Human Conduct, History and Social Science in the works of R.G. Collingwood and Michael Oakeshott.*

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R.G. Collingwood and Michael Oakeshott have contributed more than any other English-speaking philosophers to establishing the legitimacy of historical understanding against the “ignorant prejudices” of naturalism, positivism and realism. It is well known that they were generous in their praise of each other’s philosophy of history,¹ but as latter day exponents of an unfashionable philosophical idealism, each may have been disposed to be over zealous in his praise of conclusions with which he, nevertheless, fundamentally disagreed. Oakeshott, for example, contended that history is an autonomous activity disengaged from the considerations of practical life, whereas Collingwood believed that history is intensely practical and has a direct bearing on conduct. Furthermore, Oakeshott conceded the possibility of a successful social science, but denied that it is in any way related to, or derived from, the conclusions of historical understanding. Collingwood, on the other hand, is not as conclusive as Oakeshott in affirming the possibility of social science, and suggests instead that only limited generalisations, based upon the facts the historian has established by means of re-enactment, and circumstantially limited to distinct epochs, are attainable. Collingwood’s inconclusiveness is compounded by the fact that the subject matter of history, and hence that which is re-enactable, becomes far less determinate in his writings after 1936.

Their quite different views on the nature and purpose of history and its relations to practical life and social science can be traced to their quite divergent metaphysics. The aim of this essay is to explore the differences in the views of Collingwood and Oakeshott on history and social science, but it is appropriate before doing so to begin

FOOTNOTES

Note: As originally published, this article used a mixture of endnotes and abbreviations in the text. For simplicity, and for the convenience of on-screen readers, these have all been converted to footnotes. The original page breaks are denoted by square-bracketed page numbers in the left margin and vertical bars in the text (|).

* Earlier versions of this paper were presented at a conference on the “Idea of Social Science” organised by Knud Haakonssen at the Australian National University, 1988, and the “R.G. Collingwood Centenary Conference” organised by Lionel Rubinoff at Trent University, Peterborough, Canada, 1989. I would like to thank the participants for their incisive comments. I am also indebted to the advisers, among whom Lionel Rubinoff is one, who made invaluable suggestions for improving the argument and clarifying some details.

by giving an indication of their understanding of philosophical experience and its
relation to practical life, or conduct. It is not intended to detail the development and
modification of their views in this respect, merely to provide the philosophical basis
for Collingwood’s and Oakeshott’s different conclusions regarding history and social
science.²

Both Collingwood and Oakeshott assume that experience, or reality, is a unity, or an
undifferentiated whole, and it is therefore not the unity which has to be accounted for,
but its various modifications, or specifications. On the principle of unity all dualisms
are false abstractions when viewed from the vantage of the whole. This self-confessed
Hegelianism is, however, in the works of Collingwood and Oakeshott, mediated
through different sources, which with reference to the relations among specifications,
and between the specifications and the whole are principally Croce and Bradley.

Croce rejected Hegel’s dialectic of opposites because it misconceived the relation
between concepts as that of distinct contraries whose opposition becomes resolved in
a higher specification. To see reality as a series of degrees and to recognize that
opposites were not in fact opposed to unity was a significant contribution to
philosophy, but one which was undermined by a failure to distinguish between
opposites and distincts. The philosophical concept is a unity which by definition
comprises distinctions, and each of these distinctions is itself a concept. These
concepts are distinct in that they are different specifications of the whole. Spirit, for
example, distinguishes itself into intuition and thought, which are the Theoretical
forms, and the utilitarian and ethical wills, which are the Practical forms. These four
specifications of Spirit are, for Croce, distinct, but not separate; each is logically
dependent upon the lower, and is potentially, but is not itself dependent upon, the
higher. Each is a distinct concept mutually implicated in a necessary logical sequence
of degrees of reality which comprise the concept of Spirit. The contraries, or
opposites, of the concepts are integral to the concepts themselves. Beauty, for
example, which Croce associates with intuition and art, is what it is because it denies
the ugly: the negative, or contrary, is not an opposed concept, but part of the concept
of Beauty itself.³

Collingwood’s theory of the philosophical concept as a series of overlapping forms,
which at once differ in degree and kind, and comprise a unity of opposites and
distincts, derives its inspiration directly from Croce. Collingwood argues that the
philosophic concept, unlike the scientific, cannot be distinguished into distinct co-
ordinate species of a genus without falling into error. In classifying actions, for
example, we soon find that some are not exclusively one, or another, type but exhibit
mixed motives. We can ignore the overlap by identifying the margins at which the
pure essence of the concept appears to be apparent, unaffected by the intrusion of any
other species of the genus, but this is simply to commit the fallacy of “precarious

² I have traced the development of their ideas on philosophy in my “Overlap and Autonomy: the
different worlds of Collingwood and Oakeshott”’, Storia, antropologia e scienze del linguaggio, IV
(1989), pp. 69-89. Also see my “The Creation of the Past: British Idealism and Michael
Oakeshott’s Philosophy of History”, History and Theory, XXII (1984), pp. 193-214; and, The
Social and Political Thought of R.G. Collingwood (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press,
³ See B. Croce, What is Living and What is Dead of the Philosophy of Hegel, translated by Douglas
Ainslie (New York, Russell and Russell, 1969), and Logic as the Science of the Pure Concept,
margins”, because having acknowledged that there is overlap, which can be ignore by focussing on the margins, we sacrifice any grounds for asserting that the overlap will not become more pervasive. Alternatively, if we assume that the overlap is limitless, then we succumb to the “fallacy of identified coincidents”, which ignores differences in the kind of generic specification altogether. Thus a utilitarian who notices that the performance of one’s duties contributes to an increase in the general happiness can see no reason why we should distinguish between the concept of promoting the general happiness and the concept of duty. To identify the different specifications in this manner ignores the fact that each embodies the generic essence to a different degree, and thus constitutes a different kind of specification. The reason why there are different forms is because within each there is a discrepancy between what it is and what it aspires to be, and in the course of self-modification each becomes transformed into something else and embodies the generic essence to a more adequate degree.4

The variable in a scientific concept, such as different degrees of heat producing the solid, liquid, and gaseous forms of H2O, is extrinsic to the generic essence, whereas in the philosophical concept they are identical. Goodness, for example, is the variable which differentiates kinds of action, but because it is identical with the generic essence of action a variation in the degree of goodness leads to a corresponding variation in the degree to which the form, or specification, of action exhibits, or embodies, the generic essence itself.5 Because of this identity between the variable and the generic essence there can be no point on a scale of forms at which the variable is absent. Thus, for example, a scale of forms delimiting the different specifications of action cannot begin at zero; there must be a degree of goodness or the specification would not be a species of the genus action. The scale begins at unity, at which goodness, that is the generic essence, is embodied to its minimum degree. The principle upon which the scale is constructed may be | one of opposition in which we distinguish good and bad acts; or the principle may be one of distinction in terms of which we identify just, generous, and courageous acts, but such alternatives of classification, if they are not to fall victim to the fallacy of precarious margins, must themselves overlap and form a unity of opposites and distincts.6 For example, at unity the minimum degree of goodness is at once distinct from the higher specifications, and opposed to them as the negation, or privation, of goodness.

Collingwood argues that the lower form from the point of view of the higher is an inadequate embodiment of the generic essence and must be negated. The lower, however, is affirmed by the higher in having its positive content taken-up by the superordinate form. The lower is the experience which the higher modifies and transforms by constructing a theory to explain it.7 At each of the stages, or specifications, the whole of the scale is summed up to that point “because the specific form at which we stand is the generic concept itself, so far as our thought yet conceives it.”8

6 Collingwood, Essay on Philosophical Method, p. 76.
7 Ibid., p. 173.
8 Ibid., 89.
For Collingwood, the specifications of the forms of the Spirit, or experience, are, as we would expect, related to one another in a linked hierarchy of overlapping forms. Art, religion, science, history, and philosophy logically succeed each other, each with the exception of philosophy having transformed itself by aspiring to be what it was not, and each a more adequate specification of the general essence of spirit, that is, self-consciousness. The forms presuppose, and take into themselves, those which they supersede, while at the same time having potential within them those that succeed. Each of these activities, or forms of experience, is not a separate faculty, but the whole self from a different point of view, related to each other, not as co-ordinate species of a genus, but in a logically ascending scale of overlapping forms.

Practical reason and theoretical reason being species of the genus rational thought must, on the principle of overlapping forms, be related as a unity of differences in degree with differences of kind, and of opposites and distincts, the lower being both negated and affirmed by the higher. In the higher the lower is taken-up and modified. Collingwood argues, for example, that “in every field of activity there is a theoretical element, in virtue of which the mind is aware of something; there is a practical element in virtue of which the mind is bringing about a change in itself and in its world.” The different forms of experience, or spirit, all have an associated form of practical reason, or action. Play becomes manifest in Art, convention in Religion; abstract, or utilitarian, ethics in Science, duty or concrete ethics in history, and absolute ethics in philosophy.

By the time Collingwood wrote the New Leviathan that form of practical reason which he had called Absolute Ethics becomes absorbed by his concept of Duty. Duty now becomes the highest form of practical reason with its correlative history as the highest form of theoretical reason. The overlap of classes of which Collingwood spoke in An Essay on Philosophical Method still applies, but with one significant amendment. Whereas the content of the subordinate form had become totally transformed and modified in the superordinate form, Collingwood introduces in The New Leviathan, the law of primitive survivals which contends that in the higher forms of consciousness, or of society, there will remain unmodified survivals from the previous stages. This, however, does not undermine his contention that theory and practice are inextricably connected. The theoretical forms of thought, Collingwood suggests, are more completely dependent upon the practical than are the practical upon the theoretical. Real thinking “always starts from practice and returns to practice; for it is based on “interest” in the thing thought about; that is, on a practical concern with it”. Because of the law of primitive survivals an element of the practical always survives unmodified in theoretical reason. In summary, just as none of the forms is exclusive and autonomous, neither are theory or practice independent activities.

What view, then, does Oakeshott take of these matters? Both Collingwood and Oakeshott agree that the different forms, or modes, of experience are not the product of separate faculties of the mind. Oakeshott, however, wishes to deny unequivocally

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12 Collingwood, New Leviathan, p. 125.
that the different modes, or specifications, exhibit a logical or temporal series of subordinate and superordinate phases of experience.13 F.H. Bradley had intimated that he took the modes to be autonomous forms of understanding capable of achieving their own conditional perfection. In reference to natural science, for instance, he suggested that “within its boundaries I think everywise man will consider it sacred”.14 Furthermore, in relation to each other none of the modes is “higher in rank or better”, nor is any one “resolvable into the others”.15 None of them is primary nor capable of explaining the others or the totality of experience. Each is abstract and inconsistent, but, nevertheless, in relation to the whole each is necessary and cannot be denied its place.16 Oakeshott agrees with Bradley in all these particulars. The modes of experience are, for him, conditional arrests which differ from philosophy, or experience as a whole, by being satisfied with building a world of ideas upon unquestioned assumptions or postulates. Within each, criteria of appropriateness are formulated and practices and procedures subscribed to and followed. Each mode is capable of achieving a relatively high degree of coherence and consistency, and of endowing a conditional intelligibility upon its objects. Philosophy, which is the concrete totality of experience, that is experience without reservation, presupposition or arrest, interrogates the postulates of each mode, and finds that the conditional worlds they generate are ultimately contradictory and fall short of absolute coherence which is a property of the whole. Philosophy can reveal the contradictory character of the arrests in experience, but does not itself make a substantive contribution to their practices and procedures. Its intrusions are at once unwelcome and irrelevant.

In relation to each other the modes are completely autonomous, and none can be distinguished from the others in terms of subject matter. The subject matter is itself generated, or created, by, and is therefore not a given, but a conclusion of, the mode. In other words, our understanding of something “is necessarily the creature of the ideal character in terms of which it is being understood”.17 Evidence itself, in so far as it is recognized as evidence, is the creation of the interpretative practices of the modes. In Oakeshott’s view there can never be an original it, or text, which is not itself an interpretation conceived in modally distinct terms.18 He says quite clearly that there is no “prior and fixed ‘something’ upon which the interpreter works”; instead, to “‘fix’ a text involves an interpretation”: in other words, “text and interpretation are one and inseparable”.19

The exclusivity of the modes protects them from the irrelevant intrusions of the others and from the whole. Each is true for itself and therefore cannot confirm or deny the conclusions of the others, nor can it claim to be foundational in a hierarchy of modifications of experience.20 The modes are, then, in relation to each other,

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13 Oakeshott, Experience and Its Modes, pp. 71-2, 87 and 331.
15 Bradley, Appearance and Reality, pp. 404 and 405.
16 Bradley, Appearance and Reality, pp. 404, 412, 415 and 429. This is not to suggest that this is the only view of the relations that can be inferred from Bradley's work.
18 Oakeshott, Experience and Its Modes, pp. 31-32.
20 See Oakeshott, Experience and Its Modes, p. 5 and Michael Oakeshott, On History and Other
independent, but in respect to the whole their relation is one of dependence in that they exist only as abstractions of the concrete totality of experience.\textsuperscript{21}

In *Experience and Its Modes* Oakeshott identified three determinate abstract worlds of ideas, the practical, to which he later refers as human conduct,\textsuperscript{22} the scientific and the historical. Poetry was later added to acknowledge that its images and imaginings constitute an autonomous mode of understanding.\textsuperscript{23} It is true that of the modifications of experience the practical is circumstantially prior to the rest in that we first identify objects in relation to our immediate wants and concerns with the intention of satisfying our practical needs, but because of the principal of modal distinction there can be no question of logical priority.\textsuperscript{24}

Unlike Collingwood, then, Oakeshott affirms a clear distinction \textsuperscript{25} between practical and theoretical activities, or between conduct and theorizing. In Collingwood’s view it is history that negates “the traditional distinction between theory and practice” because “in history the object is enacted and is therefore not an object at all”. Collingwood’s thoughts on re-enactment are too well known to be rehearsed here, but the significance of the idea of re-enactment with its emphasis upon the purposes and intentions of the historical actors is that it requires the historian to re-live past-events in the contemporaneous practical injunctive moods of the participants. Collingwood continuously emphasized that history is emanently practical in enhancing one’s own self-knowledge and preparing oneself for action. In this respect, history has a crucial role to play because historical problems ultimately arise out of the plane of real, or practical life, and it is to history that practical problems are referred for their solution. History, therefore, stands “in the closest possible relation to practical life”.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{21} Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 324. There is no essence, or epistemological foundation, to which they can all be reduced. Each activity emerges and develops like the games that children play, formulating rules of procedure, and criteria of validity suitable for their own purposes. In Oakeshott’s famous imagery they are “voices in the conversation of mankind”, incapable of refuting each other and therefore are not adversaries, but companions and acquaintances engaged in polite discourse, in which from time to time one voice may try to dominate in the mistaken belief that its conclusions are those to which all the others must defer. See M. Oakeshott, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind”, in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London, Methuen, 1962), pp 197-247. In relation to the Taylor and Rorty debate over the question of whether the human and natural sciences are fundamentally different, Oakeshott may be said to subscribe to “universal hermeneutics” in that each mode “creates” its own subject matter in conformity with its constitutive postulates. Their methods differ, but the conditions of their modality are the same. Each predicates a different order of enquiry by invoking categorically distinct postulates, about which I will have more to say in due course. See Hubert L. Dreyfus, Charles Taylor and Richard Rorty, symposium *Review of Metaphysics*, 34 (1980), pp.3-55. Rorty, of course, explicitly invokes Oakeshott’s image of a conversation to characterise the philosophical endeavour. See Richard Rorty, “A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor”, *ibid.*, p. 39, and “A Discussion”, *ibid.*, p.52. Also see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1980), pp.156-7, 159, 163, 170-1, 318, 322, 371-3, 377-8, 386, and 389-94.

\textsuperscript{22} See On Human Conduct.


\textsuperscript{26} Collingwood, *Autobiography*, p. 114. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 106. This is not to suggest that re-enactment is a
Oakeshott, on the other hand, the practical mode, or conduct, is “categorically irrelevant” to historical inquiry.\textsuperscript{27} History, in Oakeshott’s view, is a form of theorizing and therefore “released from considerations of conduct”.\textsuperscript{28} Contrary to popular opinion, history is not derived from, nor built upon, practical life, and conversely practical life has nothing to learn from the categorically irrelevant mode of history.\textsuperscript{29} The past in history, Oakeshott contends, “is without the moral, the political or social structure which the practical man transfers from his present to his past”.\textsuperscript{30} In a series of strong allusions to Collingwood, Oakeshott denies that history concerns itself with the intentions, purposes, reasons, motives or the “deliberative calculations” of an agent, and therefore history simply cannot be conceived as the recalling, re-living, or re-enacting of past events.\textsuperscript{31}

It has been suggested that Collingwood’s understanding of the specifications of the philosophical concept as a linked hierarchical series of overlapping forms, and Oakeshott’s conception of the relation between each of the modes of experience as one of complete autonomy and categorial integrity, serve to explain their opposed views of the relation between theory and practice, and of history’s relation to practical life. It is these fundamental differences which enable us to understand better their different conclusions on the relation between history and social science.

It should be quite apparent from what has been said that for Oakeshott the world of natural scientific ideas is co-ordinate with the other arrests in experience: it cannot intrude upon, nor can it be intruded upon by, the others. This does not mean that it cannot take human activity as its subject matter: indeed, as long as scientific [theorizing conceives human activity as a process its engagement is wholly legitimate. Let me explain what this entails. In \textit{On Human Conduct} Oakeshott argues that theorizing about any going-on first requires an unambiguous identification in terms of characteristics which predicate one of two logically distinct and autonomous orders of enquiry. The first unambiguously identifies the characteristics of a going-on in terms of practices which exhibit human intelligence. Practices arise out of, and define, various types of association, and are subscribed to by those who engage in them. The second order of enquiry necessitates identifying a going-on as a process which does not itself exhibit human intelligence. Here the entities theorized know nothing of their situation; it is a process they undergo, rather than a practice to which they subscribe.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{27} Oakeshott, \textit{On History}, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{28} Oakeshott, \textit{On Human Conduct}, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{29} Oakeshott, \textit{On History}, p. 24.
\textsuperscript{30} Oakeshott, \textit{Rationalism in Politics}, p. 154. Cf. “The historian is the maker of events; they have a meaning for those who participated in them, and he will not speak of them in the same way as they spoke of them”. M. Oakeshott, “Mr. Carr’s First Volume”, \textit{Cambridge Journal}, IV (1950-51), p. 347.
\textsuperscript{31} Oakeshott, \textit{On History}, p. 64 and 93; and Oakeshott, \textit{Rationalism in Politics}, p. 164.
\textsuperscript{32} Oakeshott argues that ‘This distinction, then, between ‘goings-on’ identified as themselves exhibitions of intelligence and ‘goings-on’ which may be made intelligible but are not themselves intelligent, is not a distinction between mental and physical or between minds and bodies regarded as entities. It is a distinction within the engagement of understanding, a distinction between ‘sciences’ (that is, ideal characters) and the identities with which they are concerned. And in calling it a categorial distinction what is being asserted is that the understanding of identities recognized as themselves exhibitions of intelligence cannot be ‘reduced’ to the understanding of identities no so recognized’, \textit{On Human Conduct}, pp. 14-15. The modifications to the theories of \textit{Experience and its Modes}, and \textit{Rationalism in Politics} entailed in \textit{On Human Conduct} need not
In other words the order of enquiry predicated is scientific. As long as economics and psychology, for example, understand that about which they theorize as processes rather than practices they cannot be denied their scientific character. The fact that these young sciences have not formulated significant laws in comparison to biology, physics or chemistry is not because of a peculiarity with the subject matter, but because any young science is unlikely to be sufficiently well developed in terms of its postulates and theorems to make a significant contribution to scientific thought in its early days.

For Collingwood, however, natural scientific thought is logically inferior to history because it posits a mind/object dichotomy. In *Speculum Mentis* history itself, although superior to natural science, posited a concrete world of fact outside itself. With the formulation of the idea of re-enactment this false dichotomy between history and its object was overcome: the mind and its object are united in the process of re-enactment. Nevertheless, on the principles of the overlap of forms and the law of primitive survivals we would expect that an element of scientific thought would find its way into history. Collingwood is never quite clear on the relation between social science and history: he certainly allows the former a subordinate role in the latter, but equivocates on its efficacy and desirability. Both Collingwood and Oakeshott insist however that there is no place in history, as a mode of understanding, for natural scientific conceptions of causation and that the conclusions of history are not susceptible to being subsumed under general and universal laws.

There is, Collingwood argues, a considerable difference between a natural process and a historical process. Nature is not a continuous process because its various phases are distinct and separate. Thus the phases in a natural process fall outside each other: one phase supersedes and leaves behind another. It is a process of change in which one form is abolished in the creation of another. In other words, in a natural process the ‘past dies in being replaced by the present’. Natural processes, then, do not conform to the principle of a series of overlapping forms. The mind, however, of which history is its self knowledge, at each stage of its development retains something of its past, that is, the phases in an historical process are integrally related and do not fall outside one another. "Mind", it is suggested, "in becoming something new, also continues to be what it was; the stages of its development interpenetrate one

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34 One of the main purposes of *An Essay on Philosophical Method* is to show that the scientific concept and the philosophical concept are quite different in character. Collingwood, *Idea of History*, pp. 225. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 217.

35 detains us here. Oakeshott’s observation that there is nothing peculiar about human beings which make them unsuitable for scientific understanding is also argued by Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 347, and ‘Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor’, pp. 43-4.
another". An historical process, in the act of being historically known, lives in the present, and does so only because it is capable of being re-enacted: that which is not capable of being re-enacted is not an historical process.

What, then, is eligible for re-enactment? Collingwood is quite emphatic in *The Idea of History* that only thought in its rational forms is capable of being re-enacted. Feelings, sensations and emotions, although clearly part of mind, are excluded from the category of re-enactable human experience. Only reflective acts which are generally speaking purposive and intentional can comprise the subject-matter of history. Those aspects of mind traditionally grouped under the category of the psyche cannot be re-enacted because they are immediate experiences. Thought itself is immediate in that it occurs in a determinate context of other thoughts, and is also accompanied by feelings. Thought is peculiar, however, and distinguishable from feelings, in that it can be sustained outside its immediate context and revived elsewhere in different places and times. Only certain types of human conduct are strictly speaking historical: those which are precipitated by impulses, feelings and appetites are “non-historical”.

History is further distinguished from natural science in that it makes a distinction between the inside and outside of an event. The outside of an event refers to those characteristics which are its observable physical properties. Whereas the inside of an event is the thought processes of which the outside is their manifestation. Both the inside and outside together constitute human actions which are the subject matter of history. The historian’s work often begins with discovering the outside of the event, but quickly proceeds to the main task of rethinking the thoughts which comprise its inside. For the scientist the event is a spectacle discerned by perception and explained by assigning it to a category or class of such occurrences which stand in a law-like or causal relation to a different class of occurrences. For the historian it is not the event itself but the thought expressed in it, which has to be discovered. Discovering and understanding the thought are, for Collingwood, correlative.

We saw that for Oakeshott the differentia of history could not be the idea of re-living or re-enacting the thought of the past. Its differentia, among other things, is a certain type of present evocative of a past exclusively its own created by procedures and practices peculiar to itself. There are for Oakeshott many and various idiomatically distinct scientific activities, all of which are predicated and prescribed by the categorically unambiguous identification of a going-on in terms of processes rather than practices. In other words science and history belong to different orders of enquiry. What for the scientist is unambiguously identified as a blink, is for the historian a wink: a blink is a component in a process explicable in terms of laws, or

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38 ibid., p. 309
39 ibid., p. 297.
40 ibid., p. 216.
causal relations, whereas a wink is a subscription to a practice and an exhibition of intelligence.\textsuperscript{43}

All of the categorially similar, but idiomatically distinct sciences share what Oakeshott calls an ideal character. The world of scientific thought is one of absolute stability and regularity understood in terms of the category of quantity.\textsuperscript{44} Scientific observations are conceived in terms of quantitative measurements which communicate a world of impersonal experiences independent of ourselves.\textsuperscript{45} It views goings-on, not as practices subscribed to, but as processes. Science attempts to explain its world, a world of its own construction, in terms of generalisations. It is a world in which cause and effect have precise meanings which refer to the ‘necessary and sufficient conditions of a hypothetical situation’.\textsuperscript{46} To verify a scientific hypothesis is not a matter of checking it against a fixed and objective world of nature, but rather a matter of determining to what extent it is coherent with the world of scientific ideas as a whole.\textsuperscript{47}

Essentially, then, both Collingwood and Oakeshott view the world of natural science in terms of the search for generalisations and causal explanations, but take history to be concerned with particulars rather than universals, and which is therefore far removed from the aspirations of explanation conceived on the model of the natural sciences. Is there no place in history for this type of explanation? and could not a social science be constructed upon the foundation of historical facts?

In Collingwood’s view, natural science begins with the observation of mere particulars, or mere events, which are identified but not yet understood. To relate these mere particulars by classifying them into general types constitutes an advance in our knowledge. The facts in history, however, are not mere particulars but actions which have been ascertained by re-enactment. In other words the historian has already understood the facts and “nothing of value is left for generalization to do.” We do not understand a situation any better by pointing to the fact that similar things have happened elsewhere.\textsuperscript{48} It is only when a particular fact fails to be elucidated in isolation that such generalisations may have a value. The problem with so-called histories of the generalising type, like for example Oswald Spengler’s, is that they tend “systematically to dementalize mind and convert it into nature”.\textsuperscript{49} This is for Oakeshott, of course, \textit{pace} Collingwood, the very condition of formulating scientific generalisations about human beings.

In Collingwood’s view, any generalisations drawn from history are at best circumstantially limited. Human beings have an historical nature which changes in relation to social structures. Neither the changes, nor their outcomes, are susceptible

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{44} Oakeshott, \textit{Experience and Its Modes}, p. 176.
\textsuperscript{45} Oakeshott, \textit{Rationalism in Politics}, p. 145.
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 145.
\textsuperscript{47} Oakeshott, \textit{Experience and Its Modes}, p. 199.
\textsuperscript{48} Collingwood, \textit{Idea of History}, p. 223. Collingwood says, for example, “the historian need not and cannot (without ceasing to be an historian) emulate the scientist in searching for the causes or laws of events”.
to prediction. There are bound to be certain regularities in behaviour and characteristic patterns may emerge as long as minds of a particular type are confronted with the same sorts of situations in the context of the same social orders. But social orders change and thus cease to produce the patterns of behaviour deemed to be characteristic of them. A positive mental science based on historical facts cannot transcend history because its generalisations can hold only during a designated and limited historical period. A science of this type "can do no more than describe in a general way certain characteristics of the historical age in which it is constructed".  

We see, then, that Collingwood believed that such limited generalisations were possible. However, on the whole, and not without some equivocation, he thinks that generalisations of this kind are not very desirable, or at least are perversions of the historian’s calling. Collingwood always refers to any study of society which appropriates the methods of natural science as positivistic or naturalistic. Anthropology was one such science of society which in all its manifestations, the philological, functional and psychological, failed to free itself from positivistic tendencies. In Collingwood’s view, anthropology is “a special case of the problem of self-knowledge; and history is the only way in which man can know himself”. The anthropologists inhibit the attainment of self-knowledge by constructing a savage mind which stands outside of, and in opposition to, the knowing mind. In addition, they construct an artificial opposition between savagery and civilization. In failing to re-enact their subject matter the anthropologists fail to overcome these contrived oppositions. To posit the savage as other, something alien to our minds, and of which only irrational vestiges survive, is to deny the possibility of both understanding ourselves and our subject matter because in us, Collingwood contends, the primitive mind, from which our civilized mind developed, lives on. We repress the savage in us and project our irrational fears upon an artificial construction which we call the savage mind. In understanding the savage historically we understand the savage within ourselves.

In addition, Collingwood coined two terms which referred pejoratively to two different perversions of history. Crypto-history refers to social sciences which he thinks are really historical sciences, but which deny that they are. Classical economists, for example, in claiming that their “iron law of wages” was a theorem which must always hold in any social system were mistaken. In fact, it was characteristic of the social system in which they wrote but would not necessarily remain true in other circumstances. Pseudo history is the name which Collingwood gives to those types of enquiry which give accounts of changes, whether they are economic, ethical or social, without “the thoughts of the person or persons by whose

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52 Indeed, his criticisms of many thinkers, even the idealists whom he admired, are ultimately reducible to the fact that they rest upon naturalistic or positivistic tendencies. See, for example, the discussions of Croce and Bradley in *The Idea of History*, pp. 134-141 and 190-204.
actions these changes came about” having been re-enacted by the enquirer.\textsuperscript{56} Thus generalisations based on facts which have not been re-enacted are pseudo-histories.

It is necessary at this point to highlight a difficulty which Collingwood’s later philosophy raises about the subject matter of history, and which casts some doubt upon the continuing centrality of re-enactment in his mature conception of history. Collingwood, as we saw, had made a very firm distinction between thoughts and feelings in \textit{The Idea of History} in order to demarcate clearly the province of re-enactment. This province was not merely thought, but \textit{reflective} thought.\textsuperscript{57} However, the doctrine of \textit{An Essay on Philosophical Method} implies no such distinction, nor did Collingwood maintain the distinction in his 1933 lectures on moral philosophy where he expounds the idea of the existence of rational emotions.\textsuperscript{58} Furthermore, in \textit{The Principles of Art} and \textit{The New Leviathan} Collingwood goes to some pains to show how feelings and thoughts overlap. In the latter book, for example, he argues that at the second level of consciousness conceptual thought and appetite overlap, and at the third level desire and propositional thinking overlap.\textsuperscript{59} With the overlap of feelings and thoughts it is clearly the case that the province of re-enactment is far less determinate than it had been in \textit{The Idea of History}. As late as February, 1939 | re-enactment still appears central to his conception of history, even though thought now overlaps with feelings. On a voyage to the East Indies Collingwood reiterated his conviction that all history is the history of thought and that a condition of it being known is that it is capable of being re-enacted. It is history, he argues, which enables us to negate the distinction between theory and practice because “in history the object is enacted and is therefore not an object at all”. He goes on to suggest that in his proposed book \textit{The Principles of History} his intention is to characterize an historical morality and an historical civilization in contrast to the then prevailing scientific morality and civilization. This he did, not in \textit{The Principles of History} but in \textit{The New Leviathan} and the 1940 lectures on moral philosophy. In both the lectures and the treatise on politics the historical morality and historical civilization are entailed in Collingwood’s concept of Duty which is a completely determinate individual act. It is the appropriate thing for me to do, and no one else, in the particular circumstances in which I find myself. This is the highest level of practical reason which finds its theoretical expression in history. It is surprising that in both discussions where history is explicitly linked to Duty, there is no mention of re-enactment, even though in the 1940 lectures Collingwood addresses himself to the question of how we come to know the past which is “composed of individual events” and actions. Here he talks about the historian having to be aware of his own situation, that is, having the evidence before him of a past and being aware that he is acting in that situation by means of interpreting the evidence. Instead of talking about re-enactment he talks of interpretation: “nothing is evidence to an historian except what he can interpret as evidence, and everything is evidence which he can interpret as evidence”.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{56} ibid., p. 18.
\textsuperscript{57} Idea of History, pp. 302-15 and 330.
\textsuperscript{58} See Collingwood ms, DEP 8, pp. 125-26. He says on p. 125: “The forms of rational action have their own emotional colourings. In a sense, each is a peculiar emotion or complex of emotions; but only in the sense that they are emotions of a special kind, proper to rational beings as rational, and constituting the emotional aspects of their rationality.”
\textsuperscript{59} New Leviathan, p. pp. 47-53 and 74-82.
\textsuperscript{60} R. G. Collingwood, “Duty”, in his \textit{Essays in Political Philosophy}, ed. David Boucher (Oxford,
What, then, can be inferred from all this? If history is the highest form of theoretical reason, the *New Leviathan* itself must be history, although a different kind of history from that to which we are used. He even calls the method he uses the “historical plain method”. If history is about individual events and actions in the past, then *The New Leviathan* cannot merely be history. It does purport to give the universal characteristics of the European mind, but it does so by basing the generalisations upon the numerous soundings of individual particulars. In this respect, one may go as far as to suggest that *The New Leviathan* demonstrates a form of social science, that is circumstantially limited generalizations about the European mind and its objectifications, based upon individual historical facts. To follow this interpretation through to its logical conclusion, *The New Leviathan* with its generalizations based on facts which have not been re-enacted must be an instance of what Collingwood had previously termed pseudo-history. But what I have said is highly contentious and speculative, and perhaps we should return to some more solid ground to explore the relations between history and social science.

Even though Collingwood appears to allow for the possibility of social sciences based on historical fact, as long as those facts are first re-enacted, he sees little point in the exercise and it is difficult to envisage that he would allow of any whose generalisations could meet the “two basic demands” which Robert Brown claims have always accompanied the quest for social laws, namely, that they actually hold in specifiable circumstances and are formulated precisely enough to afford accurate prediction.

In Oakeshott’s view, if these two “demands” characterise the concern of social science, then such an understanding rests upon a misconception of scientific activity itself. The requirement that a science should have the capacity to predict future occurrences is based upon an outmoded and misunderstood conception of the conditions of scientific knowledge. The world of perception is not the object of scientific utterance and its generalisations cannot be confirmed by demonstrating their appropriateness to a situation, nor denied because of failure to predict the course of events. Science is a world of ideas and related concepts in which it is claimed that there is “the probability of the recurrence of a certain measurement within the system of its own observations”; and no more can be demanded of a science than this. Thus, for Oakeshott, social sciences may not be able to satisfy the conditions which Brown claims have been traditionally demanded, but in this respect they do not differ from the character of scientific thought in general. In fact, Oakeshott rigorously defends the claim of economics to scientific status, and although he initially had his doubts about the claims of psychology he now concedes that it is “Beyond reasonable doubt [that] there is a genuine ‘science’ of psychology which has emancipated itself from suspicion of categorial ambiguity”.

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61 New Leviathan, p. 61; see also Idea of History, p. 209.
63 Experience and its Modes, p. 228; see also p. 208.
Furthermore he defends economics against its detractors on the grounds that like all sciences it deals in probabilities, and that it is simply an ignorance of the character of science to suggest that the data of economics is more variable and complex, thus rendering it less exact, than the natural sciences. Furthermore experimentation and prediction are not intrinsic to the scientific engagement, and because economics avoids experimentation and can offer only tentative and imperfect forecasts makes it no less a science. The fundamental condition of a social science, if it is to partake of the character of science, is that it identifies its subject matter in categorically unambiguous terms. What it theorizes is a process which does not itself exhibit intelligence, and there is no reason why a social science should not build for itself a sophisticated world of related categories and theorems which is capable of attaining “conditional perfection”. However, it should be emphasized that any such social science, like for example sociology, which purports to explain “the actions and utterances of human beings” in terms of the “behaviour of social systems” is attempting to reduce the irreducible, that is; attempting to explain practices that are exhibitions of human intelligence in terms of processes that are not. Such pretentious forms of theory about human conduct are merely “a masquerade of categories”, and ultimately lack conditional intelligibility in that the conditions in terms of which the explanation is offered are themselves categorically ambiguous and thus convicted of irrelevance.

It should be clear from what has already been said that Oakeshott’s view of social science automatically excludes the possibility of such a science being based on the facts of history. He repeatedly states that there is an “absolute impossibility of deriving from history any generalisations of the kind which belong to a social science” and anyone who tries to bring history and social science together is “ignorant of the nature of either and careless of the interests of both”. Anyone who attempts a fusion of this kind will simply become embroiled in categorial confusion.

There are no general laws in history, but there are generalisations. Every historical individual, like the French Revolution, Napoleon or the Roman Empire, is a generalisation in that it is an assemblage of features or characteristics which comprise a unity in diversity. Historical individuals are nothing but “the product of generalisation”, but they “do not admit of further generalisation” because the character of historical concepts exclude it. For example, an event, a person, a situation having been designated in historical understanding does not gain further elucidation by being classified with identities of a similar kind. A historical fact is a conclusion of an historical enquiry and does not stand alone in isolation independent of the world to which it is related and from which it derives its meaning. We should not take the apparent prominence of so called historical facts in practical life to imply that history is full of such facts awaiting generalisation. The well known ghosts who are survivals from the past, like Moses, Napoleon, Canute or Hamlet who stalk the ramparts of practical life are “symbolic characters” barely distinguishable from

66 On Human Conduct, p. 17.
67 ibid., p.25.
68 Oakeshott, “History and the Social Sciences”, p. 78.
69 See Experience and its Modes, p. 161; also “History and the Social Sciences”, p. 76; and On Human Conduct, p. 5.
70 Experience and its Modes, p. 160.
“mythical figures” and invested with all the vices and virtues of practical engagements. The point is this: history does not offer fixed isolated facts for generalisation; it offers a world or nothing. To intrude upon this world in the guise of scientific understanding “spells total inconsequence”, because “it assumes to be already known what it is the purpose of an historical enquiry to ascertain”. Naturalism is equally insidious in history as it is in politics and is based upon nothing more than “the ignorant prejudice” that scientific understanding is the only valid form of understanding.

Like Collingwood, Oakeshott subjects anthropology to severe criticism for having succumbed to the insidious promises of naturalism. Anthropology claims to be both historical and scientific. It is certainly historical in that its professed subject matter is the human condition in all its variety, and the evolution of societies over time. The preoccupation with generalities and evolution may lead to bad history, but its home in the historical world of ideas can hardly be denied on that account. As to its scientific character no serious attempt has been made to conceive its world in purely quantitative terms, and even when generalisations of a different kind are given they are rarely more than enumerative judgements, like the claim that matriarchies have never led directly to advanced civilization. Enumerative judgements are, in Oakeshott’s view “valid, and for what they are worth, historical”. He even goes as far as to call them “genuine historical generalisations”. To go beyond observations of an enumerative kind about particular societies, to generalisations about human society as such is to go beyond history without becoming a science. The anthropologists claim that by means of the comparative method links in one chain of events can be abstracted to make-up deficiencies in another. A valid generalisation can only arise from this method if completely and demonstrably separate entities, having had no contact with each other, whether direct or indirect, are compared. But such atomized characteristics cannot be assumed in the world of anthropology, and even if they could be, the demand that the generalisations be quantitative in character, renders anthropology something less than science. Contrary to what anthropologists believe: “The Comparative Method is not a method which unites science and history; it dismisses history and never achieves the full condition of science”.

In summary, then, both Collingwood and Oakeshott allow of limited, but not universal generalisations in history, but consider them to add little to our knowledge. They appear to think that nothing of significance would be lost if such distractions were not engaged in: they are an irritation which lead to bad history, but which

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71 ibid., p. 43. He says elsewhere: “Each separate ‘fact’ remains an hypothesis until the whole world of facts is established in which it is involved”. See Experience and its Modes, p. 113.
72 On History, p. 24. In history, Oakeshott contends, there are “enumerative judgements” like “All the Reformation Parliaments were packed,” but there are no “universal generalizations”. See Experience and its Modes, p. 161; also On Human Conduct, p. 102.
73 On History, p. 81.
74 See, for example, W. H. Greenleaf, Oakeshott’s Philosophical Politics (New York, 1966), pp. 76-77; see also On Human Conduct, p. 97.
75 See Experience and its Modes, p. 175; On Human Conduct, p. 15 and 25; and On History, p. 4.
76 See Experience and its Modes, pp. 161-68. Sociology also falls into this category. See On Human Conduct, pp. 24-97.
77 Experience and its Modes, p. 164.
78 ibid., p. 167.
79 ibid., p. 167; see also On Human Conduct, p. 99.
unfortunately and reluctantly have to be granted an historical character. Anthropology, however, they both believe, suffers from the naturalistic tendency to view science as the only valid form of knowledge. In so far as it denies its genuinely historical character, anthropology fails to rise above a mass of confusion. It must be emphasised, however, that Collingwood and Oakeshott believed that the fulfillment of that character was to be achieved by different procedures, and that the purposes for which the historical character was to be achieved are also quite different. For the former the purpose to be achieved was an enhanced self-knowledge which would contribute to a more rational life in the present, with a view to improving conduct in the future; but for the latter there are no purposes to be achieved in history ulterior to the construction of events. Furthermore, both Collingwood and Oakeshott, while agreeing that no genuine social science can be based on historical fact, believe that general laws are capable of being formulated as long as they are faithful to appropriate categorial conditions: for Collingwood, leaving aside the complications of his final thoughts, this is the restriction of such laws to the human psyche, that is, feelings rather than thoughts; for Oakeshott the condition is that the going-on to be theorized must be identified as a process rather than a practice; that is identified in terms of the postulates of the scientific rather than the historical mode of experience.

History, then, has an integrity, for both philosophers, that cannot be compromised by social science. Consistent with his theory of the autonomous modes Oakeshott simply contends that history and social science are categorically distinct, belonging to unrelated and unambiguous orders of enquiry. Collingwood, on the other hand, because of his theory of overlapping classes could not unequivocally exclude social science from history. He did, however, think that social scientific generalizations built upon historical facts, although conditionally possible, are largely superfluous once the business of re-enactment has been concluded. Collingwood’s theory, however, remains inconclusive and equivocal because of the ambiguity of the distinction between thought and feelings, upon which the theory of re-enactment rests, but which he did not consistently sustain. If historical facts are the product of re-enacting purposive thoughts, and generalisations depend upon these facts, and indeed add little to them, then when Feelings and thoughts overlap, as they must do on the theory of *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, and which Collingwood wishes to maintain in *The Principles of Art*, and *The New Leviathan*, then historical facts must be established either by a theory of re-enactment capable of accounting for re-living feelings, or upon different principles altogether. In the absence of both, the historical facts upon which circumstantially limited social scientific generalisations can be based cannot be established or invoked.

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