

Aspects of R G Collingwood – Notes – Bob Clarke – January 2017

Biographical Notes:

- **Robin George Collingwood** (1889 -1943) was born at Cartmel, near Lake Windermere.
- Both of his parents were artists. His father was **W G Collingwood** who acted as **John Ruskin's** secretary when Ruskin was living at Brantwood, Coniston. W G was also an active archaeologist who involved young R G in his digs and, after WW1, W G designed many war memorials!
- In a well-educated family, R G was initially taught at home, but subsequently at Rugby School. He spent holidays with other young relatives in the Lake District, messing about in boats. **Arthur Ransome** was a friend of the family, and his *Swallows & Amazons* books were derived from their (enhanced) adventures.
- R G went up to Oxford and studied Classics.
- When very young, he had realised that philosophy was his metier. He was highly intelligent and spoke many languages fluently. He remained at Oxford teaching philosophy, capping his career as the **Waynefleet Professor of Metaphysics** at Magdalen College, Oxford 1935-1941.
- But he was a *polymath workaholic*! During summer vacations, he was an active archaeologist. He led a number of digs on British Roman sites & wrote more papers on archaeology than philosophy! He compiled a major work on *The Inscriptions of Roman Britain*.
- His philosophy informed his archaeological practices. As a Christian, his faith informed his philosophy.
- Having become the Waynefleet Professor, his health deteriorated from overwork and insomnia and he suffered several strokes, eventually dying of a stroke in 1943.

Philosophical Biographic Notes:

- R G conceived his mission as a philosopher (so he said) at the age of 8, having encountered Kant's, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* in his father's library!
- Prior to his going up to Oxford, **Idealism** had been a prominent philosophy there, but during his early years there, the leading Oxford philosophers of the day adopted varieties of **Realism** and **Positivism** [Positivism was a popular philosophy from **Compte** (1798 – 1857) via the **Vienna Circle**, via **Freddy Ayer** (1910 – 1989), (*Language, Truth and Logic* (1936)) until the 1960s]
- But R G definitively rejected **Realism** and espoused **Idealist** philosophy, influenced more by the Italian tradition (rather than the German Hegelian tradition): Benedetto Croce, Giovanni Gentile and Guido de Ruggiero, who was a friend of his. Kant and Dilthey were two other important influences on R G.
- As a lone Idealist among Realist Positivists, R G was something of an isolated lone voice at Oxford!!
- **History** became a major theme in his thought. He was essentially a **Historian of Ideas**.
- His eclectic **philosophy** encompassed **history, art, nature, myth and fairy stories, archaeology** and, with the build-up of **Fascism** on the Continent in the 1930s, **politics**. In his writings, he approached all of these topics **historically**. He was firmly **anti-Fascist**.
- In the late 1930s he realised that his ill-health would lead to his early death before he could publish all of his ideas in detail. He wrote his short **Autobiography** to record not just (i) his intellectual life, but also (ii) his trenchant moral critique of his Oxford Realist philosophical contemporaries, and (iii) the general thrust of the philosophy that he would have liked to write about if he could live long enough.
- He accused his Realist and Positivist contemporaries (whom he called '**Minute Philosophers**') of a **lack of moral engagement**. They espoused a **descriptive** rather than a **prescriptive** moral philosophy that touched on **ethics from the outside** as something *unfounded* that philosophers need not engage in.
- In the last pages of his **Autobiography** he accused his Oxford Realist contemporaries of teaching *a whole generation of students* to take an amoral, sceptical stance on ethical matters that contributed to the build-up of Fascism in Europe and in Oxford in particular. He effectively accused his Oxford philosophical colleagues of being **crypto-Fascists**. Not surprisingly this was not well received in Oxford!
- His most influential philosophical book **The Idea of History** was compiled from his lectures by his pupil T M Knox posthumously & probably does not present his ideas in exactly the way the he would have liked.
- His last book, *The New Leviathan* (1942), encompasses political thought, and indicts '*German Barbarism*'.

R G Collingwood Publications touched on here:

The Idea of History, Revised Edition, ed. van der Dussen (Oxford University Press, 1946, 1994). [IH].

An Essay on Metaphysics, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1940) Abbrev. [EM].

An Autobiography, (Oxford University Press, 1939) Abbrev. [AB].

The New Leviathan. (Oxford University Press, 1942, 2005) Abbrev. [NL] + many others

Key concepts: (1) *The Centrality of History for Philosophy*, (2) *A Logic of Question and Answer*,
(3) *Re-enactment* and (4) *Absolute Presuppositions*

- History is key to R G's philosophical thought: '*All history is the history of thought*'. [IH215, AB110].
- The answer to the hermeneutical question '*Why did this person act in such a way?*' was to be found by **reconstructing** the agent's thoughts so as to understand the *problems and aims, purposes and intentions* which gave rise to the actions. [IH215]. Thus R G's main doctrine for history was the **re-enactment** by the historian of the thought of historical agents [IH282-301].
- Re-enactment proceeds via a **Logic of Question and Answer**. Through this means we can re-enact the deliberative thought of earlier ages [AB29-43]
- R G held that the patterns of thought of different ages and societies derived from different '**Absolute Presuppositions**' (APs) which were generally not grasped by later generations [EM34-48]. But the historian must recognise them in order to be able to re-enact earlier thought.
- **AP** theory is developed in *An Essay on Metaphysics*, partly as a defence of **Metaphysics** against Positivists who claimed that Metaphysics was empty and its language meaningless – For R G, Metaphysics **just is** the labour of identifying what these APs are, Metaphysics is thus '*the attempt to find out what the absolute presuppositions have been made by this or that person or group of persons ...*' [EM47].

Philosophy from History:

- All of the above may appear to be R G's 'philosophy of history' - indeed, for R G: '*All history is a history of thought*', but also '**All knowledge is historical knowledge**': and thus *philosophy* – the *ultimate* discipline of knowledge - '*... is only a constituent element within history*' & (referring to Croce) '*all reality is history and all knowledge is historical knowledge*' [IH197, IH220]
- '*The so-called science of human nature or of the human mind resolves itself into history*' [IH220]
- The development of *deliberative, purposive* thought throughout history is R G's main subject matter. Thought takes on a life of its own [IH303]. We can reawaken the thoughts of a historical agent (e.g. Newton) and realise that they '*are not private property*' [IH450]. [Note similar theories developed by Popper, in his concepts of '*Objective Knowledge*' and '*World 3*', and Dawkins' concept of '*memes*']
- Historical thought is active, re-enactment is active, [IH218]: '*Thus the historical process is a process in which man creates for himself this or that kind of human nature*' [IH226]
- '*The historical process is itself a process of thought*', '*the mind actually develops ... powers from a latent to an actual state ... and brings them into effective existence*' [IH266]
- '*... a mind is nothing except its own activities ...*' ... the critical study of thinking '*... is not mere experience or consciousness, not even mere self-consciousness: it is self-knowledge*' [IH292]
- '*We study history ... in order to attain self-knowledge*'. [IH315]
- '*Philosophy then, as Collingwood understood it, had been liquidated and absorbed by history*', D Boucher, Introduction to R G's *The New Leviathan*, Ed. David Boucher (Oxford, 1992), pg. xxii.

Later Thought:

- In the *Idea of History* R G maintained that only deliberative thought could be re-enacted, but political events in Europe caused R G to move towards a recognition that emotion and feeling play an important active role in history, (Peter Johnson, (1998), *R.G. Collingwood: an introduction*, (Bristol, Thoemmes, 1998), pg.10) By 1940 he held that Fascism and Nazism '*owe their success to the emotional forces at their command*', see [AB137-167]. He wrote *The New Leviathan* to account for the rise of Fascism and Nazism in Europe and to take a philosophical stand against it.

Note that the academic journal **Collingwood and British Idealism Studies** is published twice yearly.