

DEVELOPMENT OF COLLINGWOOD'S CONCEPTION OF HISTORICAL OBJECT

It is commonly held that historical study has double aspects : inquiry in respect of the totality of past events and the inquiry in respects of the way of dealing with them. The first is called the objective aspect of history and the second, the subjective aspect of history. The ambiguity is important because it at once saddles the philosophy of history with two possible channels. The study may occupy itself with the actual course of historical events or it may be confined to a discussion of the processes of historical thinking. The former nestles in discovering either in the over-all course of events or in the general nature of the historical process, some meaning or significance that transcends the intelligibility achieved by ordinary historical work. In contrast, the latter makes a philosophical reflection on historiography : that is, the epistemological analysis of what the historians do. The over-all study of historical events is called as speculative philosophy of history while the study of historical thinking is known as critical philosophy of history although the contrasts such as substantive and analytical, material and formal also are not uncommon.

Collingwood hardly made any sharp distinction between these two aspects of history. He attempted to define the nature of historical thinking through the nature of historical object. After all, thoughts about historical thought must be thought about the object of historical thought as well. Hence, for Collingwood,

philosophy of history must be both epistemology of history and metaphysics of history. "Philosophy cannot separate the study of knowing from the study of what is known" (IH 3). The German movement with its prejudice against metaphysics evaded the task of inquiring into the objective nature of the historical process and took interest only in the historian's subjective mental process, with the result that, it conceived that process as a natural process to be mere spectacle for the historian's mind (IH, 184). Accordingly, while considering the nature of historical object in *Speculum Mentis* which is regarded as a kind of 'phenomenology of Mind' Collingwood could hardly ignore the problem of knowledge and its relation to the object.

In his earlier works, Collingwood maintained that history is concerned with given fact. Showing filial piety to his teacher Cook Wilson, Collingwood held that the sole business of history is to apprehend fact although he did not wait long to break the tradition and come out of the realistic shell.

In *Religion and Philosophy*, Collingwood held that "History is that which actually exists" (p. 49). History is concerned with asserting fact which has independent existence. Historical fact is "something independent of my own or your knowledge of it". Yet the fact did not mean for him a fact, fact limited by space and time, here and now. The appetite for the concrete together with spiritual ideal of lofty indefinite whole gleamed in Collingwood. After some seven years Collingwood wrote :

The object of history is fact as such. To determine facts far distant in space and time is not the essence of history but its climax, the very heroism bravado of historical spirit in its defiance of empirical limitation (*SM* 211).

The object of history is to transcend the empirical limitation and reach at the total fact as such. Thus, from the very begin-

ning of his career Collingwood showed his non-realistic penchant.

Collingwood advocated this queer conception of history by employing a clear-cut dichotomy : hypothesis on the one hand and assertion on the other. The former is the trait of science and the latter is the trait of history. Science makes abstraction of fact and eventually falsification of it. As Collingwood writes :

... scientific fact is a fact purged of its crude and scientifically scandalous concreteness, isolated from its historical setting and reduced to the status of a mere instance of a rule. It is a fact which has been turned from an individual into a particular. The facts which empirical science concerns itself are facts thus de-individualized, defactualized and this is what distinguishes the sense in which even the most empirical science uses that word 'fact' from the sense it bears in history (*ibid*, 186).

For historical consciousness fact is a concrete fact. The scientific consciousness simply denies the concreteness of fact and makes it a mere abstract instance of an abstract principle But,

To abstract is to consider separately things that are inseparable. ... One cannot abstract without falsifying. To think apart of things that are together is to think of them as they are not, and to plead that this initial severance makes no essential difference to their inner nature is only to erect falsification into a principle (*ibid.*, 160).

Scientific statement is thus an abstraction but historical statement however is a categorical one that asserts something which *is*. As supposition of fact science is hypothetical while as assertion of fact, history is categorical. Science, therefore, implicitly presupposes history. The inevitable transition from science to

the form next 'above' it, namely, history occurs due to a realization that the abstract must rest upon the concrete; that scientific hypotheses must have a categorical basis.

The triumph of the Renaissance scientists lay in bringing the implicit presupposition to light, in discovering that science was the abstraction from the concrete reality of history (*ibid.*, 185).

We should note here that Collingwood here considers only the *theoretical* aspect—constructions of hypotheses and theories—but fails to consider the *descriptive* aspect—ascertaining and discovering fact—scientific inquiry. In his enthusiasm to distinguish between science and history he assumes theory—building to be the sole function of science.

In the *Speculum Mentis*, Collingwood attempts to analyse the mental acts. "All thought is for the sake of action" (*ibid.*, 315). Each theoretical activity therefore has a practical aim in conduct. The type of action corresponding to art is play; that of religion obedience to commandments; that of science is utilitarianism; that of history and philosophy is autonomy and freedom. Philosophy arises at the last and final stage. Genuine 'philosophical' action will therefore be a plethora of art, religion, science and history together. Philosophical action is directed towards achieving that 'complete knowledge which the worlds of art, religion, science and history were invented to promote.

What is the need of this dangling display of fact and mind? Because the mind can never know itself in a direct way: it can only know itself through the mediation of external worlds. Works of art, religion, science, structure of historical fact, codes of law, systems of philosophy and so on ad infinitum— is the only way by which the mind can acquire the self-knowledge

which is its end. And this self-knowledge of the *Speculum Mentis* smacks the Advaita Vedantic conception of self-knowledge in Indian Philosophy. According to the Advaita conception, self is really the Ultimate reality or the Brahman. When an individual forgets itself it takes itself to be limited self or *jīva*. And when an individual regains its self-knowledge, it gains the knowledge of the Ultimate Reality or the Brahman. But the Hegelian influence is more apparent. The 'contradiction' to be found in each world, considered in abstraction from the rest, arises only in so far as that world claims to be the whole of reality. The knowing subject must submerge into the object. The alienation between the subject and the object is to be transcended. And once the ideal of totality of fact is reached, there is hardly any room for cognitive activity on the part of the subject.

Thus, in the *Speculum Mentis*, Collingwood attempts to show the dialectical development of mind. In a footnote of the book, he relates (*ibid*, 108) that the conception of the book stems from an effort to deal with the inadequacies of *Religion and Philosophy*. But actually, the book was not merely an effort to correct mistakes of a previous book or to justify his own versatility in showing the *rapprochement* between history and philosophy. It offers a remedy for discontents with the existing explanations of human nature. To Collingwood, all forms of knowledge have corresponding actions and all these actions help getting true knowledge of mind. Collingwood makes this clear at the outset :

All thought exists for the sake of action. We try to understand ourselves and our world in order that we may learn how to live (*ibid*, 15).

Characteristically, Collingwood envelopes his concern with present problems into a philosophical loin :

All thought exists for "the freer and more effectual revelation of (our) nature in a vigorous practical life" (*ibid*, 15).

The message which Collingwood preaches to our present woes is the unity of the mind. *Speculum Mentis* embarks on a search for the lost unity of the mind. It finds this unity in the growth and collapse of successive systems of thought, which mirror momentarily what the mind believes to be the ultimate truth. Once the mind learns that each new system is but an exercise in mind's self-construction of the world, each system collapses in turn. Each collapsed system leaves traces in the form of an error, which being overcome, persists in the mind as "an element in the point of view from which the mind raises its next problem". The life process of the mind is the raising and solving of problems (*ibid*, 317). Each solution of a problem gives rise to new problems and new efforts at solution. The unity of the mind consists in the fact that it is the mind which creates both problems and solutions. These problems and solutions form a kind of mirror in which the mind can see the unfolding in one continuum the growth of self-knowledge. Sufficient growth in self-knowledge causes the mind to recognise itself as the power which creates both problems and solutions. The quote Collingwood :

...the external world is not a veil between the mind and its object, but a picture of itself (the mind) drawn to aid its own self-vision (*ibid*, 313).

The sub-title of the book *Speculum Mentis* is 'The Map of Knowledge'. The book is an attempt to account for the relationships that the various branches of human knowledge, namely, art, religion, science, history and philosophy have to one another. The relationship is taken to be dialectical and in the course of his account of the essential feature of each—except, of course,

philosophy, the last resort—Collingwood shows how it points towards the essential character of the next. With the advance of knowledge, each reveals its limitation. It is therefore small wonder that the discussion of history in *Speculum Mentis* ends in section V entitled, 'The breakdown of History'. Following the Hegelian maxim that truth is the whole, Collingwood shows the limitation of history. The weak point of history is its dogmatic assertion which is provisional as ultimate. Assertion of fact is not complete until it is viewed in an all embracing context. But the historian is here and now and consequently, his perception is limited by both space and time. In comes the spartan philosopher with the finest element of human being, namely, the power of thinking. Here occurs a crucial change in Collingwood's conception : a change from fact to thought. We do not perceive except by thinking. Errol E. Harris writes :

It is because the fact is an inter-relation texture of things and events that we cannot perceive it except by thinking—by developing in our thought the inter-connections of the given datum with its context and with its past.¹

Even in our daily experience we find this to be true. When a person perceives a table, the table is not given in its totality. The subject possibly perceives a sign, an indication of a table. Nevertheless, the subject perceives the given to be a table because the present perceived sign is compatible with other established evidences of the table previously perceived. In perception we are confronted with individual fact, but we are not confronted with the total fact in sensation. What I see are colours and sound but what I perceive is a person, thing and event. It is now clear that perception is interpretation of a sensation in the light of a complex context. Just as an ordinary table cannot be perceived short of its totality, similarly a fact cannot be known without its texture. But fact in its totality can be grasped only

by thinking, which is outside the scope of history. *Speculum Mentis* thus proclaims historical scepticism.

...If history exists, its object is an infinite whole which is unknowable and renders all its parts unknowable. ... We must claim access to the fact as it really was. The ... is inaccessible. History as a form of knowledge cannot exist (SM, 234, also 238).

But historical scepticism does not amount to scepticism of all knowledge. Collingwood thought that totality as an all embracing context can be grasped by philosophy alone. Philosophy emerges where inchoate history fumbles. Philosophy is the last resort of dialectical transcendence when history relinquishes.

Thus Collingwood came to realise that in the fact of perception, mind is not indolent and perception is as much dependent on the perceiver as on the object perceived.

Collingwood first realised the importance of thought in understanding a fact in the papers of 1923 and 1925. Therein his contention was that there was no fundamental difference between sensation and thought.² In 'Sensation and Thought' Collingwood claimed that sensation is not alien to thought; rather it itself involves thinking. Again, in 'The Nature and Aims of Philosophy of History'³ he further maintained that perception is an interpretation and answering a question, namely, what is that which is perceived? History too attempts to interpret evidences of the past event. Collingwood therefore held that there is no qualitative difference between perception and history except in degree. History is simply perception raised to highest power because :

... in all perceptions we are making a judgement, trying to answer the question what it is that we perceive and all

history is simply a mere intense and sustained attempt to answer the same question.⁴

From *Religion and Philosophy*, thus there, is both ontological and epistemological shift. By this time, Collingwood's point of view regarding object and subject has radically changed. (a) Fact is no longer understood as given in a naive way. Fact is total context. (b) From the point of view of subject, historical object is no longer just assertion, it is rather interpreted perception and as such manifestation of a cognitive activity. There is an inter-connection between these two changes; since the fact is not given it is in a way created through the act of perception.

This change of view enabled Collingwood to avoid the much echo about historical scepticism. The object of history is no longer defined as independent of knowledge. "The historical data consist of what he is able to perceive" said Collingwood in the 1925 paper.⁵ Since the object is not independent of knowledge, no one therefore can any longer doubt the ability of history in knowing object. Collingwood himself believed in his early life that history was vulnerable because he identified fact with the "given" which involves no "thought". In this paper, history is taken to be too important to be abandoned so cheaply. It is interesting to notice his ingenious solicitation.

Ideally, historical thought is the apprehension of a world of fact. Actually, it is the presentation of thought to itself of a world of half-ascertained fact: a world in which truth and error are at any given moment inextricably composed together. Thus, the actual object of actual historical thinking is an object which is not 'given' but perpetually in process of being given.⁶

The above description shows that Collingwood anticipated what he would be saying in *The Idea of History* about historical

construction. That perception involves interpretation and that fact is not given but "perpetually in process of given" is not unexpected from a thinker who is increasingly rejecting realism on the one hand who so much began to recognise the importance of historical imagination in the reconstruction of the past on the other. Just as in ordinary perception, the object is a construction, in history also the past event is constructed. Thus, Collingwood discovered the same nature in what at first sight may appear to be two disparate modes of experience. The only difference between, what we ordinarily call perception and what we ordinarily call historical thinking is that the constructive work is quite implicit in perception but can be made explicit only by reflective analysis while in history the constructive work is quite evident and cannot be overlooked.

In *The New Leviathan*, Collingwood's view of the nature of historical object changed further. He began to regard history as a discourse to human actions. Facts are hereafter regarded not as "given" or "perpetually in process of given" but as "things made" (*Facta gesta*, things done). As Collingwood writes :

A study of mind on the historical method involves two renunciations. First, it renounces with Locke all 'science of substance'. It does not ask what mind is; it asks only what mind does (9.16) ... Secondly, it renounce all attempt to discover what mind *always and every where does*, and asks only *what mind has done* on certain definite occasions (9.18) (*NL*, 51).

This bold statement wiped out the last vestige of realism which was still there when Collingwood said that historical fact was gradually given. History can study only the human deeds and their thoughts. In *An Autobiography* also, he said that his-

tory is knowledge of the world of human affairs and consequently there is no a-mental historical fact. To quote Collingwood :

Since history proper is the history of thought there are no mere "events" in history : what is miscalled an "event" is really an action, and expresses some thought (intention, purpose) of its agent (*A.*, 127).

The same view is echoed elaborately in *The Idea of History*. There Collingwood's concept of history is that it is a "science or answering of questions; concerned with human actions in the past; pursued by interpretation of evidence; and for the sake of human knowledge" (*IH*, 10). History deals with past human action. But the real impetus for actions start from thought. An historian therefore should study past thought. In fact, history is a study of thought, not things thought about. In this sense, geology although is a study of the ancient world, is not history. Indeed, there cannot be a history of Nature because historians can never discover by whose agency or rather which thoughts have resulted in the creation of Nature. As Collingwood points out :

The only condition on which there could be a history of nature is that the events of nature are actions on the part of some thinking being or beings and that by studying these actions we can discover what were the thoughts which they expressed and think these thought for ourselves. This is a condition which probably no one will claim is fulfilled (*IH*, 302).

Thus, in *The Idea of History*, Collingwood came to view that historical knowledge is not acquired by acquaintance but by mediation, contradicting what he earlier upheld. While advoca-

ting the constructive theory of history. Collingwood was quite vocal in denying the givenness of historical fact :

... the past is never a given fact which he (historian) can apprehend empirically by perception (*IH*, 282).

proper historical knowledge is to be constructed upon the re-enactment of past thought.

Why Collingwood changed his points view about history from a study of given fact to the re-enactment of past thought ? This shift occurred, because he gradually came to realize that on realistic assumption the historian and the object remain in two unbridged poles. The realists contend that the world of fact is only revealed to the knowing mind but fail to satisfactorily explain how the relation between the two is established. On realistic assumption, the historian remains "the spectator of a life in which he does not participate; he sees the world of fact as it were across a gulf which, as an historian, he cannot bridge."⁷ The difficulty led Collingwood to hold that the object of historical study is not a world of fact independent of the knowing mind, but is constituted by the historians own thought.

Thus Collingwood's theory of history is a story of continual change—both ontological and epistemological. In *Religion and Philosophy*, he held that historical object is the given fact, in *Speculum Mentis* he came to regard historical object as fact as such; in *The New Leviathan*, in *An Autobiography* and in *The Idea of History*, he finally held that historical object is human action and its thought. Thus his realistic stand-point rose to its culmination in *Speculum Mentis* that resulted in scepticism which however could not be a convenient position for a man who was born and brought up in an historical atmosphere. Previously, he held historical fact simply to be independent of mind, but here he held historical object to be "individual, concrete, infinite, no

arbitrary abstraction or unreal fiction, but reality itself in its completeness" which was (sought in vain in other spheres of knowledge) however beyond the grasping power of history. Since that idea led to 'breakdown of history, Collingwood came to hold that object of history was thought. Thus, from 'Absolute Realism' (if we are allowed to use that word) Collingwood shifted to a sort of idealism. Objectivity of historical fact, however, could not be denied. The historical object must have some independent status. The historian's search is not a search through fantasy : he seeks to know what he has never known, to discover something which he assumes is 'there' to be discovered. Realism on the other hand could not be acceptable to him. In his mature thought, Collingwood said that realism is a theory of knowledge that "is based upon the grandest foundation a philosophy can have, namely, human stupidity" (EM, 34). In *The Idea of History*, therefore, he came to view that although object of history is a thought, nevertheless, it is an universal thought and hence is both subjective and objective. As Collingwood writes :

The act of thinking, then, is not only subjective but objective as well. It is not only a thinking, it is something that can be thought about (*IH*, 293).

From the cognitive point of view, too, his views changed from time to time. In the beginning of his career he held that history is an assertion; then he came to realize that there is thought element in historical assertion and finally, he held that history is an inference, and its object is past act of thought and not something given (*IH*, 305, passim).

NOTES

1. E. E. Harris ; "Collingwood's Theory of History", *Philosophical Quarterly*, 7 (1957) 38.
2. R. G. Collingwood ; "Sensation & Thought", *Proceedings of Aristotelian Society* (1923).
3. ——— ; "The Nature & Aims of Philosophy of History", *Proceedings of Aristotelian Society* 25 (1925).
4. *Ibid*, 168.
5. *Ibid*, 120.
6. *Ibid*, 161,
7. 'The Nature & Aims of Philosophy of History', 165.
Idea of History has been referred to as IH, New Leviathan has been referred to as NL, An Essay On Metaphysics as EM, and Speculum Mentis as SM.