Volume 34 Issue 1

Interpretation

A Journal of Political Philosophy

Winter 2006

Volume 34 | Issue 1

Interpretation

A Journal of Political Philosophy

Fall/Winter 2006

ISSN 0020-9635

Beyond Historicism: Collingwood, Strauss, Momigliano

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Philosophy of history, history of philosophy, history of historiography: these are the "labels" that may be used to describe, in simplified fashion, the fields of research within which Robin George Collingwood, Leo Strauss and Arnaldo Momigliano revisit historicism. But which historicism? There exist, as is well known, numerous and contrasting (even "national") versions of "historicism," from Wilhelm Dilthey to Friedrich Meinecke, from Benedetto Croce to Eugenio Garin. Moreover in speaking of historicism one cannot speak solely of the past: today there exist, above all in the Anglophone and German worlds, a variety of debates about the methods of historical research (debates about, for example, the history of languages, historiography as rhetoric, the history of concepts, the history of effects, metaphorology) which evidently have continued to refine the conceptual and interpretative instruments of classical historicism. Such is not, however, the theme of the present essay, which intends to limit itself to treating of two circumscribed questions. On the one hand, it intends to present a first discussion of the theoretical relations among the three authors under consideration, relations which have not always been kept in mind by the critical literature. But beyond this eminently "scholarly" aspect, the present essay intends to contribute a reflection on a theme which certainly cannot be considered "overcome" by the theoretical and methodological conclusions reached by the most recent versions of historicism: in essence, the theme of the *universalistic tension* which, in different ways, seems to dominate the researches of Collingwood, Strauss, and Momigliano. All this, naturally, not with a view to reasserting a now untenable model of ethnocentric universalism, endowed with self-sufficient meaning and dogmatically "necessary," but with a view to reflecting *philosophically* on the status of historical contingency which, within an historicist perspective, risks leading to theoretical, and, consequently, ethical-political

relativism. The problem consists then in redefining the relation between change and permanence, between particularism and universality, between tradition and truth (Altini 2004).

1. The Problem: Theoretical Questions and Relations

In 1967 Arnaldo Momigliano published, in the pages of *Rivista storica italiana*, a brief essay on the relation between classical political thought and hermeneutics in Leo Strauss (Momigliano 1967b). Beyond analyzing the genesis and the characteristics of Strauss's thought—midway between classical Greek philosophy, *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and German thought—the essay is guided by one particular theme: the Straussian critique of historicism. To this end Momigliano concentrates his attention on an essay of Strauss (Strauss 1952a) on *The Idea of History* by Robin George Collingwood (Collingwood 1946), and highlights the close connection, within the Straussian discourse on modernity, among anti-historicism, critique of contemporary (above all neopositivistic) social science, recovery of classical political philosophy and hermeneutics. In this regard, Momigliano seems to look with favor on the fundamental aspects of the Straussian critique of Collingwood, above all with respect to the relation between criticism and interpretation and regarding the category of *progress,* whose problematic character becomes evident in the concept of *reenactment* which attempts to combine the "reality" of the past, the demands of the present and the correctness of historical research:

> Collingwood asserted that every historical period has an historical thought that corresponds to it and which is absolutely valid for that period: he held, further, that every historical research is relative to the present, i.e. to something by definition foreign to the interests present to the men of the past. Strauss objects that there is no point in questioning a thinker of the past, if his problems are not still our problems and if therefore we are not ready to admit the possibility that, for example, Plato was right. This implies an at least provisional subordination of one's own research to the research of the thinkers of the past, who may be right. And this subordination in turn means that one must follow Plato in his way of thinking; one must accept, at least provisionally, the limits that he sets himself, the way that he has of presenting his arguments. History of thought is, then, for Leo Strauss an attempt to regain a level of thought that has been lost […]. It follows, too, that interpreting Plato is different from criticizing Plato: interpreting Plato means remaining within the limits of Plato's directives, whereas criticizing him means going

> beyond those directives. To pretend to judge the past from the point of view of the present is already to presume that the present offers a point of view superior to the past. The true thinker must keep open the possibility that he lives in an age that is inferior to the past. (Momigliano 1967b, 1165–66)

Apart from certain reservations about the Straussian method of historical research (in particular, as to whether there is a direct causal relationship between the hermeneutics of reticence and the principles of classical political philosophy: Momigliano 1967a), Momigliano underlines the importance of certain aspects of that method (for example, the question of the reticence of philosophic texts), pointing to the difference between *epoch* and *thought* (explicitly against Collingwood) as one of the strong grounds for the revisiting of historicism. Naturally, in these pages on Strauss—as on other occasions (Momigliano 1960c, 1980, 1992)—Momigliano has occasion to evaluate as well Collingwood himself and his historical methodology. Many are the themes in question: among others, the correspondence between epoch and thought, the dependence of historical research on the interests of the present, the difference between criticism and interpretation, the reinterpretation of historicism. And it is on this last point in particular, above all with reference to the position of Benedetto Croce, that Momigliano adopts a critical tone toward Collingwood, reproving him for passing over in silence his evident cultural debts to the Italian philosopher. Indeed, in the guise of a neutral review of historical studies and of the process of "historicization" of humanism in England, Momigliano's *La storia antica in Inghilterra* (Momigliano 1980) contains numerous accusations of incoherence and imbalance with respect to Collingwood's autobiography (Collingwood 1939). But beyond criticisms of a personal or scholarly character (Momigliano 1980, 761–62), the deeper cause of Momigliano's distancing himself from Collingwood probably resides in different interpretations of the relation between philology and history, and of that between history and philosophy—as represented in a difference regarding the method of historical research:

> *The philosophy of historical method is not* [. . .] *the philosophy of history* in the sense of an ordered and univocal exposition of the development of the world or of humanity. Philosophy of history in this sense is found in every school of thought that tends to become dogmatic, and it is found in Hegelian idealism insofar as the latter claimed to be a definitive philosophy [. . .]. The investigation of the *nature of historical method,* on the other hand, was in large part elaborated by those who opposed Hegelian apriorism, by philologists and historians like Humboldt, Boeckh, and Droysen. By their

> theories of historical science (probably through the mediation of Croce and in any case in a manner parallel to Croce) Collingwood was essentially inspired. He became notorious among his archeologist colleagues for his continual insistence upon the principle that one finds only what one is looking for, and therefore every excavation must start from the clear formulation of the problem that one wants to resolve by the excavation itself. This principle [...] often led Collingwood to find in his excavations exactly that which he desired to find, i.e. to fall into gross errors. In fact, in this way one neglects the obvious truth that *one is excavating in the past,* whether with the pen of the philologist or the hoe of the archeologist, not only to resolve problems already formulated, but *to open the doors to the infinity of reality,* which always transcends all problems that have been already formulated; and woe to the historian who refuses to see what he is not looking for. But the theory of historical research as "question and response" [...] has all the same the merit of insisting upon history as research, and not as mere narration or description, in a country like England which has a splendid tradition of narrative historiography [...]. Even here Collingwood is not revolutionary: he simply exaggerates, to the point of error, a movement of intense transformation in which the problematic nature of historical research is ever more recognized, without however the necessity of invalidating the great English quality of "knowing how to narrate." (Momigliano 1980, 764–65, italics mine)

In the eyes of Momigliano, Collingwood's work—if correctly read through the lens of the legacy of Croce—represents the clearest example of the difficulties which beset a philosophy of history that wishes to be accompanied and guided by careful historical research and historiography.

2. Philosophy of History and History of Progress in Robin George Collingwood

It is not easy to identify the central reference-point of the thought of Robin George Collingwood, especially if we consider the great variety of the disciplines in which he was interested (philosophy, history, aesthetics, archaeology, etc.) and of his theoretical perspectives (midway between the Oxonian traditions of Bradley and Moore and the continental perspectives represented by Croce and Gentile). Still, it does not seem rash to identify in the *philosophy of history* the element in which is primarily concentrated the originality of his theoretical position and in which the idealistic perspective helps to redefine a new concept of history. In the (posthumous) volume *The Idea of History,* Collingwood traces the various phases of Western

culture with respect to historical knowledge, from the classical Greeks to the early twentieth century, underlining their essential philosophic and scientific inadequacy. Even without analyzing in detail Collingwood's specific criticisms of the thinkers and traditions of the past, from Herodotus to Voltaire, from Tacitus to Herder, from Thucydides to Kant, it is possible to observe how the English thinker tends to construct a history of thought understood as a history of *progress* which accounts for conceptual changes (and value systems of an epoch) on an historical basis (Collingwood 1946, 228–35): in this sense, progress is not simple change, but concrete realization of values and of scientific knowledge on the historical plane (Collingwood 1946, 321–34). Collingwood's antipositivistic historical science vindicates the specificity of historical knowledge, as distinct from every form of natural science. Against the realistic English tradition and against every objectivist model of interpretation, Collingwood does not consider an historical event as a "datum," as a "fact," but as a "meaning" that can be obtained only through the logic of the *question-and-answer:* the subject becomes an *active* element in historical research precisely through his own historical conditioning—seeing that historical knowledge cannot be simple "reflection," i.e. knowledge in the abstract, but knowledge concretely situated in space and time. History is not a retelling of events or a chronicle of change, because the historian is not interested in events as such, but in events in so far as they are *expressions of thoughts* (Collingwood 1946, 217–18). The connection between the historian and the men of the past is not, therefore, constituted by memory or by temporality, but by a common participation in a single "mind" which exists in so far as it realizes itself in history:

> The historical process is a process in which man creates for himself this or that kind of human nature by recreating in his own thought the past to which he is heir […]. The historical process is itself a process of thought, and it exists only in so far as the minds which are parts of it know themselves for parts of it. By historical thinking, the mind whose self-knowledge is history not only discovers within itself those powers of which historical thought reveals the possession, but actually develops those powers from a latent to an actual state, brings them into effective existence […]. History does not presuppose mind; it is the life of mind itself, which is not mind except so far as it both lives in historical process and knows itself as so living […]. 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 is one. (Collingwood 1946, 226–27)

History is history of thought only in so far as it is history of the "historical mind" and self-knowledge of the mind (Collingwood 1946, 286–88, 302–15): in consequence, nature can-not enter into history unless in a *mediated* form. In this sense, the independence of history from nature is a source of human freedom—especially if history is, as with Croce, understood in an ethical-political sense and not as economic-social history. Historical research as critical thought is possible only where there exists "selection," i.e. autonomy from the historical "*datum*." Naturally this idealistic model of philosophy of history is explicitly contrary to the idea of uniform and recurring historical laws (present, for instance, in Comte, Marx, and Spengler) which originate in the confusion between "explaining" and "understanding" and give an erroneous judgment of the relations between science of nature and science of mind: this model, moreover, in defending a conception of the mind which knows itself through historical knowledge, offers itself as a fundamental alternative to every attempt at naturalistic, mathematical, and scientific reduction of historical knowledge (Collingwood 1946, 249–82). The humanistic and antipositivistic character of historical research is made still more evident by the fact that history is history of *human things* and of intentional *human actions* endowed with meaning; it is not classification of natural events: nature exists in history only in so far as it is recognized as such by the awareness of the historical actors. It is no accident that, for Collingwood, the understanding of an historical fact consists in ascending from "fact" to thought, i.e. from *external* to *internal*—by means of a conception of *cause* which must not be identified with that of "law" (whether natural or psychological), or of (empirical) induction, typical of the tradition of the natural sciences of the early twentieth century, but with that of "intent."

History is possible only where there exists imaginative inference, i.e. a mediation between the philological and the philosophical, between document and interpretation: although fact and document do not cease to be real data, they exist in a dimension external to that of the interpreter; they are included in the activity of historical thought not solely as documents relative to the past, but as "experiences" of thought relived in the present. The historian does not understand human action by means of generalizations and above all does not find facts ready-made for extraction and analysis, but reconstructs the internal aspect of human actions through an active process of thought which, by means of questions, assembles and evaluates the sources from which he may obtain answers, making use of his own "imagination a priori," which recomposes evidence and documents in an historically significant framework (Collingwood 1946, 231–49). True historical knowledge is not, then, merely

internal, nor merely external: history exists when an action of the past is rethought and relived (*reenacted*) with respect to the intentions of the actor as well as his motivations, beliefs, and reasonings. The history of thought, and therefore all history, is the reenactment of past thought in the historian's own mind:

> The historian, 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 be only 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 (where by a mere event I mean one which has only an outside and no inside) but actions, and an action is the unity of the outside and inside of an event […]. For history, the object to be discovered is not the mere event, but the thought expressed in it. To discover that thought is already to understand it […]. All history is the history of thought. But how does the historian discern the thoughts which he is trying to discover? There is only one way in which it can be done: by re-thinking them in his own mind. The historian of philosophy, reading Plato, is trying to know what Plato thought when he expressed himself in certain words. The only way in which he can do this is by thinking it for himself. This, in fact, is what we mean when we speak of "understanding" the words […]. The historian not only re-enacts past thought, he re-enacts it in the context of his own knowledge and therefore, in re-enacting it, criticizes it, forms his own judgement of its value, corrects whatever errors he can discern in it. This criticism of the thought whose history he traces is not something secondary to tracing the history of it. It is an indispensable condition of the historical knowledge itself. (Collingwood 1946, 213–15)

All thinking is critical thinking: the thought which reenacts past thought, therefore, criticizes them in reenacting them. Collingwood re-elaborates, then, idealism and historicism, proposing a model of philosophy of history centered on the superiority of the present: the historian can reproduce thought and meaning by means of the method of question-and-answer, which in turn can overcome the apparent contradiction between the autonomy of historical knowledge and the necessity of the document, between exteriority and interiority of the "fact" and of the document. Naturally, all this does not mean that the historian must limit himself to reproducing the emotional states of the men of the past or surrender to the charm of their

minds: precisely because the practice of history is active, it is also "criticism" and not simply a "copy" ("criticism" signifies here recreating the past with a view to purposes that may be entirely different from those of the past). Nevertheless, the imagination (at once historical and *a priori*) which founds its method on question-and-answer does not exempt the historian from the necessity of scientific rigor, just as, on the other side, the claim of objectivity cannot be an obstacle to the re-elaboration of historical problems in the present, i.e. to the transformation of interpretation into criticism. Given that the past exists as spiritual reality only in the mind of the historian who relives it, thought exists only in the historical process and this process is historical only in so far as it is known by thought: in Collingwood there is thus achieved not only the unity of history and historiography, but also that of history and philosophy, since the present from which the historian views the past is not the present of eternity, but the present of historical time. In this sense Collingwood's philosophy is an *historical philosophy* understood in a double and complementary sense: on the one hand, the understanding of philosophical problems proceeds from an historical point of view; on the other, the understanding of the nature of history proceeds from a philosophical point of view.

Naturally there exist difficulties in such an attempt to reconcile internal and external, imagination and document, subject and object, fact and thought, idealism and realism, historicism and metaphysics. Such difficulties are evident in numerous theoretical passages in *The Idea of History*: in Collingwood's conception of the relations between epistemology and psychology, in his idea of "imagination *a priori*" (which renders problematic the identity of logic and theory), in his conception of *reenactment* (i.e. of the identity between the acts of thought of the historical agent and the acts of thought relived by the historian) and in his metaphysical-speculative conception of thought understood as being at once subjective and objective, permanent and contingent, universal and particular. At this point becomes clear the idealistic heritage of Collingwood with respect to the atemporality and the impersonality of both the *objects* of thought and the *acts* of thought—an atemporality and impersonality which is at odds with his historicism and which makes it difficult to distinguish between psychology and logic. And it is these difficulties—especially as regards their consequences for philosophic historiography—upon which will be fixed the critical gaze of Leo Strauss.

3. Philosophy and History of Philosophy in Leo Strauss

Leo Strauss was all his life a careful reader of classical texts: from Spinoza to Maimonides, from Plato to Hobbes, from Xenophon to Machiavelli, his studies never failed to analyze the *form* in which these texts were written (Strauss 1952b). It does not seem entirely out of place to define his work as a personal history of political philosophy, even if one must remember that his historical researches do not dwell solely on typical themes of scholarly literature, but comprehend theoretical reflections relative to the main categories of political philosophy. Most of Strauss's scientific production is in fact permeated by a singular copresence of philosophical reflection, hermeneutical investigation and historical reconstruction, mixed with anti-positivistic and antihistoricistic criticism: in many cases, Strauss seems to philosophize by reconstructing minutely the structure of certain texts of the past, drawing lines of dialogue and genealogical trees among philosophers so as to provide for the construction of new historiographical paths; while, at the same time, his mode of writing history of philosophy is clearly founded upon a specific conception of philosophical activity (Altini 2001). Indeed, a problem of inadequacy of the bases of historical information transforms itself *immediately* into a problem of theoretical knowledge, and vice versa, the inadequacy of the form of theoretical knowledge available renders difficult, if not impossible, an adequate historical understanding. Philosophy and history of philosophy are certainly not the same thing; however, in an epoch of crisis the history of philosophy can perform certain goals and functions of philosophy: besides, the very idea of the history of philosophy presupposes that certain fundamental philosophical problems remain the same through the various epochs. The understanding of the relations between *philosophy* and *history of philosophy* in the thought of Strauss cannot be separated from a reflection upon his conception of *hermeneutics* (with particular reference to the reticence of philosophical writing), which leads to a radical distinction between history and historicism (Strauss 1959, chapters 1 and 2).

Among the texts in which Strauss confronts in greatest detail that modern confusion between history and philosophy which is at the origin of the various versions of contemporary historicism, one may point especially to his long discussion of Collingwood's *The Idea of History,* of which he analyzes various aspects, from the idea of progress to the Greek conception of history, from the relation between history and philosophy to the idea of the equality of epochs, from the role of the imagination in historical thought to the

relation between criticism and interpretation. In the volume of Collingwood there emerge clearly the affinities among the different formulations of *scientific history, epistemology of history and philosophy of history,* all closely tied to the idea that all thought is historically conditioned. The point of view of the historian is therefore without universal validity or objectivity: given that the philosophic thought of all epochs, being in essence an expression of the spirit of its own time, is equally true, every form of knowledge is relative only to the present, and above all every truth is valid only in its own historical period (Strauss 1952a, 561–66). Given that the main argument for historicism presupposes the existence of a plurality of planes of historical-cultural reference, all equally legitimate, every form of theoretical understanding presupposes a specific plane of historical reference within which it may be located. However, precisely because starting from the experience of history any teaching may be justified, the argument for historicism cannot ground itself on an historical experience, but rather on a philosophical analysis which demonstrates the essential and "natural" mutability of the categories of thought: the experience of history must be subjected to a careful critical analysis. But in Strauss's interpretation, it is precisely in the failure to provide such a demonstration that historicism manifests, in self-contradictory fashion, its own meta-historical and dogmatic character: in affirming the essential historicity of thought, historicism affirms its own historicity, and thus the provisional character of its own validity. In the very moment in which the historicist asserts the meta-historical *truth* of his own theses he admits, contradicting those very theses, that thought can grasp a universally valid truth: his manner of argument is founded therefore on a particular interpretation of philosophical knowledge that is certainly not justified, but merely masked, by the historical data on which this interpretation rests (Strauss 1953, chapter 1). Consequently, according to Strauss it proves necessary carefully to examine the characteristics of historical research implicit in the philosophical position of contemporary historicism, precisely because there exists a fatal distance between historical meaning and historicism (Altini 2000, chapters 2 and 6):

> The same belief which forced Collingwood to attempt to become a historian of thought, prevented him from becoming a historian of thought. He was forced to attempt to become a historian of thought because he believed that to know the human mind is to know its history, or that self-knowledge is historical understanding. But this belief contradicts the tacit premise of all earlier thought, that premise being the view that to know the human mind is something fundamentally different from knowing the history of the human

> mind. Collingwood therefore rejected the thought of the past as untrue in the decisive respect. Hence he could not take that thought seriously, for to take a thought seriously means to regard it as possible that the thought in question is true. He therefore lacked the incentive for re-enacting the thought of the past: he did not re-enact the thought of the past. (Strauss 1952a, 575)

In Strauss's eyes, Collingwood's philosophy of history is not only epistemology of history, but also and especially *metaphysics of history:* the apparent relativism present in the consideration of the historically conditioned character of all thought proves to be, on the contrary, a form of imperialistic dogmatism. The historical understanding that is possible in the present is in fact, for Collingwood's modern historian, superior both to the historical understanding possible in the past and to the way in which the thought of the past interpreted itself, given that the thought of the past can be known only by means of *reenactment,* i.e. through a form of *criticism* (Strauss 1952a, 560–61, 566–74). The thought of the past is then studied starting from an historicist presupposition (at once relativistic and dogmatic) which is utterly foreign to that very thought. In Strauss's interpretation, Collingwood's philosophy of history aims, through the organic unity of the "total" experience of the modern historian (Strauss 1952a, 564–66), at the accumulation of knowledge which tends to form a universal philosophic history in which the materials furnished by the past are understood and evaluated from the privileged point of view of the present. The result is the legitimizing of the idea of progress and the creation of a "perspectival" model of history, tied only to a specific tradition—its own, *here* and *now*—which, as a result of the lack of attention to what is different, is incapable of understanding in their specificity facts and ideas of the past. In this sense, the opposition between non-historical classical philosophy and modern historical philosophy renders visible the reversal of the relation between history and philosophy, characterized by the abandonment of the distinction between philosophical problems and historical problems: with the reformulation of the historical character of modern philosophy, philosophical problems have been transformed by Collingwood into "historical" problems relative to the future. For Strauss, on the other hand, to avoid remaining the prisoner of an historical subjectivity not justified from a philosophic viewpoint, it is necessary to abandon the attempt to understand the past in the light of the present. Collingwood holds that it is possible to understand an author better than he understood himself; such understanding, however, which goes so far as to claim to be the *true* understanding, is marked by a prejudice that is decidedly *anti-historical.* In Strauss's eyes, historical understanding means understanding the way in which an author of the past

interpreted himself. We cannot be seriously interested in the past if we consider the present, on principle, superior to the past: whatever may be our motive for approaching historical and historiographical problems, we must at least provisionally accept the coordinates with which the thinkers of the past worked and try to understand those coordinates in their original, authentic meaning before criticizing them. *Understanding* must precede *criticism* (Strauss 1952a, 581). The historian of philosophy must not substitute his own ideas for those of the authors he interprets, and must not claim to judge their ideas without having understood them: to write history of philosophy means, for Strauss, to try to recover lost forms of knowledge. There exists then the possibility of recovering spaces of objectivity in historical research, above all the possibility of understanding correctly the texts of the authors of the past, just as they intended them to be understood: if he does not wish arbitrarily to confound criticism with interpretation, the historian of thought must, at least to begin with, subordinate his own questions to those to which his sources tried to respond. Naturally, Strauss is aware of the fact that, in a certain sense, every *interpretation* is some sort of *criticism:* the very choice of a theme, of an author, of a text as important is an act of criticism that precedes interpretation. But this does not mean they are the same thing; interpretation and criticism are not only distinguishable but even separable. In this sense, interpretation necessarily precedes criticism:

> History as history, as quest for the understanding of the past, necessarily presupposes that our understanding of the past is incomplete. The criticism which is inseparable from interpretation is fundamentally different from the criticism which would coincide with the completed understanding. If we call "interpretation" that understanding or criticism which remains within the limits of Plato's own directives, and if we call "criticism" that understanding or criticism which disregards Plato's directives, we may say that interpretation necessarily precedes criticism because the quest for understanding necessarily precedes completed understanding and therewith the judgment which coincides with the completed understanding. (Strauss 1952a, 583–84)

The historian of philosophy cannot avoid an initial act of loyalty toward the object of study, because he must consider the real possibility of learning something of substantial philosophic importance from the study of the thinkers of the past, rather than from the study of the thinkers of the present. We can understand the philosophy of the past only if we are willing to learn something not only *about* the philosophers of the past, but *from* them: in some cases, the study of classical texts may be the only possible way to recover

an awareness of fundamental philosophical problems. This possibility becomes concrete reality in the present epoch, characterized for Strauss by the profound intellectual crisis of the West, whose solution requires a form of "emancipation" from modern philosophy. Besides, the very history of philosophy is a product of the modern world, a history which only after Hegel assumed philosophical significance. The historian of philosophy is responsible not only for the correctness and objectivity of his own research, but also and especially for bringing to light the long duration, or better the *permanence,* of philosophic problems, i.e. of the question of the *truth.* Historical understanding cannot help comparing itself with the philosophical question: the most important problem remains always the philosophic truth, so much so that the historian of philosophy must in some sense "convert" to philosophy (Altini 2000, chapter 3).

4. History, Historicism, and History of Historiography in Arnaldo Momigliano

In 1955, in Turin (Italy), there took place a discussion between Nicola Abbagnano and Arnaldo Momigliano on the theme of the language of the historian. On that occasion Momigliano, while indicating a *logical* similarity between ordinary language and historical language, also identified the difference between the two models of knowledge in question, i.e. between historical ("indirect") knowledge and empirical-perceptive ("direct") knowledge:

> The difference is in the difficulty for me in obtaining the information that establishes the fact […]. As the distance in time grows and the actors change, there grows the difficulty of explaining and there arises the problem of establishing what has happened […]. Generally speaking, historical research begins when either establishing the facts or explaining them requires a study of documents. In certain cases establishing a fact and explaining it take place together […]. But in the majority of cases the historian is in the position either of establishing facts without being able to explain them or explaining facts previously established. (Momigliano 1960a, 365–66)

Beyond the specific theoretical problem related to the mode of knowledge, there emerges here a question constitutive of the craft of the historian, the relation between "fact" and *document,* whose analysis requires a continual reassessment of historiographical techniques; most useful to this end has been the progressive interconnection among interdisciplinary perspectives in historical research (archeology, anthropology, etc.), perspectives which have

certainly helped liberate historical research from the "cult of words" (Momigliano 1984a). For Momigliano research in historical methodology is a discussion about the correct way of gathering and interpreting sources and documents through which we can establish, even if only inferentially, a relation with the past that is "mediated" by the *reconstruction of the processes* which have transmitted that same past and those same documents: since the historian does not invent "facts," if there are no documents (i.e. the only real "events" whose traces are visible to the historian), there is no history. The aim of the historian lies in recognizing how to locate the document (and therefore, in some measure, also the "fact") in its exact context of space and time. Single documents cannot be treated in an isolated fashion, for the historian cannot content himself with establishing the origin and aim of the documents, but must understand as well the sequence of events within which the documents are situated. The historian chooses his theme, his documents, his hypothesis and his method: in this sense, every historical research represents a choice of problems to resolve through asking questions of the sources, to the end of understanding what happened in a given moment to a given individual or a given group. The true difficulty of such research consists then in the relation between the definition of facts and their interpretation.

Momigliano criticizes numerous historiographical models which characterize the contemporary intellectual panorama; from the idea that history is simple rhetorical narration indifferent to the question of truth (Hayden White) to the idea that history, understood as *reenactment,* is "history of progress" (R. G. Collingwood). Moreover, underlining the problems implicit in an historical model which maintains a rigid separation between intellectual history and cultural history (Leo Strauss) or which is "anti-sociological" (Paul Veyne), Momigliano intends to draw our attention to the fact that the historian has before him not "facts" but documents. The true theme of the discussion about how to write history, *after* historicism, ought to be, then, the defining of a new relation between "facts" and documents: with the dissolution of the classical borders between history, philology and antiquarianism, every philological problem is analyzed in a context of historical events, just as every problem of historical documentation can be resolved only through the interpretation of texts, i.e. through philology:

> The historicization of philology and antiquarianism means merely that the philologist is now always conscious of standing before facts that are historically conditioned, just as the antiquarian and the historian are conscious of standing before documents that it is necessary to interpret. But historical conditions, interpretive

> methods remain to be determined in relation to the researchers' own experience and to the nature of the object under study [...]. The fading of philology and antiquarianism as sciences separate from history does not imply their absorption in history as traditionally understood, but the constitution of a new historical method, by far more complicated than that which our predecessors really had, for the interpretation of documents and their integration in an historical situation. (Momigliano 1960b, 477)

In Momigliano the distinction between historical research and historiographical research serves to clarify the historian's work, his ethical and civic ideals, his cultural and religious conditionings, his critical choices with respect to the past, made in light of the problems of the present. In the conviction that the history of historiography can help define and resolve historical problems, Momigliano undertakes a theoretical defense of the truth of historical research against every attempt at the reduction of history to ideology or rhetoric. In this sense, for every historical problem taken under examination, one must try to know also the history of that problem (i.e. the forms of its continuity or discontinuity, the tradition to which it refers, the innovation which it represents, etc.): the historical problem cannot be separated from the historiographical problem, for in every return to the past one finds reasons which lead to conclusions about the present through a reinterpretation of the past founded on documents (Momigliano 1984b). The history of historiography is then an essential part of historical research, seeing that it forces the historian to keep always in mind the historicity of his *own* problems and instruments. The history of historiography helps the historian to avoid committing a fundamental error, that of confronting directly a reconstructed past without retracing the history of the way in which that same past has been transmitted and reconstructed:

> The inevitable corollary of historicism is history of historiography, as a way of expressing the consciousness that historical problems have themselves a history. This has however produced books whose sole aim is to demonstrate that every historian and every historical problem is historically conditioned—with the added banality that even a verdict of this type on the part of the historian of historiography is historically conditioned. Such an expression of relativism, in my judgment, is indefensible. The history of historiography, like every other historical research, has the aim of discriminating between true and false. As a type of intellectual history which claims to examine the results obtained by an historian, it must distinguish between solutions of historical problems which do not convince and solutions (= hypotheses; models; ideal types) which deserve to be reformulated and developed. (Momigliano 1984b, 464)

In the manner of Croce, Momigliano accepts the requirement of finding in the present the origin of his own historical examination: the historian reconstructs the "facts" of the past (and in particular the connection between texts and contexts) while examining them in relation to the problems of the present, without however assuming that the two contexts are directly comparable. But in contrast to Croce, he underlines the importance of the encounter between historiography and history of historiography, reassessing the role of the antiquarian method (understood above all as a tool for an anti-relativistic reconsideration of historical research in the epoch of historicism) and stressing a heavy reliance upon the document for the construction of historical research: history, as *history of change,* is practical, not logical knowledge, which develops through "empirical selections" of the available materials. The historian, naturally, must distinguish between the verification of the facts in light of the evidence (distinguishing between direct and indirect sources) and their interpretation. His work will be judged not so much on the basis of his cultural presuppositions, as on the basis of his specific expertise in the utilization of documents for the investigation of the individuality and the truth of the "fact." Precisely because the historian is not an ideologue, historical research, understood as investigation of the truth of the facts of the past, requires the combination of logical categories and ethical categories (Momigliano 1985, 57–59, 73–74). The perspective of Momigliano thus distances itself as much from historicism (which implies a danger of relativism) as from positivism (according to which there exists an objectivity of history which "writes itself"):

> What we call "historicism" is a situation which emerges from this process of selection, explanation and evaluation. More precisely, historicism is the recognition that each of us sees past events from a point of view determined or at least conditioned by our individual, changeable location within history […]. Its roots lie in that extension of historical interpretation to all aspects of human life (and truly to the universe itself) which is characteristic of the nineteenth century. Historicism is not a comfortable doctrine, because it implies a danger of relativism. It tends to undermine the historian's trust in himself […]. The problem is how to situate ourselves in relation to this task of discovering facts and of making them form part of a scheme with a view to understanding and evaluating them, if we ourselves are part of the historical process that we are trying to understand. If writing history implies that we choose the facts that interest us by following certain criteria—or that we try to discover new facts by following certain interests—these criteria and these interests imply already a choice of universals or of generalizations,

> following which we wish to classify and understand the facts. We cannot understand and evaluate the facts without placing them in relation to categories and general values, but we would not be able to begin to choose (or to discover) the facts without having in mind some value or some general category to which we wish to refer the facts […]. The facts make sense only when they become part of a situation or of a process, but the choice of facts depends on the situation which from the beginning we represent to ourselves (call it hypothesis, or model, or ideal type). Moreover, to give importance to certain facts in light of a certain situation or process is equivalent to attributing a value to these facts. History is always a choice of facts which form part of a static or dynamic situation which appears worthy of being studied. (Momigliano 1984b, 456–58)

Momigliano directs his critical gaze upon all contemporary historians who found new models and new historical interpretations in the absence of documentation, and upon the basis of insufficient knowledge and ambiguous materials: in this way historical research loses the necessary criterion (at once ethical and theoretical) for distinguishing between the certain, the probable, the possible and the incredible. The duty of the historian is not that of discovering the (scientific) "cause," but is that of finding a "measure" between document and hypothesis, so as to avoid apriorisms, apologisms and judgments not founded upon the processes of change within historical "situations." And all this so as not to obscure the borders of historical research, which moves between the two poles of the verification of the facts and the interpretation of the facts that have been verified, while always having to remember the distinction between true and false: "Non basta far delle domande intelligenti per essere uno storico intelligente: occorre scoprire documenti, dare risposte" ("It is not sufficient to pose intelligent questions to be an intelligent historian: it is necessary to discover documents, to answer questions"—Momigliano 1960c, 350). The historian must arrive at "certain" knowledge about the past, not false figments of the present, because he is the witness not of the present or of the future, but of the truth. In this sense, it is very imprudent of an historian to go in search of "similarities" between the past and the present, or to pose questions, for example, about the Greek gods such as the Greeks themselves would not have understood. But how then can we evaluate the impact of certain questions upon the Greek world if not even the classical historians were conscious of these questions? And how can we produce satisfying descriptive and explanatory models if the classical historians are no longer the acknowledged guides for knowing the tendencies and characteristics of Greek society? Against Strauss, Momigliano admits to writing a

history different from that of Thucydides and to drawing inspiration from current problems, not from the ancient sources. But against Collingwood, Momigliano asserts that it is in any case crucial for the historian to try to reconstruct and understand the "facts" that have occurred in the past and not in the mind of the historian (and still less must he understand those facts in the light of an improbable directionality of history, whether tied to its beginning or its end): in this sense the difficulty of research consists not only in interpreting that which we have available, but in interpreting that which, more or less evidently, is lacking and that part of the past which is different from the present. The historian may bring to his research his personal choices, his subjective experiences, and his political, religious and cultural convictions, but he may not abuse sources and documents, issuing ideological judgments or anchoring himself to a tradition. Every document must be treated on its own terms, without forcing upon it comparisons, inferences, and deductions, because the histories of the historians must be true. History is a useful, but not sufficient, condition for action: in this sense history is, and must remain, knowledge of the past—and not a facile substitute for religion or politics—just as the historian is, and must remain, a researcher, not an advocate, ideologue, or prophet. From this point of view there is evident a strong concern regarding the relation between document and "fact," i.e. regarding the value of the truth inherent in the interminable process of historical research, verifiable through a severe examination of the data. The historian does not have "facts" before him but documents which, though they are the *sine qua non* of historical work, are not "facts." The historian is not only an interpreter of sources, but also and especially an interpreter of those past realities about which the sources furnish us with information, devoting continual *ethical* attention to distinguishing—without "absolutism," but at the same time refusing every form of "minimalism"—the true from the false:

> All the work of the historian is on sources [...]. And yet the historian is not an interpreter of sources, though he interprets them. He is an interpreter of that reality of which the sources are the approximate signs or the fragments. The historian finds in the letter the man who wrote it, in the decree the legislative body which issued it in precise circumstances; he finds in the house him who inhabited it, in the tomb the faith of the group to which the deceased belonged. The historian interprets documents as signs of men who have vanished. He finds the meaning of the text and of the object which he has in front of him because he understands it as if it still belonged to that past situation to which it in fact belonged. The historian transfers what survives into the world that does not

> survive. It is this capacity to interpret the document as if it were not a document, but a real episode of a past life, which finally makes the historian […]. The historian understands men and institutions, ideas, faiths, emotions, needs of individuals who no longer exist. He understands all this because the documents which he has in front of him, duly interpreted, present themselves as real situations. The historian understands the dead as he understands the living. (Momigliano 1984a, 484–85)

Translation by David Levy

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