler's *Decline of the West* in 1927, 'Oswald Spengler and the Theory of Historical Cycles' (EPH, pp. 57-75). Some criticisms are aimed at obvious defects and are not worth repeating here.¹¹ It is more interesting to point out that, as an archaeologist and historian, Collingwood condemned Spengler for lacking "the true historical mind" and for merely arranging into patterns "ready-made facts which he has found in books" (EPH, p. 67). In the end,

Spengler, by denying the possibility of understanding other cultures than our own, has denied the possibility of history itself. (EPH, p. 71)

There could be no stronger condemnation coming from Collingwood. And it is quite striking to note that he mocked Spengler precisely for not realizing that the very problem of history is that of the 'interrelation' of cultures:

[Spengler] actually claims that the abandonment of the historical whole, and the atomistic view of cultures, is a grand merit of his system; and so it is, for it cuts out the real problem of history, the problem of *interrelating* the various cultures, which is the problem that requires profound and penetrating thought, and leaves only the problem of *comparing* them, a far easier task for those shallow minds that can accept it. And if, as Spengler says, this is the age of shallow and decadent thought, of unphilosophical philosophy, and unscientific science, his philosophy of

¹¹ It is worth pointing out that some of Collingwood's criticisms are, although independently framed, reminiscent of the better-known criticisms by Otto Neurath in his 'Anti-Spengler' of 1921 (see Neurath, 1973).

history is, as he says it is, precisely what our age needs. (EPH, p. 66)

This is not mere philosophic criticism coming from Collingwood: much of his work as an archaeologist and as an historian of Roman Britain was indeed on the 'interrelation' of cultures, i.e. on the *diffusion* of Roman traits into Celtic art and culture.¹² Incidentally, it was for that very reason that E. E. Evans-Prichard recommended Collingwood's *Roman Britain* (Collingwood, 1932) to anthropologists (Evans-Prichard, 1932, 220). Four years later, Collingwood was to write a chapter of his *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (Collingwood & Myres, 1936, pp. 247-260) that he was to describe in his *Autobiography* as his most important contribution to history:

... a chapter which I would gladly leave as the sole memorial of my Romano-British studies, and the best example I can give to posterity of how to solve a much-debated problem in history, not by discovering fresh evidence, but by reconsidering questions of principle. It may thus serve to illustrate what I have called the *rapprochement* between philosophy and history, as seen from the point of view of history. (A, pp. 144-145)

(One should note *en passant* that this remark indicates clearly that Collingwood did not mean, with his *rapprochement*, to liquidate philosophy into history, as many have claimed since Knox.) Moreover, Collingwood saw 're-enactment' as the key to intercultural understanding:

If history is possible, if we can understand other cultures, we can do so only by re-thinking for ourselves their thoughts, cherishing within us the fundamental idea

¹² A general phenomena that has been rediscovered in post-colonial thought as 'hybridity'.

which framed their lives; and in that case their culture lives on within ours, as Euclidean geometry and Herodotean history within the mind of the modern historian. But this is to destroy the idea of atomic cultures [...] (EPH, p. 71)

I shall also come back to this point, when discussing Collingwood in relation to Winch, in section 5. One should note *en passant* that Collingwood rejected here Spengler's claim about the essentially alien nature of Greek mathematics.¹³ All this shows that, in his rejection of Spengler, Collingwood was thus clearly opposed to thesis (v). But this was in 1927, and, as we shall see, Knox accused Collingwood of having changed his mind about ten years later, so there is no basis here to reject his claim. On the other hand, it should be clear that this alleged conversion would have consisted in a *prima facie* highly unlikely rejection of what had been, as we saw, at the heart of his practice as an archaeologist and historian.

There are still other candidates for supplementation. One must also count the thesis that:

(vi) There exists no independent and universal standpoint from which to evaluate different epistemic systems.

Typical of such a standpoint is Kant's transcendental foundations of ethics. Relativists would claim that (vi) is at the heart of Western claims to cultural superiority, since it is Western thinkers that claim this independent and universal

standpoint. In what we have seen so far, however, Collingwood was not committed to any 'universalism'. Indeed, in the above critique of Spengler, Collingwood merely spoke of 'interrelation' and not of a privileged standpoint. Nevertheless, Toulmin attributed (vi) to Collingwood (Toulmin 1972a, pp. 65-85 & 1972b) on the basis of his reading of *An Essay on Metaphysics*, and this will be at the heart of section 4 below. This book is part of Collingwood's later writings about which Knox claimed that he changed his mind, and (vi) turns also out to be, as we shall see in the next section, at the heart of Knox's claim. I shall therefore be mainly concerned in what follows with (v) and (vi).

In order to bring this section to a close, I should add a few words here about contemporary debates concerning relativism. First, these debates have tended recently to focus on the doctrine of 'equal validity':

(vii) There are radically different, yet equally valid epistemic systems.¹⁴

This last may be seen as entailed by (vi), since it is on the basis of a lack of independent standpoint for comparative evaluation that one may further claim that different epistemic systems are therefore equally valid, and not just "equally significant", as Wittgenstein put it (Wittgenstein 1993, 135). The claim (vi) has attracted much attention recently because of its centrality in the 'science' and 'culture wars'. As with the incommensurability thesis (iv), above, it is not clear, however, that this 'equal validity' thesis played a role in Collingwood's thinking, or even in debates about which he would have been aware, so it is better to leave it aside.

¹³ See also EPH, p. 65. Collingwood also criticized Spengler severely in *The Idea of History*, echoing the above remark about mathematics: "in fact, not only do we understand Greek mathematics easily enough, it is actually the foundations of our own" (IH, p. 225). For similar criticisms, see Neurath, 1973, 185f.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Boghossian, 2006, p. 2

Secondly, within contemporary debates, relativism is often confused with 'social constructivism', an allied stance that can be described as the thesis that *facts* do not obtain independently of us: they are said instead to be "socially constructed in a way that reflects our contingent needs and interests" (Boghossian 2006, 22).¹⁵ Thus described, social constructivism provides supports for relativist claims such as (ii). Collingwood can hardly be said, however, to have held such a 'post-modern' view, which is genetically, not to say 'genealogically', related to the Nietzsche-inspired French post-war thought of Foucault & Co.

He may nevertheless be found guilty of holding a weaker view. As often noted,¹⁶ Collingwood appears to flirt on occasion with 'sociology of knowledge'. Here is one example, taken from a 1939 manuscript:

The aim of logic is to expound the principles of valid thought. 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; and that in consequence the truths which it is logic's business to discover are eternal truths. But 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. This enterprise is strictly historical. (PH, p. 242)

I am not going to claim with Tariq Modood that passages such as this one are "the exception rather than the rule" and dismiss them as running "contrary to the main brunt of Collingwood's thesis" (Modood 1989, 106). It is certainly true that one could *not*

develop a comprehensive reading of Collingwood on such a basis, but at the very least there *appears* to be some irresolvable inconsistencies in his text. One could follow David Boucher in thinking that

... we have to accept, rather than try to explain away, inconsistencies, and that Collingwood was an historicist who could never work out a coherent position in relation to relativism. (Boucher 1989, p. 214)

It seems better, however, to delineate instead more cautiously the import of such passages. For example, as with (ii) or (iii), which we found are not enough to characterize a controversial form of relativism, the above-quoted passage on logic does not on its own commit Collingwood to some allegedly unpalatable views. In that passage, Collingwood merely rejects a universalist thesis about the invariance of logical principles across 'time and space'. It is true that this rejection is common to relativists, but one can reject universalist claims without being committed to relativism;¹⁷ this nuanced position appears to be Collingwood's.¹⁸

¹⁷ On this, see Greiffenhagen & Sharrock, 2006a and Greiffenhagen & Sharrock, 2006b, where the authors argue neither for 'relativism' – the target of their criticisms – nor for 'universalism' about, respectively, logic and mathematics.

¹⁸ One would indeed need, as with (ii) or (iii), to supplement Collingwood's rejection of universalism in order to tease out of his text a strong relativist stance. As pointed out in Greiffenhagen & Sharrock, 2006a, there is more than one strategy developed by logical relativists. Under one strategy, relativists would argue, e.g., that the Azande are as logical as Westerners, only that they use a non-classical logic, e.g., as they are portrayed as not applying the Law of Excluded Middle. Another strategy would consist in biting the bullet and concede that from our point of view there are contradictions in Zande beliefs, only to argue that, from another point of view, one can also denote contradictions in Western thought: "It might be that what was a contradiction "for us" may not be a contradiction "for them" – and vice-versa"

¹⁵ Of course, there is a lot more to be said here - see Boghossian, 2006, Hacking, 1999, and Kukla, 2000 for critical dissections of social constructivist theses.

¹⁶ For example, in Boucher 1989, p. 212 or Modood, 1989, p. 108.

Furthermore, Collingwood was very critical of this sort of ‘sociology of knowledge’ as he found it in Marx (IH, pp. 122-126); his standpoint is actually the reverse of that in the ‘sociology of knowledge’.¹⁹ For example, in *An Essay on Metaphysics*, Collingwood claimed that the Greco-Roman world was destroyed not by barbarian attacks but through bad metaphysics, i.e. through an erroneous analysis of its absolute presuppositions (EM, pp. 224-225). At any rate, there is no place to examine all such controversial passages here, and I shall limit myself merely to the passage quoted by Knox as illustrating Collingwood’s ‘radical change’ in the late 1930s.

Knox’s Preface to *The Idea of History*: Collingwood as a Radical Historicist

The claims that logical truths are not ‘eternal’ and that logicians merely expound the principles of what passes for valid in their own time and place just sound like historicism about logic. I remarked in the introduction that the radical form of historicism attributed to Collingwood by Knox is a form of relativism.²⁰ A precise statement of this thesis implies a precise definition of both terms, ‘historicism’ and ‘relativism’, and I am not going to attempt

Greiffenhagen & Sharrock, 2006a, p. 277. As Greiffenhagen and Sharrock point out, in both cases one argues that what is a contradiction can only be judged “according to those logical standards indigenous to each culture” (Greiffenhagen & Sharrock, 2006a, p. 278). As far as I know there are no corresponding lines of thought in Collingwood.

¹⁹ On this point, see Modood, 1989.

²⁰ The point was already made in the 1930s by Maurice Mandelbaum, in *The Problem of Historical Knowledge. An Answer to Relativism* (Mandelbaum, 1967). Although this book was originally published in 1938, it looks as if Collingwood never knew about it.

this here, as ‘historicism’ is yet another of those ‘struggle-concepts’. I would again make a minimal suggestion, namely that historicism could be defined as the doctrine that any ‘particular’ (i.e. any concept, theory, action, event, etc.) can only be understood properly in terms of the place it occupied and the role it played within the process of history, out of which it came into being. This view has its origin in Hegel’s philosophy of history, where the process of history is itself understood in terms of a series of necessary stages, corresponding to the necessary stages that Reason has to go through in order to reach full self-knowledge. If one takes this last bit about the necessary stages away, one is left with historicism, a doctrine that rose to prominence in 19th-century German academia on the ruins of Hegelian philosophy, in various disciplines such as philosophy, but also history with Johan Gustav Droysen and Leopold von Ranke, and economics with Friedrich List and Adam Müller.²¹ This led to various attempts, including the well-known case of Benedetto Croce, at ‘liquidating’ philosophy into history. One should note that some equivalent story can be told about Collingwood, whose 1925 book *Speculum Mentis* is deeply Hegelian in spirit, but who seems to have abandoned later on at least the requirement that progress must follow some necessary stages. From the standpoint of a die-hard Hegelian such as Knox this move was perceived as retrograde, and this makes his negative reaction to these last developments in Collingwood’s thought perfectly understandable, albeit narrow-minded.

²¹ As a matter of fact, the expression ‘historismus’ was coined by the Austrian economist Carl Menger in his polemics with the German historical school in economics. Incidentally, Collingwood also rejected ‘universalism’ in economics at (PH, p. 243).

One should notice that, again, a thesis such as

(viii) A particular can only be understood in terms of its role within the process of history,

hardly seems on its own to imply strong relativism. Indeed, although it is more often than not true that one is both an historicist and a relativist, it is not *always* the case. For example, Hegel, as we just saw, cannot be said to adhere to (vi). But Collingwood was certainly not a Hegelian in this sense and the issue here is the attribution of (vi) to Collingwood by Knox. He cited the above-quoted passage as textual support, reading in it the sentence “There is no point in asking which was the right point of view” (Knox 1946, xii) as a statement of thesis (vi). Could one read this passage differently?

I would like first to undermine Knox’s reading. One ought immediately to note that it implies a form of determinism which is so patently false that it is hard to believe that some first-rate philosopher like Collingwood would have adopted it. To see the point, it suffices that one takes the case of St. Augustine: over and above the truism that he was not a seventeenth-century Frenchman it is implied that, in writing that ‘each was the only one possible’, Collingwood was putting forth a determinist claim according to which the social and cultural conditions being what they were during his lifetime, Augustine could not have written any history of Rome other than the one he did write.²² But, as

²² Foucault’s *episteme* in *The Order of Things* (Foucault, 1970) are meant precisely to do this job: the author of a text has lost any autonomy and the *episteme* is meant to constrain the range of views that can be held within it and determine in this way the content of the texts produced, over which the authors have somehow lost their control. For this reason,

Tariq Modood pointed out, this is just “false on straightforward historical grounds” (Modood 1989, p. 107). Indeed, during St. Augustine’s time, most Christians did not share his views (that can be verified) and his ideas were innovative precisely because, not being compelled to adopt common views of his days, he developed different ones. What this points to is that Collingwood would not have committed so easily the fallacy of confusing the context of justification with the context of discovery, which is at the bottom of this use of determinism in support of relativism. This seems to me too crass a fallacy to attribute it to Collingwood – even with diminished mental capacities – and I do not know of any passage that would support this claim, except the one under contention. In contradiction of Knox’s claim that this passage is indicative of Collingwood’s later relativist views, one finds that Collingwood already made the same point in 1930 in ‘The Philosophy of History’:

Everyone brings his own mind to the study of history, and approaches it from the point of view which is characteristic of himself and his generation.

And one should note further that he did not see this as implying relativism, as he commented that

... this does not reduce history to something arbitrary or capricious. It remains genuine knowledge. (EPH, pp. 138-9)²³

Although this is, again, an early remark, it should suffice to throw doubt on Knox’s reading. What else can one say?

Collingwood’s ‘constellations of absolute presuppositions’ are not to be confused with Foucault’s *episteme*.

²³ I owe this point to James Connelly.

In saying that there is no 'right' point of view, and that 'each was the only one possible', was Collingwood merely stating (vi)? Recall that the original from which the passage was culled out is now lost, so no help from the context is to be had. So any guess is as good as any other. When writing about St. Augustine, Tillemont, Gibbon and Mommsen, Collingwood was obviously writing about the thoughts of these historians as historical agents themselves and he was presumably applying his own views on historical understanding. Recall that, according to Collingwood, history means

... getting inside other people's heads, looking at their situation through their eyes, and thinking for yourself whether the way in which they tackled it was the right way. (A, p. 58)

This implies that the historian must evaluate the action *from her own standpoint*:

[Re-enactment] is not a passive surrender to the spell of another's mind; it is a labour of active and therefore critical thinking. The historian not only re-enacts past thought, he re-enacts it in the context of his own knowledge and therefore, in re-enacting it, criticizes it, forms his own judgement of its value, corrects whatever error he can discern in it. This criticism of the thought whose history he traces is not something secondary to tracing the history of it. It is an indispensable condition of the historical knowledge itself. Nothing could be a completer error concerning the history of thought than to suppose that the historian as such merely ascertains 'what so-and-so thought', leaving it to someone else to decide 'whether it was true'. All thinking is critical thinking; the thought which re-enacts past thoughts, therefore, criticizes them in re-enacting them. (IH, pp. 225-226)²⁴

This passage is rich in content deserving to be unpacked. For now, one should just focus on the idea that when, say, Gibbon studied Caesar's decision to cross the Rubicon, he was, to paraphrase Collingwood's unwise choice of words, getting inside Caesar's head, looking at his situation through his eyes, and thinking for himself whether Caesar's decision was the best possible one. In other words, he has to reconstruct the context of Caesar's action in order to see it as a solution to a problem (or answer to a question in a chain of questions and answers), in analogy with a move in a game of chess. But, as Collingwood studies Gibbon's judgement on Caesar, he must judge Gibbon for his own perspective, i.e. from what he knows that Gibbon knew and did not know about Caesar, what Gibbon's peculiar circumstances were that might have affected his judgement, etc. In other words, he must reconstruct the context of Gibbon's study of Caesar to evaluate his claims; to use this not so ideal analogy once more, to see them as moves in a game, except a game played on another board, where the game is that of figuring out what Caesar did.

Again, the fact that Gibbon could only judge Caesar's actions from his own perspective does not, of itself, imply that he could not obtain knowledge, i.e. state objectively true statements about Caesar; this *is* a *non sequitur* typical of crass forms of Nietzschean 'perspectivism' and I take it that this is what Collingwood denies when he said of history that it nevertheless "remains genuine knowledge". I am now going to push this point further, with help of what I think is a new interpretation of parts of *The New Leviathan*.²⁵

²⁴ See also IH, p. 242-243.

²⁵ Developed with Chinatsu Kobayashi. We both owe the impetus for it to a conversation with Laurent Jaffro.

Recall that at 14.65-14.68 of *The New Leviathan* Collingwood examines three possible answers to the question ‘Why did you do that?’: ‘because it is useful’, ‘because it is right’ and ‘because it is my duty’. This is the same as asking oneself, when confronted with a variety of possible actions in a given situation (or possible moves at one stage in a game of chess): ‘Which shall I do?’. Collingwood’s line of argument here consists in claiming that the criteria of utility, right, and duty are *sieves*, so to speak, that are progressively applied in order to eliminate possible courses of action. Collingwood then proceeded to argue that an element of caprice is left with utility or right, but not with duty, because in the first two cases some alternatives will remain open and any choice between the remaining alternatives would then be, in the absence of any further criterion, purely capricious. On this basis, Collingwood was able to criticize utilitarianism and Kant’s ‘regularian’ approach as unable to provide a proper account of duty. For example, in the latter case rules only tell us that acts of a given kind are permissible, not which particular action. Furthermore, there are often conflicting rules that apply to a given situation and that conflict cannot be resolved by a mere appeal to the rules. So the ‘regularian’ account leaves open some alternatives.

The peculiarity of duty is, according to Collingwood, that there are no alternatives left to choose from:

Duty admits of no alternatives. Whatever is my duty is an *individuum omnimodo determinatum*. There is only one of it; it is not one of a set of alternatives; there is nothing that will do as well. In the first place it is my duty and nobody else’s. [...] Secondly, any duty is a duty to do ‘this’ act and only ‘this’, not ‘an act of this kind’. [...] Hence dutiful action, among these three kinds of rational

action, is the only one that is completely rational in principle; the only one whose explanations really explain; the only one whose answer to the question; ‘why did I do that action?’ [...] answers precisely that question and not one more or less like it. (NL, 17.51-55)²⁶

And this, Collingwood adds, does not preclude an analysis in terms of utility and right, but *includes* it (NL, pp. 18.6 & 478).

How does all this translate into historical thinking, i.e., Gibbon on Caesar or Collingwood on Gibbon on Caesar? As it turns out, Collingwood believed that

²⁶ Also: “The obligation to do my duty is an obligation involving every detail of what I am to do. Nothing is left to caprice; and for a person who means caprice when he says freedom, freedom has vanished. A person who does his duty has no option; he has got to do exactly what he does; he has no choice. The consciousness of this complete obligation – complete in the sense that it covers every detail of what is to be done and leaves no option anywhere – is a universal feature of duty” (NL, pp. 471-472). The idea that an explanation of duty really explains why one has no other choice but to do only one specific action might sound strange to you, although Collingwood does not seem compelled to provide some supporting argument. I think that the reason for this is that he was reasoning in terms so congenial to him that he had lost sight of the fact that they are not obvious. By this, I mean that he was reasoning in terms of the ‘concrete universal’, a doctrine that the British idealists took from Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. In a nutshell, they considered the ordinary notion of a ‘universal’ to be a false abstraction and that of a ‘particular’ to be so empty that no pure particular could be said to exist. An individual such as Caesar – Bradley’s own example – who is re-identifiable over time, i.e. who possesses an ‘identity in difference’, was said to be a ‘concrete universal’. For traces of this in Collingwood, see, e.g., EPH, p. 29. My point here is that Collingwood’s critique of Kant’s ‘regularian’ account bears the hallmark of this neo-Hegelian notion.

The consciousness of duty is thus identical with the historical consciousness. (NL, p. 477)

This also comes out clearly in this passage:

The consciousness of duty means thinking as an individual or unique agent, in an individual or unique situation, doing the individual or unique action which I have to do because it is the only one I can. To think historically is to explore a world consisting of things other than myself, each of them an individual or unique agent, in an individual or unique situation, doing an individual or unique action which he has to do because, charactered and circumstanced as he is, he can do no other. (NL, p. 18.52)

Thinking in terms of the now old debate between Bill Dray and Carl Hempel on the nature of explanations in history,²⁷ the upshot here is that Collingwood, had he lived to know about Hempel's covering laws, would have certainly identified them with Kant's 'regularian' account, and would have claimed that, *alone*, they cannot provide a proper explanation and that something *more*, and not some weaker principle such as the 'principle of action' originally proposed by Dray (Dray 1957, 132) is needed to give a full explanation.²⁸ Of course, this is not to say that Collingwood would have agreed with Hempel's strictures: he would not have objected to the use of any covering laws in

²⁷ Carl Hempel had originally proposed his 'covering law' model in 'The Function of General Laws in History' in 1942, without any reference to Collingwood (Hempel, 1965, pp. 231-243). William Dray's original critique, making use of Collingwood, appeared in chapter V of *Laws and Explanation in History* (Dray, 1957). For further discussion of these issues by the same authors, see Hempel, 1963, Hempel, 1966 and Dray, 1963.

²⁸ This point also applies to claims that Collingwood was an ancestor to 'simulation' theory in psychology, as in Blackburn, 1992.

history, but he certainly considered that limiting oneself to them would not allow re-enactment of a given particular action of a particular historical agent in a particular situation, exactly for the same reasons the 'regularian' account would fail to account for duty. A proper explanation of one of Caesar's actions would ideally show that there was only one course of action that he could have taken, given his intentions and his own understanding of his situation, and that is why he did what he did.

So, when Collingwood wrote 'there is no point in asking which was the right point of view' and 'each was the only one possible', he probably meant no more than the truism, perfectly acceptable to the universalist, that historians such as Gibbon are, like anyone else, not perspective-free. Indeed he probably meant something of this nature: given what Collingwood knows of Gibbon, he concludes that Gibbon had to reason about Caesar exactly in the way he actually did because there was, given the evidence in front of him as an historian, his personal circumstances, etc., no other choice. This is a very strong, very anti-relativistic claim; it amounts basically to the claim that an historian, when she is able to provide a successful explanation, has thought once more exactly the thoughts of the historical agent, i.e. the historian has reached non-relative truth about the past.²⁹ This last claim stands at the heart of Collingwood's philosophy of history. In other words, the sort of relativism Knox attributed to Collingwood actually contradicts the very presuppositions of Collingwood's whole philosophy of history, especially as he

²⁹ I am referring here to Collingwood's perfectly 'objectivist' claim that an historian re-enacting the train of thoughts of an historical agent is re-thinking exactly the *same* thoughts, not even a copy of them. On this claim see Saari, 1989 and D'Oro, 2000.

developed it in his later years. There could not be a worse misreading. Alas, no other reading was more influential, outside the narrow circle of Collingwood commentators.

Toulmin on Absolute Presuppositions and the Independent Standpoint

I wish now to examine the implications of Collingwood's so-called 'logic of question and answer' and the correlated views concerning absolute presuppositions (A, chap. V) (EM, chaps. IV-V); I must assume here some familiarity with these. As I pointed out in the introduction, Collingwood held (iii), i.e. that counts as 'true' is relative to a constellation of absolute presuppositions. My reason for claiming this is that he stated indeed in his *Autobiography* that truth does not belong to propositions themselves but to the "question-and-answer complex" in which the proposition is embedded as the 'right' answer to a given sensible question (A, pp. 37-38). Since the "question-and-answer complex" in question is but part of a system ruled by a given constellation of absolute presuppositions, we get (iii). And, with this, Collingwood is flirting with relativism. As I also pointed out, in section 3, claims such as (iii) are not sufficient for holding relativism, one needs supplementation with theses such as (vi); I also pointed out in that section what Toulmin attributed it to Collingwood. Before looking at this, however, I would like to say a few words about Collingwood's reasons for holding (iii).

In chapter V of *An Autobiography*, Collingwood presents himself as some sort of revolutionary logician, proposing to substitute for propositional logic his 'logic of question and answer', and thus doing away with traditional theories of truth (correspondence, coherence, pragmatic)

since they are based on the assumption that propositions are the truth-bearers. The claim (iii) is thus a consequence of this radical stance, and so are other claims that are of importance for his whole approach to the history of ideas, such as the claim that

(ix) No two propositions can contradict themselves unless they are answers to the same question (A, 33).

This claim is indeed important, since it allows Collingwood to criticize his realist teachers (J. Cook Wilson and H. A. Prichard in particular)³⁰ for their belief that they can compare and evaluate philosophical theses without paying attention to the context in which they were framed (A, p. 42). Collingwood believed instead that the reconstruction of the context would allow one to see the thesis in question as an answer to a question that had arisen within that given context, thus elucidating its meaning.

I can only comment here that Collingwood was mistaken, and deeply so, in assuming his stance against propositional logic and therefore that he had no good reason for holding (iii). By this I mean that there are no better philosophical reasons to go against mathematical logic than to go against, say, relativity theory (as Bergson did). But Collingwood himself stated a principle of non-interference in a letter to the *Oxford Magazine* in 1923:

Any problem which arises out of the development of scientific thought must be soluble, if at all, only by a further development of the same kind of thinking and a philosopher, with whatever admiration and interest he may watch the work of scientists, has no more right to forestall the result of their inquiries by an edict as to what is "philosophically admissible" than to tell the

³⁰ On Oxford Realism, see Marion, 2000.

archaeologists what it is philosophically admissible for them to find in the inner chamber of Tutankhamen. (Collingwood 1932, p. 302).

He seems not to have realized that logic does not fall outside the scope of this principle, and that it is therefore preposterous to deny any validity to modern developments in mathematical logic on purely philosophical grounds. Collingwood's radical stance was even more out of place if we realize that his 'logic of question and answer' is more a 'logic of inquiry' than an alternative to formal logic.

At all events, a claim such as (ix) which is at first blush much more acceptable could nevertheless be salvaged from the wreckage of this whole enterprise only if one can show that it is not inextricably linked with (vi), i.e. if Collingwood, although neither a relativist nor an universalist, did not hold (vi). So we are back to Toulmin's critique, which he summarized in the following description of Collingwood's positions:

(i) At any given stage of development, the intellectual content of a discipline can be presented as a system of concepts and principles that operate on different levels of generality;

(ii) Our reasons for accepting concepts and propositions on the lower levels of generality are 'relative to'—and must be explained in terms of—those on the higher levels, and such lower-level concepts and propositions are presupposed only 'relatively' to those on the higher levels;

(iii) Our reasons for accepting concepts and principles on the highest level of all cannot be explained in this way, and these upper-level concepts and propositions are accordingly presupposed—at that stage in the development of the discipline—not relatively, but 'absolutely'.

(iv) We can make rational comparisons between propositions and concepts current at any one stage in the development of a

discipline, to the extent that they are both operative 'relative to' the same constellations of absolute presuppositions;

(v) On the other hand, if we attempt to compare propositions or concepts which are 'relative to' different constellations of absolute presuppositions, or if we attempt to compare different constellations of absolute presuppositions as wholes, we shall find no common, agreed set of rational principles or procedures for judging them;

(vi) So a proposition can be rationally appraised only 'relative to' a given constellation of absolute presuppositions and, once we leave this particular framework, we leave also the scope of rational comparison and judgement. (Toulmin 1972b, pp. 212-213)³¹

This critique must be appraised along two dimensions: first, one must see if it fits textual evidence, i.e. if it is a fair description of Collingwood's thoughts; secondly, one must assess its cogency independently of any exegetical issue. On the first score, it is difficult to see any textual support for (iv)-(vi), or any going against these claims; as a matter of fact, Collingwood hardly discusses the issue of conceptual change in his *Essay* or anywhere else, for that matter. In other words, it seems that Collingwood did not realise that he had to take a stance on (vi), and let the matter unresolved. This can be taken as evidence that he was not pushing a relativist line to begin with, or that if he was, it was somehow unbeknownst to him. On the contrary, I take the fact that he did not see the problem as evidence that those who push his thought in the direction of relativism are reading their own agenda into his text.

Toulmin's strategy is to place Collingwood in front of a *dilemma*, a false one as I shall claim:

³¹ See also the almost identical passage at Toulmin, 1972a, pp. 73-74.

Do we make the change from one constellation of absolute presuppositions to another because we have reasons for doing so; or do we do so only because certain causes compel us to?" (Toulmin 1972a, 76)

and then to argue that Collingwood cannot answer it. Recall that in a crucial, much-quoted footnote, Collingwood argued that a constellation of absolute presuppositions

forms a structure which is subject to 'strains' [...] of greater or less intensity [...] If the strains are too great, the structure collapses and is replaced by another, which will be a modification of the old [...] not consciously devised but created by a process of unconscious thought. (EM, 48n.)

Toulmin points out that Collingwood chose to speak the 'quasi-rational language' of a 'process of unconscious thought', because he could not go along with the second horn of the dilemma and explain changes of constellations in purely *causal* terms. But he could not go along the first one, i.e., *rational* terms, either:

Given Collingwood's own previous argument neither kind of answer can entirely satisfy him. He cannot answer in consistently rational terms, because his own analysis forbids it. If we advance 'reasons' to justify replacing one constellation of absolute presuppositions by another, the validity of this further argument will then have to be judged in terms of some yet more general principle. This will imply that neither constellation was fully 'absolute' or self-sustaining, in the first place; so we must go on and introduce a 'super-absolute' presupposition, for deciding when it is 'rationally justified' to step from one set of presuppositions to another; and both rival sets of presuppositions – though initially supposed to be absolute – will then be 'relative' to this new, super-absolute presupposition. [...] We can therefore account for conceptual change at the fundamental level in terms that

Collingwood can accept as 'rational' only at the price of giving up his central thesis that 'absolute' presuppositions are self-supporting and serve as the last court of appeal. (Toulmin 1972a, pp. 76-77)

This is the basis for the attribution of (vi) to Collingwood. But, as I said, it seems to me that Toulmin's dilemma is just a *false* dilemma.

Indeed, there is another way to understand what Collingwood meant by a 'process of unconscious thought' and Toulmin reasons here as if he had forgotten that Collingwood talks about absolute *presuppositions*. It is clear that any 'strain' in a constellation of absolute presuppositions is not going to appear at the very level of the absolute presuppositions themselves, as these are presuppositions only to be fleshed out retrospectively. Therefore, the strains will reveal themselves further down the chain of relative presuppositions, i.e. within some 'question and answer complex', more probably than not closer to the level of experience. They will require patching up at that level and, from one patch to another, one will end up in a situation where the constellation of absolute presuppositions now presupposed is not the same anymore, this being, again, *discovered retrospectively but not argued explicitly at the time*. Therefore, one could say that, once a certain number of changes are made towards the bottom of the chain of presuppositions, the whole chain adjusts or repairs itself to a new set of absolute presuppositions, in a process which is certainly, as Collingwood put it, 'of unconscious thought'. According to this reading, change between constellations of absolute presuppositions is a process which is neither 'causal', nor 'rational' in the sense that it is brought about through a conscious debate concerning, e.g. the consistency of a given set absolute presuppositions. It is brought about of itself as the result of

perfectly rational changes lower down the chain of relative presuppositions, as a right answer to a question leads one to raise a further question, etc.

Therefore, it seems to me that, with his dilemma, Toulmin committed the fallacy of the false dilemma, and the reasoning in his last quotation collapses: the fact that *there are no 'super-absolute' presuppositions does not mean that no explanation of process of change between constellations of absolute presuppositions is possible on Collingwood's terms*. So, it might be true that, on one reading of (vi), Collingwood held that view – there is no independent standpoint of 'super-absolute' presuppositions – , but certainly this is not a sufficient reason for relativism and Collingwood has the conceptual resources to avoid that trap. This should take care of Toulmin's critique, although the point would certainly deserve more elaboration.

Anthropology: Collingwood and Winch

In the end, it is perhaps not surprising that Toulmin chose Collingwood to illustrate the "relativist reaction to the facts of conceptual diversity" (Toulmin 1972a, p. 65). Collingwood was, along with Wittgenstein, part of a generation of philosophers inclined to emphasize "the facts of conceptual diversity", as Toulmin put it, by way of reaction against the 'scientism' and Eurocentric stance of the first generations of anthropologists, e.g. Max Müller, E. B. Tylor, J. G. Frazer, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and thus to provide arguments that were used by a later generation of philosophers to argue for relativism. Peter Winch, influenced by both Collingwood and Wittgenstein, once remarked, about relativists, that

... there are perfectly genuine and important difficulties to which they have been trying to draw attention. (Winch 1987, p. 181)

But, contrary to a widespread belief, he was not a strong relativist. In 'Understanding a Primitive Society', he spoke about the importance of the opposite view:

We should not lose sight of the fact that the idea that men's ideas and beliefs must be checkable by reference to something independent – some reality – is an important one. To abandon it is to plunge into an extreme Protagorean relativism, with all the paradoxes it involves. (Winch 1970, p. 81)³²

But Winch felt compelled to add here that:

On the other hand great care is certainly necessary in fixing the precise role that this conception of the independently real does play in men's thought. (Winch 1970, p. 81)

However, today's widespread influence of post-structuralism in the social sciences and humanities and the 'science wars' alluded to earlier have considerably polarized the debate and the sort of position that the likes of Winch tried to articulate are simply dismissed as relativism. For example, in a section of *Fear of Knowledge*, Paul Boghossian conflates in his presentation of relativism, i.e. of thesis (vii) above (Boghossian 2006, pp. 70-72) some of Wittgenstein's arguments in *On Certainty* with Evans-Prichard on the Azande. Properly understood, Wittgenstein was arguing neither for relativism, nor for the universalism held by Boghossian.³³ I venture to add that the same goes for Collingwood. For that reason, it is worth revisiting not just

³² See also Winch's essay 'Nature and Convention' for some non-relativist conclusions (Winch 1972, pp. 50-72).

³³ See Greiffenhagen & Sharrock, 2006a, and Greiffenhagen & Sharrock, 2006b for a critique of relativism from a non-universalist standpoint that more accurately reflects the Wittgensteinian point of view.

Winch but also Collingwood, taking into account the recently published *The Philosophy of Enchantment*. Again, this is a large topic, so I merely wish here to conclude with some remarks on points of contact between Winch's 'Understanding a Primitive Society' and Collingwood's manuscripts on anthropology. This might be of interest since the Wittgensteinian elements in Winch's thinking have been extensively discussed in the secondary literature, while any link with Collingwood was allowed altogether to drop out of sight.

As I pointed out, Winch was influenced by Collingwood, but he could not have known the manuscripts included in *The Philosophy of Enchantment* (PE, pp. 115-287). As a historian, Collingwood studied extensively folktales, e.g. the many variants of Cinderella (PE, pp. 235-259), as a source for the understanding of past cultures and, as a philosopher, he reflected on the possibility of using folktales for that very purpose. That led him to a critique of the early anthropologists (Müller, Tylor, Frazer, and Lévy-Bruhl), but also of Freud, and his critique is remarkably similar to Winch's. One common theme, of course, is the idea that magic is *not* a sort of 'pseudo-science'.³⁴ Collingwood has already argued for this in (PA, 57-77), which Winch knew, but there are also some sharp criticisms in *The Philosophy of Enchantment*, e.g., when he writes:

As a collection of crude facts conveniently arranged to the reader's hand, [Frazer's *Golden Bough*] is beyond praise. But, as a piece of scientific theory it is built round a framework of ideas which are radically unsound. Magic is defined as pseudo-science of the savage: a false form of that same thing

³⁴ The idea is also a leitmotif in Wittgenstein's 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*', see Wittgenstein 1993, pp. 125, 129 & 141.

whose true form, natural science, is professed by our wiser and happier selves. (PE, p. 154)

To call magic pseudo-science implies that it is mistaken for science. But who mistakes it for science? Not the savage [...] the error implied in calling magic pseudo-science is an error on the part of the modern scientifically trained anthropologist. It is he, and not the savage, who has taken magic for what it is not. (PE, pp. 155-156)³⁵

These remarks may be compared with Winch's:

Zande notions of witchcraft do not constitute a theoretical system in terms of which Azande try to gain quasi-scientific understanding of the world. This in turn suggests that it is the European, obsessed with pressing Zande thought where it would not naturally go [...] who is guilty of misunderstanding, not the Zande. (Winch 1970, p. 93).³⁶

The idea that magic is a sort of 'pseudo-science' causes indeed all sorts of misinterpretations. For example, Winch remarks that

³⁵ In order to forestall any criticism of Collingwood's use of the word 'savage', one should note that he condemned the expression in no uncertain terms: "there is no such person as The Savage. [...] The term savage has no scientific meaning" (PE, p. 158). See also the scathing footnote about Freud at (PA, p. 77n.).

³⁶ Perhaps I should point out that Collingwood was criticizing Frazer when Winch was criticizing Evans-Prichard. The latter, however, helped moving post-war British social anthropology away from the scientism of Frazer's generation, and these two should not be bunched up together. Collingwood, who probably read Evans-Prichard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* as a reader for Oxford University Press, is probably the first person to refer to it in print, at PA, p. 8n. As James Connelly pointed out, Collingwood was influenced by Evans-Prichard when developing his thoughts on absolute presuppositions (Connelly 1998, pp. 124-128).

It would be absurd to say that the savage is thinking mystically and that we are thinking scientifically about rainfall. (Winch 1970, 80)

I take it that this is an allusion to Lévy-Bruhl's concept of 'primitive mentality' (Lévy-Bruhl, 1923), which was also dismissed with contempt by Collingwood as an "extraordinarily confused piece of thinking" (PA, p. 58).³⁷ Collingwood uses to illustrate this point as an example the practice of destroying one's nail-clippings to prevent them from falling into the hands of an enemy who could then use them in a so-called 'magical' ceremony as a weapon against him. As Collingwood points out, the anthropologist would presumably assume that from his scientific point of view this is groundless, and presume therefore that the 'savage' must believe

... in a 'sympathetic' connexion between the nail-clippings and the body from which they have been severed, such that their destruction automatically injures that body. (PA, p. 59)

On this, Collingwood commented, with typical sarcasm:

The English anthropologists, good honest men, did not observe this; but their more logical French colleagues did, and proceeded to elaborate an entire theory of 'primitive mentality', showing that the 'savage' has a quite peculiar type of mind, not at all like ours; it does not argue logically like a Frenchman's, it does not acquire knowledge through experience like an Englishman's, it thinks (if you can call that thinking) by the methodical development of what, from our

point of view, is a kind of lunacy. (PA, p. 60)
³⁸

But in *The Philosophy of Enchantment* he castigated anthropologists for having created the very problem of relativism through the coining of their vocabulary:

We have grown so accustomed to hearing said that the minds of savages work quite differently from our own, that it has become an accepted dogma, and we have created a whole vocabulary of technical terms – magic, taboo, mana, totem, and so forth – which we use in describing the categories of this savage mentality. If this dogma were true, the experiences of savages would be so radically unlike our own that we could never hope to understand it. But this is not true. Such terms are not categories of savage thought; they are concepts of anthropological science, classifications under which we conveniently group certain kinds of customs and beliefs. The fact that the words are in some cases borrowed from 'primitive' languages does not alter the case; it is the anthropologist who decides how he shall use them. (PE, p. 194)

It is a great pity that Winch was not acquainted with the content of Collingwood's unpublished manuscripts. By this I mean not just that he would have liked passages such as these, but also that he was at pains in the later part of 'Understanding a Primitive Society' to explain how, when engaged in the study of other cultures, one could be said to be 'learning from' these cultures, and therefore to find grounds upon which understanding can be built. In other words, Winch was gesturing at a possible line of refutation of (v). But he gets somehow embroiled with a larger issue – nothing less than 'the meaning of life' – when he appeals to Simone Weil (Winch

³⁷ Of course, Collingwood could not have known about Lévy-Bruhl's later change of mind in (Lévy-Bruhl, p. 1975).

³⁸ About 'primitive mentality': "The anthropologist does not find it in his material. He reads it into his material" (PE, p. 188).

1970, p. 107), who was to become a major influence on his later thinking:³⁹

In my discussion of Zande magical rites just now what I tried to relate the magical rites to was a sense of the significance of human life. This notion is, I think, indispensable to any account of what is involved in understanding and learning from an alien culture. (Winch 1970, p. 105)

He then goes on to argue that the very notion of human life is constrained by what he described as “T. S. Eliot’s trinity of ‘birth, copulation and death’” (Winch 1970, p. 108) and that

... forms of these limiting concepts will necessarily be an important feature of any human society and that conceptions of good and evil in human life will necessarily be connected with such concepts. In any attempt to understand the life of another society, therefore, an investigation of the forms taken by such concepts – their role in the life of the society – must always take a central place and provide a basis on which understanding may be built. (Winch 1970, p. 111)

This is all fine, but Winch does not tell us how to proceed, except, of course, that we should not bungle our interpretation of the evidence by assessing it in terms of our scientific categories. Here, however, Collingwood has something to say, which is based on an application of his notion of ‘re-enactment’, that Winch dismissed as “an intellectualistic distortion”, at the very moment he praised Collingwood for having argued, as we saw, that understanding in history is “more closely analogous to the way in which we understand expressions of ideas than it is to the way we understand physical processes” (Winch 1970, p. 182).

Indeed, Collingwood proposes to extend ‘re-enactment’ to anthropology:

In anthropological science man is trying to understand man; and to man his fellow-man is never a mere external object, something to be observed and described, but something to be sympathized with, to be studied by penetrating into his thoughts and re-enacting those thoughts for oneself. Anthropology – I refer to cultural, not physical, anthropology – is a historical science, where by calling it historical as opposed to naturalistic I mean that its true method is thus to get inside its object or recreate its object inside himself. (PE, p. 53)

As is often the case with Collingwood, the thought is here crudely put, in terms likely to mislead, but issues concerning ‘re-enactment’ should not detain us.⁴⁰ Of capital interest here is Collingwood’s proposal to understand the ‘savage’, through an appeal to our own emotions:

Perhaps we shall do better if we seek the source of the idea [the idea of using someone’s nail-clippings as a weapon against them] not in the savage’s intellect, but in his emotions. And since we can understand what goes on in the savage’s mind only in so far as we can experience the same thing on our own, we must find our clue in emotions to whose reality we can testify in our own persons. (PE, 196)

All we need ascribe to him is the feelings which we can recognize in ourselves. (PE, p. 214)

Or, as he put it so wonderfully:

⁴⁰ At least it should be pointed out that this passage confirms the role of emotions in ‘re-enactment’, see also, e.g., PH, p. 77. For a discussion of this important issue, see Boucher, 1995, Boucher, 1997 and Dray, 1997.

³⁹ See Winch, 1989.

We must learn to face that savage within us if we are to understand the savage outside us. (PE, p. 186)⁴¹

Collingwood then proceeds to remind us that we routinely feel emotions of the same nature as those of the 'savage', e.g. concerning their nail-clippings:

A lover will cherish whatever stands in this peculiar relation to his mistress: her glove, her handkerchief, her letters, and so forth. The destruction of any such relic by a third party he will resent as an injury to the lady and an affront to himself. (PE, p. 197)⁴²

Emotions such as these are not 'survivals' from our 'savage' days,⁴³ Collingwood tells

⁴¹ One finds roughly the same idea in Wittgenstein: "Indeed, if Frazer's explanations did not in the final analysis appeal to a tendency in ourselves, they would not really be explanations" (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 127). See the next footnote.

⁴² Again, Wittgenstein uses similar examples for the same purpose in passages such as these: "Burning in effigy. Kissing the picture of one's beloved. That is *obviously not* based on the belief that it will have some specific effect on the object which the picture represents. Its aims at satisfaction and achieves it. Or rather: it *aims* at nothing at all; we just behave this way and then feel satisfied" (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 123); "When I am furious about something, I sometimes beat the ground or a tree with my walking stick. But I certainly do not believe that the ground is to blame or that my beating can help anything. 'I am venting my anger'. And all rites are of this kind" (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 137). Of course, the similarities pointed out here and in previous footnotes are not meant to mask the fact that Wittgenstein is interested in other issues, i.e. the need to avoid theory and 'historical explanations' (not, of course, in the sense of 're-enactment' but the simple idea that one should seek to explain rites through some sort of causal explanation of their origin), the need to provide merely 'perspicuous representations', etc.

⁴³ The allusion to 'survivals' is to Tylor's theory that civilized people have evolved from savages, and that somehow some traces of the latter mentality have survived in the former. See PE, p. 142.

us (alas, without providing supportive arguments), they are *universal*:

These facts are not survivals, for [...] they do not depend for their existence on a continuous tradition; they are emotional facts which arise spontaneously in the mind of each one of us, even though he may not know of their existence in others. (PE, p. 197)

Emotions of this kind have been felt *semper, ubique, ab omnibus*. (PE, p. 198)

Of course, this sort of move – an appeal to some common element – is no news in the field of anthropology. One need merely to recall the recent, much publicized debate between Marshall Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere about the 'fact' that James Cook, upon landing in 1779 for the first time in Hawaii, was greeted as the returning god Lono.⁴⁴ Here Obeyesekere appealed to a Weberian concept of "practical rationality" (Obeyesekere 1992, p. 19), anchored in "a common biological nature", in order to form the bridge between him, a native of Sri Lanka, and the Hawaiians who eventually killed Cook:

The idea of practical rationality provides me with a bit of space where I can talk of Polynesians who are like me in some sense. Such spaces, though not easy to create, are necessary if one is to talk of the other culture in human terms. (Obeyesekere 1992, p. 21)

Collingwood's route through common emotions is one way to provide such a space.⁴⁵ Perhaps this is one way to flesh out

⁴⁴ See Obeyesekere, 1992 and Sahlins, 1995.

⁴⁵ Collingwood also appeals implicitly to a form of 'practical rationality' in passages such as this: "If 'the savage' really thought in this pre-logical way, he could never have mastered, as he has done, the principles of hunting and fishing, agriculture and stock-farming, metallurgy and carpentry; he could never have devised his elaborate languages and social

what Winch was striving for, since the trinity of 'birth, copulation and death' is certainly not devoid of emotions; it is rather full of our *deepest* emotions. At all events, this would have, no doubt, given Winch food for thought.

I have not explored all the ramifications of the debates concerning Collingwood's alleged relativism; instead, I confined myself to a few specific counter-arguments, against well-known arguments by Knox and Toulmin, as well as a discussion of the non-relativist views of Collingwood in anthropology. Of course, my discussion will not settle the debate, but I hope to have at least convinced the reader, on a last point, Collingwood is more than ever worth a serious read.

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systems; he could never even have preserved and handed down the traditional stories and rituals upon which this accusation of illogicality is based." (PE, p. 188)

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Discussion

James Connelly

Just a couple of observations and maybe I could just ask you to elaborate a point about logic, giving an account of what passes for valid reasoning. As you were speaking I was just thinking about the title of the Neal's book on the development of logic. In one sense you might argue that there can't be a development of logic. But in another sense there is a development in our thinking about what logic is. You could interpret Collingwood in a very straightforward way that would be perfectly compatible with Neal's approach. [...]

On the point about conceptual change and so on, I just wondered, [whether] there's a number of ways to look at this, if one's going to argue for continuity between constellations of absolute presuppositions. One way, which I think is partly your way, is to simply deny that there is an absolute break between one and the next constellation. I mean Toulmin-type readings tend to go for breaks, but Collingwood doesn't necessarily. Although maybe there is a possibility - he doesn't always use the

word overlap in this context, he is much more likely to talk in terms of, as you were saying, 'being repaired and mended en (route)'. So that in some sense should give you a degree of historical continuity, and of course if you have got historical continuity maybe, to use the old-fashioned language, that's like identity and difference to keep yourself going. So the incommensurability problem is never an all or nothing thing.

But of course the other thing with Collingwood, he is sometimes frustratingly programmatic or manifesto-like about things. The *Essay on Metaphysics* is like a manifesto, he doesn't always tell you which presuppositions he is talking about. Elsewhere in the *Idea of Nature* he says that there are certain metaphysical presuppositions that are necessary for any science whatsoever. Or he argues that certain presuppositions are ultimate presuppositions for any form of logic and so on. Some of them he says might be held always, everywhere, and by everyone, but he doesn't, frustratingly, tell you, definitely that that is the case and which ones they are. Of course that would then give you a set of non-changing presuppositions the foreground of the changing [ones]. Now that may itself create other problems but on the other hand it would again be a principle of continuity. You said you weren't going to expand on the Winch but I would quite like you to expand on Winch. You said Winch wouldn't like this emotional development as it were.

Mathieu Marion

No I didn't say he wouldn't like it, I just said I am sure he would find it interesting, I have no idea what his reply would have been and I am not going to guess. You see, I think there is a easy way to talk about things like death. I come from a tradition in which you are okay to talk about dying all the time, and there is a of way of talking about it, in a catastrophic tone of voice and it makes you

feel like you are talking about this purely intellectual matter. Often when people tend to do philosophising about such important issues they transform them into totally intellectual matters. Like in the German tradition, much that you read about artists is becoming totally conceptual and is nothing to do with any emotional content whatsoever. And so all I was saying is that when Winch starts talking about the importance of death as being a universal in between all the societies and cultures, which may be the bridge on which we should be able to walk from one to another, I think there is a danger. I don't know if he fell into that trap or not but, to forget that death is so important because it is so deeply emotional to us, that's what makes us who we are, you don't react to death in a non-emotional way, like 'oh shoot I just broke my ashtray by dropping it on the floor,' and you know someone who would find it sad to lose their ashtray and then go and kill two other people we would declare inhuman. So I think there is this important emotional content to these issues and when you read only this paper by Winch you don't get to feel that emotions are actually the bricks of that bridge that allows us to go from one culture to another. And to come back to it, there are some limits to the possibility, I suppose, of reaching out. There is a form of incommensurability that Collingwood actually never denies because he says if you are unable to feel some things you won't be able to understand and you won't be able to make someone understand who cannot feel these things for himself; that is for sure. And so the limits, if you like, are not conceptually within ourselves.

Giuseppina D'Oro

As I see it there are two charges raised against Collingwood.

One is that it is not possible to even understand other cultures. Anybody who makes this charge against Collingwood has not read him properly because he explicitly

claims that to understand actions historically requires viewing the situation from the perspective of agents in question, bearing in mind that their belief system may differ from that of the historian. Historians who impose their own belief system on past agents are scissors-and-paste historians and Collingwood's critique of this approach is well documented.

Then there is a second charge, according to which Collingwood holds the view that it is not possible to evaluate the presuppositions that other people have made in different periods of history. In my view this second charge arises when one fails to acknowledge the distinction between history and metaphysics. The task of the historian is to try and make intelligible the actions of past agents. The task of the metaphysician is to discern the absolute presuppositions which govern different forms of enquiry and the different senses of causation at work in different explanatory practices. If you take metaphysics to be concerned with uncovering disciplinary rules Collingwood is not a relativist at all. His metaphysics does commit him to the claim that rational explanations are relative to one form of enquiry, but this is a very different form of relativism than the one which states that a claim is relative to where you are located in place and time. In many cases the charge of historicism arises out of a failure to acknowledge the division of labour between history and metaphysics.

Mathieu Marion

Two things. First of all I don't think he actually makes historicist claims, he makes historicist-sounding claims; only if you read too much into them - that is what I was trying to say. We are in agreement here but in terms of points of detail you are both right and wrong to distinguish the metaphysical project and the philosophy of history. You are right because, on the issue, if you collapse the two completely you end up

misreading him. But on the other hand there are two sides of the same coin, because the coin is the question and answer process - it's the question and answer process. It is the question and answer process that gets you going to understand Julius Caesar and the Azande. And the question and answer process indeed involves getting back into the presuppositions.

Giuseppina D'Oro

[...] There is one sense in which 'relative to' is harmless; if you use it in an epistemological sense, 'relative to this form of enquiry' it is not a form of historicism at all. If this is a form of relativism, then it is a very harmless form; it is certainly not what most people would call relativism, exactly because they use the term 'relativism' in the derogatory sense.

Mathieu Marion

But that is the point that I was making. I was saying that of itself it doesn't involve relativism. You need something stronger, you need to add to the statement 'truth is relative to epistemic system'; the fact that you cannot go from one system to another to evaluate them is, I think, incommensurability, because there are no independent standards. You have to add these things and it is not clear that Collingwood adds these things. So he ends up with something that is one ingredient of the full relativist view, the relativist view that I do not share myself but there are some ingredients in the full relativist view which, I think you are right, can be seen as harmless.

That said, it is not necessarily an argument for objectivism. I think that Collingwood was much more subtle. He was very intuitive in his ways of thinking, indeed he often sensed that this position could be pushed towards full relativism. [...] He had difficulties handling the matter but I think intuitively he was refraining from the full

thing. And only the people who read him too quickly or in order just to shoot at him make the mistake of not seeing that.

Ivan Leudar

Could Collingwood have possibly been a relativist in any strong sense and practise the method of re-enactment; I mean how would that be possible?

Mathieu Marion

I was trying to say, that to accuse him, like Knox did, of the full, crazy, radical historicism contradicts every single thing about his philosophy of history. Because the result of re-enactment is, according to Collingwood, that you succeed in thinking the exact thought as Julius Caesar, not a copy of it but the same thought, and this is a strong controversial claim in itself. As far as I am concerned is not a relativist claim, it is rather to the contrary.

Ivan Leudar

The re-enactment is though not necessarily an easy thing and the question is where the problems lie. I am trying to look at just what problems people have translating some of the Greek tragedies. Dodds' problem in translating *Bacchae* seems to be in making sense of the rituals, in understanding some other forms of life - how were the people living there - and not in their individual psychology (Dodds, 1960). [Dodds both assumes that 'folk psychology' remains the same and he takes some ideas from contemporary psychology.]

Mathieu Marion

Perhaps we should remember that Dodds is famous for the distinction between shame and guilt cultures; what is this shame and guilt - both emotions. The way to the understanding of these cultures is through the relation to emotions any one of us here can feel.

Wes Sharrock

It's clear that what's thinkable is historically dependent. I mean it is not like you can't think what Mommsen thought, and St Augustine what Mommsen thought, you know 500 years earlier. [...] What is underlying much of the history of ideas is [the question] 'how does a thing become thinkable'? What makes it a possible and an intelligible thing? [...] There is no sense in asking which one was the right one for the person to take at the certain time because you do not chose them - in that sense, they are forced. Winch talks about understanding what a person can think in a context. It is absolutely natural that, of course this person couldn't really not take that into account, and that person could no longer take that into account, but they could take this into account. So in a sense each one is the only possible point of view, because to understand that point of view is to understand it in connection to that particular time and place.

But then it kind of moves as if the point of view of an eighteenth century Englishman was a theory or doctrine, and so what you are doing is you are taking people who didn't have theories and doctrines and you are treating them as if they belong to a kind of social position. [...]

So you are not asking, was Mommsen right or wrong to think like this. But you can say now, setting aside the fact, that Mommsen was, was there something right or wrong about his view of the Roman Empire, were there things that we would accept or reject? So you have to acknowledge the fully rooted bit to understand it in the first place, and to find out what the position is. And then of course you can ask questions about it in the light of our own understanding, whether indeed he was wrong to think this, but perhaps led to think it, because of him being a nineteenth century German or an early

Christian and so on. That's not relativism at all.

Mathieu Marion

No, that's my whole point. Okay let me make this paper a bit clearer – that is exactly what I was trying to say. [...] There is obviously a truism in here, that it is not at all a relativism. Because of course each one writes from their own point of view because we can't extract ourselves from where we are and be on some sort of *ex archae aeternitatis* point of view from which we can look at all historical evidence about Julius Caesar; no we are caught within where we are. But that of course it doesn't mean that we cannot evaluate that Mommsen said wrong things about Caesar, because from your point of view they are wrong but you can also evaluate and say no, some are true and so on and so forth.

James Connelly

I just want to follow this up with reference to something that Collingwood sometimes comes up with which is the notion of real questions being related to real possibilities and real choices which he sometimes makes in the Philosophy of History and in Ethics and in his understanding in the history of Science and so on. So for example in Ethics he says you cannot compare two different choices where one of them is 'should I be Archbishop of Canterbury' when this is not a real possibility for you, and that this is important for the understanding of other cultures point or the understanding of being a footballer. You know, it is limited, is it a real choice for me to do this? Because only if it is a real choice I can project myself into it. So there is that point. And then in the case of the Toulmin quotation, the same thing there, there is no choice there in the real sense, so it is not a real question in other words to ask whether you can look at it from another point of view.

Now of course it could have been another Frenchman or another Englishman and in other papers he does talk about, as it were, different historians and their own particular biases, so he is not committed to the idea that there is one and only one eighteenth century English point of view. But it is his point again that it is an unreal question that people ask about it and that is what Knox doesn't seem to understand, that Collingwood is objecting to the unreal questions that people ask. Again in the *History of Science and the Function of Metaphysics and Civilisation* there is an interesting passage which I think substantiates some of your earlier points where he is asking about incommensurability, where he is asking, can we say the current state of science is better or worse than earlier science and you say, well, earlier science is the foundation of current science so it is not a real choice between the two, you cannot choose to have that one without having the other one because if that is the foundation of this one then that implies that they are not incommensurable of course. On the other side that you can't easily say well I will have that one, it is not as if you have got a real choice between them. I think it may be worth just bringing that thought into here.

Mike Lynch

It is very different from the Kuhnian examples where we wouldn't have a choice between phlogiston and oxygen or between Ptolemaic and Copernican [systems]. Kuhn looks into stark difference and then tries to historically account for the transition between the two. But this whole question you know, Steve Shapin argues that in some sense phrenology was part of the run up to localisation in neurology, you know, even though it's not a foundation in the sense that they build neurological localisation on a phrenological basis but it historically sets the

condition for the requirement to have places related to function in the brain.⁴⁶

Question

Would it be useful here to re-emphasise the similarity between Collingwood and Wittgenstein, because a lot of the problems here seem to come from reading Collingwood as proposing some kind of theory of epistemological absolutism.

Mike Lynch

We could say this is a transition into the plenary session

Dave Francis

If you take a Wittgensteinian reading of Collingwood, which would be something like what's *not* going on here is the proposal of a theory, but rather a series of observations about how people think, and how people think differently from one another and more complex than another and so on. If you read Collingwood that way, kind of through a Wittgensteinian lens, then you wouldn't get into this difficulty in the first place.

Mathieu Marion

Yes, that's right

General Discussion

Wes Sharrock

I just wanted to say, now that we have brought Kuhn into it, it is an interesting

analogy that Kuhn's problem was that the historian of science was a bit like an anthropologist, facing the same kind of problems. That's what got Kuhn going, that historians of science are not properly representing the autonomous culture of previous periods of science and that the story of the development of science is wrong because people get previous science wrong and they impose their retrospective conception of what science is and how it differs from [the contemporary] and that kind of thing. So we can make it Toulmin, Collingwood, Kuhn and Winch - the anthropology gang.

Mathieu Marion

On that score, perhaps just my own opinion, I get the impression that indeed Collingwood has this view that previous stages of our own culture are encapsulated in the present culture in such a way that they are accessible, so there is no incommensurability, there is no problem getting to the Greeks and so forth, and there is perfect continuity. And if there is any break it would be with civilisation and culture totally outside of our own.

Mike Lynch

Isn't this where the anthropological analogy with history becomes a little problematic? You could argue, "well, in the country I come from, and this country as well, it is just a mixture of different histories." But you could also say that if there were a continuous, relatively unbroken history, there might be some sort of a cumulative embodiment. But the idea that you have the 'savage' within you presupposes that somehow that savage is independent of local history, and the associated understandings of things, and that its relation to the environment in which you live is somehow bridgeable, somehow contained within us, which begins to look like that old stages-of-going from the primitive to the later stage.

⁴⁶ T.S. Kuhn (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
S. Shapin, 'The politics of observation: Cerebral anatomy and social interests in the Edinburgh Phrenology Debates, in R. Wallis (ed.), *On the Margins of Science: The Social Construction of Rejected Knowledge*. Sociological Review Monograph 27, Keele: The University of Keele, 1979, pp. 139-178.

Mathieu Marion

Yes, I see your point. I was just thinking about this point anyway, because I think that is how I pictured Collingwood and I am not saying, that is the right way around. On the contrary perhaps, on this score he is probably weak. As for the very last point you made, yes it sound like the good old sort of bad view. But on the other hand I think I was pointing out to Phil that he was insisting on this because he had a view that European civilisation had developed in such a way that in educating child and transforming them into adults we sterilise them so we break the relationship to our own emotions, because we sterilise ourselves away from some emotions and that makes us incapable to cope with culture where it is not like that anymore.

Mike Lynch

That's almost a Freudian idea, isn't it.

Mathieu Marion

It is, it is very close actually. The passages in which he talks about 'sterilising' in the *Principles of Art* are very close to where he speaks about Freud. [...] But I think that one can look at this as actually quite a progressive and sort of a liberating move that he was proposing for the adult European in 1938 - to be a bit more connected with their own emotions instead of basically being basically a bunch of stuck up people. [...]

Wes Sharrock

Winch says that the thing about the Azandes was that they were culturally independent of Western Christianity and so you wouldn't criticize witchcraft in the way that you would with Western European witchcraft which was culturally dependent on Christian tradition. So in terms of the various characters there are different issues of

continuity where in fact you have a continuous development where later stages relate to earlier stages and where evaluation is a different from trying to deal with independent cultural traditions. And one thing I did mention also, is probably worth really thinking about as a kind of philosophical exercise, the idea of a culture-free standard; because of course what is wrong with it is the notion that culture is an obstacle or restriction or source of trouble. That is something being of a cultural character detracts from it and if you can disentangle that from the issues, they might look quite different.

Mathieu Marion

But very clearly Collingwood comes across as the guy for whom culture is not an obstacle and that culture is just an expression of humanity, a thing to appreciate because of that.

[...]

Mike Lynch

From what you were saying he seems to have a view of humanity that makes it possible to cut through, at least, the culture that we might be embedded in, to relate to a common humanity. So that culture does in some sense- I am not sure if it would be correct to say, that culture gets in the way. But there does seem to be a distinction between the particulars of a culture and the humanity. [...]

Mathieu Marion

He is quite harsh on his own culture for sure

Ivan Leudar

Can I ask a question of James? It wasn't clear in Collingwood what these absolute presuppositions that we have in common might be. And it just seemed to me, would one assumption that he seems to make in doing the re-enactment be that the basic

feelings are similar in all people? That might be one [absolute presupposition]. The second one might concern the control of activities and the world - almost everybody makes the distinction between some things which we affect and some things which happen to us. And I am not saying these are in our nature, but it seems to me that there might be these two things that he seems to assume happen everywhere. I think the second one is more explicit and I just wondered that the assumption of common emotional makeup is implicit in much that he does.

Question

Oh, I think it probably is, although he doesn't explicitly say it.

Ivan Leudar

Well that is what I mean - he presupposes it!

Question

Yes, he does that. W.H. Walsh wrote a paper on this, on the constancy of human nature, I'll refer to that, which is essentially the same assumption, that there has to be a background assumption in order to make the trans-historical claims for the re-enactment doctrine to work and so on

Giuseppina D'Oro

On the other hand one must not forget that Collingwood wanted to combat Hume's view that there may be such a thing as a science of human nature, that human culture is ahistorical. So whilst emotions may be universal, human beliefs change drastically over time according to Collingwood. This is a crucial assumption. Forgetting this leads to scissors-and-paste history.

James Connelly

Well he did not want cultural artefacts, as it were, to be mistaken for intrinsic features of human nature.

Dave Francis

Going back to Wes's point. How do we deconstruct the notion of a culturally independent understanding? The way to do that presumably is to argue that the notion of culture itself is an empty notion, there is no such thing as culture in the sense in which anthropology and sociology treat it as a technical term. We are talking about how people live, what people do, we live the way we do, we do a variety of things, we believe in a variety of stuff, other people in other places live the ways they do, some of which are pretty similar to the ways we live, others in ways which are quite different from the stuff that we do, but not totally different in most cases.

Mathieu Marion

If I may say so the link through emotion is quite interesting precisely because it requires no theoretical rubbish in order to say, well, from the way we do things we need a bit of theory in order to say we understand the other culture or the way people live. We can understand very directly and very simply how...

David Francis

...so much of this is premised on the idea that there is a thing called culture. Let us apply a bit of (Whitehead) to this, this is a fallacy of misplaced concreteness, there is no culture, there are differences and there are similarities, and when we try and describe those we do so in a way that creates this so-called entity of culture. There is no such thing, let us do away with the term.

Mike Lynch

Is there such a thing as society?

[General laughter.]