Book Reviews

Rethinking R.G. Collingwood: Philosophy, Politics and the Unity of Theory and Practice

Gary Browning

Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke & New York, 2004, vii + 213pp.

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The major theme of this book is philosophy as a form of rethinking. This is entirely appropriate to Collingwood's philosophical enterprise, conveying, as it does, not only the familiar idea from *The Idea of History* of all history as rethinking and as the history of thought, but also the less often noticed central theme of his approach in *An Essay on Philosophical Method* and *An Essay on Metaphysics*. It is to Browning's credit that he draws out this idea and its implications for civilization and society so neatly. Overall I am in general agreement with the book — but I do have some reservations both in form and substance and I shall dwell on some of these in what follows. However, my critical comments should be taken within the context of overall agreement both with Browning's general approach to Collingwood's thought and also with many of his particular analyses and exegeses.

The first of my critical comments is that the book lacks a full discussion of *An Essay on Philosophical Method* and the scale of forms as a restatement of Hegelian dialectic. This is important because Browning wants to assimilate Collingwood's thought to Hegel's in many respects. However, Collingwood spent many years in achieving an account of dialectic adequate to serve both in *de jure* justification of his own *de facto* dialectically constructed substantive philosophical output, in defence of Hegel's dialectic (against Croce's criticism), and also as a justification of Bradley's notion of degrees of truth and reality. The related point is that Collingwood was not (*pace* Browning) always a dialectical thinker; he became so after he published *Religion and Philosophy* in 1916: it was a hard won achievement. He became a dialectical thinker before he was able to philosophically justify his dialectic and Browning tends to ignore this aspect of Collingwood's development.

Again, the book contains little or nothing on Croce and Gentile. Without asking for it to be a different book (an easy temptation for the reviewer, many of whom delight in castigating an author for not writing the book that they themselves would have written) it nonetheless needed to address Croce in respect of the nature of dialectic and Gentile in respect of the particular form that the dialectic of the forms of experience took in *Speculum Mentis*. Browning is quite right to construe *Speculum Mentis* as a close cousin to

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, both in its general approach and its employment of a dialectical approach to the forms of experience; but in respect of its precise structure and order, the relation between the forms of experience is closer to Gentile than to Hegel or Croce. This is enough to demonstrate that Collingwood was not an uncritical Hegelian; neither, of course, was he an uncritical Crocian or Gentilian. Although he learnt much from both he also rejected part of their thought. For example, he rejected Croce's static conception of the forms of experience and replaced it with one that was thoroughly dialectical; in justifying this course of action he also defended the Hegelian dialectic against Croce's criticism that dialectical relations could only hold between opposites and not distincts. Again, although this is clearly evident in the very structure and dialectical arrangement of *Speculum Mentis*, it was left to *An Essay on Philosophical Method* to provide the philosophical justification of this way of proceeding by developing the conception of a scale of forms characterized by relations of both opposition and distinction.

Again, in his eagerness to assimilate Collingwood to Hegel, Browning tends to overlook or underplay the Kantian moment in Collingwood's thought. He is surely correct in what he asserts — highlighting 'the significance of Hegel as a philosophical point of reference' for Collingwood (p. 22) — but there are also Kantian tendencies at work in Collingwood and the presence of both shows that it is not easy to assimilate him to either camp. Texts that demonstrate this are (among others) the lectures on the philosophy of history from 1928, the pamphlet *Faith and Reason* (in itself also an important precursor to the doctrine more fully developed in *An Essay on Metaphysics*), and the unpublished translation of and commentary on the preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Collingwood had Kantian and Hegelian moments: Browning emphasizes the latter and Josie D'Oro in her *Collingwood and the Metaphysics of Experience* (Routledge, 2002) emphasizes the former. Awkward as it is, Collingwood was both and more besides.

On the social and political side of the book I found much to agree with. This aspect of Collingwood's thought has hitherto been given insufficient attention. This neglect is now being redressed and Browning does much to show why we should take notice of it. Notions of civilization, progress, political action; the role of historical understanding in self-understanding, in the idea of duty as a concrete determination of action not reducible to rules; the relation between theory and practice are all genuine contributions to political theory and Browning shows why.

A final point about editing. The book contains a large number of typographical and spelling errors. There are misplaced, displaced or missing footnotes (e.g. the first two footnotes are transposed, footnote 45 to Chapter 1 is missing, and this has knock on effects); De Ruggiero is misspelt throughout,

as is Modood. Tighter editing would have helped here, and also on those occasions where Browning makes a comparison between Collingwood and another thinker without following it up in detail. There is sometimes a tendency to juxtapose Collingwood with other thinkers (whether Lyotard or Rawls) without it really being clear what the point of the exercise is, other than that it might be interesting that there are similarities. At the risk of sounding ungrateful, a slightly longer book, more tightly edited and with space to develop some of its themes at slightly greater length would have been more satisfying. But if ever called upon to recommend a book that deals sensitively and sympathetically with Collingwood's philosophy in relation to politics, philosophy and theory and practice, I shall not hesitate (and neither should you) to recommend this volume.

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The Philosopher and His Poor

Jacques Rancière, edited and with an introduction by Andrew Parker, translated by John Drury, Corinne Oster and Andrew Parker
Duke University Press, Durham & London, 2004, xxvi + 247pp.
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Why have so few philosophers been democrats?, asks Jacques Derrida in *Voyous* (2003). In *The Philosopher and His Poor*, first published in French 20 years prior to *Voyous* (1983), and now available in English translation, Jacques Rancière sketches an answer to the same question. The philosopher divides himself from his poor, the thinker from the labourer. Philosophy is founded in a principle of distinction that is maintained even by the author of *Distinction*; from Plato to Bourdieu, social theory abolishes politics by refusing to recognize the possibility that the shoemaker might also take to the public stage. Those familiar with Rancière's work will recognize here an early outline of political themes dealt with in more recent books such as *The Shores of Politics* and *Disagreement*. *The Philosopher and His Poor* will be of value to such readers on more than merely genealogical grounds, however; in the reading of Plato which opens the book lies the common ground for the author's political and aesthetic writings, whose trajectories might appear to have diverged somewhat in recent years. For the same reason, those new to Rancière will find this a helpful introduction.