

# R. G. Collingwood: Historicist or Praxeologist?

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WORK IN PROGRESS – COMMENTS WELCOME

## I. Historicism, Positivism, Praxeology

Since its inception, the Austrian School has battled against the twin foes of positivism and historicism. Indeed, it was in the *Methodenstreit* against Gustav von Schmoller's historicist approach to economics that the Austrian School was born, or at any rate christened. Nevertheless, there is one version of historicism upon which Austrians tend to look as an ally – at least up to a point. I refer to what may be called the *Verstehen* school, associated with thinkers like Wilhelm Dilthey, Heinrich Rickert, Wilhelm Windelband, Benedetto Croce, Max Weber, and, notably for present purposes, the English philosopher and historian R. G. Collingwood (1889-1943). Austrians value this school for what Ludwig von Mises called its “methodological dualism,” that is, its recognition that the *Geisteswissenschaften*, or sciences of mind, should not imitate the methods of the *Naturwissenschaften*, or sciences of nature.

Struck by the success that inductive, mathematical, and experimental procedures had brought to the practice of natural science, the positivists had recommended that the humanistic sciences of history, economics, etc., should adopt the same approach. Against this view, the *Verstehen* school maintained that social science, and in particular history, is unique because rather than merely looking for external causal connections among the events with which it deals, it studies the *reasons* and *motives* behind those events. Hence the proper approach must be to understand, *verstehen*, such reasons and motives, rather than looking for empirical laws in the positivist manner.

The reductionist attitude of positivism, Mises writes, “moved first Dilthey, then Windelband, Rickert, Max Weber, Croce, and Collingwood to opposition.” These thinkers “made history self-conscious” by “elucidating the epistemological features of the study of history.” (Mises 1985b, 308-9)

The refutation of the positivistic doctrine concerning history is an achievement of several German philosophers, first of all of Wilhelm Windelband and of Heinrich Rickert. They pointed out in what the fundamental difference between history, the record of human action, and the natural sciences consists. Human action is purposive, it aims at the attainment of definite ends chosen, it cannot be treated without reference to these ends ....  
(Mises 1990, 40)

The *Verstehen* school had successfully vindicated the autonomy of history.

Thus far, the Austrians and the *Verstehen* theorists can agree: the task of social science is, in Ludwig Lachmann's felicitous phrase, "to make the world around us intelligible in terms of human action and the pursuit of plans."<sup>1</sup> (Lachmann (1977), pp. 261-262.) But in Mises' view, the *Verstehen* theorists had escaped from positivism only to fall into a kind of relativism. In rejecting the model of the natural sciences, they took themselves to have closed off the possibility of a social science that could claim "universal validity for all human action irrespective of time, geography, and the racial and national characteristics of people."

For men living in the spiritual climate of the second German Reich, it was an understood thing that the pretensions of "abstract" economic theory were vain .... As they saw it, human action ... could be dealt with scientifically only by history. Their radical empiricism prevented them from paying any attention to the possibility of an a priori science of human action.

The positivist dogma that Dilthey, Windelband, Rickert and their followers demolished was not relativistic. It postulated a science – sociology – that would derive from the treatment of the empirical data provided by history a body of knowledge that would render to the mind the same services with regard to human action that physics renders with regard to the events in the sphere of nature. The German philosophers demonstrated that such a general science of action could not be elaborated

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<sup>1</sup> The full Lachmann quotation is: "Economics has two tasks. The first is to make the world around us intelligible in terms of human action and the pursuit of plans. The second is to trace the unintended consequences of such action." But the second task is really an application of the first, not an addendum to it. When Lachmann refers to unintended consequences, he's not talking about holes in the ozone layer and the like; he's talking about the purposeful actions that B takes as a response, unintended by A, to A's purposeful actions – as when the imposition of price controls (a purposeful action on the part of some politicians) has the unintended consequence of shortages (a purposeful response on the part of producers to the costs imposed by the controls). See n. 10 below.

by a posteriori reasoning. The idea that it could be the product of a priori reasoning did not occur to them.  
(Mises 1990, 40-41)

Accordingly, in renouncing the errors of positivism, the *Verstehen* school had also renounced the one thing that positivism had, from the Austrian standpoint, gotten *right*: the conception of human action as governed by timeless laws. If there are no such laws, then economic *theory* becomes impossible; there is only economic history. The *Verstehen* theorists had become historicists:

The fundamental thesis of historicism is the proposition that, apart from the natural sciences, mathematics, and logic, there is no knowledge but that provided by history. There is no regularity in the concatenation and sequence of phenomena and events in the sphere of human action. Consequently the attempts to develop a science of economics and discover economic laws are vain. The only sensible method of dealing with human action, exploits and institutions is the historical method. ... [I]n his proper field, the exposition of past events, [the historian] does not rely on any other branch of knowledge. The standards and general rules to which he resorts in dealing with the historical material are to be abstracted from this very material. They must not be borrowed from any other source.  
(Mises 1985b, 199)

For Mises, by contrast, there are *two distinct* methodological dualisms that must be recognised by any adequate account of social science. One is the distinction between the methods of natural science and the methods of social science; we may call this *first-order methodological dualism*. The second is a distinction *within* the social sciences: between history, which follows what Mises calls the *thymological* method of understanding (*Verstehen*), and economics, which follows what Mises calls the *praxeological* method of conceiving (*Begreifen*). (Mises 1978, Mises 1981, Mises 1985b, Mises 1990, Mises 1998) This latter distinction we may call *second-order methodological dualism*. While thymology is *a posteriori*, praxeology is *a priori*, and indeed represents the *a priori* conditions of thymology's intelligibility;<sup>2</sup> it is the timeless logical features of purposeful action that *constitute* "the sphere of history," though they do not determine its specific content. (Mises 1990, 47) Hence human action is law-governed, just as the positivists

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<sup>2</sup> Mises' distinction between natural science, thymology, and praxeology may be seen as corresponding to Gottlob Frege's distinction between the outer, inner, and third realms.

claimed, but the laws in question are conceptual, not empirical, and are essentially concerned with the *meaning* that actions have for their agents. They are the laws of *Verstehen*, but not the product of *Verstehen*. From Mises' standpoint, the merit of the *Verstehen* school lies in its recognition of first-order methodological dualism, while its chief error lies in its failure to recognise second-order methodological dualism.

A somewhat different way of illustrating the relevant distinctions is as follows. There are two questions that might be asked about the character of social-scientific explanation. First, is it *teleological*? That is, does it make essential reference to reasons and purposes, rather than mere causal connections? Second, is it *nomological*? That is, does it appeal to laws that are necessary, timeless, and universal? Praxeology answers yes to both questions. Historicism, at least of the *Verstehen* variety, answers yes to the first question and no to the second. Positivism answers no to the first question and yes to the second.<sup>3</sup> Thus positivism and historicism each grasp one side of the truth and disparage the other, while praxeology transcends the shortcomings of both camps.

My present concern is with R. G. Collingwood, generally regarded as the 20th century's foremost writer on the philosophy of history. As we have seen, Mises identifies Collingwood as a member of the *Verstehen* school, and *eo ipso* as an historicist; but he also attributes to Collingwood a certain insight that the other *Verstehen* theorists lacked:

Their interpretations were in many regards unsatisfactory. They were deluded by many of the fundamental errors of historicism. All but Collingwood failed entirely to recognize the unique epistemological character of economics.

(Mises 1985b, 308)

Now the “unique epistemological character of economics,” for Mises, is precisely that it is an *a priori* praxeological science transcending the limitations of mere history. We can see, then, how Mises proposes to interpret Collingwood. In assigning Collingwood to the ranks of the *Verstehen* historicists, Mises is saying that Collingwood grasps first-order

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<sup>3</sup> Is there any major school of thought that answers no to both questions? Some of the more vulgar historicists (e.g., Schmoller, Marx) sometimes sound as though they are embracing this position. But they can also sound like *Verstehen* theorists, or again like positivists. Their views are perhaps too muddled to be lucidly categorised.

but not second-order methodological dualism; but in granting that Collingwood did not “fail entirely” to recognise the status of economics, Mises is also suggesting that Collingwood did at least have a *partial* or *implicit* grasp of second-order methodological dualism, while falling short of a complete understanding.<sup>4</sup> Collingwood is perched uneasily between historicism and praxeology.

I propose to examine Collingwood’s relation to the two methodological dualisms identified by Mises. As we shall see, Mises has put his finger on the key to interpreting Collingwood on this issue: Collingwood is a consistent defender of first-order methodological dualism, but wavers between affirming and denying second-order methodological dualism. Placing Mises and Collingwood in juxtaposition will enable us to understand both thinkers better, as well as illuminating possible “gains from trade.” I hope to show that, despite his irresolute attitude toward second-order methodological dualism, Collingwood is an exceptionally able and important thinker whose affinities with Mises run deep, and who deserves to be better known in Austrian circles.<sup>5</sup>

## II. Collingwood as Anti-Positivist

Collingwood was an enthusiastic admirer of Francis Bacon. This fact might seem to cast doubt on his credentials as a first-order methodological dualist in anything like the Austrian style. After all, has not Murray Rothbard denounced Bacon as “the prophet of primitive and naïve empiricism, the guru of fact-grubbing,” who reduced scientific inquiry to “sifting endlessly and almost mindlessly through empirical data”? (Rothbard 1995, 129, 292) In criticism of Baconian method, Rothbard writes:

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<sup>4</sup> We should not assume that Collingwood is the only *Verstehen* theorist of whom this is true; Croce, e.g., may well be another. For parallels between Croce and Mises, see Kirzner 1960.

<sup>5</sup> What about influence? By the time of Collingwood’s death (1943), Mises was not especially well-known in Britain, and I have found no evidence that Collingwood knew of his work – though he must certainly have been aware in general terms of the role the Austrian School had played in the *Methodenstreit*. We know that Mises had read Collingwood’s *The Idea of History* (published posthumously in 1946), since he quotes from it twice in *The Ultimate Foundation of Economic Science*. (Mises 1978, 135nn.) Several passages in Mises’ *Theory and History* bear the clear stamp of influence from *The Idea of History* as well. Mises cites no other work of Collingwood’s, but his remark about Collingwood’s understanding of economics makes it virtually certain that Mises had also read Collingwood’s 1925 article “Economics as a Philosophical Science.” (*International Journal of Ethics* 35 (1925), 162-85; reprinted in Collingwood 1989, 58-77.) Despite the striking parallels between that article and Mises’ thought, chronological considerations appear to rule out the possibility of substantial influence in either direction.

No scientific truths are ever discovered by inchoate fact-digging. The scientist must first have framed hypotheses; in short, the scientist, before gathering and collating facts, must have a pretty good idea of what to look for, and why.  
(Rothbard 1995, 292)

But while Rothbard and Collingwood may disagree about *Bacon*, they are not necessarily disagreeing about *method*. Collingwood writes:

Francis Bacon, lawyer and philosopher, laid it down in one of his memorable phrases that the natural scientist must ‘put Nature to the question’. What he was denying, when he wrote this, was that the scientist’s attitude toward nature should be one of respectful attentiveness, waiting upon her utterances and building his theories on the basis of what she chooses to vouchsafe him. What he was asserting was two things at once: first, that the scientist must take the initiative, deciding for himself what he wants to know and formulating this in his own mind in the shape of a question; and secondly, that he must find means of compelling nature to answer, devising tortures under which she can no longer hold her tongue. Here, in a single brief epigram, Bacon laid down once for all the true theory of experimental science.

It is also, though Bacon did not know this, the true theory of historical method. ... The scissors-and-paste historian reads [historical sources] in a simply receptive spirit, to find out what they said. The scientific historian reads them with a question in his mind, having taken the initiative by deciding for himself what he wants to find out from them. Further, the scissors-and-paste historian reads them on the understanding that what they did not tell him in so many words he would never find out from them at all; the scientific historian puts them to the torture, twisting a passage ostensibly about something quite different into an answer to the question he has decided to ask.

(Collingwood 1993, 269-70)

In short, the traits Collingwood praises Bacon for exemplifying are the very traits Rothbard condemns Bacon for lacking. Whoever is correct on the *interpretive* issue (I’m inclined to think both sides are exaggerating), their standards for *evaluation* are quite similar.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mises likewise applauds, though without reference to Bacon, the introduction into history of “the critical method,” which liberates history from a “naïve attachment to what has been handed down in the chronicles and historical works of the past,” teaching it to “subject all sources to critical scrutiny.” (Mises 1976, 68)

While history and natural science agree in being (in Collingwood's sense) Baconian, i.e. in being *critical*, this critical approach takes different forms in the two domains. Indeed, their methods diverge precisely *because* they are both critical. Collingwood distinguishes "two approaches to the problem of self-knowledge: the natural sciences and the sciences of man." Each "has its own problems and must solve them by its own methods."

Neither can do anything but harm, either to itself or to its fellow, by trespassing on its fellow's hunt. ... Of these two different forms of science, *the one that has started a hare must catch it*. ... The reason is plain. You can only solve a problem which you recognise to be a problem. ... The same methods, therefore, which led to the asking of a question must lead to the answering of it.  
(Collingwood 1992, 12-13)

Collingwood accordingly inveighs against "the uncritical application to philosophical questions of methods and results derived from the sciences." A humanistic discipline "has its own problems and its own methods, and must look for its own results" rather than trying to ape the methods of the natural scientist. "Science is the scene of remarkable triumphs," Collingwood admits, but "so is agriculture"; just as the success of agriculture does not imply that "surgeons ought to perform their operations with a plough," neither does the success of science imply that "philosophers ought to attack their problems with the weapon of the scientist." (Collingwood 1924, 281)

For Collingwood, the crucial difference between history and natural science is that historical events have both an "inside" and an "outside":

The historian, investigating any event in the past, makes a distinction between what may be called the outside and the inside of the event. By the outside of the event I mean everything belonging to it which can be described in terms of bodies and their movements: the passage of Caesar, accompanied by certain men, across a river called the Rubicon at one date, or the spilling of his blood on the floor of the senate-house at another. By the inside of the event I mean that in it which can only be described in terms of thought: Caesar's defiance of Republican law, or the clash of constitutional policy between himself and the assassins. The historian is never concerned with either of these to the exclusion of the other. He is investigating not mere events (where by a mere event I mean one which

has only an outside and no inside) but actions, and an action is the unity of the outside and inside of the event. He is interested in the crossing of the Rubicon only in its relation to Republican law, and in the spilling of Caesar's blood only in its relation to a constitutional conflict. His work may begin by discovering the outside of an event, but it can never end there; he must always remember that the event was an action, and that his main task is to think himself into this action, to discern the thought of its agent.  
(Collingwood 1993, 213)

In history, then, explaining an action involves uncovering the connection between its "inside" and its "outside." In natural science, by contrast, such a procedure would be inappropriate, since physical events have no "inside."

In the case of nature, this distinction between the outside and the inside of an event does not arise. ... It is true that the scientist, like the historian, has to go beyond the mere discovery of events; but the direction in which he moves is very different. Instead of conceiving the event as an action and attempting to rediscover the thought of its agent, penetrating from the outside of the event to the inside, the scientist goes beyond the event, observes its relation to others, and thus brings it under a general formula or law of nature.  
(Collingwood 1993, 214)

Now it is clear how a positivist is likely to respond to Collingwood's distinction. *Look here, Collingwood, the positivist will say; your talk about the "inside" and "outside" of events is just a spooky metaphysical-sounding way of talking about causal relations among events. Of course the historian looks for such causal relations, just as the natural scientist does; when you say that the historian looks for the "inside" of the event, all you really mean is that the historian, to be sure, looks for causes of the event, but not just any sort of causes – rather, causes that are beliefs or desires or plans or some such. And indeed that has proven to be a generally reliable way to proceed; you're just using a rather picturesque, and I'm afraid misleading, metaphor to make this dull and uncontested point. Just as the natural scientist explains a physical event by invoking inductively-grounded causal laws linking events of that sort with earlier physical events, so the historian explains an historical event by invoking inductively-grounded causal laws linking events of that sort with the beliefs and desires of human beings. And so long as you don't mean anything more mysterious than that by "Verstehen," we positivists are*



Verstehen theorists too. *Historical laws may differ from physical laws in the nature of their relata, but the nature of the relation itself is precisely the same in both cases. Get over it!* (To see a positivist saying something very much like this, read Hempel 1942.)<sup>7</sup>

For Collingwood, however, such a response would be a misunderstanding. We do not first identify the historical event and then look about for some other event in terms of which to explain it. Once we have fully identified the historical event, we have explained it. When Collingwood says that in understanding an historical event we must see past the event's outside to its inside, it's important not to think of the inside as something like a gremlin inside a black box (or inside a transparent box, for that matter). For then we could have the box without the gremlin or vice versa. Rather, inside and outside are related as the concave and convex sides of a curve; their relation to one another is logical, not causal.

For science, the event is discovered by perceiving it, and the further search for its cause is conducted by assigning it to its class and determining the relation between that class and others. For history, the object to be discovered is not the mere event, but the thought expressed in it. To discover that fact is already to understand it. After the historian has ascertained the facts, there is no further process of inquiring into their causes. When he knows what happened, he already knows why it happened.

(Collingwood 1993, 214)

Crusoe did not *first* ascertain that this was a human footprint and *then* infer that it had been made by a human visitor. Neither do I *first* discover certain stratified remains (La Graufesenque Samian, Flavian coarse pottery, mint coins of Vespasian) and *then* infer a Flavian occupation. To discover *what* the evidence is, is already to interpret it. ... One must be careful then not to assert an *inferential relation* between the 'evidence' and the 'conclusion to which it leads'. The relation between the two things is more like the relation between seeing a surface and seeing a body. To see the surface intelligently *is* to see the body: and if *not* seen intelligently the surface doesn't provide data from which a body can be inferred.

(Collingwood 1999, 140-41)

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<sup>7</sup> Of course Hempel belongs to the *better* class of positivists – those who at least allow psychological states to enter into historical laws, rather than insisting that such states be reduced to something describable in purely physical terms.

The point Collingwood is making here is essentially the same as Hayek's observation that "all propositions of economic theory refer to things which are defined in terms of human attitudes toward them." (Hayek 1948, 52n.; cf. Hayek 1979, 52) Any such items as "tools, medicine, weapons, words, sentences, communications, and acts of production" – in short, all the various sorts of "objects of human activity which constantly occur in the social sciences" – are *defined* not in terms of their objective physical properties, since "there is no single physical property which any one member of a class must possess," but in terms of their meanings for the people who use them. (Hayek 1948, 56; cf. Mises 1998, 40)

If we define an object in terms of a person's attitude toward it, it follows, of course, that the definition of the object implies a statement about the attitude of the person toward the thing. When we say that a person possesses food or money, or that he utters a word, we imply that he knows that the first can be eaten, that the second can be used to buy something with, and that the third can be understood ....  
(Hayek 1948, 62-3)

When I recognise something as "money" or as a "weapon" – that is, as an item defined in terms of human purposes – I simultaneously begin to understand the behaviour of the people using it; I can place the item in "a scheme of actions which 'make sense' just because I have come to regard it not as a thing with certain physical properties but as the kind of thing which fits into the pattern of my own purposive action." (Hayek 1948, 65-6) As historians, we do not so much *find* our evidence as *make* it.<sup>8</sup>

In short, when we are dealing with objects whose nature is defined in terms of terms of beliefs and desires, figuring out what beliefs and desires lie behind it is no longer a purely empirical inquiry. As Collingwood points out, an archeologist cannot even *describe* his data "without using some interpretative terms implying purpose, like 'wall', 'pottery', 'implement', 'hearth' ...." (Collingwood 1939, 133) The "laws" linking

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<sup>8</sup> "The whole perceptible world, then, is potentially and in principle evidence to the historian. It becomes actual evidence in so far as he can use it. ... Evidence is evidence only when someone contemplates it historically." (Collingwood 1993, 247; cf. Reisman 2002 on natural resources.)

Vespasian coins with a Flavian occupation are conceptual, not causal. In identifying *what* the item is, we have already discovered its “inside.”<sup>9</sup>

Does this mean that the presence of Vespasian coins at a site *logically guarantees* the earlier presence of a Flavian occupation at that site? If that is what Collingwood means, we should have to chide him for shaky logic. But we need not so interpret him. It is often assumed that evidentiary connections, if conceptual, must be necessary; this is unwarranted. It may be a conceptual truth that A is evidence for B, without its being a conceptual truth that A is *decisive* evidence for B. Then A and B would be linked *logically* and yet at the same time *defeasibly*. In the absence of defeaters, the evidence would then be *provisionally* decisive, i.e., decisive in the present circumstances, decisive pending further evidence. These conceptual-yet-defeasible pieces of evidence are what Wittgenstein calls *criteria*, and one learns them not by looking the relevant terms up in a dictionary but by mastering certain interpretive practices. Whether this is the sort of thing Collingwood means I am not certain; but I think it is what he *ought* to mean.

In *The Principles of Art*, Collingwood says that there can “never be any absolute assurance” that our interpretations are correct, but only “an empirical and relative assurance,” based on our apparent success in making sense of the actions we are trying to interpret. (Collingwood 1938, 250-51) But in *The Idea of History*, Collingwood maintains that finding an historical interpretation that “proved its point as conclusively as a demonstration in mathematics” is an experience familiar to any competent historian, and that those who doubt this had better become trained historians and find out for themselves. (Collingwood 1993, 262-3)

These two claims are perhaps not as irreconcilable as they appear. When Collingwood says that historical demonstrations are as compulsory as mathematical ones, he may mean that although “history consists mostly of imaginings, similarly interpolated between and among the facts recorded by our authorities,” it is not an empirical but an “*a priori* imagination,” embodying “universality and necessity.” “What the historian imagines, in so far as he does his work aright, is what he must imagine,” and indeed

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<sup>9</sup> Compare Hayek: “[W]hile at the world of nature we look from the outside, we look at the world of society from the inside; while, as far as nature is concerned, our concepts are about the facts and have to be adapted to the facts, in the world of society at least some of the most familiar concepts are the stuff from which that world is made.” (Hayek 1948, 76)

“what any historian in possession of his evidence would imagine.” (Collingwood 1999, 151-2) On the other hand, when Collingwood says that historical assurance is merely “empirical and relative,” he may mean that the historian’s assurance is always open to being overturned by new evidence: “no historical conclusion is closed in perpetuity.” (Collingwood 1999, 156) What evidence the historian actually possesses at any given time is an empirical and contingent matter; what interpretive conclusion should be drawn, *given* that evidence, is by contrast *a priori* and necessary.

This may be a useful corrective to Mises’ judgment that historical interpretation must always fall short of “scientific objectivity” because “historians may agree in everything that can be established in a rational way and nevertheless widely disagree in their interpretations.” (Mises 1990, 12) Yet given that, for Collingwood, historical “evidence” seems to be theory-laden all the way down (Collingwood 1965, 29-30), it’s not clear how the contrast between contingent evidence and necessary inference is to be maintained. In the end, Collingwood seems to be pointing to something like reflective equilibrium. (See Collingwood 1999, 154-8.)

In any case, the connection between the inside and the outside of an object of historical study is *in some sense* conceptual, not causal. Collingwood applies this principle to the specific case of *language*:

The sensuous vehicle of discourse, sound or the like, is not discourse. To discourse is to *mean something* by the sounds (or what not) you make. A language is not a system of sounds or the like; it is a system of sounds or the like as having meanings.  
(Collingwood 1992, 41)

Descartes, looking at the fire, asked himself whether in addition to his own idea of as fire there was also a real fire. For Vico, looking at such a thing as the Italian language of his own day, no parallel question could arise. The distinction between the idea of such an historical reality and the reality itself would be meaningless. The Italian language is exactly what the people who use it think it is.  
(Collingwood 1993, 66)

In general, the appearance/reality gap does not apply in social science – or at least it does not apply in the same way as in natural science. When events are identified in terms of their meanings, an event is whatever the participants in that action find it to be:

When I speak of action, I shall be referring to that kind of action in which the agent does what he does not because he is in a certain situation, but because he knows or believes himself to be in a certain situation.  
(Collingwood 1939, 102)

The principles here referred to are different from the causal laws of natural science in that they do not operate except consciously. It is only because the player knows the rules of the game that the rules of the game explain his moves.  
(Collingwood 1993, 475)

Man as body is *whatever the sciences of body say that he is*. ... Man as mind is *whatever he is conscious of being*.  
(Collingwood 1992, 7)

Hence in the social sciences, the *cause* of an action is never “a mere situation or state of things,” but always “a situation or state of things known or believed by the agent in question to exist.” (Collingwood 1998, 292) In this respect Collingwood is in perfect agreement with the *methodological subjectivism* of the Austrian School:

There is for history nothing beyond people’s ideas and the ends they were aiming at motivated by these ideas. If the historian refers to the meaning of a fact, he always refers either to the interpretation acting men gave to the situation in which they had to live and to act ... or to the interpretation which other people gave to the result of these actions.<sup>10</sup>  
(Mises 1985b, 161)

For Collingwood, then, historical events are logically, rather than causally, related to the facts that explain them; in philosophical terminology, the relation between the explanatory factors and what they explain is an *internal* rather than an *external* relation. That is the point of calling the explanatory factor the “inside” of the event. In historical explanation, fully identifying the event – that is, identifying its “inside” – *is* explaining it. We do not need to cast around for *other* events.

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<sup>10</sup> Note that these two interpretations correspond respectively to Lachmann’s “two tasks” of economics; see n. 1 above.

That is not to say that historical explanation is not concerned with relations between events. If two events are part of the same plan, then their insides will exhibit internal relations with one another. When we are “looking at history empirically, as mere outward facts,” then we will “see no logical connexions”; nor should we, for “between the mere events, there *are* none.”

But history consists of actions, and actions have an inside and an outside; on the outside they are mere events, related in space and time but not otherwise; on the inside they are thoughts, bound to each other by logical connexions.

(Collingwood 1993, 118)

What makes different phases of a plan form part of a single action, a single historical event, is not their causal relations but their teleological ones.

The end depends on the means in the sense that it is conditional; for its realization on the means; the agent cannot have the end without having the means. The means depend on the end in the sense that the means are conditional for being good, that is, for being chosen, on the end's being chosen. The agent only chooses the means because he chooses the end; his choice of the means is logically dependent on the choice of the end. ... It follows that the two choices which make up one single choice are choices of two actions which together make up one single action. ... [W]hen a man has begun taking steps which constitute the means to a given end, the activity which is the end does not lie before him as something wholly in the future, something merely expected or hoped for; it stands in his consciousness as an activity upon which he has already embarked, to which he is already committed. ... [E]very action is a complex of actions. There is no such thing as an absolutely simple and indivisible action. ... [A]n action [falls] into two distinct phases, logically connected by a relation of mutual dependence, but distinct in the sense that one phase is the completing or crowning phase, the other the preparatory or preliminary phase. These two phases are again subdivisible [into crowning and preliminary phases]. The crowning phase is the end; the preliminary phase is the means. ... [W]hen he begins to do the action, he is already conscious of himself as beginning to do the action which is the end: but he is doing it not immediately but mediately, doing it by doing ... the means to it.

(Collingwood 1992, 435-7)

A plan consists of acts organized into a coherent whole; but it must be remembered that no plan consists of a definite finite number of acts; and that any act, however trifling, is already a plan and contains in itself a diversity of lesser acts. However far one pushes the analysis of a plan into its component parts, one never reaches an atomic act which cannot be subdivided. And similarly, however far one goes in adding act to act and forming more and more complex plans, every plan that really is a plan has the simplicity and unity of a single act.<sup>11</sup>  
(Collingwood 1989, 112)

Neither a single event nor a sequence of events is *explained*, in the distinctively historical sense of “explanation,” by pointing to purely causal relations; any such sequence of events must be exhibited as a unified whole with a *single* inside.

Identifying the causal antecedents of an event, in the natural-scientific sense of “cause,” is neither necessary nor sufficient for an *historical* explanation of it:

No historian can claim to have shown that a certain sequence of events *must* have fallen out thus and no otherwise. The fall of a man’s income may lead him to retrenchment or to bankruptcy: which it does, depends certainly on what kind of man he is, but what kind of man he is can never be finally determined: he determines it himself *in* his own action as he goes on. He goes on to bankruptcy and we say he *was* an extravagant and thriftless man, but this does not explain *why* he chose that alternative, it is only a way of saying that he *did* choose it.  
(Collingwood 1999, 142)

We explain the event by illuminating it from the inside, not by looking for empirical laws governing all events of that type. For Collingwood, then, the “idea of history” is the “idea of action as individual.” History is concerned, not with the causes of revolution *per se*, but with, say, the French Revolution; the historian’s task is to analyse “the individual action or complex of actions in its context of equally individual actions.” Why did the instigators of the French revolution do what they did? Because they sought certain ends and followed certain rules. “But what ends they pursued, and what rules they recognized, are questions whose only answer is: ‘They did pursue those ends. They did recognize

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<sup>11</sup> Compare Mises: “Human life is an unceasing sequence of single actions. But the single action is by no means isolated. It is a link in a chain of actions which together form an action on a higher level aiming at a more distant end. Every action has two aspects. It is on the one hand a partial action in the framework of a further-stretching action, the performance of a fraction of the aims set by a more far-reaching action. It is on the other hand itself a whole with regard to the actions aimed at by the performance of its own parts.” (Mises 1998, 45)

those rules. The fact that they did so is the fact that they were the men who made the French Revolution.”<sup>12</sup> (Collingwood 1989, 156-7)

Natural events enter into history only insofar as they are referred to in the thoughts and plans of conscious agents; and a nonexistent natural event falsely believed to be actual will have just as much impact on history as the real thing. (Collingwood 1993, 317) Hence nature is not, in historical science, a separate explanatory principle apart from thought:

It is not nature as such and in itself (where nature means the natural environment) that turns man’s energies here in one direction, there in another: it is what man makes of nature by his enterprise, his dexterity, his ingenuity, or his lack of these things. The ‘unplumbed, salt, estranging sea’, as a nineteenth-century poet called it, echoing with some servility this eighteenth-century conception, estranges only those people who have not learned to sail on it. When they have discovered the art of navigation, and become reasonably skilled mariners, the sea no longer estranges, it unites. It ceases to be an obstacle, it becomes a highway. Beset with danger, no doubt .... but no human being has ever put safety first and stayed at home if he thought, as who has ever not thought? that something he wanted was waiting for him at the other end of the road. And if he did, it would still be his thought about the dangers, not the dangers themselves, that kept him at home.  
(Collingwood 1999, 93-4)

When people ... speak (as ... Montesquieu, for example, did) of the influence of geography or climate on history, they are mistaking the effect of a certain person’s or people’s conception of nature on their actions for an effect of nature itself. The fact that certain people live, for example, on an island has in itself no effect on their history; what has an effect is the way they conceive that insular position; whether for example they regard the sea as a barrier or as a highway to traffic. Had it been otherwise, their insular position, being a constant fact, would have produced a constant effect on their historical life; whereas it will produce one effect if they

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<sup>12</sup> Compare Mises: “In dealing with such ultimate data history refers to individuality. The characteristics of individual men, their ideas and judgments of value as well as the actions guided by those ideas and judgments, cannot be traced back to something of which they would be the derivatives. There is no answer to the question why Frederick II invaded Silesia except: because he was Frederick II.” (Mises 1985b, 183)

“Why did Caesar cross the Rubicon? ... Perhaps Cicero or Brutus, faced with a similar situation, would have behaved differently. The only correct answer is: he crossed the Rubicon because he was Caesar. ... What we call a man’s or a group’s character is the totality of our knowledge about their conduct. If they had behaved otherwise than as they actually did, our notions of their character would be different.” (Mises 1985a, 239-40)



have not mastered the art of navigation, a different effect if they have mastered it better than their neighbours, a third if they have mastered it worse than their neighbours, and a fourth if every one uses aeroplanes.<sup>13</sup> (Collingwood 1993, 200)

History is thus determined, not by nature, but by what human beings make of nature.

The inside of an historical event consists of thought. “All history,” Collingwood concludes, “is the history of thought.”<sup>14</sup> (Collingwood 1993, 215) The only way for the historian to “discern the thoughts which he is trying to discover” is by “re-thinking them in his own mind.” All history, then, is “the re-enactment of past thought in the historian’s own mind.” (Collingwood 1993, 215)

Suppose, for example, he is reading the Theodosian Code, and has before him a certain edict of an emperor. Merely reading the words and being able to translate them does not amount to knowing their historical significance. In order to do that he must envisage the situation with which the emperor was trying to deal, and he must envisage it as that emperor envisaged it. Then he must see for himself, just as if the emperor’s situation were his own, how such a situation might be dealt with; he must see the possible alternatives, and the reasons for choosing one rather than another; and thus he must go through the process which the emperor went through in deciding on this particular course.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Compare Mises: “The geographical interpretation of history failed to recognize [that t]he environment works only through the medium of the human mind. ... The natural conditions which render skiing a very useful means for traveling were present both in Scandinavia and in the Alps. But the Scandinavians invented the skis, whereas the inhabitants of the Alps did not. For hundreds, nay thousands of years these peasants were closeted during the long winter months in their mountain homes and looked longingly upon the inaccessible villages down in the valleys and upon the unapproachable homesteads of their fellow farmers. But this desire did not activate their inventive spirit. ... Different men and the same men at different times respond in a different way to the same stimuli.” (Mises 1990, 290)

“To say that man reacts to stimuli and adjusts himself to the conditions of his environment does not provide a satisfactory answer. To the stimulus offered by the English Channel some people have reacted by staying at home; others have crossed it in rowboats, sailing ships, steamers, or, in modern times simply by swimming. Some fly over it in planes; others design schemes for tunneling under it.” (Mises 1985b, 245)

Though Mises does not cite *The Idea of History* here, the similarity in wording suggests that he has Collingwood’s “insular position” example in mind.

<sup>14</sup> Compare Mises: “The genuine history of mankind is the history of ideas.” (Mises 1985b, 187)

“History is the record of human action. Human action is the conscious effort of man to substitute more satisfactory conditions for less satisfactory ones. Ideas determine what are to be considered more and less satisfactory conditions and what means are to be resorted to to alter them. Thus ideas are the main theme of the study of history.” (Mises 1985b, 224-5)

<sup>15</sup> Compare Mises’ claim that the *Verstehen* method “puts us into the milieu of the action” by reconstructing “the valuations, the aims, the theories, the beliefs and the errors ... of the acting individuals and the way in which they envisaged the conditions under which they had to act.” (Mises 1990, 12)

(Collingwood 1993, 283)

The person to whom speech is addressed .... takes what he hears exactly as if it were speech of his own: he speaks to himself with the words that he hears addressed to him, and thus constructs in himself the idea which those words express. ... Understanding what someone says is thus attributing to him the idea which his words arouse in yourself ....

(Collingwood 1938, 250)

As historians, we are able to enter into Theodosius' thoughts because he is a thinking being like ourselves; we can see through the outside of his actions to the thought within because we know what sorts of thinking would correspond to those sorts of external behaviour in our own case.<sup>16</sup>

A firm line must be drawn between the interpretive science of human action and *psychology*, at least where the latter is understood as an empirical science.<sup>17</sup> Hence Collingwood contrasts psychology so understood, which treats mental states merely as “self-contained facts,” as “events happening in the mind,” with what he calls a *criteriological* science that studies mental states considered as bearers of truth or falsity, rightness or wrongness, success or failure. (Collingwood 1916, 40; Collingwood 1933, 128; Collingwood 1938, 171n.; Collingwood 1993, 1-2; Collingwood 1998, 114; Collingwood 1999, 83-88, 108) These latter distinctions are “valid for reason and will

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<sup>16</sup> Compare Hayek: “[I]n discussing what we regard as other people's conscious actions, we invariably interpret their action on the analogy of our own mind. ... If, for example, we watch a person cross a square full of traffic, dodging some cars and pausing to let others pass, we know (or believe we know) much more than we actually perceive with our eyes. ... I know the meaning of this action because I know what I would have done in similar circumstances.” (Hayek 1948, 63-4)

“Just as the existence of a common structure of thought is the condition of the possibility of our communicating with one another, of your understanding what I say, so it is also the basis on which we all interpret such complicated social structures as those which we find in economic life or law, in language, and in customs.” (Hayek 1948, 76)

<sup>17</sup> Compare Mises: “The problems investigated in the laboratories of the various schools of experimental psychology have no more reference to the problems of the sciences of human action than those of any other scientific discipline. Most of them are even of no use to praxeology, economics, and all the branches of history.” (Mises 1985, 264; cf. Mises 1978, 47) Hence Mises distinguishes psychology, a natural science, from thymology, an interpretive and historical science.

Collingwood's usage does not line up neatly with Mises', however. What Collingwood means by “psychology” appears to include both what Mises means by “psychology” and part, but not all, of what Mises means by “thymology.” In Collingwood's terms, Misesian thymology is divisible into criteriological and non-criteriological parts.

but not for sensation and appetite”; hence psychology, however useful it may be as a science of *feeling*, becomes a pseudo-science as soon as it tries to be a “science of mind.” (Collingwood 1939, 94-5)

Where the logician will say ‘that argument is defective, I will show you why’, the ‘psychologist’ will say ‘that argument is characteristic of a middle-aged, middle-class Englishman, I will show you why.’ (Collingwood 1999, 86)

Such psychologism takes the form of an “epistemological materialism” that treats “intellectual operations, or operations of thought,” as nothing more than “aggregations and complexes of feeling.” Just as “the aim of materialistic biology was to wipe out the old biology with its guiding notion of normative function,” so epistemological materialism attempts to dispense with the normative dimension of thought:<sup>18</sup>

Theoretical reason or knowledge was only a pattern of sensations; practical reason or will, only a pattern of appetites. ...[A] logic of thought faces the fact that thought is self-critical and consequently attempts to give some account of the criteria used in this self-criticism, while a psychological science does not. (Collingwood 1998, 113-15)

The psychologistic approach to the science of mind, Collingwood maintains, is akin to the attempt to study music by applying “callipers and measuring-tapes” to musicians and examining their physiological reactions rather than actually listening to the music. (Collingwood 1999, 89-90) Precisely this psychologism lies behind the positivistic approach to historical explanation, where causal links are traced among the outsides of actions, as if those actions had no insides.<sup>19</sup> Positivism treats historical events as brute facts devoid of meaning.

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<sup>18</sup> Collingwood’s project here is akin to Frege’s critique of the psychologistic interpretation of logic: “Logic is concerned with the laws of truth, not with the laws of holding something to be true, not with the question of how people think, but with the question of how they must think if they are not to miss the truth.” (Frege 1997, 201-3, 250)

<sup>19</sup> Compare Hayek: “The misunderstanding is that the social sciences aim at *explaining* individual behavior .... The social sciences do in fact nothing of the sort. If conscious action can be ‘explained,’ this is a task for psychology but not for economics ....” (Hayek 1948, 67)

In ignoring the distinction between truth and falsehood, the psychologist has not ignored something alien to thought, namely its accidental relation to an object other than itself, he has simply ignored thought; for thought is nothing whatever but the drawing of this distinction.  
(Collingwood 1924, 276)

Insofar as the psychologistic “pseudo-science of thought” endeavours to “usurp the field of logic and ethics in all their various branches, including political science, aesthetics, economics, and whatever other criteriological sciences there may be,” it degenerates into “the propaganda of irrationalism.” (Collingwood 1998, 142)

### III. Collingwood as Historicist

Anyone who holds, as Collingwood does, that motives and acts are internally related already has good reason to embrace praxeology. As Hayek observes:

From the fact that whenever we interpret human action as in any sense purposive or meaningful ... we have to define both the objects of human activity and the different kinds of action themselves, not in physical terms but in terms of the opinions or intentions of the acting persons, there follow some very important consequences; namely, nothing less than that we can, from the concepts of the objects, analytically conclude something about what the actions will be.  
(Hayek (1948b): 62-3.)

And praxeology is simply the body of these conceptual truths about human action. Still, it is one thing to be committed to a conclusion and another thing to draw it. We have now seen the general shape of Collingwood’s first-order methodological dualism. But what is his attitude toward second-order methodological dualism?

Initially, things look grim. Collingwood denies the possibility of an “exact science” in the realm of human action, and insists that there is really no social science other than history: clear symptoms of historicism. He considers the possibility of a second-order methodological dualism – of a distinct *within* social science, between historical and nomological ways of studying human action – and explicitly rejects it:

It may be granted that mind is the proper and only object of historical knowledge, but it may still be contended that historical knowledge is not the only way in which mind can be known. There might be a distinction between two ways of knowing mind. Historical thought studies mind as

acting in certain determinate ways in certain determinate situations. Might there not be another way of studying mind, investigating its general characteristics in abstraction from any particular situation or particular action? ... This conception, however, is very confused. ... In the case of a machine, we distinguish structure from function, and think of the latter as depending on the former. But we can do this only because the machine is equally perceptible to us at motion or at rest .... But any study of mind is a study of its activities ....[There is] nothing a mind is, distinct from and underlying what it does.

(Collingwood 1993, 221-22)

Since we cannot study what mind *is* apart from all the various things it *does*, the study of mind can only be the study of the various concrete activities of mind which constitute human history.

It might of course be possible, Collingwood admits, to study certain patterns and regularities exhibited *in* mind's historical activity. But any such study would only be more history, not something more precise, transcending history:

A positive science of mind will, no doubt, be able to establish uniformities and recurrences, but it can have no guarantee that the laws it establishes will hold good beyond the historical period from which its facts are drawn. Such a science (as we have lately been taught with regard to what is called classical economics) can do no more than describe in a general way certain characteristics of the historical age in which it is constructed. ... To regard such a positive mental science as rising above the sphere of history, and establishing the permanent and unchanging laws of human nature, is therefore possible only to a person who mistakes the transient conditions of a certain historical age for the permanent conditions of human life.

(Collingwood 1993, 223-4)

Oddly enough, Mises quotes this passage *favourably*. (Mises 1978, 135-6n.) The reason, as the context of Mises' discussion makes clear, is that he is taking the passage as a critique of a *positivistic, psychologistic, empirico-causal* science of human action. So indeed it is; but only because it is a critique of *any* social science outside "the sphere of history." Collingwood and Mises are agreed in condemning the sort of empirical sociology that enshrines temporary and local regularities as "laws," as in the statistical

approach to economics.<sup>20</sup> But there is in this passage no indication that Collingwood would look any more kindly upon the claims of praxeology. Mises applauds the passage as an affirmation of first-order methodological dualism, but neglects to observe that it is also a repudiation of second-order methodological dualism.

That Collingwood rejects not only any *a posteriori* but also any *a priori* extrahistorical science of human action is clear from the contrast he draws between mathematical and philosophical sciences. In asserting a geometrical proposition about triangles, Collingwood observes, we take ourselves to be talking about “triangles as such,” not just about this or that triangle; in making our assertion we may employ “the illustrative case of an individual triangle which is also a triangle of a particular kind,” but “our assertion in no way rests either on its individual or on its particular features, but only on those which belong to it as a triangle.” This, Collingwood tells us, is the method of “exact science.” (Collingwood 1933, 112) We can also recognise it as the method of praxeology. But, Collingwood continues, “this procedure is bad philosophy,” because if the philosopher “begins by convincing himself that the concept with which he is dealing has certain attributes, and goes on by forcing these attributes upon every specification and every instance of it,” he is bound to run afoul of the principle that a “statement about a generic concept which is true as applied to one of its specific forms is likely to require modification before it can be applied to any other.” (Collingwood 1933, 114-5) In other words, while abstract universal laws may be valid in mathematics, they do not apply in the philosophico-historical sciences that deal with human action. Hence it is a mistake to suppose that historical understanding requires “supplement from outside in the form of the so-called laws” discovered by “sociology, economics, and the kindred sciences.” These other sciences are useful only “so long as they are incorporated within the body of history itself.” (Collingwood 1924, 208)

Collingwood draws the inevitable conclusion that there is, properly speaking, no such thing as timeless economic principles; an economist’s theories are merely a description of the “economic principles accepted at that time and place”:

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<sup>20</sup> Both thinkers regard statistics as a historical rather than a nomological enterprise. (Collingwood 1993, 357; Mises 1978, 55-57)

For economics, this has been seen by the Marxists, and it has been admitted by J. M. Keynes, with the odd result that he has tried to construct a ‘general’ economic theory, stating the supposedly general principles of which any ‘special’ economic theory, like Adam Smith’s, is a special case. ... The so-called classical economists have written of an ‘iron law of wages’, meaning that a certain theorem about wages must always be true under any kind of social system. Actually, the theorem was true of the social system under which they wrote, but under a different social system it would not necessarily remain true. The so-called classical economics is thus a crypto-historical science, describing a certain set of transient historical conditions under the belief that it was stating eternal truths ....  
(Collingwood 1999, 243-4)

Such a position is, of course, antithetical to the entire Austrian approach. But it gets worse; not only is economics relativised to specific historical contexts, but *logic is so as well*:

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. It is a study in what is called contemporary history = history of the recent part in a society which the historian regards as his own society.  
(Collingwood 1999, 242)

Thus “philosophy as a separate discipline is liquidated by being converted into history,” Collingwood tells us cheerfully (Collingwood 1999, 238), as though this were a feature, not a bug; and so Collingwood apparently plunges into the morass of what Mises calls “polylogism.” This is the very abyss of historicism.

#### **IV. Collingwood as Praxeologist**

If that were the whole story on Collingwood, we would simply have to bow our heads sadly and reflect that

*Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight  
and burned is Apollo’s laurel-bough  
that sometime grew within this learned man.*

*Collingwood is gone: regard his hellish fall  
whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise  
only to wonder at unlawful things  
whose deepness doth entice such forward wits  
to practise more than heavenly power permits.*

We would also have to wonder how Mises could possibly have denied that Collingwood “failed entirely to recognize the unique epistemological character of economics.”

But Collingwood’s historicist pronouncements are by no means the whole story. Yes, he says them; but he also says a number of things flatly inconsistent with them. To begin with, the polylogism he embraces in one place he rejects in another, in terms reminiscent of the opening sections of *Human Action*:

[T]he error of regarding as optional what is really necessary .... is the error advocated by those who, anxious to distinguish sharply between the workings of the civilized and the uncivilized mind, assert that the savage does not think logically as we do, but has other laws which take the place, in his mind, which the fundamental laws of logic take in ours. These so-called laws are in fact not laws at all; they are empirical descriptions of certain types of error to which all men are prone, whether civilized or uncivilized; and a very little clear thinking is sufficient to show that a person who falls into errors of this type is just as loyal to the laws of identity, contradiction, and excluded middle as the most highly trained scientist.

(Collingwood 1993, 475-6)

Likewise, the second-order methodological dualism he denies in one place he affirms in another. For example, Collingwood notes that although “the results of our historical inquiries may be true,” we cannot *know* them to be true in the absence of a “general logic of historical thought” that can “establish *a priori* the pure principles on which all historical thinking is to proceed.” (Collingwood 1993, 390) Since “a law of thought *qua* valid must be a law binding on the reality known by that thought,” it follows that in “discovering how historians always and necessarily think,” we are *eo ipso* “discovering how historical fact is always and necessarily constituted.” (Collingwood 1993, 435)

It is sometimes held, and widely at the present time, that principles of interpretation are derived inductively from the inspection and comparison of historical sources .... In a psychological sense it is no doubt true that we recognize the principles by examining instances of them .... But from



a less psychological point of view, which means a point of view less easily satisfied with the first superficial appearance of the facts, it becomes obvious that we accept the principle not because we have seen an example of it but because the principle itself proves acceptable; and that it possesses a certainty far more complete than the certainty that attaches to the fact which, we fancied, guaranteed it. The function of the instance now seems to be, rather, to reveal to us the principles which we implicitly accept, not to introduce us to principles to which till now we were strangers.

(Collingwood 1993, 383-4)

In short, Collingwood seems to be saying that in addition to the practice of history itself, there is another form of inquiry, a *logic of history*, which establishes *a priori* the principles presupposed by history, and that these principles are something we bring *to* our historical studies, not something we glean from them. This is a clear statement of second-order methodological dualism; and the attributes that Collingwood here assigns to the “logic of history” are the very attributes assigned by Mises to praxeology.

In addressing the question whether human history is governed by laws, Collingwood again states precisely the Misesian position: history is governed by the laws of praxeology, but by no further laws in addition.<sup>21</sup>

If the determining forces of history were unchangeable natural laws, every period of history would be just like every other except in merely external and irrelevant details .... What individualizes historical periods is the diversity of the principles on which men act; but the historical materialist is obliged to deny this diversity and impose upon all men alike a single uniform set of motives and springs of action.

The excuse for falling into this error lies in the fact that in one sense all rational beings do, and must, act on the same principles: the principles which define what rationality is. It is necessary therefore to distinguish between two kinds of principles: these universal and necessary principles, apart from obedience to which there is no such thing as action at all, and others, which may be called empirical principles, which can be changed without such consequence. ... Two complementary errors are therefore possible: the error of regarding as necessary what is really optional, and the error of regarding as optional what is really necessary.

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<sup>21</sup> “The orbit of the natural sciences is the field in which the human mind is able to discover constant relations between various elements. What characterizes the field of the sciences of human action is the absence of constant relations apart from those dealt with by praxeology. In the former group of sciences there are laws (of nature) and measurement. In the latter there is no measurement and – apart from praxeology – no laws; there is only history, including statistics.” (Mises 1978, 56-7)

(Collingwood 1993, 475-6)

But this is Mises' position down to the letter. There do exist, it turns out, "universal and necessary principles," principles valid for every historical era; these are "the principles which define what rationality is," and without them there is "no such thing as action at all." In short, Collingwood embraces praxeology. To treat praxeological principles as historically relative is to regard the necessary as optional, just as to give credence to empirically-based laws of human action in addition to the praxeological is to regard the optional as necessary.

Praxeological principles are sometimes criticised for being vacuously circular. Collingwood considers a similar objection to *philosophical* principles generally, and offers an answer which may also serve as a vindication of praxeology. Unlike the empirical and mathematical sciences, which "bring us to know things of which we were simply ignorant," philosophy "brings us to know in a different way things which we already knew in some way." (Collingwood 1933, 161) Since "in all philosophical study we begin by knowing something about the subject-matter, and on that basis go on to learn more," so that "at each step we re-define our concept by way of recording our progress" (Collingwood 1933, 97), it follows that a philosophical analysis is not *supposed* to teach us new information; instead, it articulates more fully what we already knew.

Establishing a proposition in philosophy, then, means not transferring it from the class of things unknown to the class of things known, but making it known in a different and better way.

(Collingwood 1933, 161)

Thus, if judgment is defined as the reference of an ideal content to reality, this may be criticized on the ground of circularity, since to refer means to judge; but that is a fault only if the definition is addressed to a person who has never thought about the nature of judgment. To a person who has already thought about a given concept, definitions of it which formal logic would condemn as circular, metaphorical, or obscure may be of the utmost value.

(Collingwood 1933, 97-8)

Philosophy deals with "transcendental concepts," which differ from empirical concepts in being "universal and necessary form[s] of mental activity."

[A] transcendental concept *need* not be defined, because we are all possessed of it so far as we think at all; nor *can* it be defined, because, being necessary to all thought, it is necessarily presupposed in its own definition and the definition thus becomes circular.<sup>22</sup>  
(Collingwood 1993, 357)

How are such transcendental principles to be established? In the same way as praxeological axioms: by showing them to be presupposed in their own denial. Referring to psychology (in the non-criteriological sense), Collingwood writes:

If psychology is a correct account of thinking, it is a correct account of the thinking of psychologists; that is to say, psychology itself is only a kind of event which goes on in the minds of people called psychologists, a complex of mental idiosyncrasies innocent of any distinction between truth and falsehood. But no psychologist believes that his own psychological theories and inquiries can be described in this way. He tacitly excepts his own activity of scientific thinking from the analysis which he is giving of mind in general: that is to say, the mind which he is describing is not the mind which is doing the description, but something not merely different but absolutely heterogeneous. ... Psychology is refuted by the psychology of psychology.  
(Collingwood 1924, 275-6)

This argument is precisely analogous to Rothbard's case for the axiomatic status of purposeful action:

The action axiom [is] unchallengeable and self-evident since the critic who attempts to refute it finds that he must use it in the process of alleged refutation. Thus, the axiom of the existence of human consciousness is demonstrated as being self-evident by the fact that the very act of denying the existence of consciousness must itself be performed by a conscious being. ... A similar self-contradiction faces the man who attempts to refute the axiom of human action. For in doing so, he is ipso facto a person making a conscious choice of means in attempting to arrive at an adopted

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<sup>22</sup> Compare Ayn Rand: "An axiomatic concept is the identification of a primary fact of reality, which cannot be analyzed, i.e., reduced to other facts or broken into component parts. It is implicit in all facts and in all knowledge. It is the fundamentally given and directly perceived or experienced, which requires no proof or explanation, but on which all proofs and explanations rest. ... Axiomatic concepts are the *constants* of man's consciousness, the *cognitive integrators* that identify and thus protect its continuity. ... [T]here is a way to ascertain whether a given concept is axiomatic or not: one ascertains it by observing the fact that an axiomatic concept cannot be escaped, that it is implicit in all knowledge, that it has to be accepted and used even in the process of any attempt to deny it." (Rand 1990, 55-59)

end: in this case the goal, or end, of trying to refute the axiom of action.  
He employs action in trying to refute the notion of action.  
(Rothbard 1997, 68)

Moreover, Collingwood offers the same *explanation* as do the Austrians for the possibility of establishing axioms in this way – namely, the fact that in such cases the knowledge is homogeneous with its object:

In geometry the body of the science is heterogeneous with its subject-matter; in logic they are homogeneous, and more than homogeneous, they are identical; for the propositions of which logic consists must conform to the rules which logic lays down, so that logic is actually about itself .... It follows that logic cannot be in substance merely hypothetical. Geometry can afford to be indifferent to the existence of its subject-matter .... But logic cannot share this indifference, because, by existing, it constitutes an actually existing subject-matter to itself. .... Logic not merely discusses, it also contains, reasoning; and if a logician could believe that no valid reasoning anywhere actually existed, he would merely be disbelieving his own logical theory.  
(Collingwood 1933, 129-130)

Geometry studies the properties of triangles, and treats them as hypothetical entities; this it can reasonably do, because geometry is not a triangle. ... But logic studies the properties of judgements: and logic is itself a judgement or an assemblage of judgements: therefore the existence of logic guarantees the actual reality of its own subject-matter  
....  
(Collingwood 1993, 340)

Likewise for Mises, “praxeological propositions ... refer with all their exactitude and certainty to the reality of human action” because “both – the science of human action and human action itself – have a common root, i.e., human reason.” (Mises 1990, 15) Both Mises and Hayek identify the method of social science with Empedocles’ formula *gnôsis tou homoïou tôi homoïôi* – the “knowledge of like by like.” (Mises 1976, 42; Mises 1981, 134; Hayek 1967, 58)

The real thing which is the subject matter of praxeology, human action, stems from the same source as human reasoning. Action and reason are congeneric and homogeneous; they may even be called two different aspects of the same thing. That reason has power to make clear through pure ratiocination the essential features of action is a consequence of the fact that action is an offshoot of reason.

(Mises 1998, 39)

Moreover Mises, like Collingwood, contrasts the *hypothetical* character of *geometrical* axioms with the *categorical* character of *praxeological* axioms:

The a priori knowledge of praxeology is entirely different – categorially different – from the a priori knowledge of mathematics .... The starting point of all praxeological thinking is not arbitrarily chosen axioms, but a self-evident proposition, fully, clearly and necessarily present in every human mind. ... [P]raxeology is not geometry. ... The assumptions of Euclid were once considered as self-evidently true. Present-day epistemology looks upon them as freely chosen postulates, the starting point of a hypothetical chain of reasoning. Whatever this may mean, it has no reference at all to the problems of praxeology.

The starting point of praxeology is a self-evident truth, the cognition of action, that is, the cognition of the fact that there is such a thing as consciously aiming at ends. ... The truth of this cognition is as self-evident and as indispensable for the human mind as is the distinction between A and non-A.

(Mises 1978, 5-6)

The theorems attained by correct praxeological reasoning are not only perfectly certain and incontestable, like the correct mathematical theorems. They refer, moreover with the full rigidity of their apodictic certainty and incontestability to the reality of action as it appears in life and history. Praxeology conveys exact and precise knowledge of real things.

(Mises 1998, 39)

Collingwood grasps not only the *form* of praxeological theory, but much of its content as well. For example, he understands the praxeological conception of demonstrated preference:

Choice is choice between alternatives, and these alternatives must be distinguishable or they are not alternatives; moreover, one must in some way present itself as more attractive than the other, or it cannot be chosen. (Collingwood 1945, 41)

We can never choose A over B unless we prefer A to B. This is not because of some sort of psychological determinism, however, but rather because preference is the “inside” of the action, not some earlier state causally correlated with it. “A voluntary action is not *preceded by* a decision to do it; it *begins with* a decision to do it.” (Collingwood 1992,

96) Since “deciding which of two things is the better is the same as choosing between them,” it follows that “goodness is always relative to an act of choice, and where there is no act of choice between two things, to speak of one as better than the other is meaningless.” (Collingwood 1998, 392)

Collingwood also agrees with Mises that our concept of causality is grounded in our experience of purposeful action; for practical purposes, a cause is “*an event or state of things which it is in our power to produce or prevent, and by producing or preventing which we can produce or prevent that whose cause it is said to be.*” (Collingwood 1998, 296)

Collingwood’s praxeological insights extend to the field of economics as well: “the ultimate or fundamental problems of economics are soluble only by abandoning any attempt to think about them empirically or inductively, and dealing with them according to their true nature, as philosophical problems to be approached by philosophical methods.” (Collingwood 1989, 59) The economic relativism he accepts in some places he repudiates in others, drawing a distinction between on the one hand the *historical* aspects of economics, which are empirically based and have “a low degree of theoretical accuracy,” and on the other hand the *theoretical* aspects of economics, which are “co-extensive with rational action in general.” This is precisely Mises’ distinction between (thymological) economic history and (praxeological) economic theory. Admittedly, Collingwood goes on to relegate to the historical realm much that for Mises belongs to the theoretical:

There can, therefore, be a theory of wealth, a theory of exchange, a theory of supply and demand; and of these things there can be no history. But there can only be a history, and in the strict sense of that word there can be no theory, of capital, manufacture, credit or currency.

(MS Collingwood, DEP 8, 90; quoted in David Boucher’s Introduction to Collingwood 1992, xxiv)

Collingwood argues that the concept of *money* is “one that belongs to philosophical economics”; Collingwood’s attempted philosophical analysis of money, however, is a disaster from the Austrian point of view. Collingwood observes, rightly, that using something as a *medium of exchange* is logically different from using it as a *commodity*; but he wrongly concludes that “whatever is well adapted to fulfil one of these functions is

to just that extent ill adapted to fulfil the other,” and that accordingly the only good medium of exchange is that which has *no value as a commodity*. (Mises’ Regression Theorem, by contrast, shows that exchange-value *presupposes* an original use-value.) Collingwood even takes Gresham’s Law as a *support* for the superiority of unsound money, since under Gresham’s Law “in fair economic competition a currency which is not thus loaded with commodity value will always defeat one which is.” (Collingwood 1989, 71-5.) From an Austrian standpoint, of course, the moral of Gresham’s Law is precisely the opposite: unsound money drives out sound only in circumstances *other* than “fair economic competition,” i.e., only when currencies are *overvalued by law*.

His economic analysis does have better, more Austrian moments, however. He understands the *double inequality of value* involved in economic exchange:

It may be worth while to explain what is meant by equality of value. There is, of course, no such thing as ‘value’, a measurable substance of which equal quantities may somehow exist in a penknife and a two-shilling piece. And if, *per impossibile*, this did happen, no one could have any reason for choosing to have one rather than the other; for, their values being equal, neither would have any preferability. In point of fact, to the vendor of the penknife, the two-shilling piece is worth more than the knife – he would, of the two, rather have the coin; whereas to the purchaser, the knife is worth more than the two-shilling piece. The value of two things is said to be equal (the knife e.g. is priced at, or said to be worth, two-shillings) when the holder of *each* thinks an exchange advantageous to himself i.e. prefers what the other holds to what he himself holds. This explains the concept of profit, which remains perplexing so long as we allow ourselves to take the phrase ‘equality of value’ literally. If the values of the goods exchanged are equal, then no one can make a profit except by fraud. But profit simply consists in getting what you want in exchange for what, relatively speaking, you do not want; and hence every true exchange is profitable to both parties. (Collingwood 1989, 76n.)

He also recognises that there is no inconsistency between economic law and instability of preferences:

If the price is a higher price than I am disposed to pay, I do not pay it. No doubt I may change my mind and pay it tomorrow; I may pay it five seconds hence; but that will be because circumstances have altered, and when this has happened the act is a different act. (Collingwood 1989, 66)

And he understands the Misesian notion of *autistic exchange*, and recognises that it forms the essential nucleus of all exchange:<sup>23</sup>

[N]o one can be a purchaser without being at the same time a vendor, and vice versa; every sale is an exchange, and each party sells what he gives and buys what he takes. But [in another sense] there is no such thing as an exchange between persons. What one person gives, the other does not take. I may give a piece of bread for a cup of milk; but what I give is not the bread, but my eating of the bread, and this is not what the other party gets; he gets *his* eating of the bread, which is an utterly different thing. The real exchange is my giving up the eating of bread and getting the drinking of milk; and there is another exchange, that of his drinking against his eating, on the part of the person with whom I am said to exchange commodities. All exchange, in the only sense in which there can be a real exchange, is an exchange between one person and himself; and since exchange, understood as the relation between means and end, is the essence of economic action, all the essentials of economic theory can be worked out with reference to a single person.  
(Collingwood 1989, 64)

Hence Collingwood even endorses the “Crusoe economics” approach derided by most historicists. (Collingwood 1992, 397)

Collingwood’s description of the distinction between economic theory and economic history could have been penned by Mises himself:

Exchange, in the sense of exchange with one’s self, the balancing of means against ends, is the fundamental conception of economics. The task of economics as a philosophical science is confined to stating this conception and working out its necessary implications; the task of economics as an empirical science consists in showing how this activity reappears from point to point in a constantly changing historical process; how the social structure of a certain time or place – especially of our own time and place – reveals the features which, according to philosophical or pure economics, all economic activity must present.  
(Collingwood 1989, 71)

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<sup>23</sup> Compare Mises: “The proposition: Man acts, is tantamount to the proposition: Man is eager to substitute a state of affairs that suits him better for a state of affairs that suits him less.” (Mises 1985b, 269)

“Action is always essentially the exchange of one state of affairs for another state of affairs. If the action is performed by an individual without any reference to cooperation with other individuals, we may call it autistic exchange. An instance: the isolated hunter who kills an animal for his own consumption; he exchanges leisure and a cartridge for food.” (Mises 1998, 195)



And the implications of autistic exchange for “just price” theory are clearly discerned:

Now because, in an economic act, I am answerable to myself only for driving with myself a bargain which shall satisfy myself, it follows that there is no appeal from this act; there is no way of fixing the right price of anything except by finding out the price which, at the moment of purchase, the purchaser is willing to pay.  
(Collingwood 1989, 66)

This principle is ordinarily expressed in the theorem that the price of a commodity varies directly as demand and inversely as supply; these two factors being really identical, since the demand for a given commodity is nothing but the supply of other commodities that are exchanged for it, and vice versa. Demand, in the economic sense of the word, is not all synonymous with desire or want; there is no ‘demand’ for a thing till something is offered in exchange for it, that is, till someone proposes to buy it. The ordinary theorem, therefore, means that prices are fixed by proposals to buy. But this truth is obscured in empirical economics by the idea of quantitative prices, which are supposed to vary as the intensity of the demand varies. This idea involves the fallacious assumption that what I pay for is (for instance) bread, whereas what I really pay for is my eating of this bread; and the price of this cannot vary, because it is a thing that happens only once. ... [E]mpirical economics ... tries to distinguish by a quantitative scale individual cases whose real differences are qualitative. Prices are thus fixed afresh by every single act of exchange that takes place. Every such act is a determination of value; and value in the economic sense of the word cannot be determined in any other way. When a man who owns certain goods puts a price on them he is simply forecasting what, in the given circumstances, someone will think it worth his while to pay; and when the circumstances change, he must price his wares afresh. Hence all prices are always ultimately fixed by the ‘higgling of the market’; but this is, in practice, concealed by the way in which a skilful vendor will anticipate such higgling and put upon his goods a price which, understanding the mind and circumstances of his public, he knows they will pay. And if people will not pay the price which he has fixed, this shows, not that the public is too stupid or too stingy to pay a reasonable price, but that his calculation of what he could get was at fault.  
(Collingwood 1989, 67)

This does not mean, Collingwood explains, that demands for a “just price” or a “just wage” are entirely confused. “The right price of anything is what it will fetch at a given moment on a give market; but it does not follow that everything ought always to be on sale in every market.” Hence demands for a just price are not confused if what they really means is that, in some particular case, what is given for a price should be given as a

gift instead; that is a moral claim, to be examined on its own terms. But, Collingwood maintains, it makes no sense to acquiesce in something's *being* a price and then to demand that its precise quantity be set "by any standard other than the act of exchange itself."<sup>24</sup> (Collingwood 1989, 68-70)

Collingwood also recognises the folly of any attempt at a *quantitative* description of human preferences:

In heat as known to the physicist there are differences of degree; so there are in the heat we feel as a bodily sensation. In physical heat, the excess of one over another is a definite amount: we can raise a pint of water from one temperature to another by adding a certain amount of heat. In heat as we feel it, this is not the case. We cannot add a slightly tepid feeling to a feeling of moderate warmth and so produce a feeling of greater warmth. (Collingwood 1933, 72)

Though Collingwood does not use these terms, he is plainly observing that differences of degree are *cardinal* in the case of physical heat, but merely *ordinal* in the case of felt heat. He goes on to contrast the quantitative character of comparisons between physical objects with the non-quantitative character of comparisons between pleasures. It makes sense to that one book is so many times higher than another, but if we say that one *pleasure* is so many times greater than another, then we are either "using quantitative terms in order to express metaphorically something not itself quantitative," or else confusing pleasure, which is not measurable, with its "bodily concomitants," which may well be. (Collingwood 1933, 70-71; note that Collingwood here restricts the notion of measurement to cardinal quantities. If one extends the notion of measurement to cover ordinal rankings as well, as in Rand's conception of "teleological measurement,"<sup>25</sup> then

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<sup>24</sup> Collingwood is too quick, however, to assume that "[a]s soon as any moral motive is imported into an economic question the question ceases to be an economic one, and the price, or wage, or interest becomes a gift." (Collingwood 1989, 68) As Mises points out, "it does not make any difference for the determination of market prices whether an 'egoistic' buyer buys because he wants himself to enjoy what he bought or whether an 'altruistic' buyer buys for some other reasons, for instance in order to make a gift to a charitable institution." (Mises 1978 pp75-6) One and the same economic action can include both self-seeking and charitable aspects. (Mises 1981, 88, 177)

<sup>25</sup> "In regard to the concepts pertaining to evaluation ('value,' 'emotion,' 'feeling,' 'desire,' etc.), the hierarchy involved is of a different kind and requires an entirely different type of measurement. It is a type applicable only to the psychological process of evaluation, and may be designated as '*teleological measurement*.'"

degrees of pleasure do become measurable; but this would appear to be a terminological difference, not a substantive one.)

If two things A and B agree in having  $x$ ness, and if A has more  $x$  than B, it does not follow that the difference between them is a measurable quantity. ... A piece of stone is heavy. Its weight is measurable. You can express it after doing what we call weighing it, as a multiple of certain units. ... [But t]ake the example, 'I like this picture better than that'. The question 'how much better?' will be a sensible question if it means 'much better or only a little better?' but if it is a demand for a measurement of the difference it is not a sensible question. ... Much has been said about an alleged hedonistic calculus, or an alleged calculus of goods, on the assumption that these things are quantitative in their amounts and in the differences between their amounts. But no one has ever put forward a calculation belonging to such a calculus involving figures to which he will commit himself and which he will submit to a fellow-expert for independent checking, as a man will commit himself to an evaluation of  $\pi$  or a calculation of the earth's diameter or the moon's weight. ... If A and B were pleasures, comparable in the sense that one is greater than the other, and also commensurable in the sense that one is greater than the other by a definite amount, then A must consist of X units of pleasantness and B of Y units of pleasantness; and if A is the greater, or more pleasant, there must be a positive amount of units of pleasantness  $X-Y$ , and  $X-Y$  units of pleasantness is just as much a pleasure as X units of pleasantness or Y units of pleasantness. Therefore, if A and B are pleasures which are commensurable, the difference between them is itself pleasure. And if the difference between them is not a pleasure, they are not commensurable. But ... the difference between them is not a pleasure. ... Q.E.D.  
(Collingwood 1992, 408-12)

Since only cardinal quantities can be aggregated, Collingwood draws the further inference that aggregate utility is an incoherent concept: "The sum of human happiness has neither increased, nor diminished, nor remained constant, because there is no such thing. ... What is a sum which cannot be reached by a process of computation?" (Collingwood 1965, 114)

From the assumption that all differences of degree must be "susceptible of measurement and calculation," i.e., must be cardinal, there "arise all the attempts to treat philosophical matters like pleasures, goods, and so forth mathematically." Such attempts

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Measurement is the identification of a relationship – a quantitative relationship established by means of a standard that serves as a unit. Teleological measurement deals, not with cardinal, but with *ordinal* numbers – and the standard serves to establish a graded relationship of means to end." (Rand 1990, 32-33)

are, inevitably, “uniformly unsuccessful.” (Collingwood 1933, 80) This is of course precisely the Austrian argument against the use of mathematical methods in economics.<sup>26</sup>

I like one picture and should like to possess it; I like another more, and desire more strongly to possess it ... Here we have pleasures and desires that are comparable as greater and less, but not measurable, But I may go on to price the pictures. I may say, I will give £5 for the first and £10 for the second. I offer more for no. 2 because I like it more, and desire more strongly to possess it. But there is nothing in the relative strength of my likings and desires that corresponds with the arithmetical ratio between the prices I offer. There cannot be. For money consists of units, and likings and desires do not. But a careless thinker might easily slip into fancying that if I pay for my pleasures and pay twice as much for one pleasure as for another this constitutes evidence that one pleasure is twice as great as the other.

(Collingwood 1992, 417)

From this recognition that prices are cardinal while the corresponding preferences are ordinal, it is only a short inferential step to the necessity of a price system for economic calculation!

Unlike Mises, however, Collingwood denies that the *a priori* principles of economics apply to all action whatsoever. For Collingwood there are three kinds of action: those in which means and end are distinct, those in which means and end are united, and those to which the concepts of means and ends do not apply. Economic principles, he maintains, apply only to the first of these:

An economic act is an act which differentiates itself into two parts, one of which is done for the sake of the other. ... This duality is not present in impulsive action, for here the distinction between means and end is simply non-existent. If we take the case of the shouting child, or of an angry man kicking a chair, and try within this act to distinguish means and end, we find no room for such a distinction. It is a misrepresentation of the facts to say that a man kicks the chair as a means to work off his anger; if that were a rue account if the case, it would not be an impulsive act. A man might perhaps say to himself: ‘I feel angry; how can I work off this passion? Perhaps kicking a chair would do it; let us try;’ but if he did, it would be a case not of impulsive, but of economic action. In moral action, on the other hand, the distinction is present, but it is merged in as fresh

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Rothbard (1993), 15-16.

unity; thus it is actually a definition of moral action to say that a moral act is an end in itself .... The distinction between impulsive and economic action may be stated by saying that in impulsive action we do what we want, whereas in economic action we do what we do not want in order that we may do what we want.  
(Collingwood 1989, 62-3)

In impulsive action, we have no reason for what we do. In moral action, what we do is a reason unto itself. Only in economic action do we have a reason *beyond* the action itself.

Collingwood holds that every action partakes to some degree of all three categories;<sup>27</sup> however, the degree of any particular category may well be near zero. Economic principles apply to any action only *to the extent* that it partakes of the economic category.<sup>28</sup> From an Austrian standpoint, of course, this is a confusion; praxeology as such applies equally to any means-end relation, whether means and end coincide or not.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “In the light of the end, the means cease to be merely laborious or painful; they become an integral part of that which, taken as a whole, we desire. In the light of the means, the end ceases to be something outside ourselves which is given to us as a result of our labours; it becomes our own activity regarded as achievement.” (Collingwood 1989, 63)

<sup>28</sup> Collingwood’s conception of economic action as merely a certain *kind* of action leads him to resist the suggestion – welcome to both Marxian socialists and Austrian libertarians – that “the work of the state may be done better by delegating it to other bodies that are in closer touch with the actualities of social life.” Such calls for privatisation (at least that is what they are in the Austrian context) represent, we are told, the error of “historical materialism,” i.e., the view that “nothing is real but what is economic.” Collingwood complains:

“Economic values are real, but they are no more real than political values. I am ready to agree that the modern state is an imperfect embodiment of the political spirit; just as I am ready to agree that the Royal Academy is an imperfect embodiment of the artistic spirit. But I should not listen with much sympathy to anyone who said, ‘You admit the imperfections of the Royal Academy; then let us scrap it and have an annual exhibition of British Art organized by the Bank of England.’ A person who said that would merely be warning me not to trust his judgment in matters of art.

The economic life has its own end, prosperity; the political life has its own end, peace. Peace and prosperity may very well go together, but they are not the same thing.” (Collingwood 1989, 108-9)

Collingwood accordingly dismisses the unregulated market as an “intolerable” economic anarchy (Collingwood 1989, 185), and has little patience with the objection that centralised government is more dangerous a tool for achieving peace than is the decentralised market; such worries are, he assures us, “mere mental vertigo or loss of nerve.” If the people distrust the government, they can at any time, he says rather blithely, “destroy the government that they distrust and substitute one that they trust.” Those who “cannot make up their minds to trust any” will end up “governed by one they do not trust, which is unlikely to respect their economic opinions.” (Collingwood 1989, 76-77; this last argument would seem to be at once a *petitio principii* and an *ad baculum*.)

<sup>29</sup> As Rothbard explains: “It is often charged that any theory grounded on a logical separation of *means* and *ends* is unrealistic because the two are often amalgamated or fused into one. ... The only sense to the charge concerns those cases where certain *objects*, or rather certain *routes of action*, become ends in themselves as well as means to other ends. This, of course, can often happen. There is no difficulty, however, in incorporating them into an analysis .... The critics of praxeology confuse the necessary and

Therefore the laws of economics apply with as much force to “moral” action as to “economic.” As for “impulsive” action, Collingwood himself admits that wherever we have autistic exchange we have “the balancing of means against ends.” But kicking a chair in anger is certainly autistic exchange; if the kicking is an action at all, it has as its inside a preference for kicking the chair over not kicking the chair, and so in kicking the chair we exchange the not kicking of it for the kicking of it. That is *minimal* purposiveness, but it is enough to bring the action under economic law.

## V. Re-enacting Collingwood’s Thought: A Diagnosis

Collingwood’s grasp of economic principles may be flawed, but we can certainly see him, in many passages, exhibiting considerable insight into the nature of second-order methodological dualism. Why, then, does he have those *other* passages, where he renounces the very insight he has proven himself to possess?

One might try to interpret this phenomenon in terms of chronological development; perhaps Collingwood simply changed his mind. The attempt has indeed been made to periodise Collingwood’s thought into historicist and anti-historicist phases. But if Collingwood did change his mind, he did it over and over again; one can find both historicist-sounding doctrine and praxeological-sounding doctrine scattered through every temporal stratum of Collingwood’s thought, early, middle, and late. He may have experimented with different resolutions at different points in his career, but the tension between praxeology and historicism pervades his thought as a whole.

Clearly, Collingwood is muddled on this issue. But Collingwood is a philosopher of too keen discernment to be *easily* muddled. If he wobbles so precariously in his orbit, we can infer the existence of a powerful gravitational force. What, then, explains his irresolute stance on second-order methodological dualism?

As a hypothesis, I suggest that the destabilizing force is Collingwood’s commitment – a commitment common among the Hegelians and idealists by whom he was deeply influenced – to the proposition that *all abstraction is falsification*:

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eternal separation of ends and means as *categories* with their frequent coincidence in a particular concrete resource or course of action.” (Rothbard 1993, 66)

To abstract is to consider separately things that are inseparable: to think of the universal, for instance, without reflecting that it is merely the universal of its particulars, and to assume that one can isolate it in thought and study it in this isolation. This assumption is an error. One cannot abstract without falsifying. To think apart of things that are together is to think of them as they are not ....  
(Collingwood 1924, 160)

This is an ancient and costly error, one long ago refuted by Aristotle.<sup>30</sup> Drawing on Aristotle's discussion, the medieval Aristoteleans drew a helpful distinction between *precisive* and *non-precisive abstraction*.<sup>31</sup> Thomas Aquinas, for example, writes:

Abstraction may occur in two ways. First ... we may understand that one thing does not exist in some other, or that it is separate from it. [= precisive abstraction] Secondly ... we understand one thing without considering another. [= non-precisive abstraction] Thus, for the intellect to abstract one from another things which are not really abstract from one another, does, in the first mode of abstraction, imply falsehood. But, in the second mode of abstraction, for the intellect to abstract things which are not really abstract from one another, does not involve falsehood. ... If, therefore, the intellect is said to be false when it understands a thing otherwise than as it is, that is so, if the word *otherwise* refers to the thing understood. ... Hence, the intellect would be false if it abstracted the species of a stone from its matter in such a way as to think that the species did not exist in matter, as Plato held. But it is not so, if *otherwise* be taken as referring to the one who understands.<sup>32</sup>  
(Aquinas 1999, p. 157; *Summa Theologiae* I. 85. 1 ad 1)

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Physics* 193 b 22-36, *Metaphysics* 1077 b 23-1078 a 29.

<sup>31</sup> "Precision is a mode of abstraction by which we cut off or exclude something from a notion. Abstraction is the consideration of something without either including or excluding from its notion characteristics joined to it in reality. Abstraction without precision does not exclude anything from what it abstracts, but includes the whole thing, though implicitly and indeterminately." (Armand Maurer, note to Aquinas (1968), p. 39n.)

<sup>32</sup> Compare Abélard: "Abelard has to explain why thoughts gained through abstraction are not erroneous ... even though they conceive things other than they are .... When I regard a man only as substance or only as a body, he explains, I am not conceiving anything in his nature which is not there, but I am not attending to all which he has. My thought would be erroneous if I regarded his nature as being only substance or only body. There is nothing erroneous, however, in regarding him only as substance or body; the 'only' must apply to the regarding, not to the way in which the man exists." (Marenbon 1997, 166-167; notice that the "nominalist" Abélard and the "realist" Aquinas are in perfect agreement on this issue.) Rand makes a similar point in her own theory of abstraction: "Bear firmly in mind that the term 'measurements omitted' does not mean, in this context, that measurements are regarded as non-existent; it means that *measurements exist, but are not specified*." (Rand 1990, 11-12) For further discussion, see Long 2001, 409.

It should now be obvious that Collingwood's dictum "To think apart of things that are together is to think of them as they are not" runs directly afoul of the point the Aristoteleans are trying to make. It is one thing to consider a thing *as not* having some of the properties it has; it is quite another to consider a thing *not as* having some of the properties it has. In the first case, abstraction falsifies, because the *not* is imputed to "the thing understood"; in the second case, abstraction does not falsify, because the *not* applies merely to "the one who understands." Collingwood's mistake is to assume that all abstraction is precise.

Why would this mistake hinder his grasp of second-order methodological dualism? Well, praxeology studies the logical form of human action in abstraction from its content. But of course the logical form of human action cannot *exist* in abstraction from its content; so if one thinks of abstraction as precise, it will seem that praxeology must falsify its subject-matter:

The concept is not something outside the world of sensuous appearance; it is the very structure or order of that world itself. The arrangement and the material arranged are only distinguished by an abstract and arbitrary distinction within an indivisible whole. The universal is only real as exemplified in the particular, the particular as informed by the universal. The symbol is what it is because of its meaning, the meaning is only what that symbol means. Hence the meaning or concept or universal is not a separate object of consciousness, other than the world of sense; not something seen through a veil of sense, but the structure of that veil itself.  
(Collingwood 1924, 159)

Likewise, then, praxeology cannot be a 'separate object of consciousness' from history, since it is the structure of history itself.

Now in a sense there is nothing objectionable about this conclusion. As I've argued myself: "Praxeology without thymology is empty; thymology without praxeology is blind." (Long (forthcoming)) But although praxeology and thymology may imply one another and form an inseparable unity, it does not follow that we may not attend to one of the two in abstraction from the other. But it *would* follow, if all abstraction were precise; and Collingwood draws precisely this inference:

The life of the mind is whole, without seam, woven from the top throughout; the only sense in which we can separate one attribute from the



others is that we may abstract it, that is, have a false theory that it is separate ....  
(Collingwood 1916, 154)

In attempting to lay bare the grammatical structure of our language, the grammarian “is not a kind of scientist studying the actual structure of language,” but rather “a kind of butcher, converting it from organic tissue into marketable and edible joints.” Collingwood is not denying that grammar has its uses; he is simply insisting that its effect is “not to understand language, but to alter it.” “Language as it lives and grows,” Collingwood maintains, “no more consists of verbs, nouns, and so forth than animals as they live and grow consist of forehands, gammons, rump-steaks, and other joints.” (Collingwood 1938, 257) When we attempt to contemplate the logical structure of language in abstraction from its concrete embodiment, we subject language to “a strain tending to pull it apart into two quite different things, language proper and symbolism” (Collingwood 1938, 262), since “selecting is idealizing, for the omission of some part of the object is not mere omission of a part but alteration of the whole.” (Collingwood 1925, 75) Since praxeological categories are to action what grammatical categories are to language, Collingwood is committed to supposing that praxeology distorts its subject-matter in the same way. Reason is “concrete thought,” whose task is to study the universal as it actually exists, namely, *as it is embodied in particulars*, rather than as a universal “torn apart from its particulars and converted into a closed and abstract formula.” (Collingwood 1924, 196) It follows that social science must likewise study human action in its concrete historical embodiment; hence praxeology “as a separate discipline is liquidated by being converted into history.”

On the one hand, Collingwood recognises that historical understanding has a timeless logical structure. When he focuses on that fact, he recognises that the delineation of such a structure is the task not of history itself but of a distinct *a priori* science. This is when he writes his praxeological passages. But when he reminds himself that all abstraction is falsification, he is led to suppose that he *cannot* after all distinguish that structure as an object of study distinct from what it structures; this is when he writes his historicist passages. In fact we can observe the transition occurring within the confines of a single passage. “Action as such is purposive,” Collingwood begins, “and anything purposed is

an end. Hence to be means to an end is the invariable characteristic of all action.” (Collingwood 1924, 171) So far, so good; this is the founding insight of praxeology. But Collingwood immediately goes on to add that if we stop there we will be guilty of one of those “artificial separations” to which the scientific mind is prone. Once we consider human action concretely rather than abstractly, we will see that the distinction between means and end is a “mere artifice of thought,” since “every action stood in a unique relation to a unique end,” and “in any given instance the means and the end were inextricably bound up together.” (Collingwood 1924, 171) Since economic methodology relies on the means-end distinction *abstractly* understood, economics turns out to be “an abstract, arbitrary, and therefore erroneous description” of human action.<sup>33</sup> (Collingwood 1924, 173)

If all abstraction is falsification, it might appear that we cannot know *one* of a thing’s properties without knowing *all* of them. If that includes a thing’s *relational* properties, then since everything is related to everything else – “Whenever we think of any single thing as real, we are assuming, consciously or unconsciously, the infinite context of reality as a whole ....” (Collingwood 1925, 24) – it would seem to follow that we must know *everything* in order to know so much as one thing. Collingwood does not *quite* make this inference; indeed, he appears to deny it:

It has been said that anything torn from its context is thereby mutilated and falsified; and that in consequence, to know any one thing, we must know its context, which implies knowing the whole universe. ... [But] to restrict the being of thought to its own immediacy [is] to deny it as thought. ... Every act of thought, as it actually happens, happens in a context out of which it arises and in which it lives, like any other experience, as an organic part of the thinker’s life. ... But an act of thought, in addition to actually happening, is capable of sustaining itself and being revived or repeated without loss of its identity.  
(Collingwood 1993, 298)

Hence, Collingwood infers, in interpreting Caesar’s motives I do not rip them out of their context and so render them unintelligible; rather, my activity of re-creating Caesar’s

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<sup>33</sup> The assumption that economic theory cannot be abstract without ceasing to be “realistic” is the central confusion of Milton Friedman’s methodological writings (Friedman 1953), though he renounces realism in favour of abstraction rather than, like the Hegelians, vice versa.

thinking process is a *continuation* of that very thinking-process, as the butterfly is a continuation of the caterpillar. It is this historical continuity that allows my current mental activity to be knowledge *of* Caesar's earlier activity. A past event is existent, and therefore knowable, only insofar as it is still happening. "In knowing the present, we are knowing that into which the past has changed." (Collingwood 1993, 405)

But Collingwood's escape from the view that we must know all a thing's relations in order to know any is narrower than it might seem; indeed, all that saves him from it is his acceptance of the notion of "degrees of truth." On Collingwood's view, our knowledge at any one time is true, but incompletely true – meaning not just that there are truths it fails to include, but that even those truths it does include are *incompletely true* because abstracted from the totality of their relations. But our knowledge is not simply false, because it is *partly* true – meaning not that it contains some parts that are completely true and other parts that are not, but rather that, considered as a whole, it has a better-than-zero degree of truth; as we might wish to put it, it approximates the complete truth more closely. For Collingwood, however, the advance of knowledge is not a matter of *replacing* worse theories with better ones; the new theories are simply the old bad ones at a higher stage of development, just as the butterfly, once again, does not displace the caterpillar but simply *is* the caterpillar matured. A less accurate theory is not discarded in favour of a more accurate one; rather, the less accurate theory *is* the more developed one in its infancy. "The end is not the antithesis of the beginning, but the same thing raised to a higher power." (Collingwood 1916, 107) Since every piece of human knowledge is, if not the complete truth *per se*, at least the complete truth in embryo, it is misleading, Collingwood thinks, to call it false. All the same, there is a sense in which, for Collingwood, unless we are omniscient, the little we do know is not quite true: "if we ask for a definition or description of *x* the only true reply is to describe it in its full relations with *y* and *z*." (Collingwood 1916, 110-11) "Omit any part, truncate the course of history or eviscerate some of its detail, and you mutilate the plot, imparting to it a false emphasis and misrepresenting its general significance." (Collingwood 1965, 39) Nothing is entirely true unless it is the entire truth.

Hence, strictly speaking, "even thought itself, in its immediacy as the unique act of thought with its unique context," is "not the object of historical knowledge" and "cannot

be re-enacted.” Historical interpretation does not literally “apprehend the individual act of thought in its individuality, just as it actually happened.” Nevertheless, we do apprehend “the act of thought itself, in its survival and revival at different times and in different persons.” Collingwood stresses that this is not a timeless universal, instantiating itself first in Caesar and later in his interpreters; rather, it is something historical and concrete.<sup>34</sup> (Collingwood 1993, 303) “The re-enactment of the past in the present *is the past itself* so far as that is knowable to the historian.” (Collingwood 1993, 450) We can never identify the *essence* of anything, considered in a complete and final sense; but we *can* identify what Collingwood calls “a ‘relative essence’, an ‘essence from our point of view’, where ‘we’ are the persons engaged in a certain kind of scientific inquiry.” (Collingwood 1992, 300)

Collingwood is thus not *opposed* to abstraction, so long as in abstracting we recognise the limitations of what we are doing:

To fancy that when thought begins making abstractions it condemns itself to live in a world of abstractions and turns its back on reality is as foolish as to fancy that an unborn child, when it begins building itself a skeleton, turns its back on flesh and blood and condemns itself to live in Ezekiel’s Valley of Dry Bones. ... The life of a vertebrate is a symbiosis of flesh with bone; the life of thought is a symbiosis of immediate consciousness with abstractions. ... It is a further development of the same foolish fancy when people obsessed with this fancy ... look forward to a divine event whereby thought shall not only return to the womb but there digest its own skeleton. ... [A] wealth of abstractions indicates not poverty in immediate consciousness but abundance of it, as a wealth of honey in the comb shows, not that the bees have left off visiting flowers, but that they have visited flowers to some purpose.

(Collingwood 1992, 52-53)

Interpreting facts and applying abstractions are really not two processes but one.

(Collingwood 1992, 249)

Abstraction is a necessary part of thought. In thinking of a process of change you must think of its positive and negative elements in abstraction from the process. ... False abstraction is the same thing complicated by a

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<sup>34</sup> Hence Collingwoodian “thoughts” are not purely psychological items, like the denizens of Frege’s inner realm or Popper’s world 2; nor are they purely logical items, like the timeless denizens of Frege’s third realm; they seem most akin to the mutable denizens of Popper’s world 3.

falsehood: the falsehood, namely, that these two opposite elements are mutually independent and hostile entities.

(Collingwood 1992, 192-3; cf. Collingwood 1965, 40)

In this last passage it might *look* as though Collingwood is finally seeing his way to the distinction between non-precise and precise abstraction; but in the context of his other remarks, I think he must rather be interpreted here as distinguishing two kinds of precise abstractions: those recognised as provisional and those misrepresented as final.

Another factor contributing to Collingwood's confusion over second-order methodological dualism is his doctrine of *absolute presuppositions*. These presuppositions are like axioms in that they are necessarily presupposed in any intellectual endeavour and so cannot themselves be questioned without incoherence. Collingwood accordingly agrees with the positivists' claim that metaphysical statements are not genuine assertions; but he denies the positivist corollary that such statements are therefore meaningless and dispensable. Such "haste with tumbril and blade" is unwarranted: metaphysical statements are not *propositions* but *presuppositions*. (Collingwood 1998, 166)

[T]here is no possible method of verifying a metaphysical proposition. For any verification is a process resting on presuppositions; hence presuppositions as such can never be verified. The logical positivists, of course, draw the wrong conclusion from this [because they confuse] the case of a proposition which *needs* verification and fails to get it with the case of a proposition which doesn't get it because owing to its function in the structure of thought it can't need it ....

(Collingwood 1998, 407)

Absolute presuppositions are *unlike* axioms, however, in not being timeless, but instead being relative to particular historical eras. We can switch from one absolute presupposition to another; but doing so is not a matter of surrendering a particular proposition, but instead of abandoning an entire system of thought. (Nowadays this would be called a "paradigm shift.") This doctrine of absolute presuppositions could easily encourage Collingwood to suppose that even if praxeological principles turn out to be logically presupposed in all our thinking and are therefore immune from coherent challenge, that is still only a historically relative fact about *us* and *our* particular forms of cultural life and intellectual inquiry.

Collingwood is led to his doctrine of absolute presuppositions by his (perfectly reasonable) observation that the meaning of a statement depends on its context:

[L]ogicians fling themselves headlong in hordes, like lemmings, and suicidally discuss the import of ‘propositions’ such as ‘the king of Utopia died last Sunday’, without stopping to ask: ‘in what tone of voice am I supposed to say this? The tone of a person beginning a fairy tale ... or the tone of a person stating a fact of which he wishes to convince his audience ... or the tone of a person trying to pull a logician’s leg ...?’ If you don’t know what tone to say them in, you can’t say them at all: they are not words ...”

(Collingwood 1938, 265-6)

For someone who regards all abstraction as precise, however, this perfectly reasonable observation begins to become corrosive, implying that we can *never* make sense of any statement outside of its original context. According to Collingwood, “you cannot tell what a proposition means unless you know what question it is meant to answer.” Since “the meaning of a proposition is relative to the question it answers,” so is its truth: “No two propositions ... can contradict each other unless they are answers to the same question.” (Collingwood 1939, 33)

On one way of looking at things, the question *What was Plato’s theory of the state?* is an *historical* question, while the question *Is that theory of the state correct?* is a *philosophical* one. But for Collingwood, the second question is meaningless. Plato is trying to solve the problem of the Greek *polis*; for him a practical problem, not just a theoretical one. The existence of a certain historically defined mode of social existence is a presupposition of Plato’s inquiry. For us, by contrast, there is no practical problem of the Greek *polis*. Since we do not share Plato’s context or presuppositions, we cannot share his problem, and so we cannot intelligibly regard his solution to it as either right or wrong. Instead, we can recreate his point of view, and evaluate his solution from the standpoint of his questions, just as an atheist can weigh the merits of different solutions to theological problems; but that is an “historical” inquiry. We can also trace the process whereby *our* conception of the state, with its distinctive problems and presuppositions, developed out of Plato’s; that too is an “historical” inquiry. (Collingwood 1939, 59-63)

The question what presuppositions underlie the ‘physics’ or natural science of a certain people at a certain time is as purely historical a question as what kind of clothes they wear. And this is the question that metaphysicians have to answer. It is not their business to raise the further question whether, among the various beliefs on this subject that various peoples hold and have held, this one or that one is true. This question, when raised, would always be found, as it always has been found, unanswerable ....

(Collingwood 1939, 66)

If we take as an example of a metaphysical presupposition the proposition *all events have causes*, the business of the metaphysician as such is not to assert this or its contradictory (e.g. it is not his business to ‘prove’ or ‘criticize’ it or the like) but to *discover that in our ordinary language we presuppose it*. The words ‘all events have causes’ in the mouth of a metaphysician, expresses an assertion on his part which, if expressed in full, would run ‘in our ordinary thinking we presuppose that all events have causes’. ... The propositions which he asserts are historical propositions, describing what ‘we’ do in ‘our’ ordinary thinking: the method of verifying them is accordingly the historical method. Whether certain persons do or do not in their ordinary thinking presuppose that all events have causes is a question of fact, like the question whether they do or do not wear trousers.

(Collingwood 1998, 404-5)

Hence there is no special *non*-historical work for philosophers to do; for if it makes no sense to inquire into the truth or falsity of Plato’s ultimate presuppositions, it equally makes no sense for us to inquire into the truth or falsity of our own. Our “absolute presuppositions” are what we *rely* on in judging truth or falsity. Accordingly, “it is meaningless to say that, of the Aristotelian pluralistic metaphysics and the Kantian monistic metaphysics, one is intrinsically better than the other.” (Collingwood 1998, 393)

Human beings did, no doubt, like other animals, exhibit certain types of behaviour on certain types of occasions long before they became aware of doing so. When they first began thinking rationally about their own behaviour, each man asking himself, ‘why do I behave like this?’, they found by observing their own behaviour and distinguishing its various types that these various types were in fact correlated with types of occasion. They became aware in this way that there were certain rules which in fact they obeyed. They became aware of rules as immanent in their own behaviour.

(Collingwood 1992, 447)

Hence the earliest form of law, the form which predominated until the 13<sup>th</sup> century, is “unmade customary law existing in communities as a way in which the community habitually acted”; it was “not positive law because it involved no legislation.” (Collingwood 1992, 217) Legal rules were regarded as “objective,” i.e., human agents were not regarded as having “the power to change or make the law.” (Collingwood 1992, 450; the similarity to Hayek’s writings on law is obvious.) In the same way, we cannot *directly* make or unmake our absolute presuppositions, since we cannot argue for or against them; but we can abandon an entire historically defined mode of life in favour of another one, and in changing modes of life we will be changing absolute presuppositions also.

An absolute presupposition cannot be undermined by the verdict of ‘experience’, because it is the yard-stick by which ‘experience’ is judged. To suggest that ‘experience’ might teach my hypothetical savages that some events are not due to magic is like suggesting that experience might teach a civilized people that there are not twelve inches in a foot and thus cause them to adopt the metric system. As long as you measure in feet and inches, everything you measure has dimensions composed of those units. As long as you believe in a world of magic, that is the kind of world in which you live.  
(Collingwood 1998, 193-4)

This analogy is problematic, however. Measurements in feet and measurements in meters are merely notational variants of each other, different ways of saying the same thing. If explanations that appeal to magic and explanations that don’t are likewise different ways of saying the same thing, then they do not differ in any *substantive* presuppositions; all we need is a translation manual. But Collingwood does seem to view different historical eras as being *interestingly* different in their presuppositions.

Collingwood seems to be thinking about absolute presuppositions in something like the following way. a) When I am playing chess, I cannot deliberate about whether to move the bishop non-diagonally, for in so deliberating I would be ceasing to play chess. The rules of chess, including the rule that bishops only move diagonally, are *absolute presuppositions* of the activity of playing chess; they *define* what counts as that activity. In that sense, the bishop’s moving diagonally is not something we can coherently



question. b) On the other hand, though, we are under no necessity to play chess in the first place; we could always switch to a different game with different rules, and *those* rules might very well allow the bishop to move non-diagonally.

Hence, as things stand, the possibility of moving the bishop non-diagonally is closed off only relative to certain *historically contingent* presuppositions. Of course, deciding not to play chess any more is not itself a move in chess; and in the same way, the switch to a different mode of intellectual inquiry with different presuppositions is not a switch that could be justified *within* our existing mode of intellectual inquiry itself.

Once we see that this is what Collingwood means, however, we can also see that it can't quite work. The problem is that there is no one meaning of "bishop" that will make both (a) and (b) true. If by "bishop" we mean something *defined* by the rules of chess, then (a) will be true but (b) will be not; there cannot be a new game in which I move the bishop differently, because if I am moving it differently it is not the bishop. I can reject chess and the bishop along with it, but I cannot reject chess and then keep the bishop around in new employment. If instead by "bishop" we mean something that *can* exist *outside* the context of chess (say, the wooden figure itself), then (b) will be true, but (a) now seems open to question. When I am in the course of playing chess it certainly makes sense for me to *consider* moving the bishop-as-wooden-figure non-diagonally. To consider this will of course be to consider cheating, or goofing around, or abandoning the game – in short, something other than playing chess – but I can consider it nonetheless. And merely *considering* it does not count as ceasing to play chess.

Analogously, then, if it is an absolute presupposition of Newtonian but not of ancient Greek scientific practice that celestial and terrestrial bodies are subject to the same laws (which is part of what Collingwood means in contrasting Aristotelean pluralism with Kantian monism), then either by "celestial and terrestrial bodies" we mean something defined in terms of our current scientific practice, or we don't. If we do, then ancient Greek science did not – could not – make *different* presuppositions about celestial and terrestrial bodies; it necessarily made no presuppositions about them at all. Reference to celestial and terrestrial bodies simply could not occur in Greek science. Our presuppositions and the bodies they are about stand or fall together. But this proto-Kuhnian view does not seem to be what Collingwood has in mind. Alternatively, if we

*can* refer to celestial and terrestrial bodies in abstraction from our current scientific worldview, then that worldview is simply *not* an “absolute presupposition” of our thinking about those bodies.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis has his demonic narrator rejoice that “in the intellectual climate” which the forces of hell “have at last succeeded in producing throughout Western Europe,” the present generation is no longer “nourished by the past.”

Only the learned read old books and we have now so dealt with the learned that they are of all men the least likely to acquire wisdom by doing so. We have done this by inculcating the Historical Point of View. The Historical Point of View, put briefly, means that when a learned man is presented with any statement in an ancient author, the one question he never asks is whether it is true. He asks who influenced the ancient writer, and how far the statement is consistent with what he said in other books, and what phase in the writer’s development, or in the general history of thought, it illustrates, and how it affected later writers, and how often it has been misunderstood (specially by the learned man’s own colleagues) and what the general course of criticism on it has been for the last ten years, and what is the ‘present state of the question’. To regard the ancient writer as a possible source of knowledge – to anticipate that what he said could possibly modify your thoughts or your behaviour – this would be rejected as unutterably simple-minded.

(Lewis 2001, 150-51)

To invoke this passage against Collingwood might seem unfair. It is Collingwood, after all, who insists that the interpretive sciences must be *criteriological* rather than psychological – that is, they must be concerned with thoughts as true or false, right or wrong, rather than as mere mental events.

When a man makes a statement about the nature of God (or anything else) he is interested, not in the fact that he is making that statement, but in the belief, or hope, or fancy that it is true. If then the psychologist merely makes a note of the statement and declines to join in the question whether it is true, he is cutting himself off from any kind of real sympathy or participation in the very thing he is studying – this man’s mental life and experiences. ... The mind, regarded in this external way, really ceases to be a mind at all.

(Collingwood 1916, 41-2)

Collingwood would thus see himself and Lewis as being on the same side of this issue.

Under the theory of absolute presuppositions, however, historical interpretation becomes criteriological only in a rather strained and indirect sense. In interpreting Aristotle's scientific theories I am still concerned with their truth – not their truth absolutely, however, but their truth relative to *his* presuppositions. The criteriological character of my inquiry becomes “incapsulated,” i.e., “existing in a context of primary or surface knowledge which keeps it in its place and prevents it from thus overflowing.” Our re-enactment of past thought is “a re-enactment with a difference,” i.e., incapsulated re-enactment. An “incapsulated” thought is one which “though perfectly alive, forms no part of the question-answer complex which constitutes” the context of the interpreter. In interpreting, say, Admiral Nelson's decision not to make himself a “less conspicuous target” by removing his decorations, we do not ask ourselves *Nelson's* question, “shall I take off my decorations?” Our awareness that we are in a study rather than on the deck of a ship in battle prevents this question from arising. The questions that do arise are instead ones like “what did the *Victory's* deck look like to a person thinking about his chances of surviving the battle?” and “shall I go on reading this book?” (Collingwood 1939, 112-113) Similarly, then, when I read Aristotelean physics the question “are the planets *really* attempting to imitate the divine perfection?” is one I cannot properly ask; I can only ask whether that conclusion was a reasonable one for *Aristotle* to reach.

Of course Collingwood is too good a philosopher actually to *practise* this dreary advice. His pages are full of pronouncements to the effect that Plato was wrong about this and Hegel right about that. What drives him into this tension between theory and practice, I suggest, is once again his failure to distinguish precise from non-precise abstraction.

Collingwood's criticism of psychology is that it considers our ideas in *abstraction* from their objective purport. But this same suspicion of abstraction ultimately plunges Collingwood into a kind of psychologism of his own, refusing to consider ideas in abstraction from their historical context and so imperiling the objective purport he had tried to save. The doctrine of absolute presuppositions thus undermines his own first-order methodological dualism.

What Collingwood fails to see is that considering our ideas in abstraction from their objective purport is harmless so long as the abstraction is non-precise. The problem

with psychology, or rather with *psychologism*, is that its abstractions are *precise*. Rather than assigning feelings to psychology and thoughts to logic as Collingwood does, we can grant that thoughts are studied by both psychology and logic, but psychology, properly conducted, studies thoughts in (non-precise) abstraction from their objective purport while logic does not.

## VI. Conclusion

Imagine a nifty conclusion here.

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