Collingwood and Weber vs. Mink: History after the Cognitive Turn

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Abstract

Louis Mink wrote a classic study of R. G. Collingwood that led to his most important contribution to the philosophy of history, his account of narrative. Central to this account was the non-detachability thesis, that facts became historical facts through incorporation into narratives, and the thesis that narratives were not comparable to the facts or to one another. His book on Collingwood was critical of Collingwood’s idea that there were facts in history that we get through self-knowledge but which are nevertheless objective, his account of re-enactment, and his notion of absolute presuppositions. It is illuminating to compare Collingwood to Weber with respect to these puzzling arguments, for the same issues arise there in different form. Recent work in social neuroscience on mirroring allows a different approach to these puzzles: mirror system “knowledge” of others and simulation fit, respectively, with Weber’s idea of direct observational understanding and Collingwood’s re-enactment account. This account allows for the detaching of historical facts about thoughts and action from narrative.

Keywords

Collingwood, Weber, Mink, mirror system, Verstehen

Both R. G. Collingwood and Max Weber responded to— in Weber’s case, lived in— the period that Collingwood identified as the defining period of the philosophy of history, and both read and responded to the same thinkers, including Wilhelm Dilthey, Heinrich Rickert, Georg Simmel, and historians like Eduard Meyer, who was an explicit target of Weber’s and Collingwood’s. Moreover, the standard formulation of the professional “philosophy of history” in English in
Maurice Mandelbaum’s *The Problem of Historical Knowledge*\(^1\) not only examined these same German thinkers, but took over many of Weber’s conclusions, restating them in “analytic” terms. Louis O. Mink dealt with the same problems, especially the problem of relativism. So it is possible to see the relationship between all three.

Collingwood said many famously odd things about history and metaphysics. Yet his most repeated idea, that historical knowledge has the character of re-enactment, has proven to be difficult to get rid of. It reappears in the recent neuroscience literature on social cognition\(^2\), and has a close affinity to the idea of simulation. Weber, equally famously, designated his sociology *Verstehende Soziologie*, and appealed to the notion of empathy, which is also central to the neuroscience literature on social cognition and closely related to the ideas of re-enactment and simulation. The meaning of the term *Verstehen* for Weber has been controversial ever since. In the original formulations there is a strong sense of epistemic finality: Weber said that understanding seeks *Evidenz*; Collingwood said that history "proves its conclusions with ... compulsive force"\(^3\) and claimed that historical knowledge of individual thoughts and actions involves the “*a priori* imagination,” which is to say a source which is beyond further justification.

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or analysis. These claims have puzzled (not to say, in the case of Collingwood, enraged) commentators ever since.

In the 1970s, with such writings as Charles Taylor’s “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man” and, in historiography, Mink’s essay “Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument,” a kind of consensus emerged about understanding that dropped this talk and eliminated the strongly psychological implications of notions like re-enactment and Evidenz. They replaced it with ideas drawn from either hermeneutics, especially the idea of the hermeneutic circle, which abhors finality, or with the idea that historical explanation was irreducibly narrative in character and that the completion of a historical explanation consisted in conforming to the demands of narrative form. Much of this was influenced by G. E. M. Anscombe’s Intentions, especially the idea that the explanation of human action involved not cause but redescriptions in which the explanatory

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redescription swallowed up, and consequently implied, the originally described fact.\textsuperscript{8}

The idea that there was an empathic element in historical understanding was an embarrassment to these philosophers. Anscombe dismissed Wittgenstein’s comments on “natural signs” of an intention as a mistake.\textsuperscript{9} The whole model of re-enactment depended on an experience that was necessarily subjective, because the re-enactment itself could not be shared or made into a public document. Similarly for understanding: hermeneutics may not produce convincing or final results, but it operates on something shared-- a text. To construe historical information on the model of a text at least provided something like an objective ground, the documents themselves, even if the process of interrogating texts based on prior assumptions precluded any sort of interpretive finality. This divided historical fact and narrative in a particular way. The idea that history was inherently a matter of narrative provided a way of making sense of the idea that historical knowledge was at least in a limited way objective: it worked with an objective “text” of historical material and formed this material into narrative wholes. But it denied that there are “facts” without interpretation. The epistemic qualities of the process of interpretation could then be discussed, and found to accord with the historian’s sense of what historical knowledge was.

Non-Detachability

\textsuperscript{8} Anscombe, \textit{Intention}, 46, para. 26.

\textsuperscript{9} Anscombe, \textit{Intention}, 5, para. 2-3.
Mink’s core idea is non-detachability: narratives are what gives meaning to events, indeed makes them facts, and historical accounts can be compared only by comparing the narratives in terms of which the facts are made. Narratives incorporate the facts. Conclusions cannot be detached from the narratives that historians construct. This is an extreme version of the seeing-as thesis, applied to narratives rather than theories, giving us a narrative-dependent account of history. At the same time, narratives are means of comprehension, rather than the sorts of thing that can be tested. So there may be alternative narratives, which are alternative means of comprehension. There is a puzzle about the relation between these narratives when they conflict or compete, because competing narratives don’t aggregate into more comprehensible narratives, but produce something that is neither narrative nor comprehends anything. Collingwood talked about narrative in a way that opens the door to this kind of thinking, and Mink, who was the author of the most comprehensive study of Collingwood\(^{10}\), was steeped in Collingwood’s thought. Even the idea of narrative as Mink developed it is foreshadowed in Collingwood, as when Collingwood described “the resemblance between the historian and the novelist.”\(^{11}\) So the differences between them are not to be found in the notion of narrative itself, but elsewhere.

Mink diverged from the traditional notions of historicism and historical relativism in historiography by locating the relativistic moment at the point of the narrative achievement of comprehension. Traditionally, the reasoning had been that different epochs had different


\(^{11}\) Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 245.
presuppositions or metaphysics, as well as different interests or presuppositions about what was valuable or interesting, and therefore different histories, and different modes of thinking historically. It was then added that historians with different ideologies in the same era would construct different histories. Mink did not deny any of this, but instead thought that the core problem is that narratives themselves represented distinct achievements of comprehension that can only be compared as a whole and are not like factual claims that can be rejected or affirmed on the basis of the evidence. It was no surprise to him that historians disagreed, even when they were from the same historical epoch, and that there was no fact of the matter that would settle their disagreements: they would have reached this pass merely by virtue of achieving narrative comprehension in different ways.

This reasoning points to an important difference between the ways in which Weber and Collingwood, on one side, and Mink, on the other, conceived of the issues, as well as to a stark oddity. Both Weber and Collingwood are “relativists” and “historicists” in the sense that they consider the historian to be the child of the times in which they live, that their interests and ways of thinking about historical topics will differ, as will the questions which they ask and thus the answers that they will get. This perspectivalism, however, stands in apparent contrast to the idea that there can be Evidenz or compulsive proof in history. Why wouldn’t notions of “proof” or evidence also be relativized to the times? One could then treat the notion of fact and associated notions is as a matter of internal realism, and say that within a perspective there can be compulsive proof and fact, but only within a perspective. But neither Collingwood nor Weber treated it this way, and that makes this into a much more interesting problem than the traditional discussion of relativism.
Weber and Collingwood

Mink’s idea of non-detachability allows us to identify the more interesting problem. Both Collingwood and Weber seem to draw a line between those historical things about which compulsive proof is possible, and those that are a matter of perspective. They regard something, in short, as genuinely detachable. Collingwood and Weber also have answers of a kind to Mink’s concerns that do not lead to the same despairing conclusions about historical knowledge that Mink was led to. So part of our task will be to reconstruct those answers. But Mink had good reasons for his “linguistic turn” that led to the skeptical conclusions of “Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument.” In what follows, I will try to explain Collingwood and Weber in a way that avoids these legitimate concerns. One issue, that is nowhere explicit in Mink, but which is central to the thinking of the German founders of the philosophy of history, involves the terms in which the problem of relativism itself was framed, terms that both Weber and Collingwood struggled with and attempted to escape, with only partial success. Another involves the notion of understanding through re-enactment, which was seen by the critics of both Weber and especially Collingwood as a source of subjectivity that undermined the notion of a scientific and objective history.

The two problems, I will argue, are related, and both are illuminated by considerations from cognitive science, especially the literature on mirror neurons or mirror systems and empathy. The first problem derives from a Kantian notion of presuppositions and a specific confusion that is produced by the combination of two ideas: the idea that there is an added
element in cognition that makes raw data, or immediate experience, into something meaningful, and the idea that this added element is like a premise or presupposition that cannot be grounded. Both ideas run through Collingwood and Weber, and are central to their way of setting up their versions of the problem of relativism, and of defining history as a discipline or science. The second problem involves the dubious status of re-enactment itself, which seems necessarily like a second-hand or subjective experience rather than a primary fact about the historical subject.

Collingwood formulated the core issue in a passage in which he was commenting on Georg Simmel’s *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*¹². Collingwood paraphrased Simmel as saying that

> The facts of nature and the facts of history are not facts in the same sense of the word. The facts of nature are what the scientist can perceive or produce in the laboratory under his own eyes; the facts of history are not “there” at all: all that the historian has before him are documents and relics from which he has somehow to reconstruct the facts. Further, he sees that history is an affair of spirit, of human personalities, and that the only thing that enables the historian to reconstruct it is the fact that he himself is a spirit and a personality. All this is excellent. But now comes Simmel’s problem. The historian, beginning from his documents, constructs in his own mind what professes to be a picture of the past. This picture is in his mind and nowhere else; it is a subjective mental construction. But he claims that this subjective construction possesses objective truth.

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How can this be? How can the merely subjective picture constructed in the historian’s mind be projected into the past and described as something that actually happened?\textsuperscript{13}

This is the question that both Collingwood and Weber provide an answer to, and it is more or less the same answer: there are historical facts about acts, matters of thought or minded behavior—or as Weber would say “subjectively meaningful action.” As Weber put it, there is a class of facts are subject to direct observational understanding. His example is of a man chopping wood. These are the cases, as Collingwood put it in a similar context, where if the historian “knows what happened, he already knows why it happened.”\textsuperscript{14} Of course, not all historical claims, answers to historical questions, or historical narratives, are facts of this sort. The facts of direct understanding are detachable from larger narratives, answers to historical questions, and the like.

The obvious difference between Weber and Collingwood on one side and Mink on the other is the facts that they take to be basic to history. For Mink it is events which become history through incorporation into a narrative. For Weber the core subject matter is actions, defined in these terms: “We shall speak of ‘action’ insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behavior—be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence.”\textsuperscript{15} Notably,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Collingwood, \textit{The Idea of History}, 170-171.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Collingwood, \textit{The Idea of History}, 214.
\end{itemize}
Collingwood dismissed “events” as the subject matter of history. As he put it in a passage on Eduard Meyer, “he never gets farther towards answering the question ‘What is an historical fact?’ than to say: ‘An historical fact is a past event’.” Collingwood said instead that “the historian is not concerned with events as such but with actions, i.e., events brought about by the will and expressing the thought of a free and intelligent agent.”\textsuperscript{16} Collingwood said “thoughts” rather than “meanings,” as in Weber, but the object of history is the same as the object of sociology for Weber: history is about actions and their connections: “the science of \textit{res gestae}, the attempt to answer questions about human actions done in the past.”\textsuperscript{17}

Mink would argue that actions become actions as part of a larger narrative, that there are not two steps, identifying the action and then the connections, or identifying the actions through the connections, and then constructing a narrative, but one—making a narrative which incorporated the events that “action” terms describe. He was dismissive of Collingwood’s own formulations of the problem, especially “his cavalier identification of the historical \textit{object} as the

\textsuperscript{16} Collingwood, \textit{The Idea of History}, 178.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Res gestae}, in the common law, involves an exception to the hearsay rule. It refers to statements made spontaneously in the course of a series of events by participants which are not second hand but part of the event itself and admissible despite being hearsay because they are part of the event-- the term implies the connected character of the statement and the events themselves. A witness who heard such a statement made in the course of an event with connected elements could testify to hearing it without being an eyewitness to the facts referred to in the statement itself.
Mink wanted an account of historical knowledge that better accords with history as an actual discipline, which contains much more than actions—indeed, could be said to contain anything that can be put into the form of a narrative. This dispute over the boundaries of “history” is one we need not resolve, other than to show its connection with the detachability thesis, and its centrality to the claims that Collingwood made about re-enactment. The place to begin is to realize that what Collingwood, and Weber, said about the primary fact of the understanding of actions is radically different from what they said about historical explanation, historical narrative, and so on. For Collingwood and Weber, individual actions are the elements of history, and they are understandable in a way which can be characterized in terms of proof and evidence. In contrast, historical theses, narratives, and the like are characterized in terms of hypotheticals, one-sidedness, even as having the character of fiction, with the difference being that the elements--the understood thought out actions of individuals, are not a matter of fiction but are true.

Weber and Collingwood made parallel claims about the nature of historical questions at the level above the understanding of individual actions. Collingwood put it in terms of the logic of question and answer, and Weber in terms of the historian’s interest. Both of them thought that the motivation for historical inquiry involved, in some sense, the quest for self-knowledge. For Weber, the pressing problem for modern man was to understand the historical origin of the capitalism which orders his existence. Collingwood said similar things: that the accounts one gives are relative to questions or interests and that these interests change historically. But for

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both of them, these “interested” forms of historical inquiry are detachable from the problem of understanding action as such. The thoughts of Caesar do not depend on the questions we ask. Nor does our knowledge of these thoughts. We may be motivated to understand Caesar by the question “how does the thinking and motivations of figures in antiquity differ from our own?” And understanding Caesar helps answer this question. But it does not add any content to the understanding of Caesar’s thoughts. Collingwood gave the following as an example of primary historical understanding of action.

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 the situation with which the emperor was trying to deal, and 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 see the possible alternatives, 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.¹⁹

Weber said something almost but not quite parallel.

... if I have before me a “legal source,” by which I mean a source of knowledge of the law, be it a legal code, ancient legal sayings, a judgment, a private document, or whatever— I must necessarily first get a picture of it in legal doctrine, the validity of which legal precept it logically presupposes.20

Weber outlined a two step process of reconstructing past legal doctrine for explanatory purposes. The first step involves a kind of empathy. “I find this out,” Weber said,

by transporting myself as far as possible into the soul of the judge of the time; and by asking how a judge of the time would have to decide in a concrete case presented to him, if this legal precept which I am construing doctrinally were the basis of his decision.21

What is in common is the idea of empathy. What is puzzling is the question of what enables empathy to be proof-like, and whether there is some sort of problematic theoretical content— presuppositions or ideal-types, for example— which are required to enable empathy, but which at


the same time would taint the act of empathizing with the problematic theoretical contents that lead to the problem of historical relativism.

Collingwood recognized that empathy or in-feeling amounts to adding something. And it is this business of adding something that produces the deepest puzzles. He framed his historical discussion of this point by reference to one’s own past:

I may now be experiencing an immediate feeling of discomfort, and I may ask myself why I have this feeling. I may answer that question by reflecting that this morning I received a letter criticizing my conduct in what seems to me a valid and unanswerable manner. Here I am not making psychological generalizations; I am recognizing in its detail a certain individual event or series of events, which are already present to my consciousness as a feeling of discomfort or dissatisfaction with myself. To understand that feeling is to recognize it as the outcome of a certain historical process.\(^{22}\)

This identification is at the heart of Collingwood’s solution to the problem of relativism.

His own view is that the historian “discovers [the] thought [of an intelligent agent in the past] by rethinking it in his own mind.” But how does this happen without falling into subjectivity? This was Dilthey’s problem:

Dilthey has come up against the question which Windelband and the rest had not the penetration to recognize: the question how there can be a knowledge, as distinct from an immediate experience, of the individual.  

But Collingwood’s own answer to this question is odd. Mink points out why:

According to Collingwood, the criterion of historical truth is the “*a priori* imagination.” But this seems, *prima facie*, completely incapable of distinguishing history from fiction, and incompatible with the empirical nature of historical research and argument.

Mink took this to discredit the idea that the *a priori* imagination could do the things that Collingwood thought it could, and at the same time to justify treating these facts as having the same semi-fictive character as narrative facts generally. For Mink, as for Collingwood, there is something added by the historian. But for Mink the added content is the narrative structure that produces comprehension. But what narrative adds does not fall into the realm of fact. From the point of view of the facts of the world, whatever is added by narrative is arbitrary. Indeed it is something of a mystery why there *are* given narrative structures. One could ask what they do at all. Mink answered this question, in a sense, when he characterized them as an instrument of cognition. But this is just to say that they are organizing devices, not to validate them as

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organizing devices. For Mink, this leads to a relativistic dead end: there are multiple possible narratives which either conflict or fail to aggregate into a larger narrative. Mink thought that this provided a way of making sense of and crediting some of Collingwood’s *obiter dicta*. But it also highlighted the differences between Collingwood’s views and the narrativity approach.

Collingwood repeatedly insisted on the incorrigibility, finality, and terminal character of historical understandings of action, or as Mink put it, their “immunity to the threat of new evidence.” Mink tried to deal with these statements by translating Collingwood’s problem into linguistic form, making the problem of finality into a problem having to do with descriptions. Non-detachability applies to these descriptions, which are narratives, because they incorporate the facts. This leads him to interpret Collingwood as follows:

The narrative is not a story *supported* by evidence, it is the statement of evidence itself, organized in a narrative form so that it jointly constitutes the answer to specific questions. That evidence might indifferently confirm different theories (e.g. that Haig was mad, or sane) and could at best confirm (not prove) a theory even if the theory had no rivals. But the story is the uniquely necessary answer to the question what Haig was doing, because it *shows* him doing it. And in this respect it has some kind of incorrigibility or immunity

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to the threat of new evidence, which could at best serve to answer some other question or questions in conjunction with some or all of the evidence that answers this question.\textsuperscript{26}

Taken in “this respect,” Collingwood’s notion of finitude can be accepted. But this does not mean that the narrative is “the true story”: “necessity, corrigibility and completeness are all relative to the specific question asked.”\textsuperscript{27}

This is Mink’s own later position in nuce. Narrative form provides a constraint and goal for the historian, but not one that saves history from the problem of relativism. The coherence lent by narrative, or added by it, has no special claim to truth-- indeed, as Collingwood himself pointed out, narrative is a method of fiction. Moreover, narrative forms seem themselves to be merely conventional, so if what is added by the historian is narrative structure in the pursuit of coherence, the result seems to have nothing to do with the truth of the account, which seems to be contained in the factual content rather than in anything added. The factual content, however, is not theory-free or in this case narrative-free: a fact is only a fact by way of incorporation. Not surprisingly, in post-modernist literary thinkers, the idea that the added element was the fictive became a standard claim.

This is of course not Collingwood’s view. So the dispute is about what is added, and how this added thing relates to objectivity and proof. And this is related to the focus on action.

\textsuperscript{26} Mink, \textit{Mind, History, and Dialectic: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood}, 193, emphasis in the original.

\textsuperscript{27} Mink, \textit{Mind, History, and Dialectic: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood}, 193.
Collingwood said that historical knowledge is in part— the added part— a form of self-knowledge. We seem to be forced in one of two directions by this notion of adding self-knowledge. If self-knowledge is individual, private, not especially communicable, and perhaps even largely tacit, to add this is to add a subjective element. If the added element was specific to the individual, the addition would be arbitrary, and thus the product, would be arbitrarily related to the historical truth. If what was added was “presuppositions” which were shared in a social group, or by an epoch, one would get historical relativism, but within this there would be the possibility of a kind of internal objectivity, objectivity by the standards and in the conceptual terms of the group. This dilemma is what led Mink to collapse the two problems into the one problem of narrativity.

But there is every reason to suspect that the problems here have more to do with the concepts employed to describe them than with the phenomenon of historical understanding itself. The phenomenon of understanding that Collingwood has in mind is described in his autobiography in quite different terms.

People who do not understand historical thinking but are obsessed by scissors and paste, will say: “It is useless [to as why Caesar invaded Britain] because if your only information comes from Caesar, and Caesar has not told you his plans, you cannot ever know what they were.” These are the people who, if they met you one Saturday afternoon with a fishing rod, creel, and camp-stool, walking towards the river, would ask: “Going fishing?”

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The “scissors and paste historian,” Collingwood’s punching bag in *The Idea of History*, is faced by the problem described by Mink. *His* task *is* to cut out events from the historical record and paste them into a coherent narrative. Collingwood’s appeal to the notion of the *a priori* imagination is metaphor-filled, but it points toward something different:

The historian’s picture of his subject, whether that subject be a sequence of events or a past state of things, thus appears as a web of imaginative construction stretched between certain fixed points provided by the statements of his authorities; and if these points are frequent enough and the threads spun from each to the next are constructed with due care, always by the *a priori* imagination and never by merely arbitrary fancy, the whole picture is constantly verified by appeal to these data, and runs little risk of losing touch with the reality which it represents.²⁹

The problem with this picture is raised by comments made by Collingwood himself. Collingwood said that history is inferential: “It is a science whose business it is to study events not accessible to our observation, and to study these events inferentially, arguing to them from something else which is accessible to our observation, and which the historian calls evidence.”³⁰


The problem with calling this science and using the term “infer” here is evident if we translate this into conventional “science” talk. It is difficult to see how we can infer that someone is going fishing from facts, such as their carrying a fishing rod and bait bucket, plus self-knowledge, such as knowledge that if we were carrying this equipment we would be going fishing. The premises or presuppositions that would be required to warrant an inference from an “if I had a pole I would be going fishing” understood as a statement about my self-knowledge to “they have a pole so they are going fishing” as a statement of their self-knowledge would be problematic or false, and equally problematic in the general form “If I were in their situation, they would do as I would do.” We can’t make these statements empirical, because as individuals we have no access to the self-knowledge of others to test the generalization, and in any case our hearers would not have access to ours to see if the supposed correlation did hold. But it would also be odd if inferences of roughly this kind did not work much of the time.

To be sure, there is a sense in which empirical inferences can be made with this material that predicts very well: people who are carrying fishing poles toward a body of water have a high probability of using them to fish. But this is a behaviorist prediction. It makes no reference to the intentions of the fisherman, and indeed to add a claim about intention in this case is groundless and ungroundable. Positing an intervening variable of an intention would be possible. But it would serve no purpose unless there was more to the generalization, for example cases in which the fisherman had the intention but did not fish, but did something else, such as checking the water for its suitability for fishing, that could also be predicted by the intention to fish. The behaviorist would say that this is all there is to the notion of intention anyway: nothing is added from the person based on self-knowledge, other than the person’s knowledge of their own
behavioral propensities. The notion of intention is simply a theoretical construct that makes sense of the way the intervening variable predicts, and the sole ground for this construct is the improvement in the scope of prediction that is gained by positing it. The historian, on this account, would be someone who was in possession, perhaps tacit possession, of a large set of generalizations of this type, which could be used in historical inferences. Imagination, self-knowledge, and the like could be given a behavioral interpretation: imagination is just a form of theory construction which employs these tacitly held generalizations; self-knowledge is the extensive empirical knowledge we have gained from self-observation of our own behavior. This would get us out of the need to appeal to the “a priori” imagination, though the effect of the posited notions of intention and the imaginative work of constructing would be much the same: we would merely be construing this as an entirely empirical project. Nevertheless, from a phenomenological point of view, the differences would perhaps be negligible: if a vast part of our personal learning about the world that allows us to attribute states to other minds is tacit, and the patterns of inference that we acquire are tacit, as is their operation, at the point we make conscious non-tacit judgments of others we are merely using all this tacit machinery without being aware of it. The existence of this tacit learning is a causal condition of our interaction with others, and of thinking historically, but is not meaningfully accessible to reflection and plays no role in our methodological reflections about writing history.
The difficulties in imagining how people would have come to our notions of intention and the like from behavioral evidence, made famous by Sellars\textsuperscript{31} and in the debates over behaviorism and phenomenology in the sixties\textsuperscript{32} led philosophers of Mink’s generation to reject this behaviorist approach as unwieldy and not in accord with the character of our experience of self-knowledge. Behaviorism was a solution to the problem of objectivity: it simply reconstrued formerly “subjective” facts as objective behavioral facts. The rejection of behaviorism reintroduced the problem of objectivity about other minds, and also about the status of the personal element in knowledge. The temptation in the face of these difficulties was to solve it and retain objectivity by locating the relevant inferential reasoning in a different part of “science”: to say that we make these inferences not on the basis of convoluted behaviorist empirical truths but on the basis of presuppositions. We may then say that interpretation presupposes the mindedness of other people, or their rationality. We could then say that reconstruction of their reasoning or re-enactment of their thoughts can be warranted by these presuppositions together with data about what they were given in their situation.


Mink was certainly inclined to think that this is more or less what Collingwood must have been unsuccessfully groping toward with his notion of the *a priori* imagination. Assimilating the *a priori* imagination to “presuppositions” provides a neat solution to the problem of what Collingwood should have said. But it is not a good solution to the problem of what he meant. On the one hand, Mink must face the problem that Collingwood treated absolute presuppositions as the stuff of metaphysics, and metaphysics itself as no more than an historical inquiry into past absolute presuppositions. He must then also account for Collingwood’s apparently insane insistence that the knowledge we have in history is final, a terminus, objective, and so forth. Nothing seems quite so dodgy or subjective as the kinds of re-enactments and reconstructions that historians produce. This is why Mink was so ready to abandon all this talk himself in favor of the notion of narrative. But Collingwood did not.

Perhaps the solution to the latter problem is to be found in Collingwood’s theory of mind, and much has been written about what Collingwood might have meant in his comments on mind. Moreover, much of *The Idea of History* is taken up with a critique of theories of “experience” that conflict with his account of historical knowledge. Collingwood has to reject privacy, in some sense, because that would consign the minded aspect of action to the unknowable, and indeed he does.33 But none of this helps to solve the apparent problems with the idea that self-knowledge is a necessary additive to historical knowledge, nor does it explain the idea of the *a priori*

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imagination. We are still captive to the idea that historical knowledge about mindedness is inferential, and thus to puzzles about the grounds of these inferences.

Direct Observational Understanding and *Evidenz*

Weber used some different language, which is problematic in other ways, but nevertheless is revealing when compared to Collingwood’s. The differences relate directly to Collingwood’s problems over inference: Weber distinguished between the kinds of understanding that involve inference and the kinds that do not when he distinguished direct from explanatory understanding.

Understanding may be of two kinds: the first is the direct observational understanding of the subjective meaning of a given act as such, including verbal utterances. We thus understand by direct observation, in this case, the meaning of the proposition $2 \times 2 = 4$ when we hear or read it. This is a case of the direct rational understanding of ideas. We also understand an outbreak of anger as manifested by facial expression, exclamations or irrational movements. This is direct observational understanding of irrational emotional reactions. We can understand in a similar observational way the action of a woodcutter or of somebody who reaches for the knob to shut a door or who aims a gun at an animal. This is rational observational understanding of actions.

The second kind is explanatory understanding, where:
we understand in terms of motive the meaning an actor attaches to the proposition twice two equals four, when he states it or writes it down, in that we understand what makes him do this at precisely this moment and in these circumstances. Understanding in this sense is attained if we know that he is engaged in balancing a ledger or in making a scientific demonstration, or is engaged in some other task of which this particular act would be an appropriate part. This is rational understanding of motivation, which consists in placing the act in an intelligible and more inclusive context of meaning. Thus we understand the chopping of wood or aiming of a gun in terms of motive in addition to direct observation if we know that the wood chopper is working for a wage or is chopping a supply of firewood for his own use or possibly is doing it for recreation. But he might also be working off a fit of rage, an irrational case.\(^\text{34}\)

*Res gestae* enables us to distinguish fits of rage from recreation: “In all the above cases the particular act has been placed in an understandable sequence of motivation, the understanding of which can be treated as an explanation of the actual course of behavior. Thus for a science which is concerned with the subjective meaning of action, explanation requires a grasp of the complex of meaning in which an actual course of understandable action thus interpreted belongs.”\(^\text{35}\)

In each case, according to Weber, the analyst strives for *Evidenz*—a tricky term that is central to the philosophy of Franz Brentano. The term, as Brentano defines it, means evident to


everyone. He was thinking of mathematical truths and truth of logic. But the term also can apply to any of a range of terminal facts or forms of knowledge, including knowledge of what a person chopping wood is doing. There is no inference here, just as there is no inference that warrants the basic laws of arithmetic. Brentano was quite consciously anti-Kantian here—there is no appeal to hidden presuppositions, absolute or otherwise. Evident for everyone is evident without qualification or any need for or possibility of further justification. Husserl and Frege accused Brentano of psychologism for this reasoning. But there is nothing psychological here beyond the fact of evidence itself. Thus direct understanding is concerned with non-inferential understanding, which can attain Evidenz without inferential justification.

Indirect knowledge is a different matter. For Weber, this does involve inference, inferences that are potentially fallible. And it typically also involves such things as the model of rational decision making. So Weber distinguished the kind of a priori knowledge associated with reconstructing decisions, such as the battlefield choices of Moltke, which only approach Evidenz, from the knowledge of what the person chopping wood is doing. But both are cases of knowledge of intention, or what he calls subjective meaning. And the material for the reconstruction of decisions includes, in addition to the ideal-type of rationality, material from “direct observational understanding.”

Collingwood ran the two together in the notion of re-enactment. But distinguishing direct and indirect understanding serves to alleviate some of the strangeness of the comments of Collingwood: it allows him to have both his claim that history is inferential and his claim that there is a terminal kind of knowledge of actions. It also allows us to make sense of the claim that the historian adds self-knowledge and is also objective— the puzzling combination that Mink
could not make sense of. Explaining how this might work requires a reconsideration of Collingwood’s remarks on interpolation and the \textit{a priori} imagination.

\textbf{The \textit{A Priori} Imagination and Interpolation}

Collingwood’s term for the historian’s capacities for understanding, the \textit{a priori} imagination, does not help with the notion of finality, or what Weber calls \textit{Evidenz}. Imagination is not a ground for anything, in the way that direct observational understanding is for Weber. The \textit{a priori} imagination is related to narrative, because it is the “activity which, bridging the gaps between what our authorities tell us, gives the historical narrative or description its continuity.”\textsuperscript{36} But for Collingwood it was not narrative form itself that does this, but something in the mind. So to salvage Collingwood’s account, what one needs to ground the historians’ claims is something in the mind that provides some sort of assurance that the historian is correct.

Mink dismissed this doctrine as near-gibberish, and, as we have noted, assimilated the \textit{a priori} imagination to “presuppositions.” Mink argued that Collingwood was, in a confused way, groping toward Kantianism with this idea, and that he more or less arrived there in his last writings on philosophical method with the notion of absolute presuppositions. He also argued that Collingwood corrected himself in his later discussion of absolute presuppositions.

\textsuperscript{36} Collingwood, \textit{The Idea of History}, 241.
I would suggest that the mystery of these descriptions is dispelled if we recognize the “a priori imagination” as an early and imperfect attempt to bring out the notion of a “constellation of absolute presuppositions.” Like absolute presuppositions, the historical imagination is said to be a priori; and as they are later said to be “the yard-stick by which ‘experience’ is judged” (EM 193-4\textsuperscript{37}) so the imagination is “the touchstone by which we decide whether alleged facts are genuine.”\textsuperscript{38}

But Collingwood was quite clear about the idea that historical knowledge is in part self-knowledge, and that this self-knowledge is an added element to the historical record itself. Presuppositions, absolute or otherwise, do not seem to be examples of self-knowledge, and in any case do not fit Collingwood’s own cases, such as the fisherman with his creel.

Mink’s argument for this conclusion is itself a historical reconstruction of Collingwood’s confusions, and involves interpolation:

Collingwood gives one striking clue to what he was trying to think through. As his example of the function of imagination in interpolating among evidence, he says that when we perceive a ship and later perceive it at a different place we necessarily infer that it has occupied intermediate positions in the interval. Now this cannot be “already an

\textsuperscript{37} Collingwood, \textit{An Essay on Metaphysics}, 193-194.

example of historical thinking,” as Collingwood calls it (IH, 241\textsuperscript{39}), because the ship’s motion has no “inner” side of thought to be re-enacted. The illustration is in fact the example given by Kant of the \textit{a priori} concept of causation, which together with other categories of the understanding determines the form of ordinary perception and of scientific thinking, exactly as Collingwood says that the imagination determines historical thinking \textit{a priori}. The illuminating mistake of choosing this example shows that Collingwood was on the way to recognizing that \textit{all} thinking is informed by absolute presuppositions, but for the time being could regard this only as the unique character of historical thinking.\textsuperscript{40}

But this seems questionable when one considers what Collingwood did with the notion of absolute presuppositions, and with metaphysics itself. Metaphysics, he argued, can only be the history of absolute presuppositions. Mink acknowledged this as well:

\begin{quote}
Four years later, in the \textit{Essay on Metaphysics}, he transposed the same example into a new key, and said that not the perception of the ship but Kant’s \textit{analysis} of its presuppositions
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{39} Collingwood, \textit{The Idea of History}, 241.

\textsuperscript{40} Mink, \textit{Mind, History, and Dialectic: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood}, 185, emphasis in the original.
is “historical” thinking; what Kant really achieved was the elucidation of the absolute presuppositions of eighteenth-century science (EM, 245 and Ch. XXVII).\footnote{Collingwood, \textit{An Essay on Metaphysics}, 245 and Ch. XXVII.}

But Mink ignored these odd claims about absolute presuppositions, and treated the absolute presuppositions of history and of all thought as the true substitute for Collingwood’s absurd and confused notion of the \textit{a priori} imagination.

So what are absolute presuppositions for Collingwood? In Kant they cannot have a history. They have a justificatory role, warranted, circularly, through “transcendental” regress arguments from the validity of the claims they are needed in order to justify. For Collingwood, in contrast, they were simply a class of beliefs which have the property that they cannot be challenged within the system of which they are a part without affirming them. The best one can do with such beliefs is to describe them, make them intelligible, and, historically, show how they survive in later beliefs of the same type. Mink saw the conflict between this conception and Kant, and explicated Collingwood as follows:

Absolute presuppositions, whether taken singly or as belonging to constellations, are not subject to proof or disproof. This follows directly from Collingwood’s denial that they are propositions and his acceptance of the usual view that only propositions are capable of being true or false. But additional material reasons are offered: absolute

\footnote{Mink, \textit{Mind, History, and Dialectic: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood}, 185.}
presuppositions are not subject to proof because “it is proof that depends on them, not they, on proof” (EM, 17343). Clearly an absolute presupposition could not be proved by showing it to be entailed by something more fundamental; for then it would not be an absolute presupposition. But neither is any sort of empirical evidence relevant: an absolute presupposition is not derived from experience in the first instance (EM, 19744) and “cannot be undermined by the verdict of ‘experience’ because it is the yard-stick by which ‘experience’ is judged” (EM 193-445). In a different context (PA, 8 n.46), Collingwood had quoted the anthropologist Evans- Pritchard to the same effect: “Let the reader consider any argument that would utterly demolish all Zande claims for the power of the oracle. If it were translated into Zande modes of thought it would serve to support their entire structure of belief.”47

Collingwood’s point was that there are beliefs that are incapable of being treated as true and false yet are essential for understanding others, and that we can understand these beliefs. Mink’s Kantian interpretation was this:


44 Collingwood, An Essay on Metaphysics, 197.


47 Mink, Mind, History, and Dialectic: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood, 143, emphasis in the original.
What can it be, then, which fits the description of an absolute presupposition? Only one thing: an a priori concept. Absolute presuppositions are concepts functioning as a priori; constellations of absolute presuppositions are a priori conceptual systems. The theory of presuppositions, on this interpretation, belongs to that history of ideas which began with Kant ... . Kant’s a priori concepts, which he called “categories of the understanding,” were regarded by him, as Collingwood regards absolute presuppositions, as providing the general structure of experience and at the same time, when “schematized” or applied over time to the raw data of the manifold of sensation, as yielding synthetic a priori truths which are the ultimate premises of scientific knowledge. Kant thought, moreover, that he had proved the categories of the understanding to be necessary conditions of the possibility of experience überhaupt; thus they jointly constitute, in his view, the formal structure of mind—not just of the modern mind, or of the Western mind, but of anything which could count as a mind at all.  

Collingwood of course said nothing like this: metaphysics, according to Collingwood, was no more, and able to be no more, than the history of these kinds of beliefs.

To be history in Collingwood’s sense means that they can be understood as thought; it does not mean that they should be endorsed. Judging an entire way of life, he suggested, is

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48 Mink, Mind, History, and Dialectic: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood, 146, emphasis in the original.
pointless. It seems plausible for him to think that judging the fixed-in-place premises of historically past viewpoints is pointless for the same reason, namely that the judgment is only going to be a reflection of our own historically limited prejudices. The effect of this reasoning is to do what Davidson does to fundamental presuppositions in “The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme”—to demote them to the status of beliefs that we can understand or fail to understand as thought at all.

This returns us to the problem of understanding itself: what could Collingwood have meant by the ship example if he was not, as Mink thought, in error about the historical imagination, and groping blindly toward Kant? The answer, perhaps, is in the notion of interpolation itself. In any case, interpolating to identify something, or describe a motion, such as a ship, is an activity that has some properties that are relevant to answering the question that seems to be at the heart of Mink’s issue with Collingwood: how can a claim about action be objective, final, and what-not and at the same time require personal input, input which some people might be better equipped to give?

Mink conceded that there is something to the idea of finality: questions about grounds for knowledge eventually run out and become senseless. An example would be when we arrive at an answer which: “announces a fact which cannot be further questioned, for example, ‘Because I remember seeing her wear it’. (How do you know you remember, etc. is senseless?).” But he


could make nothing more of this, and commented that “it is not immediately obvious how this analysis would apply to more complicated cases of historical interpretation.” Could interpolation fit this case? In a sense, for Collingwood’s argument to work, it must. Collingwood placed interpolation at the center of the task of the historian: with the fisherman with his rod and creel we interpolate his intention to fish. The historian takes documents and spins webs between them. The task of spinning the threads in the web is interpolation. And interpolation is something that can be done by different interpolators using different individual backgrounds to arrive at results that agree and are a terminus, and are in this sense objective. Mink would perhaps have replied that this would only work if the interpolators shared presuppositions. Collingwood would have rejected this. Can we make sense of interpolation in a way that fits Collingwood?

Enter Mirror Neurons

The neuroscience literature suggests that “we recognize someone else’s action because we manage to activate our own inner action representations using mirror neurons.” Of course “we” don’t manage anything–the brain does. But it does so on the basis of our own abilities to perform similar actions, and especially “from the massive experience we have accumulated over

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the years in planning and executing self-produced activities.”53 One of the most striking groups of findings in this literature involves what we have been discussing as interpolation. Subjects are shown moving bodies, but with only a very few data points visible: for example a video projection of a person walking with only a small number of reflective patches on the body so that only the motion of these patches is visible to the subject. People are remarkably accurate at distinguishing motions based on these very limited inputs. In short, we are in fact very good interpolators, and the interpolating that we do engages the mirror system so that many of the same connections fire when we see the action as when we ourselves perform it.

Moreover, experience makes us better interpolators and identifiers. Dancers can see things about dance moves that other people can’t see,54 male and female ballet performers see the typical gender-specific dance moves of their own gender better.55 This is what Weber called direct observational understanding. There is no “inference” involved—it is understanding with Evidenz or something very similar to it, and it is a case of adding our self-knowledge to the raw data to produce a fact about a human action. This is a natural phenomenon. There is no need to

appeal to Kantian categories, no universal presuppositions about rationality or mindedness on which it is necessary to rely.

But there is a peculiarity about objectivity. A dancer identifying a move is making an objective judgment. It would be evident to others with similar dance training and experience. The mirror neuron literature quotes Poincaré in a similar context:

“How does it happen that there are people who do not understand mathematics … . There is nothing mysterious in the fact that everyone is not capable of discovery … . But what does seem most surprising, when we consider it, is that anyone should be unable to understand a mathematical argument at the very moment it is stated to him.”

So the idea of evidence in the sense of Evidenz or evidence for anyone needs to allow for “anyone” to be qualified. Nevertheless, the “objective” character of the recognition of the dance move or the correctness for the mathematical reasoning stands. This is very different from the problem of narrative comprehension in Mink. There are no conflicting and correct identifications or mathematical outcomes.

This is enough to get us something that the non-detachability thesis denies us: objective facts in which the observer has an input resembling the a priori imagination which does not

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involve Kantian absolute presuppositions, or for that matter relative presuppositions. Moreover, they are facts about minded action, they involve interpolation, and they allow for the possibility that experience and knowledge improves one’s capacity to perform identifications. These identifications have the kind of finality Collingwood had in mind. There is no further justification for them.  

Alvin Goldman asks how far this goes toward understanding understanding. The mirroring mechanism is this:

57 “We will posit that, in our brain, there are neural mechanisms (mirror mechanisms) that allow us to directly understand the meaning of the actions and emotions of others by internally replicating (‘simulating’) them without any explicit reflective mediation. Conceptual reasoning is not necessary for this understanding. As human beings, of course, we are able to reason about others and to use this capacity to understand other people’s minds at the conceptual, declarative level. Here we will argue, however, that the fundamental mechanism that allows us a direct experiential grasp of the mind of others is not conceptual reasoning but direct simulation of the observed events through the mirror mechanism. The novelty of our approach consists in providing for the first time a neurophysiological account of the experiential dimension of both action and emotion understanding” (V. Gallese, C. Keysers C., and G. Rizzolatti, “A Unifying View of the Basis of Social Cognition,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 8 (2004), 396).
Person A “directly” understands the mind of person B if A experiences a mental event that matches one experienced by B, and A’s mental event is caused by B’s mental event, via a brain mechanism that can reproduce such matches on similar occasions.\(^{58}\)

This only goes so far, as Goldman observes:

Does [this mechanism, as described] suffice for social understanding? Not yet, I suspect. What [this] arguably captures is a notion of mental contagion. Is contagion sufficient for understanding, or mindreading? I think not. The receiver of a contagious mental state might not know the identity of the sender, and might not think of the sender as a subject of a matching state. Crying among infants is contagious, and we may assume that the crying behavior transmits upsetness from one infant to another. Do babies who experience upsetness as a consequence of hearing another’s cry represent the latter as upset? As undergoing a matching state? That is debatable. If not, then I don’t think it’s a case of either mindreading or interpersonal understanding. For these to occur, the

receiver must represent the sender as a subject of a similar state, must impute such a state to the sender. No such requirement is included in [this description of mirroring].\textsuperscript{59}

This is not the same set of facts as the facts involved in the idea of re-enactment. Nevertheless, there is obviously a close connection between the two, and between re-enactment, which is a conscious activity, and largely or partly unconscious activities such as what G. H. Mead called rehearsal\textsuperscript{60} and what is currently discussed under the heading of simulation. Simulation would include the processes by which one anticipates the actions of others. Re-enactment is a self-conscious form of simulation. Part of what goes into simulation, or re-enactment, is the stuff that the “brain mechanism” produces: the experience of emotional and action understanding, and perhaps much more than this, including following the thought of another.\textsuperscript{61} These experiences are “final” in the relevant sense, they fit the notion of a priori imagination, and they are “objective” in the same sense as the dancer’s judgments about the actions of other dancers are.

As with many results in cognitive neuroscience, almost everything about this reasoning is controversial, and here as elsewhere the controversies involve philosophical terms. The difficulties set in as soon as we start talking about re-enactment itself. Is re-enactment a direct

\textsuperscript{59} A. Goldman, “Mirror Systems, Social Understanding and Social Cognition,” emphasis in the original.

\textsuperscript{60} G. H. Mead. "Social Psychology as Counterpart to Physiological Psychology", \textit{Psychological Bulletin} 6 (1909), 408.

application of a mechanism of simulation, or does it involve a further development, such as the implicit theory of mind that could be regarded as being required for conscious re-enactment? What is the status of concepts, including mental concepts in ordinary understanding and the kind of understanding involved in historical reconstruction of past thoughts? There are many possible ways of answering these questions, but a few general considerations are relevant here.

Re-enactment involves the scaffolding of tacit mechanisms of identification— we know what swimming the Tiber is without being able to articulate this knowledge— but the construction of a re-enactment can refer only to the matching of conscious and non-tacit elements of the historical action situation with our own thoughts. Our access to our own mental processes is limited and biased and the content of re-enactments has these same limitations. If our sense of the intentional character of our own action is a cognitive illusion produced by these biases and limitations, for example, our historical understanding will reproduce this cognitive illusion in our reconstruction of Caesar’s thought.

But there is an additional problem: not only are there biases and limitations of our knowledge of our own minds, our language for articulating the mental is itself highly problematic and the source of its own illusions. Terms like belief and presupposition, as well as concept, are familiar terms, but they are terms of a kind that have themselves varied historically and between cultures, or not been present at all in other cultures.62 They are terms of art. It is perhaps not surprising that it is the philosophical forms of these terms that cause the most difficulty in these discussions.

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What is characteristic of this language is that it employs problematic analogies between a conscious, linguistically articulated performance and a tacit, inaccessible, or unconscious one. There is a reasonable question as to what corresponds to “concepts” in the mind. Does there need to be, for example, a typification or some neural analog to a type concept in the mind in order for there to be recognition of an action—a kind of mental shadow world of concept analogs? Or are “beliefs” and “concepts” better understood entirely as part of public linguistic behavior, as words we use, to articulate, however problematically, the “understanding” that we have already achieved tacitly, through a mechanism like simulation, but which we may struggle to express?

One reasonable ground for skepticism about “re-enactment” is the unreliability of this kind of higher order, conscious simulation. Weber, as we have seen, is careful to distinguish direct and indirect or inferential forms of understanding. Collingwood was inclined to run the two together, seeing the historian and the person seeing the fisherman walking to the fishpond with a rod and creel and determining what he intends to do as cases of the same kind. Weber was right to distinguish degrees of Evidenz in the two cases; whether Collingwood was right to think of them as of the same kind is an open question. For cognitive scientists who think that the notion of mirroring should be restricted to the best understood cases of motor activity, Weber would be right: motor activity like wood-chopping is the sort of thing that the mirror system does automatically; the other kind of understanding requires thought and inferences that may misfire. Collingwood might reply that interpolation occurs in each case.

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The recent discovery of mirror neurons in the human brain outside of the area of motor activity might be taken to support Collingwood’s reply. If thinking about others with respect to emotions, higher mental processes, and so forth works in generally the same way as our thinking about the body movements of others, as historians reenacting the thinking and acting of past historical figures would be making the same kinds of unconscious inferences as those we make unconsciously when we identify dance movements and the like. The implausibility of the idea of reenactment results from the sense that it seems to be weakly anchored in the kind of odd facts that the historian ordinarily has to work with, facts which do not directly point to emotions, higher mental processes, and so forth, but are instead clues to what the historical figure was actually doing. The “why” seems speculative: actions are open to multiple interpretations, and no amount of evidence seems to be enough to definitively establish one interpretation. Nevertheless, it is a remarkable feature of historical research that the discovery of small bits of information often forces very large revisions of assessments of past actions. For a Collingwood fortified with these findings about the wide distribution of mirror neurons in the brain, this could be interpreted as follows: our reenactments are not merely speculative, but rest on a very strong capacity to infer the significance that actions had for people in past on the basis of little information, just as mirror neurons activate and permit the identification of bodily movements on the basis of small

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inputs. We can do so, in both cases, because in each case our own brains provide so much—so much web-making power provided by the links in our own minds—to fill in the missing data.

This is a difference over the scope of direct understanding. Another, distinct, difference between Weber and Collingwood appears in connection with the answering of larger historical questions. Weber argued that actions need to be understood in terms of meaning, but also to be “causally adequate,” meaning that an attributed cause of an action—a belief-desire combination might be an example—must attain a minimal level of probability to count as an explanation. This means that cases of direct understanding and cases of indirect understanding qualify as “causes” more or less automatically: the fisherman with the creel and rod we understand as going fishing is probably going fishing. But larger historical questions, for example about the causes of capitalism, are not the subject of either direct or indirect “understanding,” as actions are. They are answered by composing narratives. Weber made the point that all history, meaning all historical narrative, has at least a minimal causal element. In these cases, however, the inferences that are made about larger historical events, such as the emergence of Capitalism, are not unconscious, nor are they based on empathy. They are causal. The kind of causation that is relevant in the case of historical questions is not billiard ball causation. Causal narratives may be made up largely or entirely of understood actions, but the causal significance of the actions themselves is a separate fact from the facts involved in understanding, and the separation becomes more obvious the larger the scale of the events in question. Calvin did not understand himself as a father of modern capitalism: we make the causal connections that show him to be one.
For Weber, the relevant kind of causation is a form of chancy causation which requires the selection of a reference class against which to assess chance relations. Choices of reference classes are largely a matter of the historian’s interest and need to fit the question the historian is asking. Moreover, there will almost always be multiple casual sequences that qualify as providing at least a minimal casual structure for a narrative. In the case of capitalism, both the one-sided materialist and the one-sided spiritual explanations qualify. Collingwood dealt with such cases in terms of the logic of question and answer, which ran the two kinds of question, understanding and cause, together. In both accounts there is room for a good deal of underdetermination between the historians account and the historians data. But it is only with the undetachability thesis, the denial that there is data apart from narrative form, that these accounts produce a problematic relativism, as distinct from a recognition of the limits of what can be concluded on the basis of the historical evidence and a recognition of the different kinds of questions that can be addressed by the historian.

Exit Kant

Mink was trapped in a philosophical locution in terms of which Collingwood made no sense, so he interpreted him as groping toward Kant. In his eagerness to make his interpretation arrive at the Kantian station, however, Mink ignored all the warning semaphores on the way, including Collingwood’s whole account of the \textit{a priori} imagination, and drove the train through to the end, only to find that the terminal station was no longer labeled metaphysics, but was now called history, the same as the starting point of the journey—metaphysics itself, according to
Collingwood, being no more, and able to be no more, than the history of these kinds of beliefs. Weber and Collingwood were also trapped, in the language of later neo-Kantianism and British Idealism respectively. The writings of Collingwood and Weber are riven with attempts to stretch the problematic Kantian language of presuppositions, the notion of typification, inference, concept, and similar terms in order to speak about the situation of the historian. They failed, though it is possible to reconstruct what they were trying to do. Mink tried to reconstruct Collingwood in the language of the analytic philosophy of the 1950s and 60s. He failed, by his own account. Collingwood appears, in Mink’s great book, to be irretrievably perverse and confused. But there was something in both Collingwood and Weber that was right, that eluded Mink, that we can now perhaps understand.