

William H. Dray: *History as Re-enactment* – R. G. Collingwood's *Idea of History*¹

*Frederik van Gelder*²

It's possible to be dishonest in philosophy, and this is the proof. Dray's book is a sustained polemic pretending to be a scholarly monograph. It does it by taking all of analytic philosophy's assumptions on historiography for granted, and measuring, in the light of this, an author – Collingwood – whose life work consisted in the demolition of the very assumptions which Dray takes for eternal verities. In this way Dray shows, to his own satisfaction, that Collingwood was not an analytic philosopher. That's a bit like going to great pains to prove that Churchill was not a dentist. That may be so, but it doesn't tell us much about Churchill, or in this case, Collingwood.

The issues involved here are not only central to philosophy but to all of the social sciences. They must be made explicit if they are going to be rescued from the partisan treatment they receive at Dray's hands. At least part of it is that old divide between analytic (or 'Anglo-American') philosophy on the one hand, continental philosophy on the other; (according to a different classification: Idealism/Realism) going back at least as far as Kant's critique of Hume, (Pascal versus Descartes, for that matter) reaching a kind of dramatic head during this century in the confrontation between Popper and Adorno during the early sixties. As John Passmore puts it:

„These two kinds of philosophising still survive. Philosophy is not, as science is, a single intellectual community. It is not just, as is also true in science, that philos-

1 Oxford University Press 1995.

2 This review published in: *Philosophy in Review*, 17 (1) 25-27 (1997)

ophers specialise. In a much more divisive way, they have different philosophical heroes, different ideas about what constitutes good and bad philosophising.“³

Dray’s speciality is the ad hominem, the snide insinuation, the academic nudge and wink, the pedant’s ‘we are not amused.’ Take the standard problem of how we are to relate to the views and attitudes of those who come from cultures different from our own, separated from us by time, geography, cultural differences – or, for that matter, by class, race or gender. No aspirant historian can ignore it. The literature on this question is huge; publications abound on individual aspects thereof – understanding versus explanation, verstehen/erklären, hermeneutics, structuralism versus functionalism, causes versus reasons. The questions are discussed not only by philosophers and historians but by sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists. In short: this is a standard and well-known problem within all of the social sciences. This may offend our intuition that there are objective truths independent of the knowing subject doing the perceiving – which is what analytic philosophy insists the natural sciences are saying – but from Kant onwards even this has been forcefully challenged.

That for Collingwood these questions are central is clear even from the tendentious way they are presented in this book, but it is typical for Dray that views he disapproves of are not countered by argument but rejected as the personal excentricities of the person holding them:

„As mentioned by Collingwood himself in his *Autobiography*, it seems to have been only in his lectures of 1928, after having experienced something like a philosophical ‘illumination’ at le Marteouret in France, that he came to make central to his account of historical reconstruction the notion that, if the historian is to understand past human activities in a properly humanistic way, he must get ‘inside’ them by a process of re-thinking or re-enactment.“⁴

In Dray’s portrayal of things, Collingwood is an eccentric odd-ball whose views are so outlandish that we owe a special debt of gratitude to anyone prepared to muster the patience to study this stuff at all:

„It thus sometimes requires a certain amount of patience, and even of goodwill, to elicit a sensible and coherent doctrine from what Collingwood actually has to say. There is nevertheless comfort for perplexed students of his writings to be derived from the attitude which he himself adopted to the writings of Fichte. ‘The chief

3 *Recent Philosophers – a supplement to ‘A Hundred Years of Philosophy.* London 1985, p. 12.

4 p. 23.

difficulty which a reader finds in dealing with Fichte's view of history', Collingwood declares, 'is the difficulty of being patient with what appears so silly.'

A few more examples of Dray's style: „apparent arrogance or intransigence“ (p. 30) „brusque remarks“, „stridency of manner and unevenness of performance“, „he snaps at an imaginary interlocutor bold enough to demand supporting reasons for a position he has taken: 'I am not arguing; I am telling him.'“ „there are traces of irritability in the earlier works as well as in the later“ – some positions are „grossly misconceived“, but this may have been the result of his „failing health“.

In short, anyone serious about understanding Collingwood or the issues raised by him will have to look elsewhere. The primary bibliography is useful, however, as well as the list of at least some of the unpublished manuscripts held by the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

All of this is a pity. Collingwood was publishing in the period between the wars, in the middle of that European and then world catastrophe which Hobsbawm calls „The Age of Total War“, and which was to cast its malevolent shadow upon everything which was to follow. His *Speculum Mentis* was published in 1924, his *Essay on Philosophical Method* in 1933, his *Autobiography* in 1939, (in which he explains why he was so dissatisfied with the Realism of his Oxford tutors, the same Realism with which Collingwood-expert Dray then beats him about the head half a century later) *Essay on Metaphysics* in 1940, *The Idea of Nature* posthumously in 1945. The dates speak volumes.

Our world is in crisis, while an important part of the intellectuals operating in the university system of education pretend that there is nothing amiss, and imply that even pointing this out is somehow 'not quite nice', an abuse of the rules of etiquette, or a subjective value-judgement not supported by the evidence.

„Two world wars in one generation, separated by an uninterrupted chain of local wars and revolutions, followed by no peace treaty for the vanquished and no respite for the victor, have ended in the anticipation of a third World War between the two remaining world powers. This moment of anticipation is like the calm that settles after all hopes have died. We no longer hope for an eventual restoration of the old world order with all its traditions, or for the reintegration of the masses of five continents who have been thrown into a chaos produced by the violence of wars and revolutions and the growing decay of all that has still been spared.“

That was written by Hannah Arendt, not by Collingwood, and it is a language which in its sense of urgency goes beyond that of the philosophising

Oxford don. But they express the same sense of unease with a historiographic positivism which thinks of its own enterprise as an „empirical science, like meteorology“ (*The Idea of History*, p. 1), the same sense of unease which moves Collingwood to turn to philosophy as a means of discussing these things. On all this one learns nothing at all from Dray, because the latter represents the same narrow specialisation, the same academic provincialism, against which Collingwood was protesting in his writing – unavailingly, as we learn from this book.