

***Period and Place:  
Collingwood and Wittgenstein on Understanding Others***

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***Prologue***

What it takes to understand radically different others lies at the heart of the philosophies developed by Collingwood and Wittgenstein at roughly the same time.<sup>i</sup> Their approaches contain three differences that are *prima facie* significant, but ultimately prove to be little more than a divergence in emphasis. This is particularly remarkable in light of the fact that the two thinkers are frequently thought to stand at opposite ends of the methodological spectrum with respect to the value of metaphysics.

First, there is the difference between period and place. Whereas Wittgenstein typically considers examples of (chiefly fictional) people from geographically distant strange lands, Collingwood concentrates specifically on the thought and action of past figures from the history of Western civilization. This relates to the second difference between them, which is that Wittgenstein focuses on *collectives* of people whereas Collingwood is primarily interested in *individuals*. The third, arguably largest difference, is in their conceptions of what understanding involves. For Collingwood, this is a matter of *re-enacting* the practical reasoning of those concerned; Wittgenstein, by contrast, seems to think it requires a serious *immersion in the other's form of life*, a feat more (on some views *only*) feasible with one's own contemporaries.

We must nonetheless view their approaches to understanding others as complementary, rather than opposed. For one, it is plausible to expect that the conditions for understanding the foreign present should parallel those for the local past of historical understanding. As the famous opening line of L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* contends, 'the past is another country, they do things differently there' (1953:1). We must also take care to not exaggerate the differences in their interest. Wittgenstein does not solely focus on understanding one's *contemporaries*, and Collingwood was certainly interested in cultural beliefs and practices, as exemplified in his works of history, the doctrine of absolute presuppositions (arguably inspired by Evans-Pritchard<sup>ii</sup> but connected to the 'hinge propositions' of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*<sup>iii</sup>), and his critique of anthropology.<sup>iv</sup> *Pari passu*, not all of Collingwood's pronouncements are about individuals and, as we shall see, Wittgenstein's more personal worries about understanding others focus explicitly on the thought of individuals.

While Wittgenstein does not adhere to anything resembling Collingwood's method of re-enactment, there are deep commonalities in how they conceive of the relation between thought, action, and explanation. Both philosophers resist the temptation to assume that the thoughts of others are inner mental events which are in principle hidden from us. Rather, actions are the observable expressions of our thoughts and desires and it is in principle possible for one person to have *the very same thoughts* as another. However large the psychological or cultural obstacles to this might be they are ultimately *contingent* in nature.

The task of both the historian and the anthropologist, so conceived, is not to establish facts and offer causal explanations for them, but to explore what a situation means or meant to those whom one is trying to understand. As Peter Winch would later put it, 'the way to understand events in human history [...] is more closely analogous to the way in which we understand expressions of ideas than it is to the way we understand physical processes. (Winch 1958: 123-4).<sup>v</sup>In this methodological approach, Collingwood and Wittgenstein are close as two coats of paint.

## I. Understanding Through Re-enactment

According to Collingwood, the explanation of past action requires a reconstruction of the thought and reasoning that led up to it. Without this our knowledge is limited to the occurrence of bodily events and, as such, lacks understanding. Since the re-enactment involved inevitably occurs from a different perspective it takes on a critical form:

The history of thought, and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian's own mind. This re-enactment is only accomplished, in the case of Plato and Caesar respectively, so far as the historian brings to bear on the problem all the powers of his own mind and all his knowledge of philosophy and politics. It is not a passive surrender to the spell of another's mind; it 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 judgment of its value, corrects whatever errors he can discern in it. This criticism... is an indispensable condition of the historical knowledge itself... the thought which re-enacts past thoughts . . . criticizes them in re-enacting them.<sup>vi</sup>

The clue to what re-enactment itself consists in is provided some pages later:

Suppose, for example, [the historian] 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 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 choose to see the possible alternative, 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. Thus he is re-enacting in his own mind the experience of the emperor; and only in so far as he does this has he any historical knowledge, as distinct from a merely philological knowledge, of the meaning of the edict.<sup>vii</sup>

Without such re-enactment, we can at best only *chronicle* events. But the missing element is not a discrete thought or intention that hides behind an otherwise clear meaning. In the case of a philosophical text, for instance, its meaning can only be understood once one has seen 'what the philosophical problem was, of which his author is here stating his solution [...]re-thinking for himself the thought of the author'.<sup>viii</sup> To achieve this, we must 'come pre- pared with an experience sufficiently like his own to make those thoughts organic to it'.<sup>ix</sup>

In what sense are we supposed to go through the *same* process of thought as the person we are trying to understand? Collingwood's readers today must themselves adopt strategies of re-enactment in order to find out what Collingwood actually meant by it. As we cannot make sense of what it would be to go through the same *particular* process, it is tempting to assume that Collingwood has in mind a thought process of the same *type*. Nothing could be further from the truth:

When I read Plato's argument in the *Theaetetus* against the view that knowledge is merely sensation, I do not know what philosophical doctrines he was attacking; I could not expound these doctrines and say in detail who maintained them and by what arguments. In its immediacy, as an actual experience of its own, Plato's argument must undoubtedly have grown up out of a discussion of some sort, though I do not know what it was, and been closely connected with such a discussion. Yet if I not only read his argument but understand it, follow it in my own mind by re-arguing it with and for myself, the process of argument which I go through is not a process resembling Plato's, it actually is Plato's so far as I understand him correctly.<sup>x</sup>

The rethinking of a thought, then, is identical to its critical consideration. So understood, the practice shares elements with the Pyrrhonic method of holding a belief without assenting to

it. Collingwood is here explicitly rejecting the (still) dominant view that identity, as opposed to mere resemblance, is either a matter of strict numerical (token/token) identity, or an instantiation of a universal type in a token copy.<sup>xi</sup> Instead, he maintains that one may go through the *very same* thought process as Plato just by reasoning in *exactly the same* way as he did. A thought process, after all, is but a reasoning process and we cannot rule out that two people at different times and places might, in principle, reason in exactly the same way. How might such sameness be ruled *in*? We find a ready-made example in Jorge Luis Borges' story about Pierre Menard, who initially sets out to write the *Don Quixote* from scratch, initially by *being* Miguel de Cervantes (learning Spanish, returning to Catholicism, forgetting the history of Europe from 1602 to 1918, etc.) but finally coming to write the 9<sup>th</sup> and thirty-eighth chapters of Part I and a fragment of Chapter twenty-two through his own experiences.<sup>xii</sup>

This *through-ness* is what Collingwood calls *immediacy*, which he contrasts with *mediation*:

[Thought] is both immediacy and mediation. 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 . . . in addition to actually happening it is capable of sustaining itself and being revived or repeated without loss of its identity... what we think is not altered by alterations of the context in which we think it [...] in their immediacy, as actual experiences organically united with the body of experience out of which they arise, Plato's thought and mine are different. But in their mediation they are the same.<sup>xiii</sup>

Collingwood's thought that two people can have the very same thought itself shared by Wittgenstein. But Wittgenstein's remarks on this are unconcerned with overcoming any pragmatic difficulties which might be presented by period or place, seeking instead to establish a logical possibility in the philosophy of mind. This is not because Wittgenstein has no interest in the first set of worries. It is just that we must look elsewhere in his work to find them, in what we might call his philosophy of understanding. As we shall eventually see, however, the two areas of enquiry are not unconnected. Wittgenstein's philosophy of mind both completes and is completed by his philosophy of understanding. In order to appreciate how this completion itself completes the thought of Collingwood we must first take a brief excursion into the relation of thought to action.

## II. From Thought to Action

Wittgenstein notoriously rebukes the commonsense assumption that two people cannot have the same pain:

“Another person cannot have my pains.” – Which are *my* pains? What counts as criterion of identity here? Consider what makes it possible in the case of physical objects to speak of “two exactly the same”, for example, to say “This chair is not the one you saw here yesterday, but is exactly the same as it”: In so far as it makes *sense* to say that my pain is the same as his, it is also possible for both of us to have the same pain: “But surely another person can’t have THIS pain” – the answer to this is that one does not define a criterion of identity by emphatic stressing of the word “this”. Rather, what the emphasis does is to suggest the case in which we are conversant with such a criterion of identity, but have to be reminded of it. The substitution of “identical” for “the same” (for instance) is another typical expedient in philosophy.<sup>xiv</sup>

The view here is that we are being presented with two different language games, neither of which is *in itself* justified or unjustified, correct or incorrect, though their comparative proximities to everyday parlance are instructive. It is all-too-easy to become so fixated by a philosophical or scientific picture that we fail to recognise that there are other, equally legitimate, ways of seeing the same thing. A related danger is that of switching between two different conceptual schemes in mid-thought, as illustrated in the following example by P. M. S. Hacker:

The reasoning is confused, for two different language-games are being crossed . . .  
‘pain in my leg’ does not determine a location in the same way as ‘penny in my pocket does’. Hence we should be suspicious of the claim that since A’s pain is in his foot and B’s pain is in *his* foot, therefore their pains are in different places.<sup>xv</sup>

As David Boucher, Wendy James, and Philip Smallwood demonstrate, Collingwood's undated paper 'Observations of Language) isolates 'the identity of language in near-Wittgensteinian terms' (Collingwood: 2005 xvii & 18, n.1). Collingwood here writes:

It is a mistake to think of it as having certain properties or powers in itself and apart from the ‘using’ of it: for since it is an activity, not an instrument, it does not exist save in being ‘used’.<sup>xvi</sup>

Boucher et.al note that while there is no evidence that Collingwood knew of Wittgenstein's ideas (and so may have formulated his own views of language independently) we find additional parallels in *The Principles of Art* and *The New Leviathan*:

One does not first acquire a language and then use it. To possess it and to use it are the same. We only come to possess it by repeatedly and progressively attempting to use it.<sup>xvii</sup>

A word is not a sound or group of sounds . . . ; it is a sound or group of sounds having its own meaning, namely what a person using that word means by making that sound.<sup>xviii</sup>

Unlike Wittgenstein, however, he would not have had any problem with the claim 'you cannot have my pain' *per se*. This is because pain, for Collingwood, is a sensation, and therefore strikingly different from thinking in not being a 'directional activity'.<sup>xix</sup> Accordingly, the spatio-temporal criteria that apply to the having of the sensation do not apply to what Collingwood means by 'thought' viz. *what* is thought rather than the thinking of it.<sup>xx</sup>

We are now in a better position to explore how re-thinking past thoughts is meant to help with the understanding of historical figures and, *mutatis mutandis*, with the explanation of their actions. As already noted, Collingwood maintains that without the reconstruction of the reasoning that led up to action, the historian's knowledge is limited to that of the occurrence of bodily events. Without re-enactment, we can only capture a record of statements which *chronicle* events:

The processes of nature can... be properly described as sequences of mere events, but those of history cannot. They are not processes of mere events but processes of actions, which have an inner side, consisting of processes of thought; and what the historian is looking for is these processes of thought. All history is the history of thought.<sup>xxi</sup>

Thoughts, for Collingwood, are but aspects of the actions which can be used to characterise them. Accordingly, there are no hidden 'inner' thoughts which lie behind – and causally precede – actions:

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 inside of an 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 . . . an action is the unity of the outside and inside of an event... [the historian's] main task is to think himself into this action, to discern the thought of its agent... For history, the object to be discovered is not the mere event, but the thought expressed in it. To discover that thought 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.<sup>xxii</sup>

While Collingwood couches his position in Hegelian terminology,<sup>xxiii</sup> there is an obvious parallel here with Wittgenstein's contention that nothing is hidden (PI §§243-316). William Dray captures this aspect of Collingwood's philosophy of mind & action very well by comparing his philosophy of mind to that of Ryle:

[F]ar from considering explanatory thoughts as unobservable events, he regarded them as having no existence at all apart from the events which expressed them. In this connection, his views are much closer to those of his successor in the Chair of Metaphysical Philosophy of Oxford, Gilbert Ryle, than has always been supposed. Suggestive in this connection is his vigorous attack on what he called 'the metaphysical theory of mind' – the conception of it as a non-physical substance, rather than a complex of activities.<sup>xxiv</sup>

If action is ontologically inseparable from thought then one cannot even begin to understand explain action without understanding the thoughts which form part of its constitution. Given this tight connection, the question of whether beliefs and 'pro-attitudes' are *causes* of intentional behaviour does not even arise. This is because it makes no sense to look for nomological relations between the inner and outer aspects of one and the same event. One may, of course, observe correlations between various inner and outer characterisations, but the latter are not what the historian is trying to explain, for the job of the historian is to explain *action* – and thereby also *thought* – not mere movements of material bodies. A unified account of neuroscientific explanations of every single bodily movement of some person does not constitute a biography.

Actions, for Collingwood, are not identified through – let alone *with* – bodily movements, but by the *thought(s)* which they express. When he speaks of actions having an interior aspect that events lack, this is arguably a metaphorical way of expressing the Aristotelian point that in attempting to understand any given action we may ascribe a practical syllogism to its agent. Such syllogisms are reconstructed reasonings which help to explain the agent's action by disclosing *what* she was doing. They need not either accompany or precede the act, which they are not entirely separate from. Hence Collingwood's claim that when historians know *what* happened they already know *why* it happened ('for the historian there is no difference between discovering what happened and discovering why it happened').

A related thought would later be echoed by Wittgenstein's pupil G. E. M. Anscombe in her account of explanation by re-description:

The description of something as a human action could not occur prior to the existence of the question 'Why?', simply as a kind of utterance by which we were *then* obscurely prompted to address the question.<sup>xxv</sup>

Whether or not Collingwood had recognised that explanation is sensitive to description, what is clear is that, despite his reference to the 'inner', he joins Wittgenstein and anticipates Anscombe in taking his point about action being the outer *expression* of thought to debunk a causalist approach to explanation that was already gaining prominence<sup>xxvi</sup>:

This does not mean that words like 'cause' are necessarily out of place in reference to history; it only means that they are used there in a special sense. When a scientist asks 'Why did that piece of litmus paper turn pink?' he means 'On what kinds of occasions do pieces of litmus paper turn pink?' When an historian asks 'Why did Brutus stab Caesar?' he means 'What did Brutus think, which made him decide to stab Caesar?' The cause of the event, for him, means the thought in the mind of the person by whose agency the event came about: and this is not something other than the event, it is the inside of the event itself.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Collingwood's methodological approach here is once again eerily close to that of Wittgenstein, as described above.<sup>xxviii</sup> With this in mind, let me now outline Wittgenstein's approach to understanding others before relating it back to that of Collingwood.



### III. Sharing Lives

Whereas Wittgenstein's published writings on forms of life refer to entire communities of people, his personal obsession with the difficulty of understanding others focuses on individuals<sup>xxix</sup> and as such lies closer to the interests that Collingwood is *best* known for.<sup>xxx</sup> Conversely, passages such as the following from a letter sent to Ethel Collingwood shortly after his arrival in Indonesia [31/11/38] could have easily been written by Wittgenstein:

It is a very odd thing, this idea that one entire civilization should be so related to another that any member of the first is given a title of nobility by any member of the second. It doesn't mean that either understands the other, for they don't; nor that the dominant people beat the natives at their own game and win their respect that way, for that again doesn't happen; it does mean, however, that the natives recognize the strangers as people whom they can see to be obeying a stern and exacting law, living for an idea & not for a good time, living hard & not taking things easy. And I don't think that this is true any longer. I don't think that people hereabouts look up much to Europeans.<sup>xxxi</sup>

In response to a letter from C.L. Stevenson, Wittgenstein writes 'I'm sorry you must do a lot of the history of philosophy for it will hardly help you to clear up your own muddles'. It would be precipitous to dismiss this as preposterous without making a little effort to understand the thought behind it. The pleasing irony is that *part* of the reason for Wittgenstein's doubts about the history of philosophy being able to help with one's personal philosophical muddles is a deep pessimism about our power to readily understand the thought of others. This difficulty becomes particularly salient when we are trying to understand people who lived in the distant past and spoke a different language, both literally and metaphorically:

Really to understand other peoples [sic] thoughts or to learn from their confusions is *enormously* difficult, especially if they lived long ago and talked a philosophical language which isn't your own. The only thing to do is to tell *yourself that you don't understand what exactly they were at*. If you've ever had a real thought yourself you'll know that it is difficult for you to understand other peoples thoughts. I know that, as

a professor of philosophy, you've got to profess to understand what everyone meant when they said...But you aren't a professor, and so just enjoy your freedom!<sup>xxxii</sup>

In the arena of the history of ideas, we're all latecomers seated at the gods, with restricted viewing; but at least we got in. Wittgenstein undoubtedly found the ideas on show – at least as incarnated in our *reception* of them – too thoroughly muddled to be of use to anybody. The letter to Stevenson reveals why he also took it to be an extremely hard and perhaps thankless (though not altogether hopeless) task to attempt to re-evaluate standard interpretations of past texts. Indeed, he seems to have acquired many of these second-hand, with the exegetical disinterest of a first-year undergraduate, a stance fortified by his curious apathy with regard to whether other philosophers had previously entertained the same thoughts as he (1922:26 & 1953: viii).<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Wittgenstein would have approved of Collingwood's pronouncement that '[e]very piece of writing is primarily addressed by the writer to himself' (Collingwood 1933/2008:209) and that, as Bernard Williams has put it 'you could not understand what was being said by an author unless you understood [...] the question that he was trying to answer (Williams 2006:344). While he liked to spot congenial features, Wittgenstein cared little for whether what *he* saw in Plato, Spinoza, Hume, Schopenhauer, Freud, or whomever coincided with what *they* had in mind; what mattered was that it was there to be found.<sup>xxxiv</sup> This is not a celebration of the death of the author, but of the life of the reader. As such, it is immune from Collingwood's chastising of the scissors-and-paste teacher whose 'claim to know what question the author is asking is a fraud which anyone could expose by asking for his evidence' (1939/2013:71).<sup>xxxv</sup>

Another instructive anomaly is Wittgenstein's precise juxtaposition of the *historical* with the *personal*. This is complicated by the a *prima facie* tension between his anti-scepticism about *knowledge* of other minds and his pessimism in private correspondence about *understanding* (or being understood by) other people.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The contrast reveals that while it is *metaphysically possible* to not only understand the thought of another person but to have *the very same thought* as them, it is *in practice almost impossible* to do so. Hence Wittgenstein's remark, in a later letter to Sraffa that 'it's impossible, or almost impossible, for certain people to understand each other' because of the 'differences of their whole lives'.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

The problem of understanding, we are reminded, is not limited to period and place but permeates our daily lives; if the history of pop music from Dylan, Bowie, and Springsteen to Beyoncé, Winehouse, and Lorde is anything to go by, some of our most prevalent life differences stem from generation, racial, and gender gaps in chic, wage, and achievement. Collingwood's thoughts on the first of these reveal a stance consonant with Wittgenstein's appropriation of Nestor's line 'the thing about progress is that it always seems greater than it really is' (see Cahill 2006):

If a community of fish-eaters had changed their method of catching fish from a less to a more efficient one [...] this would be called an example of progress. But from whose point of view is it an improvement? [...] the older generation will see no need for the change knowing as it does that life can be lived on the old method. And it will also think that the old method is better than the new; not because of irrational

prejudice, but because the way of life which it knows and values is built round the old method [...] To him, therefore, the change is no progress but a decadence (IoH 325).

The thought that bridging such life-gaps is *almost* – but not quite – impossible is testimony to Wittgenstein's thinking that the difficulty here is not metaphysical but psychological. Indeed, as early as the *Tractatus*, he sees no difficulty in the idea of having or thinking the same thought as another:

Dieses Buch wird vielleicht nur der verstehen, der die Gedanken, die darin ausgedrückt sind – oder doch ähnliche Gedanken – schon selbst einmal gedacht hat.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

If the qualification of 'similar thoughts' marks any kind of hesitation at all it is of a psychological (not philosophical) nature. Indeed, Wittgenstein has such a high standard for thought that he finds it is hard for writing to express thoughts at all (1922:28), let alone ones that have not already been anticipated in some way. It is highly improbable, in this view, for one person to fully understand the thought of another. Nonetheless it remains possible precisely because two people can share the same thought. Wittgenstein presents us with no theory here but it is clear that they need to have much else in their lives in common for this to be the case. Whereas Collingwood emphasizes the *reasoning* that led to the thought in question, Wittgenstein highlights the importance of shared *forms of life*.

In his book *Historical Explanation: Re-enactment and Practical Inference*, Rex Martin compares what he presents as Wittgenstein's idea that the 'content' of practice founded on game-forms can be neither true or false to Collingwood's doctrine of absolute presuppositions.<sup>xxxix</sup> His aim is to show how 'action explanations constitute a practice, a language-game' (Martin 1077:203), thereby integrating his modified version of Collingwood's account of re-enactment as the reconstruction of practical reasoning with G.H. von Wright's theory of practical inference.<sup>xl</sup>

This takes us to the heart of the distinction between explanation and understanding. Martin laments:

Von Wright has provided no real role for understanding in his account of the logic of action explanations [...] has failed to integrate understanding into his account of the teleological explanations of actions.<sup>xli</sup>

He subsequently argues that while von Wright provides a corrective to Collingwood's distorted role of understanding by showing that 'an action-explanation derives its force not just from facts in perspicuous connection but from these facts *when placed within their proper framework*, the framework provided by the basic schema'<sup>xlii</sup>, and that we can view re-enactment as 'the way of establishing facts that will satisfy the conditions of the schema for action-explanation' by showing 'that these particular facts do "fit together"'.<sup>xliii</sup> It is here that

Wittgenstein comes to the rescue, by providing the schema which lies at the foundation of the language game or practice.<sup>xliv</sup>

Exegetical quibbles aside, what is striking about Martin's approach is that the next chapter of the same book, 'Other Periods, Other Cultures', explicitly compares historical explanations to cultural ones without mention of Wittgenstein's numerous remarks on understanding others. A possible explanation of this oddity is the unhelpful Wittgensteinian fixation on language games and practices. But Wittgenstein's oeuvre is not only far richer than the picture resulting from this malady would seem to allow, it also chimes much better with the thought of Collingwood.

Martin defines understanding as 'the ability, given a particular set of facts, to construct an unforced narrative'.<sup>xlv</sup> This to be contrasted with the psychological construal of understanding as an *experience* of some kind (e.g. of having 'got it'). To understand another, on this view, is to be able to render their words and deeds intelligible via a narrative that lends itself naturally to the given facts, as opposed to one which is forced upon them like some ill-fitting puzzle piece that ostensibly completes the sky. The ability need not be exercised, of course. We might *immediately* see the meaningfulness in another's conduct; but the criteria for judging whether we in fact do so is tied to one's being able to explain it to another.

In the case of distant periods and cultures, nothing is immediate, at least not conclusively so. Here is how Isaiah Berlin characterizes a typical challenge:

We must therefore ask ourselves what the world must have been like for those to whom such use of language, which is almost meaningless to us, made sense [...] Transpose ourselves [...] only with the most agonising effort that we can even attempt to enter the mentality into another world [...] to our remote ancestors ploughs actually appeared to have teeth; rivers, which for them were semi-animate, had mouths: land was endowed with necks and tongues, metals and minerals with veins, the earth had bowels, oaks had hearts, skies smiled and frowned, winds raged, the whole of nature was alive and active (Berlin 1974: 344-5).<sup>xlvi</sup>

Martin argues persuasively that the problem of other periods (viz. how to understand the past from the radically dissimilar perspective of the present) is structurally identical to the problem of other cultures (viz. how to understand another culture given ethnocentric distortion).<sup>xlvii</sup> The possibility of history thereby hinges on the same kind of transcendental abilities as the possibility of anthropology. Martin contends that Collingwood's idea of a 'changing human nature' that 'conceived of a set of thoughts and actions common to men at one time turning into a wholly different set for other men at a later time' (1977:216) rules out transhistorical generalizations from the outset. This is a mistake, in his view, because we can only come to understand others by appeal to schema of practical inference that have transhistorical application.<sup>xlviii</sup>

It is precisely here that Wittgenstein can come to Collingwood's rescue. What the

social understanding requires is not the Winchian application of any kinds of rules of inference which 'favour a static picture of a fully functioning and coherent system' (Williams 2006: 357) but an immersion into their form of life. In the case of other periods this can only be simulated through re-enactment. It is a false dilemma to think that understanding a radically different person or culture must be either completely impossible or a mere matter of locating some norms and making the relevant inferences. Understanding is a matter of degree and can be difficult to properly attain even with those closest to one, not to mention one's own self. But it is in principle always possible to share a way of living with another and thereby also come to share their thoughts.

Wittgenstein uses 'forms of life' to refer to regular forms of living (Hacker 2015: § 3), but one finds no difficulty in extending the concept to cover a particular individual's unique way of living. So understood, a form of life need not be an entire community's way of living, but simply that of an individual. If 'to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life' (PI §§19), might this not also apply to the language of a particular person? This would not be a private language in Wittgenstein's principled sense, but the distinct language of a particular person nonetheless.

The alternate understanding of Wittgenstein's forms of life as 'part of our inflexible biological human nature'<sup>xlix</sup> is implausible, both as an interpretation of Wittgenstein and as a philosophical view in its own right. This is not to say that biological differences cannot underlie or enable cultural ones, just that the everyday difficulty of understanding others is not based on biology. The dilemma between a difference in forms of life that is purely biological and one that is merely cultural is a false one. The criteria for understanding others are ultimately behavioural and this includes both natural and nurtured conduct:

[...] he [the explorer in the foreign land] can come to understand it [the foreign language] only through its connections with the rest of the life of the natives. What we call 'instructions', for example, or 'orders', 'questions', 'answers', 'describing', etc. is all bound up with very specific human actions and an order is only distinguishable as an order by means of the circumstances preceding or following // accompanying it //.<sup>l</sup>

Suppose you came as an explorer to an unknown country with a language quite unknown to you. In what circumstances would you say that the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on? Shared human behaviour [Die gemeinsame menschliche Handlungsweise]<sup>li</sup> is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language.<sup>lii</sup>

Moreover, as Glock, and Baker and Hacker point out, even the cultural-specific is ultimately rooted in biology:

[...] understanding an alien language presupposes convergence not of beliefs, but of patterns of behaviour, which presuppose common perceptual capacities, needs and emotions [...] we “could not find our feet” with a community of human beings who give no expression or feeling of any kind, and we would presumably be at a loss with spherical Martians.<sup>liii</sup>

Shared human behaviour provides the essential leverage for understanding mankind. This “shared behaviour” is not only the common behaviour of mankind which manifests our animal nature, our natural needs for food, drink, warmth, our sexual drives, our physical vulnerability, etc. It also includes the culturally specific forms of behaviour shared by members of the tribe – their specific forms of social behaviour – observation of which and interaction with which enables us to interpret their language [...] any “form of life” accessible to lions, given their natural repertoire of behaviour and their behavioural dispositions, is too far removed from ours for any noises they might emit to count as speech.<sup>liv</sup>

We need not worry then, as Martin does, whether or not human nature is constant. What matters is that Wittgenstein shares Collingwood's thought that the actions of individuals should be understood against a background of shared assumptions that may be culturally specific. In this respect, it is a moot point whether or not Wittgenstein would ultimately reject Collingwood's historical metaphysics, for even Strawson's substitute account of core (transhistorical) concepts is in keep with contextualist anthropology.<sup>lv</sup> Indeed, we could even acquire the elusive ability to understand a speaking lion if we successfully immersed ourselves into its non-human form of life.<sup>lvi</sup>

### **Epilogue**

It is common and not entirely mistaken to think of Collingwood as a metaphysician and Wittgenstein as the anti-metaphysician *par excellence*. The followers of the latter would form a crucial part of the ordinary language backlash to the British idealist movement, whose tail end they associated Collingwood with. Given all this, it is pretty remarkable that Collingwood and Wittgenstein developed strikingly similar views on what it takes to understand another person independently of one another during the same period of years.

While they go about this in strikingly different ways, this is not a case of reaching the

same conclusion through different, let alone incompatible, routes. Far from it, the two philosophers reason in similar ways when considering the relation of thought to action, and of both to explanation and understanding.

I began this essay by highlighting a number of contrasts in *focus* between Collingwood and Wittgenstein. These were (i) period vs. place, (ii) individual vs. collective, (iii) re-enactment vs. forms of life. It turned out that not only were these superficial differences of emphasis, but that Wittgenstein's philosophical anthropology provides the glue which makes Collingwood's anti-transhistoricism stick.<sup>lvii</sup>

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i Wittgenstein's Preface to *Philosophical Investigations* (PI) is dated January 1945; Collingwood's *The Idea of History* (IoH) was originally published in 1946. Both had been working on these uncompleted (posthumously published) masterpieces for years and would continue to develop their ideas until their early deaths. For literature on various resemblances between the two philosophers see Boucher (1995: n. 42).

ii James Connelly (2013:413-4) notes that the doctrine may have been influenced by *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*, which Collingwood read in manuscript form for the university press; for comparisons between Evans-Prichard and Wittgenstein see Winch (1964:22ff.); cf MacIntyre (1962 & 1964).

iii Bernard Williams(2006:355ff.) contends that 'absolute presuppositions structure practices' and that 'Collingwood should have acknowledged more than he did in this connection what in relation to Wittgenstein is called the primacy of practice'. In his *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, 'our presuppositions are claimed to be no better (or worse) than those of allegedly primitive people who 'only possess a peculiar interpretation of the phenomena' (Wittgenstein 1993:141). This approach culminates in the 'hinge proposition' remarks *On Certainty* (e.g. §§ 341, 343, & 655) that are arguably not propositions at all but akin to heuristic maxims for interpreting phenomena. As Danièle Moyal-Sharrock argues, these 'hinge certainties' are *not* inferred from experience and do *not* function as grounds, but rather as the 'scaffolding of our language games' (Moyal-Sharrock, 2005:80-2; cf. Hamilton, 2014:104ff).

iv For the last of these see Collingwood (2005), as well as his 'Log of a Journey in the East Indies in 1938-9' (Collingwood 1939/2013: Part II); see also Connelly (2009). As the editors of *The Philosophy of Enchantment* point out, 'some of the points made by Collingwood in his critique of early anthropology are mirrored in Wittgenstein's almost contemporary notes made on the Golden Bough, also little known and most fully published only in 1993' (Collingwood 2005:lxvi).

v I consider Winch's somewhat uncharitable interpretation of Collingwood in Sandis (2015b: 379-800).

vi IoH (216–7).

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- <sup>vii</sup> Ibid (283).
- <sup>viii</sup> Ibid; see also Collingwood (1939: 53–76).
- <sup>ix</sup> IoH (300). In Sandis (2011) I try to show that Collingwood here strikes a balance between empathy and detachment.
- <sup>x</sup> IoH (301).
- <sup>xi</sup> For the type/token distinction in Collingwood See D’Oro (2000), Saari (1989), & Van der Dussen (1995).
- <sup>xii</sup> Borges (1939).
- <sup>xiii</sup> IoH (300–301).
- <sup>xiv</sup> PI (§§ 253–254).
- <sup>xv</sup> Hacker (1990:21).
- <sup>xvi</sup> Collingwood (2005:18).
- <sup>xvii</sup> (Collingwood 1938:250).
- <sup>xviii</sup> Collingwood (1942/1992: 41).
- <sup>xix</sup> Collingwood (1938: Ch.8); see Asad (2012:49) for complications relating to emotion.
- <sup>xx</sup> For the *locus classicus* of this distinction see White (1972).
- <sup>xxi</sup> IoH (215).
- <sup>xxii</sup> Ibid(213–4).
- <sup>xxiii</sup> See Sandis (2011:12-15). For parallels between Hegelian and Wittgensteinian approaches to the philosophy of action see Taylor (1979 &2010) and Laitinen & Sandis (2010ab:6–7).
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Dray (1980: 12). In similar spirit, Giuseppina D’Oro (2003) argues that Collingwood’s philosophy of mind offers a viable account of the irreducibility of the mental which has been mistakenly regarded as one of Ryle’s targets; see Collingwood’s(1933/2008:253-326) for his correspondence with Ryle. Anscombe (1963:83, § 46).
- <sup>xxvi</sup> For Collingwood’s place in the history of the reasons/causes debate, see Sandis (2006 & 2015b) and D’Oro & Sandis (2013).
- <sup>xxvii</sup> IoH (214–5). For his alternative way of capturing the nature of action explanation which does not resort to the inside/outside metaphor see Collingwood (1940/1998: 285–89).

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<sup>xxviii</sup> It is even closer and, along with Wittgenstein, served as a forerunner to the kind of descriptive metaphysics that Strawson (1959) would pioneer in the aftermath of Wittgenstein's heyday. The largest difference between them is that the latter replaces *historical* metaphysics with 'a massive central core of human thinking' which, unlike Collingwood's absolute presuppositions, 'has no history' because 'there are categories and concepts which, in their most fundamental character, change not at all' (ibid.: 10); see also Hacker (1996:176).

<sup>xxix</sup> I explore this contrast in Sandis (2015a).

<sup>xxx</sup> But see note iv above.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Underlying in the original, as quoted by James (2013:522).

<sup>xxxii</sup> Wittgenstein to C.L. Stevenson, 22.12.1933; in McGuinness (2012, §165, p.218).

<sup>xxxiii</sup> For a deeper exploration of Wittgenstein's ambivalent relation to the history of philosophy, see Glock (2005).

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Von Wright (1955:543-4) writes that '[f]rom Spinoza, Hume, and Kant he said that he could get only occasional glimpses of understanding' whereas 'he did read and enjoy Plato'.

<sup>xxxv</sup> The passage also includes an incidental mention of Wittgenstein, in the same breath as Plato and Kant.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> See Sandis (2012 & 2015b) for how his cryptic remark about the speaking lion may serve as a point of contact between the two domains.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Wittgenstein to P. Sraffa, 23.8.1949; in McGuinness (2012: §410, p.450).

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Wittgenstein (1922:26). Ogden translates this as 'This book will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it – or similar thoughts' (1922:27); Pears & McGuinness as 'Perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who has himself already had the thoughts that are expressed in it – or at least similar thoughts' (1974:3).

<sup>xxxix</sup> Martin (1977: 209-10); Collingwood (1940/1998: Part I).

<sup>xl</sup> For a sympathetic yet pertinent critique of von Wright's account see Anscombe (1974).

<sup>xli</sup> Martin (1977: 94).

<sup>xlii</sup> Ibid (95), emphasis in original.

<sup>xliii</sup> Ibid (96).

<sup>xliv</sup> Martin equates the two but this infelicity need not concern us here.

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<sup>xlv</sup> Martin (1977:94).

<sup>xlvi</sup> A book-length treatment of a cultural example akin to Berlin's historical one may be found in Lear (2006). One difference between Berlin and Collingwood is that the former places a greater emphasis on the notion of empathy; for Collingwood's influence on Berlin see Bevir and Choi (2015:334-56).

<sup>xlvii</sup> Ibid (217); see also Danto (1965: & 201-56 & 1966) and Martin & Hanson (1973). Danto distinguishes between the explanatory need of general laws and that of narratives. In his book, he only mentions Collingwood once, alongside, Croce and Dilthey, all identified as 'Historical Idealists [...] unanimous in insisting upon a radical distinction between the behaviour of human beings and non-human entities, and a corresponding radical distinction between the groups of disciplines which respectively study these two allegedly distinct kinds of behaviour' (1965:205). Notwithstanding the complicated exception of animal thought (see Sandis 2012), this puts Wittgenstein in the very same 'radical' boat.

<sup>xlviii</sup> In his later work Martin writes that '[t]he place to look in order to find models or sympathetic examples of Collingwood's idea that basic presuppositions couldn't be verified would be [...] not logical positivism [...] but rather strong critics of that doctrine, like Wittgenstein or Quine (2013:259); for Collingwood's response to logical positivism see Williams (2006: 353-4).

<sup>xlix</sup> The phrase - but not the view – belongs to Glock (1996: 124-5).

<sup>l</sup> Wittgenstein [MS 165, pp. 97ff.]; as quoted in Baker and Hacker (1985:191 & 2009:177).

<sup>li</sup> See Hintikka & Hintikka (1986: 209), von Savigny (1991:113–14), and Ma & van Brakel (2016: Chp. 6) why Anscombe's rendition of this phrase as 'the common behaviour of mankind' is deeply problematic.

<sup>lii</sup> PI (§ 206).

<sup>liii</sup> Glock (1996: 128).

<sup>liv</sup> Baker and Hacker (2009:173, inc. n. 1; see also 218ff.) In this revised version of Baker and Hacker (1985:186–187), 'shared behavior' substitutes what was previously 'common behavior' throughout. This is because the common behaviour of humanity does not completely exhaust our shared behaviour, which also includes behaviour that is 'culturally specific' (this last term helpfully replaces what was previously characterised as 'the diverse species-specific forms which such behaviour may naturally take for human beings').

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<sup>lv</sup> See note xxix, above. Both the Humean and the Kantian strands of Strawson's approach to concepts may be at odds with Collingwood's wholesale rejection of the uniformity of human nature, but neither of them undermine the explanatory importance of shared particulars. In his review of William Dray's *Laws and Explanation in History*, Strawson accordingly argues that while some 'general knowledge of human nature' is relevant to historical explanation, there are no covering-laws of human behaviour for it to appeal to (Strawson 1959b:266); he also chastises Dray for (apparently) failing to distinguish between 'reconstructing a calculation and endorsing it as a correct calculation' (ibid: 267; see Dray 1963:72 &83 for his response).

<sup>lvi</sup> Sandis (2012:151-2).

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