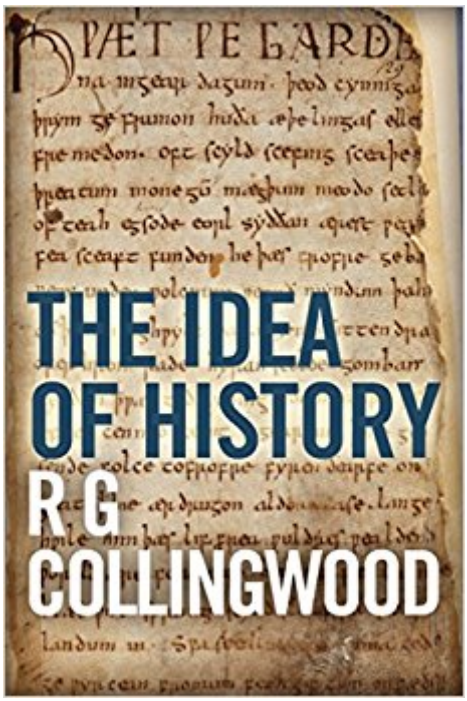
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The Idea Of History



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Synopsis

Ã¢â ¬Å“The name Ã¢â ¬Ëœphilosophy of historyÃ¢â ¬â„¢ was invented in the eighteenth century by Voltaire, who meant by it no more than critical or scientific history, a type of historical thinking in which the historian made up his mind for himself instead of repeating whatever stories he found in old books.Ã¢â ¬Â•For many years before his death in 1943, R. G. Collingwood, who was both a Professor of Philosophy at Oxford and a practicing historian, was engaged in what he intended as a major contribution to the philosophy of history. The Idea of History, first published in 1946, was this contribution. It became a canonical text, and linked the practise of philosophical thought with the job of the historian to place themselves in the minds of those men whose deeds he was placing into a context.Four parts of the book describe how the modern idea of history has developed. Collingwood begins with the Greeks and Romans, writing of Livy, Tacitus, Herodotus and Thucydides, then progressing to the early modern period throughout Europe and focussing in turn on each of the main centres of historical thought: Italy, Germany, France and England. A final section consists of a number of essays on such subjects as the nature of history, historical method, historical evidence, and progress, which show a great depth in study which is written in engaging and methodical prose.Ã¢â ¬ËœThe wit of [CollingwoodÃ¢â ¬â„¢s] learning and the many-sidedness of his gifts as a philosopher, scholar and artist are manifest...an example of scholarship and depth presented with ease and grace.Ã¢â ¬â„¢ Hans Kohn, New York Times Ã¢â ¬ËœA pleasure to read, a first-hand, enlightening, and intellectually stimulating treatment of a philosophically important subject...It has been a long time since I have encountered a contemporary work of which as much could properly be said...There is much to be learned from it.Ã¢â ¬â„¢ Ã¢â ¬â œ Arthur E. Murphy, The Philosophical ReviewR. G. Collingwood (1889-1943) was a philosopher and historian, and also worked on books concerning archaeology. Albion Press is an imprint of Endeavour Press, the UK’s leading independent digital publisher. For more information on our titles please sign up to our newsletter at www.endeavourpress.com. Each week you will receive updates on free and discounted ebooks. Follow us on Twitter: @EndeavourPress and on Facebook via http://on.fb.me/1HweQV7. We are always interested in hearing from our readers. Endeavour Press believes that the future is now.

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Customer Reviews

History is not a scientific process of cutting and pasting events into a sequence based upon testimony. History is an active mental evaluation of what took place and why it took place. It is the mind considering its thoughts.Collingwood begins with an introduction to history and its philosophy. History is more than events. It involves thoughts. "Philosophy is reflective. The philosophizing mind never simply thinks about an object, it always, while thinking about any object, thinks also about its own thought about that object" (1). This philosophy of history goes back to the Greeks who placed mathematics at the center of the picture (4). Since that time there have been "two great constructive ages of European history": the Middle Ages and the 16-19th centuries. The Middle ages were concerned with theology. The 16th-19th centuries were concerned with the laying down of the foundations for natural science.Collingwood asks four questions about history and then seeks to answer them with answers that the populous would term acceptable. What is history? What is it about? How does it proceed? What is it for? His answers are: 1. History is a kind of research or inquiry (science) (9) 2. seeking to find out answers about human actions done in the past 3. accomplished by the interpretation of evidence 4. for the furthering of human self knowledge.He then moves into an evaluation of historical thought beginning with the Greeks. Originally history was merely myth and theological. It was a theocratic history - intent on understanding the god in question (14-15). "Myth, on the contrary, is not concerned with human actions at all" (15). There are

no human characters, only gods.Scientific history arose and took prominence with Herodotus. It was the Greek mind which recognized that history is and can be a science (18). Instead of theocratic, it is humanistic. This thinking of historical thought was inherently opposed to Greek thought. Because history deals with human action, and that action is always changing, then these actions are not knowable. So went the thought processes of the Greeks. Therefore they had to divide history into two sections, knowledge proper and opinion.Men such as Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Livy (whose whole task was to assemble the traditional record of early Roman history and weld them together into a single continuous narrative), Tacitus (never really thought out the fundamental problems of his enterprise) and others played a role in the progression of historical thought.Part 2 is composed of the influence which Christianity had over historical thought and evaluation. Here the author addresses the leaven of Christian ideas and characteristics of Christian historiography. The Christians jettisoned two of the leading ideas of Greco-Roman historiography which are: 1) the optimistic idea of human nature and 2) the substantialistic idea of eternal entities underlying the process of historical change (46).Because they believed in creation, they could not fully accept the metaphysical doctrine of substance found in the Greeks and Romans. God alone is eternal (47). With their new view they saw God's purposes being worked out, not mans. The actions were more than mere events, they were the agents used by God to work out his plan (48). Therefore, the medieval historiographer's chief goal was to reveal the outworking of the divine plan (53).Part 3 addresses Romanticism, Herder, Kant, Schiller, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Hegel and Marx, and Positivism. Romanticism needed to make progress in two areas: "first, the horizon of history had to be widened through a more sympathetic investigation... and secondly, the conception of human nature as something uniform and unchanging had to be attacked" (86). This provided the bases upon which the majority of Collingwood's context is based.Herder was the first, and arguably the most important in regard to these changes (88). His view was teleological, each step of the evolution of man brought him closer to the end - and in man he became his own end as a rational being.Kant essentially argued that nature created a creature, any creature, for its own end. She created grass, not to feed a cow, but so that grass might be (98). His "idea" can be summarized in four points: a 1) universal history 2) presupposes a plan 3) bringing into human rationality 4) but in the process of bringing it in creates human irrationality (103).Schiller understood Kant to mean that universal history is the history of progress from savage to modern man (105). Kant looked to the future for the culmination, while Schiller looks at the present.Hegel was the culmination of the movement begun by Herder. He refused to approach history by means of nature (114). Nature is cyclical, nature has no history. Here he was rejecting the Darwinian view of nature and history.The

positivists' plan was to find the facts and frame laws around them. This desire to ascertain all the facts turned history into a dividing up of the minutia until the big picture could no longer be understood. They then were not allowed to judge the facts, but merely say what they say. Therefore, history was only an external look at events, with no thoughts involved.Part 4 contains scientific history as found in the different countries of England, Germany, France, and Italy. Positivism, although it claimed to only be scientific, was the methodology of natural science raised to the level of a universal methodology. (134). Bradley understood historical knowledge to be "no mere passive acceptance of testimony, but a critical interpretation of it" (138). The fundamental thesis of his Logic is that "reality consists neither of isolated particulars nor of abstract universals but of individual facts whose being is historical" (141).Bury, one of Bradley's successors, was a perplexed and inconsistent positivist (147). He was able to separate facts and place them together without making a judgment call. He added to Gibbon's work on Rome in the footnotes, without changing anything in the text. This to Collingwood is a perplexity because all information which one has at his disposal must be taken into account to reveal the thoughts of the actor. If more information is found, that would constitute the need to rethink the thoughts.The final portion, part 5, explains how the previous generations have missed the mark. He addresses human nature and human history. The study of history is founded on the fact that man wants to know everything, and in this, seeks to know himself (205). In seeking to know more about himself he seeks to know more about the past. A historians goal is not merely to dissect the event, "but discern the thought of its agent" (213). He is attempting to penetrate into the event and detect the thought which they express (214).For Collingwood, history, in many ways, is the "imaginary picture of the past" (248). History is seen through the eyes of another. Something which we possess, with which Collingwood did not have to deal, is a limitless ability to preserve events today through audio and visual recording. Even if we were able to record an entire battle, we would not have a true history. Even if we had every order and statistic detailed. Even if we were to video an entire war, from its initial conflict, till the signing of a treaty, we could not have a true history. According to Collingwood, true history involved knowing the thoughts behind the actions. This a priori imagination bridges the gaps between the "facts" and the historical narrative (241). Therefore, if one is to know the philosophy of Plato, he must first re-think it in his own mind, and then also "think other things in the light of which I can judge it" (301).I am appreciative of several aspects of Collingwood's idea. History is more than dates, places, people and events. Those only have significance in a larger picture of why they happened. As the author states, "statistical research is for the historian a good servant but a bad master" (228). In order to arrive at why something happened, one must consider the thoughts behind the individuals actions at a

certain time. As was presented, history is in no ways a mere piecing together of known people and events. Those ideas had thinkers, those thinkers had core beliefs, and those beliefs had a culture, and that culture had a history. If one seeks to understand history apart from the bigger picture they will be left with an empty shell. Collingwood's idea generates from the assumption that the natural sciences are the foundation for all thought (315). The scientific method is not the only way in which facts can be ascertained. Thinking about thinking must take place. Inherent in the reaction of Collingwood to the scientific nature of history are several difficulties which need to be settled. If history is, as Collingwood argues, a rethinking of the past through the minds of the actors, how are we to come to a knowledge of his thoughts? A difficulty arises when one's actions conflict with their perceived thoughts. If Caesar claimed to want Alexandria, yet chose Rome, how could we know his thoughts? Are we to judge by only his actions? And then what about when one actor thinks differently about the victory or failure of another actor? How are we able to bridge the temporal, cultural, and geographical bridge into the lives of past actors? Collingwood has failed to take into account the complexity of the thought process. Individuals do not always think rationally. Nor do they always act in accordance with what they think. At times humans merely react to circumstances out of their control. One actor of history may have a rational reason why he will go into battle and engage in a certain fight, however his entire thinking can change because he stepped in a hole, a lightning bold struck, a spear grazed his thigh, or an eagle sailed over his head. We simply do not have the ability to rethink anyone else's thoughts.Collingwood attempts to limit this by claiming that there are "reflective" or "deliberate" acts which have been thought out before hand (309). How are we to know which acts are deliberate and which are reactionary? Is a deliberate act one which we have specific written evidence? This difference may be able to able to be noted in a handful of cases, but not to the extent that we are able to construct a history of a people, or epoch, or battle. In our attempt to rethink the thoughts of others we not only do have the disadvantage of time and geography, but we have the disadvantage of culture. As Gadamer argues, our individual "horizon" is different than any other horizon. I could never think the same thoughts about a battle as a Greek soldier. His understanding of honor, Caesar, victory, human life, gods, afterlife, and pain do not correspond to mine. I may be able to understand some of those for the Greek soldier in general, but I will never know the feeling of fighting for his family or city or honor. Rethinking his exact thoughts is an impossible task. Another major difficulty with the ideas of Collingwood is his understanding of progression. Are we getting closer to history or farther from it as time progresses? If, as the author believes, we are thinking more clearly and asking better questions, than we should be getting closer to history. But does that mean that everything we are thinking today will be disproved in the next

generation because they are thinking more clearly? Isn't there an inherent difficulty in claiming to be the apex? What comes after the apex?Collingwood espouses a kind of "neo-idealism" which believes that the historian is the product of his own history. To a certain extent, this viewpoint is correct, for one is never able to completely escape himself. To conclude, however, that each historian can only come to his conclusion, right or wrong, because of his past, is to subjective. The idea of depravity was rejected by the Renaissance thinkers, but I wonder if that is not the very idea which allows us to properly "historicize"? We are only able to think one's thoughts after someone else as we are able to empathize with them. Depravity links us all. Collingwood, I believe sees the mind as generally progressing - thinking differently about all because it is now thinking differently about itself. Is he robbing from himself the foundation upon which he stands - at least for ancient history?

R. G. Collingwood's The Idea of History would be more correctly classified as a work of philosophy than a work of history, as the primary goal of the work is to present Collingwood's philosophical conception of the nature of history. In terms of methodology, Collingwood's book can be divided into two main sections.Parts I-IV are more historical as Collingwood traces the development of the practice of history. It begins with its Greco-Roman roots, examines the influence of Christianity, and moves on toward the development of modern scientific history, and finally finishes by examining the concept of history up to the then-present day. Throughout this first portion Collingwood does not directly present his philosophy, leaving it to the reader to infer it from his critiques of other historians. Part V is where Collingwood finally lays out his entire philosophy of history, fully elaborating what he only partially revealed in parts I-IV.

Collingwood attempts a massive diagnosis of the philosophy of history and the history of historical methodology. The best part of the book is when he talks about Greek and Roman historians.Since Collingwood died without finishing the book it would be unfair to put the problems in the later part of the book at his door.The books, though flawed, leaves the reader with an appreciation of what goes into the creation of history.

The history of the Historical Methodology is probably the single most important thing I learned in graduate school. I wish I had taken this course when I was a freshman at 18 years old. In fact, I never had a course on this topic, but through READING books like Collingwood, I have supplemented the educational deficits inherent in higher ed.

This book takes a look at history as a writing genre. I am not entirely sure that I agree with his thesis that this art has been improved by the historians' injection of more of themselves and their opinions into their narratives, but his treatment of this topic is thoughtful and novel. He induced me to read some of the ancient historical works, including "The Histories" by Herodotus who is said to be the father of history.

This book does not really need a review - it is classical. The true sign of a great book - it describes complicated things (philosophy and history, collective mind and individual belief, fact and interpretation) in a simple way comprehendible by a "plain human being". This is one of those books. As Albert Einstein put it: If you can not explain your idea to a 7 year old - it is not a true scientific idea.

What History and what it isn't. But what a discussion

Very deep and philosophical. Not something one can read on the side. I have only read a few chapters but if you have time to think about what you are reading it will be very informative.

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