

Can Ideas Have Histories? Lovejoy, Collingwood, and Barfield on Meaning and Metaphysics

To reflect on the very idea of a “History of Ideas” is to be struck by how awkwardly it sits for us. On the one hand, colleges and universities across the nation have whole programs dedicated to its study, including such major institutions as Johns Hopkins University, Brandeis University, Williams College, the University of Washington, and the University of Chicago. On the other hand, the main trend in contemporary historiography militates against the very existence of such a thing as a “history of ideas.” The defining feature of New Historicism, which has been the dominant theoretical force in literary studies for the last fifteen years, and increasingly influences scholarship across the humanities, is that cultural production arises from, is rooted in, is causally conditioned by, and is finally reducible to, the material context in which it appears. As Kenneth R. Johnston puts it, the New Historicist practice is to collapse the historical “foreground”—the subject investigated—into the socio-political background. New Historicists are deeply indebted to Marx and Foucault but also aim to avoid “master narratives” such as govern the historical approaches of, say, Toynbee and Spengler (and Marx and Foucault), and so hope to achieve a greater degree of objectivity in their work. They eschew the vast narrative scope of projects like Macaulay’s *History of England* because—to stick with that example—Macaulay’s concern is to cover “the Revolution which brought the Crown into harmony with the Parliament, and the Revolution which brought the Parliament into harmony with the nation”.ⁱ All the tiny bits of historical detritus that don’t fit this narrative are ignored, New Historicists say, and so we lose a textured appreciation of all the objective features of the period Macaulay

covers. Moreover, though they will often gesture towards a balance of material conditions and intellectual content in practice, a very brief analysis is enough to confirm that the theoretical foundation of New Historicism is structured by the most thorough-going nominalism and materialism. In the final analysis, for the New Historicist there is no such thing as an idea, of a real general concept or term irreducible to a particular sensation or set of sensations, or of sensations that are not reducible to socio-political conditions that themselves resolve into neurophysiological stimuli.

My subject in this paper is the idea of a “history of ideas,” not New Historicism, but it’s worth a brief preliminary digression to show why the “ideal” New Historicist project, a project that would effectively reduce all eidetic content to material causes, cannot succeed, even in theory. Collingwood famously argues that “all history is the history of thought” (we’ll get to this claim in a few minutes). The ideal New Historicist project would argue, instead, that “all history includes no thought” insofar as thoughts are the epiphenomenal detritus of material interactions, to which they are reducible. A simple thought experiment is enough to show that such a history could not be written. Try to envision what a history of, say, an episode in the French Revolution, or the publication of Shakespeare’s sonnets or the *Lyrical Ballads*, or any other common historical subject, would look like. The motives of Coleridge and Wordsworth in writing them are no longer relevant, unless these are analyzed into physiological responses to material stimuli. The famous “Preface” that begins it would then be interesting as a record of such stimuli. So too would the ideological matrices that the *Ballads* challenge and reinforce. The 18th century versification practices they rebel against are only of interest if they too are so reduced. And so on. I hope it’s clear that such a history would

be worse than useless, and I can't imagine any scholar writing one (and there's a good deal of excellent New Historicist research).

I've gone through this digression because I want to establish from the outset that any conceivable history must include irreducible eidetic content, whether one calls it "ideology," "cultural production," or simply "thought." New Historicist theory implies, when it doesn't state directly, that one could reduce thoughts to material conditions or power relations if only one pushed one's analyses just a little bit further, but I hope I've shown that such a reduction is impossible, even in theory, because the historical subject itself vanishes in the process. How exactly does one describe Shakespeare's sonnets without referring to ideas as proper subjects of discussion in their own right? If one cannot do so, then New Historicist theory and practice can't be brought into conformity. The real question, then, is what to make of ideas and their role in history. One way to begin that investigation is to examine the ways Arthur Lovejoy, R.G. Collingwood, and Owen Barfield discuss the history of, and to place those discussions in the wider context of their epistemological and metaphysical underpinnings.

Now, the "history of ideas" is venerable enough that it thrives in its own right as an object of historical interest. Typically such histories will begin with the fact that Lovejoy created the first History of Ideas program at Johns Hopkins University, and will include discussion of the ways in which A.O. Lovejoy shaped the methodology of "history of ideas" investigations, even as they note that many of Lovejoy's methods and conclusions have been critiqued or abandoned.ⁱⁱ Less often explored, however, are the epistemological and metaphysical underpinnings of Lovejoy's innovations—more specifically, whether or to what extent Lovejoy's historical practices are affected by his

defense of what he calls “the epistemological dualism of the theory of representative perception, and the psychophysical dualism which conceives empirical reality to fall asunder into a world of mind and a world of matter mutually exclusive and utterly antithetic.”ⁱⁱⁱ This is surprising because *The Revolt Against Dualism*, in which Lovejoy gave his most sustained defense of his dualisms, is subtitled “An Inquiry Concerning the Existence of Ideas,” and it is especially to be lamented because it is Lovejoy’s philosophical perspicacity more than his specific achievements in the history of ideas that most support Isaiah Berlin’s judgment that Lovejoy is “the best of all modern historians of ideas”.^{iv}

Lovejoy views his dualisms as supporting his theory of ideas. In particular, Lovejoy promotes dualism with regard to the present object, the past or future object, and the minds of others. So, for example, I cannot have unmediated knowledge of present objects because my awareness of them can only be by means of my intermediating sense organs. Consequently, saying that I perceive an object amounts to saying that it is a “partial or symbolic reproduction in the awareness of a cognitive organism which is at the same time capable of thinking of some general scheme or order in which existences have separate and mutually exclusive situations, and of referring attributes to the data of which it is directly aware to external situations in the world.”^v

We note in passing that Lovejoy describes the origin and function of symbolic systems here in a way that correlates with his account of the origin of language, but only on the way to further noting that what Lovejoy says about the dualism of the present object applies with still greater force to that of past and future objects. These have a two-fold split, as it were: as formerly or possibly present, they have the duality of present

objects, but they are further divided from present, unmediated awareness by the intervention of temporal distance. Moreover, the conclusion that each of these supporting planks compel is that “ideas” themselves originate for Lovejoy as private abstractions from equally private sense data. Lovejoy defends the seventeenth-century dualists who “forged a scheme of ideas which—as it is now the fashion to say, not altogether untruly—has bound the minds of reflective men, and especially men of science, ever since.”^{vi} This scheme defines “essentially the nature of ‘ideas,’ as Descartes and Locke (for the most part) used that term.”^{vii} That is to say, ideas are “particulars which arise through the functioning of percipient organisms, are present only within the private fields of awareness of such organisms, are destitute of certain of the essential properties and relations implied either by the historic concept of the ‘physical’ or by the contemporary physicist’s concept of it, and possess properties which physical things lack.”^{viii} Whatever may be the merits of this position, it is a surprising foundation for a methodology of the history of ideas: after all, in what sense can entities that “are present only within the private fields of awareness” be said to *have* histories? The question that arises for Lovejoy’s reader at this point is what this means for the history of ideas. Consider the following: Person A says to Person B “the universe is a Great Chain of Being;” Person A acquired all the concepts in the sentence via the wholly subjective mediation of the senses; Person B did so as well, and by definition cannot know whether she has the same concepts as Person A. Moreover, when Person B replies “no, the universe has evolved randomly from unstructured chaos” the problem is both repeated and compounded. When readers finish *The Great Chain of Being*—an exponentially longer set of such assertions—they have no way of knowing whether their interpretation squares with

Lovejoy's own, or with that of any other reader; they cannot know if they understand Leibniz, or if Leibniz understood either Plato or Spinoza's understanding of Plato. In short, Lovejoy's masterpiece cannot be a "history of ideas" if by the history of ideas we mean what Lovejoy claims he means, namely "the processes of the human mind, in the individual or the group, which manifest themselves in history."^{ix} If "the processes of the human mind" are coterminous with "the private fields of awareness" of "percipient organisms" they cannot have histories because they cannot be shared and can in no coherent sense be said to endure—for *whom*, precisely, did "the Great Chain of Being" persist, if it cannot be shared?

Whatever drawbacks Collingwood's views may have, they wouldn't seem to be the same as Lovejoy's. Collingwood's main philosophical influences were Hegel and Croce, typically classified as absolute or objective idealists, very far removed from Lovejoy's neo-Lockean brand of dualism. Collingwood does make a distinction similar to that of Lovejoy, though, and it has the same overarching importance to his theory. Historical judgments of any kind, he says, are different from judgments about nature. Nature consists of "events" while history consists of "acts," the difference being that "in the case of nature, [the] distinction between the outside and the inside of an event does not arise. The events of nature are mere events, not the acts of agents whose thought the scientist endeavours to trace."^x The historian, by contrast, "investigating any event in the past, makes a distinction between what may be called the outside and the inside of an event. By the outside of the event I mean everything belonging to it which can be described in terms of bodies and their movements. . . . By the inside of the event I mean that in it which can only be described in terms of thought. . . . The historian is never

concerned with either of these to the exclusion of the other. He is investigating not mere events . . . but actions, and an action is the unity of the outside and the inside of an event.”^{xi}

There is an uneasy tension in Collingwood’s views of this subject, though: for while Collingwood here tries to maintain an explanatory balance of the “inner” and “outer” portions of the historical act, at others he seems to privilege the inner to the point of excluding the outer. For example, fifteen pages after the statements quoted a moment ago, Collingwood maintains that “thought is therefore not the presupposition of an historical process which is in turn the presupposition of historical knowledge. It is only in the historical process, the process of thoughts, that thought exists at all; and it is only in so far as this process is known for a process of thoughts that it is one.”^{xii} We can see the outer half of the event begin to melt away here in the expansion of the history of thought into history as such. This process becomes essentially complete another fifteen pages later when, having shown that “there are for historical thought no fixed points thus given: in other words, that in history, just as there are properly speaking no authorities, so there are properly speaking no data.”^{xiii} From this Collingwood concludes that “freed from its dependence on fixed points supplied from without, the historian’s picture of the past is thus in every detail an imaginary picture, and its necessity is at every point the necessity of the *a priori* imagination. Whatever goes into it, goes into it not because his imagination passively accepts it, but because it actively demands it.”^{xiv}

It would be unfair to say that Collingwood is simply inconsistent here— everything depends on what he means by the “*a priori* imagination” and the relation of imagination to perception and the “outer” event. He seems to insist, as he most famously

puts it, that “all history is the history of thought.”^{xv} And yet, as William Dray has shown, “it is clear that, far from considering an agent’s explanatory thoughts as unobservable entities, [Collingwood] regarded them as having no existence at all apart from events in the agents life, which could be regarded as expressing them.”^{xvi} Dray notes in particular Collingwood’s “vigorous attack on what he calls the ‘metaphysical’ theory of mind—the conception of it as non-physical substance rather than as a complex of activities.”^{xvii} Dray says that Collingwood offers only a “sketch” for a philosophy of mind, and I think he’s right about the upshot of Collingwood’s direction, but it overlooks a crucial aspect of Collingwood’s theory, the notion of “re-enactment.” “There is only one way,” Collingwood says, that the historian can “discern the thoughts which he is trying to discover” and that is by “re-thinking them in his own mind.” (IH 215) Thus, “the history of thought, and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of the past thought in the historian’s own mind” (IH 215). Dray hints that Collingwood has a functionalist or materialist—in any even a non-idealist—theory of mind. If he does, it’s hard to see how it can be reconciled with Collingwood’s claim that the historian does just *simulate* or *approximate* the thoughts of, say, Caesar, but actually thinks the very same thoughts. As Collingwood puts it, “historical knowledge is the knowledge of what mind has done in the past, and at the same time it is the redoing of this, the perpetuation of past acts in the present” (IH 218). Notice the impersonal use of “mind”—not your mind or my mind or Caesar’s mind is the object of historical knowledge, but simply “mind.” Similarly, Collingwood contends that: “In a sense, these thoughts are no doubt themselves events happening in time; but since the only way in which the historian can discern them is by re-thinking them for himself, there is another sense, and one very important to the

historian, in which they are not in time at all. . . . If Mr. Whitehead is justified in calling the right-angled triangle an eternal object, the same phrase is applicable to the Roman constitution” (IH 217-8).

Here we have views that sound straightforwardly idealist, even Platonic, in their implications. History is the history of thought, and thoughts, though they exist in time, are timeless and can be re-thought, re-enacted, as well by the historian as by the original thinker. All of this clearly implies a metaphysic, a total world-view, that especially demands that we know, for example, how such thoughts relate to “nature,” which has no “inside” and yet seems to be governed by “thoughts” in the form of natural laws.

And yet, as I said, I think Dray is right in taking Collingwood out of the idealist box. That is because in his final years Collingwood put forward the outline of a metaphysic that is not materialist or idealist. For example, in the *Essay on Metaphysics* Collingwood argues that metaphysics should be approached not as the search for the nature of reality or being, but instead as a effort to ascertain the “absolute presuppositions” a given holds that define what reality is for it. In his *Autobiography*, written shortly before his death, Collingwood says that:

Metaphysics . . . is no futile attempt at knowing what lies behind the limits of experience, but is primarily at any given time an attempt to discover what the people of that time believe about the world’s general nature; such beliefs being the presuppositions of their ‘physics’, that is, their inquiries into its detail.

Secondarily, it is the attempt to discover the corresponding presuppositions of other peoples and times, and to follow the historical process by which one set of presuppositions has turned into another.^{xviii}

Collingwood didn't live long enough to apply this view in detail to his philosophies of history and nature, or to show how or where reality and presuppositions converge, but it seems clear enough that if he had he would have healed the gap that seems to open up between them. Metaphysics in this view simply is the history of thought in the form of the presuppositions, the most basic assumptions, that allow us to think other thoughts at all. And because this is a metaphysic, it must obviously include our basic assumptions not just about history but also about nature, and it is where those two must converge.

In the second half of his career Barfield was deeply engaged with Collingwood's work. In fact, he begins both *History, Guilt, and Habit* and *Speaker's Meaning* with extended discussions of Collingwood's view of history, and it is clear that he finds much to agree with. For example, he thinks that Collingwood "lays his finger"^{xxix} on the difference between evolution and history when he says that "all history is the history of thought." History, Barfield says, is "something that imports a consciously directed process" whereas evolution is "an unconscious process." Barfield then immediately qualifies these definitions to bring them into full conformity with Collingwood, saying that evolution is "a natural process" and that history is "a human one."^{xx} Barfield infers from this that for Collingwood "you cannot study the history of thought without thinking the thoughts whose history you are studying"—and this study is, says Barfield, what we now call the "History of Ideas."^{xxi} At the same time, though, Barfield registers concern about two aspects of Collingwood's position: the sharp separation of natural from historical science, and the doctrine of "re-enactment." Barfield never directly challenges the latter, but he acknowledges "it has been disputed, by historians and others"^{xxii} and he

doesn't try to defend Collingwood from the "uneasy" critics who ask "What on earth does he mean by this 're-enacting'?"^{xxiii}

It's the former, though, the methodological dualism of natural and historical sciences, that attracts Barfield's critical attention. Specifically, Barfield argues that Collingwood can't simultaneously maintain that Caesar's thought and the historian's thought are the same thing while also maintaining that "nature has no inside." When he does so, Barfield says, he forgets that "if a concept in my mind is one and the same with the concept in yours, then it clearly cannot be the product of either my organism or yours."^{xxiv} Thus, when Collingwood:

posits an unbridgeable gulf between history and science . . . he bases that doctrine on the presupposition, which he takes for granted, that man has what he calls an 'inside,' but nature has no 'inside.' Thought, of which he says history consists, is the inside of man and his actions. But nature has no corresponding inside—no inside at all. We see that, in denying an inside to nature, he is really still conceiving thought as the product of man's physical organism, although this quite incompatible with that view of the superindividual essence of thought which he himself has just categorically stated.^{xxv}

In other words, Barfield suspects that Collingwood has fallen despite himself into a dualism that parallels those espoused by Lovejoy (and that underlie New Historicist practice): the natural person—which, qua natural, has no inside—underlies and gives rise to the historical person who, qua historical, has an inside the essence of which is to be

“superindividual.” How, Barfield asks, is this possible, and the question is very pointed indeed.

Barfield doesn’t make the connection here, but it’s obvious that Collingwood’s difficulty in putting forward a fully defensible theory of re-enactment is connected to his history/nature, inside/outside split. And it is here that Barfield provides a useful supplement to Collingwood’s position—the missing link, for Barfield, is the history of language itself, within which these problems do not occur. “However it may be with historical study,” he says, “there is . . . one case where we certainly do re-enact—and really there can hardly be a better way of putting it—in the present the thinking of the past . . . although we are not often very keenly aware that that is what we are doing. Is it not exactly what we do whenever we speak or write?”^{xxvi} The *sine qua non* of language use for Barfield is that “when we use a word, we re-enact, or adopt, or reanimate, or entertain the thought of previous users of the same word or some part at least of that thought. It may be a very small part indeed. But we must be doing just that thing to some extent; for otherwise we should not be uttering a word at all, but simply making a noise!”^{xxvii} Collingwood himself lacks an adequate philosophy of language—the one he puts forward in *Philosophy of Art* treats language as ultimately the expression of primal emotions, just the sort of thing that Barfield targets in his critique. Redefining re-enactment via Barfield’s “semantic approach to history”—that is, “to study . . . the thought previously expressed from time to time by words in daily use”—alleviates the questions that have plagued Collingwood’s theory as he presented it. Such an approach “must attempt to penetrate into the very texture and activity of thought, rather than to collate conclusions. It is concerned, semantically, with the way in which words are used

rather than with the product of discourse. Expressed in terms of logic, its business is more with the proposition than with the syllogism and more with the term than with the proposition. Therefore it must particularize.”^{xxviii} Thought shades into perception here, as it always does for Barfield, rendering both Collingwood’s nature/thought dichotomy moot. To re-enact Caesar’s thoughts is to think in Latin, with the world view that is implicit in its meanings. To study the history of language is to study the histories of both thought *and* perception—in other words, it is to collapse the history/nature division.

If Barfield is of use to Collingwood, so too is there also a way Collingwood can be very useful to Barfield. Barfield frequently disclaims metaphysics. For example, at the beginning of *Saving the Appearances* Barfield says “this is not a book about metaphysics.” However, he certainly presents ideas in it that have unavoidable metaphysical implications—that thinking is supraindividual and that “nature is man’s unconscious,” to take just two examples. It simply won’t do, in my view, to describe one’s book as “not . . . about metaphysics” while filling it with metaphysical claims. The reason, I think, that Barfield reverts to this position is that, like Collingwood, he is just as uneasy about idealism as he is about materialism. “One of the disadvantages of being an out-and-out materialist,” he says, “is that you can no longer use the word ‘nature’ with any consistency, because in your system it includes everything; just as one of the disadvantages of being an out-and-out idealist is that you can no longer use the word ‘spirit’ meaningfully, because in your system it includes everything” (HGH 5). So Barfield saw the same pitfalls that Collingwood eventually saw, and it’s a shame that he seems not to have been aware of Collingwood’s attempt to reconstruct metaphysics as a science of “absolute presuppositions” since that’s really what Barfield’s notion of the

“evolution of consciousness” evident in the history of ordinary words amounts to anyway. Readers of Barfield or Collingwood interested in extending the thought of each could do worse than to apply one to the other; and people interested in the role of ideas in history at all could certainly do worse—in fact, I think must begin—to re-enact the thought of them both.

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ⁱⁱ See, for example: Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge and London 2004), Donald R. Kelley, *The Descent of Ideas: The History of Intellectual History* (Aldershot, England, 2002), R. Macksey, ‘The History of Ideas at 80’, *Modern Language Notes*, CXVII (2002) pp.1083-1097.

ⁱⁱⁱ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Revolt Against Dualism: An Inquiry Concerning the Existence of Ideas* (New York, 1930), p.3.

^{iv} I. Berlin, ‘Reply to James C. O’Flaherty’, *New York Review of Books*, XL (1993) p.XXX

^v Lovejoy, *Revolt*, p.316.

^{vi} Lovejoy, *Revolt*, p.1.

^{vii} Lovejoy, *Revolt*, p.264.

^{viii} Lovejoy, *Revolt*, p.264.

^{ix} A. Lovejoy, ‘Reflections on the History of Ideas’, in ed. Donald R. Kelley, *The History of Ideas: Canon and Variations* (Rochester, 1990), p. 4.

^x Collingwood, R.G. *The Idea of History* (Oxford UP, 1993) p.214.

^{xi} Collingwood, *Idea*, p.213.

^{xii} Collingwood, *Idea*, p.227.

^{xiii} Collingwood, *Idea*, p.243.

^{xiv} Collingwood, *Idea*, p.245.

^{xv} Collingwood, *Idea*, p.115.

^{xvi} William H. Dray, *History as Re-Enactment: R.G. Collingwood’s Idea of History* (Oxford, 1995).

^{xvii} Dray, *History*, p.40.

^{xviii} A, pp.65-6.

^{xix} Owen Barfield, *History, Guilt and Habit* (Middletown, 1979) p.4.

^{xx} Barfield, *History*, p.4.

^{xxi} Barfield, *History*, p.6-7.

^{xxii} Barfield, *History*, p.6.

^{xxiii} Owen Barfield, *Speaker’s Meaning* (Middletown, 1967), p.23.

^{xxiv} Barfield, *Speaker’s*, p.108.

^{xxv} Barfield, *Speaker’s*, p.109.

^{xxvi} Barfield, *Speaker’s*, p.23.

^{xxvii} Barfield, *Speaker’s*, p.23-4.

^{xxviii} Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances* (London, 1954).