

Chapter 11 History

Teaching Notes

Excerpt from RG Collingwood's *The Idea of History*

(Read the questions at the end of this extract first.)

The historian, investigating any event in the past, makes a distinction between what may be called the outside and the inside of an 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 his assassins. **The historian is never concerned with either of these to the exclusion of the other.** He is investigating not mere events (whereby 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 the inside of the event. He is interested in the crossing of the Rubicon only in its relation to Republican law, and the spilling of Caesar's blood only in its relation

This section introduces a clear definition of 'outside'. Can students identify the relevant elements?

Consider the use of the example to *illustrate* not just in place of a definition.

Clear definition of 'inside'. Can students identify the relevant elements?

History deals with *both*.

Collingwood suggests 'action' is different from 'event'. Action is inside and outside. What is that difference? What is implied by 'action' that Collingwood would suggest is *not* implied by 'event'?

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 the action, to discern the thought of its agent.

In the case of nature, this distinction between the outside and the inside of an event does not arise. The events of nature are mere events, not the acts of agents whose thought the scientist endeavours to trace. ... Instead of conceiving the event as an action and attempting to rediscover the thought of its agent, the scientist goes beyond the event, observes its relation to others, and thus brings it under a general formula or law of nature. ... Whereas the events of history are never mere phenomena, never mere spectacles for contemplation, but things which the historian looks, not at, but through, to discern the thought within them. ... To discover that thought is already to understand it. ... When [the historian] knows what happened, he already knows why it happened.

... But how does the historian discern the thought which he is trying to discover? There is only one way in which it can be done: by re-thinking them in his own mind. ... So the historian of politics or warfare, presented with an account of certain actions done by Julius Caesar, tries to understand these actions, that is, to discover what thought in Caesar's mind determined him to do them. This implies envisaging for himself the situation in which Caesar stood, and thinking to himself what Caesar thought about the situation and the possible ways of dealing with it. The history of thought, and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of past thoughts in the historian's own mind.

Important idea: the idea of 'thinking yourself' into the action. This opens a really interesting discussion of what this means. How can a twenty-first century historian think themselves into the actions of ancient historical figures, about which they might know very little? Historians bring so much with them when uncovering the thoughts of individuals in the past (cultural, social, historical context) ... particularly what the historian thinks is reasonable.

'What reason does [some ancient figure] have to act?' will be coloured by what the *present* historian thinks is reasonable. Is it possible to find 'reasonable' actions which utilize utterly foreign thought processes? (We might open the discussion to how WOKs, which are present influences, influence what we say about the thinking of past figures.

Distinguishing natural science from history.

Here we have a claim about the scope of the natural sciences. Does history have 'laws' in the same way?

Consider having a student look up a quick and easy definition of 'scientific law'. Does this sound like what history provides?

This draws on the notion of 'action'. An action requires both inside and outside, so describing the action is to describe the inside.

Highlighting again the nature of rethinking.

[This process] is a labour of active and therefore critical thinking. The historian not only re-enacts past thought, he re-enacts it in the context of his own knowledge and therefore, in re-enacting it, criticizes it, forms his own judgement of its value, corrects whatever errors he can discern in it.

Collingwood introduces here the notion of evaluation or judgment. The suggestion is that while we 'rethink' the thoughts of our historical subjects (eg, Caesar) we will be doing so from our own perspective; we cannot leave our own perspectives and beliefs and thought processes at the door.

... Man is regarded as the only subject of historical process, because man is regarded as the only animal that thinks, or thinks enough, and clearly enough, to render his actions the expressions of his thoughts.

... Historical knowledge is the knowledge of what mind has done in the past, and at the same time it is the redoing of this, the perpetuation of past acts in the present.

In other words, applying critical reflection from our own perspectives – critical = searching for rational process which would explain the outside of the agent's behaviour, but also reflecting on those thoughts from our perspective.

... The historian must in two ways go beyond what his authorities tell him. One is the critical way. ... The other is the constructive way. ... I described constructive history as interpolating, between the statements borrowed from our authorities, other statements implied by them. Thus our authorities tell us that on one day Caesar was in Rome and on a later day in Gaul; they tell us nothing about his journey from one place to the other, but we interpolate this with a perfectly good conscience.

History is necessarily 'constructive' – filling in gaps where doing so is reasonable.

This act of interpolation has two significant characteristics. First, it is in no way arbitrary or merely fanciful [if] our construction involves nothing that is not necessitated by the evidence, it is a legitimate historical construction of a kind without which there can be no history at all.

A lot to unpack. Historical narratives must remain loyal to that about which there is evidence to say, but this interpolation is necessary for genuine history. Historians then seem caught between an essentially imaginative exercise, but one which is necessarily constrained by available evidence.

Room here to discuss imagination as part of the historical process. Does it add reliability and rigour or does it lower this credibility? Moving then on to the significance, how might a historian manage this dilemma in the search for reliable claims?

Secondly, what is in this way inferred is essentially something imagined. If we look out over the sea and perceive a ship, and five minutes later look again and perceive it in a different place, we find ourselves obliged to imagine it as having occupied intermediate positions when we were not looking. That is already an example of

historical thinking; and it is not otherwise what we find ourselves obliged to imagine Caesar as having travelled from Rome to Gaul when we are told that he was in these different places at these successive times. ... This activity, with this double character, I shall call *a priori* imagination.

A prior = 'known prior to experience'. Here he means that you cannot really help but say that certain events must have happened even though there might not be direct evidence of them. If we know that Caesar was in Rome at one point and Gaul in another, then we are 'obliged' to say he was also in the points in between – even if we have no direct evidence of him being there.

... As works of imagination, the historian's work and the novelist's do not differ. Where they do differ is that the historian's picture is meant to be true. ... This further necessity imposes upon him obedience to three rules of method, from which the novelist or artist in general is free.

Distinguishing the historian's 'task from the novelist's' (this is a comparison in method and scope between art and history).

The historian's picture stands in a peculiar relation to something called evidence. What we mean by asking whether an historical statement is true is whether it can be justified by an appeal to the evidence; for a truth unable to be so justified is to the historian a thing of no interest.

A more interesting point than being in a subclause would imply. Where there is no evidence, there can be no 'truth'.

Reading questions:

- 1** Why do you think Collingwood introduces the distinction between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of an event? Why is this distinction particularly important for the historian, and less so, or not, for the natural scientist?
- 2** What do you think Collingwood is saying about what constitutes an *historical* event?
- 3** ‘When [the historian] knows what happened, he already knows why it happened.’ What does Collingwood mean here?
- 4** What does it mean for an historian to *understand* an event from the past?
- 5** In ‘re-enacting’ the past thoughts, how do you think the historian critiques, tests or evaluates the thoughts he is re-enacting?
- 6** What role does imagination play in the historian’s trade? Does it add to or detract from the credibility of the historical knowledge being constructed?
- 7** What do you think Collingwood means by the ‘peculiar relationship’ in which he says the historian stands with respect to evidence?
- 8** Briefly summarize Collingwood’s ‘historical method’.
- 9** Choose a *real-life historical situation* and apply the key elements of Collingwood’s thinking about history.
- 10** Choose an object or artefact that you think demonstrates an ‘inside’ in the way that Collingwood means this. What thought has been ‘put into’ the object?

Encourage students to read these first. These questions could be a written task or a series of discussion questions (think, pair, share).

I’ve used this as a way of allowing a pair of students to chair the discussion themselves (promoting communication and leadership skills).

This might serve as a way of linking to the IA exhibition project.