

# Interpretation

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- 3 Terence Kleven A Study of Part I, Chapters 1–7 of Maimonides’  
*The Guide of the Perplexed*
- 17 Larry Peterman Dante and Machiavelli: A Last Word
- 37 Robert K. Faulkner The Empire of Progress: Bacon’s Improvement  
Upon Machiavelli
- Review Essay*
- 63 James W. Muller Collingwood’s Embattled Liberalism
- Book Review*
- 81 Nino Langiulli *Individuals and Their Rights*, by Tibor Machan

# Interpretation

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## Review Essay

# Collingwood's Embattled Liberalism

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R. G. Collingwood, *Essays in Political Philosophy*. Edited by David Boucher (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990, ix + 237 pp., \$55.00).

Almost half a century after the death of R. G. Collingwood, Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy at Oxford, a new volume of his writings on politics has appeared. Edited by David Boucher, author of a recent study of Collingwood's political thought,<sup>1</sup> *Essays in Political Philosophy* makes available eighteen selections from his published and unpublished writings. Eight extracts are reprinted from books or journal articles, while ten appear in print here for the first time; of these, seven are drawn from lecture notes and three from other manuscripts among the Collingwood papers in the Bodleian Library. To these are appended a 1918 reader's report on Collingwood's unpublished manuscript "Truth and Contradiction," which he destroyed after the appearance of his *Autobiography* in the late 1930s, and parts of three letters on current politics penned by Collingwood to his student T. M. Knox between 1937 and 1940. The earliest selection was written during the First World War and the latest during the Second: the essays here collected thus span the whole of Collingwood's life as a mature writer. Despite the curious stipulation required by Collingwood's daughter "that no item should be reproduced in its entirety" (3 n. 10; cf. viii), Professor Boucher has managed to fashion a readable and intriguing book, which not only offers material never before published but also complements and illuminates Collingwood's other political writings.

After the editor's introduction, Collingwood's essays are organized into two parts. The first, "Political Activity and the Forms of Practical Reason," begins with an essay, originally published as a journal article, that undertakes a philosophical investigation of economic action. Despite the cleverness and success of "the science of economics," Collingwood finds it laboring under disciplinary blinders. Economics has attained great "prestige" by formulating "empirical laws" by induction from the study of economic facts; yet economists presuppose some "fundamental conceptions, such as value, wealth, and the like," which they rarely define or ponder (58). Collingwood finds the clue to understanding these conceptions in the idea of economic action, which discerns a

human intention behind economic facts rather than simply describing them, as an empirical psychologist might. His “thesis” is “that there is a special type of action, which we ordinarily distinguish by such epithets as expedient, useful, profitable, and the like,” and “that this utilitarian or economic type of action is the fundamental fact with which all economic science is concerned” (59). Collingwood distinguishes economic action from action done on impulse—a child who “runs shouting round the garden” or “an angry man kicking a chair” (61, 62)—in that economic action involves calculation. Unlike impulsive action, which follows desire “without more ado” (61), economic action has an end that is “immediately desired” and a means that “is only mediately desired, as the necessary presupposition of the end” (63). Collingwood is unpersuaded by “the hedonist” who sees no difference between economic action and impulsive action, since everyone does just as he likes: for there is a difference between simply doing what you like and doing what you dislike for the sake of something else that you like (61, 63). Economic action always involves an element of prudence that is missing in impulsive action.

A like distinction must be made, according to Collingwood, between economic and moral action. Borrowing in effect Kant’s distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives, he argues that we act morally when we set aside expediency and do something simply because it is right. Of course one may do the right thing for prudential reasons—obeying a rule for fear of being caught, or treating others decently for reputation’s sake—but those actions have an economic rather than a moral motive. Only when considerations of utility are “subordinated to duty” is an action moral. Again, Collingwood is unpersuaded by “the utilitarian” who would explain moral action on the grounds of expediency, since every prudent man chooses means in relation to an end he has chosen: for there is a difference between the duality of ends and means in economic action and their unity in moral action (61). Here the end and the means, though distinguishable as in economic action, are “merged in a fresh unity”: we aim “to be good; and the only means to being good is—being good” (63). Thus Collingwood, though not without a doubt as to whether this taxonomy is exhaustive (62), distinguishes actions into the three categories of impulsive, economic, and moral.

Economic action is marked by a combination of pain and pleasure, or aversion and desire. In the economic action called exchange, for instance, one gives up one good in return for a good that one wants even more. Since it is the individual preference for those oranges over these apples that causes a man to give up his apples for oranges, Collingwood understands this transaction not as the exchange of one man’s apples for another man’s oranges, but as one man’s exchange of apples for oranges and another man’s exchange of oranges for apples. Each man finds the other useful in making the exchange, but each gets the better of the exchange—not of the other—because of his own subjective preference for what he receives over what he gives up. A man has to exchange

one good for another through the medium of the market. Preferences change from hour to hour, so market values alter. If he sets too high a price on the good he wants to exchange for another good, then his preference is ineffectual and he fails to find a market; if he sets too low a price on it, then he finds a market but buys dear. Collingwood allows that some economic exchanges are seen to have been imprudent: the price that a vendor "ought to have asked is the highest price that the public will pay" (67). But his insistence that value is subjective forces him to deny that there is any "right price" and prevents him from calling any willing exchange unfair (66). Even the man who buys dear—who finds no choice but to sell his labor, perhaps, for a pittance—cannot be said to strike a bad bargain, since he only chooses to exchange one condition for another that seems better to him. Such a purchase may "offend our moral consciousness," but then we really claim "that *this* case morally demands not an act of exchange, but an act of gift," which would remove the situation from an economic to a moral plane (65). While Collingwood admits that there are some kinds of exchanges which simply ought not to be made (for instance, prostitution), his argument leads him to claim that "there cannot conceivably be any economic argument against gambling," since the gambler prefers his wager to standing pat, "and there is an end of it" from the economic point of view (69 n. 4). Yet one must wonder whether there is not some truth in the almost universal judgment of empirical economists that gambling is imprudent—or whether Collingwood's admission of prudential calculation in economic action is finally consistent with his insistence on valuing that remains, in his terms, impulsive.

In the second selection, taken from his lecture notes, Collingwood begins by asking which things are good; his answer, from arguments in a previous lecture, is "that the goodness of a thing is the fact of it being chosen" (78). Here we suffer from the omission of those arguments; but, presupposing thus that goodness is no more than a human choice, he bids us consider why we choose what we choose. Sometimes we have no conscious reason for choice; this kind of choosing Collingwood calls caprice, or goatishness.<sup>2</sup> Cambridge Realists like G. E. Moore, whose "doctrine is that there is never any reason why anybody chooses anything" (79), suppose that all choice is capricious. But Collingwood holds that rational choice entails the consciousness of alternatives and of reasons for preferring one to another. When we can explain why we chose as we did, he calls our choice rational, though he dismisses as "unreal" (i.e., tautological) the explanation that we chose something because it was good, or pleasant, since he understands goodness as nothing but what we choose, and pleasure as "a constituent of activity, a presupposition of choice" (84–85). Real explanations, he argues here, may be reduced to three: utility, right, and duty. We have already encountered the pursuit of the "useful"—or as it may be called the "expedient," the "profitable," or the "prudent" (86)—in our consideration of economics; here Collingwood elaborates on this type of action,

which involves ends and means. Action which aims at an end is consciously understood to be divided into “two distinct phases,” which in fact belong to all action: a “preparatory or preliminary phase” and a “completing or crowning phase” (88). In the time sequence of action, immediate acts, or means, come first; but in the logical sequence of a man’s desiring, the mediate act, or end, comes first. Here Collingwood’s argument resembles that of Hobbes in the first part of the *Leviathan*.

The reader will have noticed that the taxonomy of actions of the first essay, which distinguishes among impulsive, economic, and moral actions, does not correspond with the taxonomy of the second, which distinguishes among capricious, utilitarian, right, and dutiful actions. Not that Collingwood means to distinguish between impulse and caprice, or between economics and utility as motives; but his distinction between right and duty, asserted but not explained in the second essay (86; cf. 86 n. 5), modifies the taxonomy of the first. That this revision reflects a refinement in Collingwood’s thought is the main theme of Boucher’s introduction. He offers as a “particular” justification for a new collection of writings the fact that Collingwood’s previously unpublished essays “illuminate far more clearly than the cursory discussion in *An Autobiography*, or in the short expositions in *The New Leviathan*, the distinctions he wished to make between utility, right, and duty” (4–5). Indeed, this tripartite division of goods and of the motives for rational action suggests the plan of the first part of *Essays in Political Philosophy*, which the editor chose to mirror Collingwood’s own order of argument. The first two essays distinguish utility from caprice; the remaining essays of the first part explain how right and duty differ from the first two motives and from each other, beginning with five essays on politics.

In the first of these essays Collingwood looks past the substance of the state, which he finds ordinarily the focus of political theory, to study politics “from a different angle” (92). He finds politics not only in states but also in churches, trade unions, and municipalities, and in the relations of these associations with states. Since sovereignty belongs to all political action, it inheres in all of these associations, not only in states (106–7). A focus on states leaves the observer perplexed when practical problems arise whose solutions depart from the confines of state sovereignty—for instance, the League of Nations. Instead, Collingwood considers political action, arguing that it differs from moral action and economic action, just as they differ from each other. While moral action is performed out of duty and economic action aims at wealth, political action (such as a society undertakes, for instance, in making a law) is performed “for some other reason—a political reason” (95; cf. 117). Political goodness consists in “a life lived under good laws,” which Collingwood describes as principles “really worked out in thought so as to apply to a particular region of practice, really laid down as binding within that region, and really obeyed or observed” (96). He finds political action epitomized in the “singular” English practice of queuing for tickets, which he has not seen “in any other country”

but which exemplifies the choice of “a political value: orderliness, regularity, submission to a rule which applies equally to all persons.” Again, if you came upon one man who was threatening to shoot another and you decided to interfere, though both of them were strangers, out of “the feeling that one can’t have this sort of thing going on . . . shooting people like that,” then your motive would be political (97–98). According to Collingwood, you do not really answer the question *why* you can’t have this sort of thing, for if you did your action would have a utilitarian motive instead. The political motive involves a simple resolve that “I won’t have it”—Collingwood’s acknowledgment of the political importance of what the Greeks called *thymos*. Observers who confuse economic and political action will miss the difference, for instance, between a price and a fine (99).

Contrary to Thrasymachus’ claim in the first book of Plato’s *Republic*, rulers do not rule for their own benefit; or, when they do, they are not acting as rulers (100 n. 1). To make a rule is to regulate one’s own conduct along with that of others (101). While savages follow inscrutable rules, civilized men follow rules they have made themselves. Collingwood admits that even civilized rules may develop unintentionally, citing as examples both the rules within a family and “the law and custom of the British Constitution” (103 n. 2). Yet he discerns a distinctive intention behind political action, or regulation, as such: just as the getting of wealth in economic action is for the sake of prosperity, the promulgation and observance of rules in political action is for the sake of “its own end, peace” (108). But if political action has after all its own end, to which it contributes by well-chosen means, may it not be likened to economic action in its concern for means and ends—in a word, for utility? In any case, here is an unambiguous echo of Hobbes, who in the first part of the *Leviathan* makes peace the most important end of political life. Collingwood’s claim that “political action is essentially regulation” (100) follows Hobbes in diminishing the importance of the political regime and the controversy over justice that it presupposes. By denying any standard of good beyond human choice, both writers drain disputable content out of the political good and reduce it to the mere regularian form of law.

In a second essay on politics, Collingwood argues that in political action we make and follow a plan. Some would claim that following a plan makes us unfree, but they are mistaken: “we are always free to break the rule,” but “the power to follow out a plan is a real power, something involving more rationality and therefore more freedom than the simple power to do what we like at any given moment” (111–12). Such a plan may be as modest as the suppression of “seditious or obscene publications,” which falls within the proper province of the state in Collingwood’s view (113), or as grand “as the establishment of the Principate by Augustus” (112). Collingwood’s third essay on politics begins by denying that it recognizes any “form of goodness except conformity to rule” (118): to do one’s moral duty cannot be part of a political intention.

The state makes room for private conscience only as part of its provision “for the security of person and property” (119). The citizen’s part is to comport himself according to the laws of the land. Lawbreakers contradict themselves, according to the argument that Collingwood silently borrows from Kant, by relying on the very laws they break: a forger depends on a banking system that presupposes honesty even as he tells himself that dishonesty is justified by his desperate need (121–22).

This brief treatment of crime anticipates the last two essays on politics in this part, which take up the question of punishment. Collingwood begins by opposing punishment to forgiveness. Though both are attributed to God and enjoined upon man by the Bible, they seem contradictory: if punishment is a duty, then forgiveness seems like “sentimental weakness” (125); but if forgiveness is a duty, then punishment seems no better than revenge. Collingwood argues that both claims rest on “the moral consciousness.” Punishment should not be understood simply as the “state organization of revenge,” since revenge is a second crime but punishment is a moral duty. (In this early essay, first published in 1916, Collingwood does not yet distinguish between right and duty.) Nor should punishment be understood as deterrence, “as a means of self-preservation on the part of society” (126). Such a view, compounding “cruelty and selfishness,” allows us to maltreat a criminal in order to deter others, like “a marauder nailed *in terrorem* to the barn-door” (127). The only just punishment is retribution—“giving a man the punishment he deserves” (128). There is actually no contradiction between punishment and forgiveness: the pain we inflict by punishment aims at no more than evoking the criminal’s “self-condemnation or moral repentance,” which in turn makes it possible for us to forgive him. Indeed, the best punishments entail no incidental pains: a word of admonishment, without any encouragement from the stick, “goes straight home” to a properly brought-up child. Collingwood admits, however, that “extremely coarsened and brutalized” criminals will have to be punished by less “perfect” means (131).

The second essay on punishment, from a lecture written in 1929, asks whether its purpose is deterrence, retribution, or reformation. Since “it is immoral to inflict suffering” on someone simply “for the sake of frightening other people,” deterrence cannot be justified unless it is simply the effect of punishment as retribution. Likewise, since forcing a man to amend his ways is immoral “unless his habits are such that he deserves to be hurt,” reformation can only be justified on the same ground (133). The wish to achieve deterrence or reformation leads easily to excessive punishments, which may be avoided only by reining the punishment back into line with just retribution. Collingwood acknowledges that punishment as retribution must be carefully purged of anger, since an angry man is unfit to decide what a criminal deserves (134). Here he draws a distinction, however, between the political action of determining a proper punishment and the moral action of assessing moral guilt. The court

simply tries to determine whether a man “has broken the law, and if so, what law” (135). Hence some “moral delinquencies”—amongst which Collingwood lists greed, laziness, ill temper, drunkenness, and adultery—are not criminal offenses; but “they are punished elsewhere than in the courts” (136). In its political life a society aims not at moral purity but at conformity to rules, some (like the length of women’s skirts) enforced by fashion and others by the courts. The good man will be concerned about the moral guilt of the prisoner in the dock; the good judge, as such, will ask only whether the prisoner has broken the law (138).

After the five essays on politics, the first part of the book concludes with two essays on ethics. The first of these, “Monks and Morals,” taken from Collingwood’s account of a yacht trip to the Greek islands in 1939, is the most charming of the essays. Together with some of his students from Oxford, he had visited the monastery of the Monks of the Prophet Elijah on Santorini (144 n. 1). What they found among the monks was music, grace, devotion, dignity, and hospitality; all of these elements were so foreign to their utilitarian way of thinking that they could find them appealing only by what “seemed a kind of treason to their upbringing.” His students could not but admire the beauty of the monks’ way of life, but they were ashamed of their admiration:

They had been taught that monks were at worst idle, self-indulgent, and corrupt; at best selfishly wrapped up in a wrong-headed endeavour to save their own souls by forsaking the world and cultivating a fugitive and cloistered virtue. They had, I suspect, been taught that the best was worse than the worst; for whereas a vicious monk was a sinner to be saved, and from another point of view a man doing his best, like most men, to have a good time, a virtuous monk was a man irremediably sunk in the deadliest of moral errors: a man who had renounced the primary duty of helping his fellow men, and had thus corrupted the best thing in human nature, the moral principle itself, into the worst, a purely individual and self-centred quest of salvation. (144)

The students, no crude materialists, were willing to grant the social utility of music. But the monks were removed from society. What good was beautiful music without an audience to hear it? Still, after living closely with the monks for a few days, the students had found no “moral faults” in them (145).

After the visit to Santorini, and especially during the night watch on the yacht, Collingwood conversed with his students about their contrary impressions. Perhaps they already prized pursuits as useless as the Santorin music. For instance, they agreed that pure mathematics was worth while, despite its lack of social utility; for even if the pure mathematician published, the only result was to increase the number of pure mathematicians. If others found pure mathematics worth while and were proud to have its practitioners in their midst, then they felt that their life was of some benefit to themselves. The Greeks around the monastery clearly held that view about the monks and their way of life. But what if their admiration was simply superstition? Yet the view

that “utility is the only goodness” contradicts itself (147). In the world of the utilitarian, reasoning about means proliferates while reasoning about ends recedes. But the ends must be good for their own sake and cannot themselves be sought merely as means to something else: for if ends disappear altogether, then means are no longer useful for anything intrinsically choiceworthy. Collingwood likens “the moral bankruptcy” of this unbending utilitarianism to inflation in economics, where people find themselves rich in banknotes but poor in real goods: if “everything one does is done in the hopes of purchasing by its means a satisfaction which never comes,” then “life is not worth living” (148). So if we trust our impression “that the Santorin way of life is a good way,” including their honored monks, then we may find ourselves obliged to defend the monks against our Protestant, secular, utilitarian world, even at the risk of Collingwood’s being accused at Oxford “of corrupting its young men” during their nocturnal dialogue. But, after all, he asks, “What is the use of travel if it doesn’t broaden your mind? And how can it do that except by showing you the goodness of ways of life which, according to the prejudices you have learned at home, ought to be bad?” (149).

In the final essay of the first part, “Duty,” Collingwood lays out his peculiar understanding of the third of the motives for rational action. Any sort of rational action obliges one to give up “the particular kind of freedom which belongs to capricious action,” for “obligation in general is merely the denial of caprice” (150). To act usefully one is obliged to do something that contributes to one’s end; to act rightly one is obliged to obey a rule. Yet both utility and rightness still allow a “relic of caprice” (151): one can choose which means to use or how to act within the law. Moreover, utilitarianism offers no explanation of why one chooses a given end, nor does regularianism explain why one recognizes a given rule. Only when one acts out of duty, according to Collingwood, does the element of caprice still present in other kinds of rational action disappear altogether. Hence “duty is completely rational” (152), which means that “a person who does his duty has no option; he has got to do exactly what he does; he has no choice” (151). Collingwood understands duty as an obligation that allows no discretion—one which springs from “the situation in which, as a practical agent, I find myself or place myself” (153). Both situation and action appear to the agent in their “unbroken or unanalysed individuality” (154).<sup>3</sup> But it is not immediately clear why duty has to point inexorably to a single action; and it might appear to the reader, as it must have appeared to his students when Collingwood presented this argument as a lecture, that this understanding of duty is tautological: “I do this because I have got to do it” (153).

Collingwood seeks to escape from these difficulties by connecting dutiful action to a theme that might surprise us but for the fact that *The Idea of History* is his most famous book. “There is a thing called history,” he writes here, and “every situation which the historian studies is an individual situation” (155). Briefly he summarizes the argument of *The Idea of History* that each historical

event is individual and can only happen once; that the men who made history acted as they did because of their situation; and that the historian's view is determined by his own historical situation. He concludes that "the consciousness of duty is thus identical with the historical consciousness" (157). Though historical study is still confined by historians who fail to rise above utilitarian or regularian analysis, the idea of duty allows us to understand the individual actions of men in history as rational. "Granted," for instance,

that Gladstone was the man he was, conscious of himself as standing in the situation in which he was aware of himself as standing, the historian is able to ask how he came, towards the end of his life, to pursue Irish Home Rule as an end, and to pursue it, though unsuccessfully, through the means of parliamentary action. And these questions are historically answerable. (158)

Instead of imagining the events of history as accidents, the historian can understand their necessity. Instead of supposing that the French revolutionary capriciously chose to recognize a certain rule, and to obey it in a certain way, "the historian may hope to show that he recognized that rule because he had to recognize that rule and obeyed it in that unique way because he had to obey it in that unique way"(158).

Collingwood's understanding of duty, the crowning element of his political philosophy, thus depends on his philosophy of history. That philosophy, which owes much to Hegel, bids us believe that the choices men make in history are not really contingent upon their own willing, and thus that Gladstone had to pursue Irish Home Rule, Augustus had to found the Principate, and the French revolutionaries had to wield the guillotine. All of these actions appear to Collingwood to have been imposed by duty on the men who took them, if only the historian could understand how. Yet his view runs counter to common sense in denying that the men who took these actions might have chosen otherwise. By attributing to duty many historical actions that seem anything but dutiful, it seems to excuse or justify actions that are usually considered morally culpable; and it belies our ordinary understanding that duty has a moral or religious basis rather than an historical one. Aside from these moral drawbacks, Collingwood's view of history leads to the unwelcome conclusion that the historian's duty is to understand the men he studies not as they understood themselves but in a unique way imposed upon him by what has happened since. Despite Collingwood's insistence on deprecating the freedom we give up by forsaking "the residue of caprice" in other kinds of action in order to do our duty, he leaves our most rational actions entirely subject to the accident of the historical moment in which we act. One can hardly help wondering whether this understanding of duty, which confines even philosophy to the well-worn paths of our own era, does not underestimate man's ability to act and think freely.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly Collingwood thought himself bound by duty not to conform to the political fashion of his day. The apocalyptic theme of the closing paragraphs of

*An Autobiography*, which might almost be called a jeremiad against what he considered the increasing acceptance of fascism in the Britain of the late 1930s, finds a more sober echo in several of Collingwood's letters to T. M. Knox in the second appendix of *Essays in Political Philosophy* (232–34).<sup>5</sup> The essays in the second part of the book, which the editor calls "Civilization and its Enemies," show how Collingwood thought about the public questions facing his country and the rest of the civilized world. He begins the first of these essays, "The Present Need of a Philosophy," by arguing that philosophy can contribute to public debate on intractable social problems not by dictating the correct solution but by providing a conviction "that all scientific problems are in principle soluble"—failing which, he avers, there is a great temptation simply to conclude "that the special problems of the modern world are inherently insoluble" (168). What allows philosophy to provide this conviction is a growing assurance that all human things are made by men, so that "there can be no evils in any human institution which human will cannot cure" and no permanent obstacles to human progress (169). This assurance is based on a view of man "conceived neither as lifted clean out of nature nor yet as the plaything of natural forces, but as sharing, and sharing to an eminent degree, in the creative power which constitutes the inward essence of all things" (170).

In his second brief essay of this part, "The Rules of Life," originally written as a lecture in 1933, Collingwood announces a practical rather than an academic purpose in his pedagogy: "I have not been trying merely to supply you with materials for writing a successful paper on Moral Philosophy in the Schools." Instead, he seeks to make his own experience useful to students in deciding how they should act. He describes their world as one "whose chief singularity is that nothing in it can be trusted to stand firm." While their parents were brought up in a framework of institutions that seemed certain to last, "this framework has collapsed" (171).<sup>6</sup> The older generation can never "entirely adjust themselves" to the change but can only "grope uneasily in the unaccustomed darkness." Collingwood describes two unsuccessful tacks they took: first they embarked on a bootless attempt "to rebuild what had in fact been finally destroyed"; then, despairing of success, "they rushed to the other extreme and plundered the ruins in which they lived, and called this having a good time." It is up to his students to make themselves "at home in that darkness" and to learn to find their way there. Amid the ruins of the old system have been born new movements, both religious and political (amongst which Collingwood includes communism and fascism), all of them sharing "a spirit of serious constructive work." Gently he deprecates the growing popular clamor for a leader, suggesting that a worthy follower would have to have a defensible way of life before he professed allegiance to any leader (172). Collingwood lays down three rules that his students might follow: (1) "know yourself," which is the only way to find the independence that a man needs to be happy; (2) "respect yourself," which means not to give in to a reductionism that belit-

ties human nature and denies a proportion between the body and the soul; and (3) "orientate yourself," which allows a man to rise above fear and anger and to treat love as more than an animal appetite. He concludes by appealing to his students' desire to leave "a new world" to their children (173–74).

In his 1927 preface to Ruggiero's *History of European Liberalism*, reproduced here as the third essay of the second part, Collingwood defines liberalism as the principle that assists "the individual to discipline himself and achieve his own moral progress" (175), discerning in it a happy mean between overbearing authoritarianism and ignorant democracy. Combining a democratic "respect for human liberty" with an authoritarian insistence on "the necessity for skilful and practised government," liberalism is now under attack from "powerful and dangerous enemies" (176). That attack upon liberalism is the theme of the following essay, "Modern Politics," which is taken from an undated manuscript entitled "Man Goes Mad." Therein Collingwood describes "the essence" of liberalism as "the idea of a community as governing itself by fostering the free expression of all political opinions that take shape within it, and finding some means of reducing this multiplicity of opinions to a unity." Parties, territorial constituencies, majority votes, and parliamentarism are simply means, and not indispensable means at that, for assuring that opinion is freely expressed on political questions (177). This free expression of opinions is to be not just tolerated but actually fostered, since it improves the nation's politics and provides a political education to citizens. For "the last three centuries" this idea of political life has been developing, with "France, England, and the United States" the most important contributors. Collingwood judges it "certainly one of the greatest achievements" of our civilization, even though it is hardly finished (178). Liberalism is not well suited to every political situation: it would not be chosen by a nation in acute danger from war or violent crime, which has an urgent need for less talk and more force.

Liberal government is attacked from the right, which rues its inefficiency and calls for resolute action by powerful experts—as if a state of emergency were the permanent and proper condition of good government. Collingwood fears that even in England, "the home of the parliamentary system," the power of parliament is giving way to government by the cabinet and the permanent civil service. But the principles of liberal government "are the most precious possession that man has ever acquired in the field of politics"; and free government is possible only when government "can appeal, over the heads of criminals, to a body of public opinion sufficiently educated in politics to understand the wisdom of their acts" (180). To take away the right of public debate is so to brutalize the populace as to leave them unable to do more than "to throw up one gangster government after another" (181). Liberal government is also attacked from the left, which claims that liberalism is only an attractive cloak beneath which capitalists plunder the wage-earners. Within the capitalist system, according to their argument, free debate occurs only among the exploiters;

the exploited class can find redress only by waging war upon their oppressors and establishing the temporary dictatorship of the proletariat. Collingwood is friendlier to this attack from the left, since it aims to vindicate liberal principles;<sup>7</sup> but he rues the “anti-liberal” method of the socialists (182), who have borrowed from “Kant’s essay on *Universal History*” the idea of a revolution that ushers in a “happy millenium,” and from Hegel a glorification of class warfare (183–84). Collingwood teases the socialists by arguing that the political ideas they have borrowed are “obsolete”—that “they are,” in fact, “undigested lumps of bourgeois ideology in the stomach of socialist thought” (184).

It is “madness” to abandon liberal principles; but liberals are perhaps too apt to blame ideologues of the left and right for the ills that have come over them. Collingwood argues in a moderate tone that “nothing is gained by blame: something perhaps, by trying to understand” (184). Instead, he blames liberalism itself for not having applied to international relations or to private business the generous principles it established in domestic politics. It would be easy to miss the fact that Collingwood is actually criticizing liberalism for a moderation that its founders would have thought realistic: his argument is not untinged with the millennialism he decries in Kant. In the case of foreign affairs, he explains that our neglect has left us with “weapons more destructive, wars more expensive, and national hatred (a thing hardly known in the seventeenth century) smouldering everywhere.” Within the body politic, this “external illiberalism” was mirrored in the private realm of business, which was held exempt from government control. Only Adam Smith’s “extraordinary doctrine” that men actually serve each other by serving themselves kept them from seeing the truth in the socialists’ critique of life in liberal society (185). Thus liberals themselves, according to Collingwood, must reap the harvest of “the failure of our grandfathers” to apply their own principles consistently. That failure, however, hardly justifies the intemperate attacks from left and right, “not against the incomplete application of liberal principles, but against those principles themselves” (186).

The central essay of the second part, originally published as an article in 1940, inquires into the reason for the appeal of fascism and Nazism. Here Collingwood finds another cause of the decline of liberalism: the loss of its “vital warmth” at the heart, which comes from religion. In the spirit of John Stuart Mill’s argument that uncontested opinions degenerate into dead dogmas, he argues that just as “Greco-Roman civilization” met its demise when its inheritors “lost heart,” liberalism is threatened by the collapse of its spiritual underpinnings (187). For Collingwood, Greco-Roman civilization was succeeded by Christianity, which, after a vital youth, suffered a curious fate during the scientific revolution of the Renaissance. Modern science carefully divided Christianity into its rational and superstitious parts, preserving what was logical and discarding the residue (188). An “Illuminism” became orthodoxy among

educated men, who did not scruple to disguise their hostility towards religion. The political principle of “free speech and free thought for everyone” was, in Collingwood’s view, “distilled” from Christianity; but it disdained the religious beliefs that might have helped to sustain it (189). Christianity seems to him the real source of the idea that every man has “infinite dignity or worth,” which in turn is the ground of our liberal rights; these gifts came to each man because of God’s love for us and the intercession of Christ (190). The Christian view of human nature which entails liberal principles survived long after Christianity had been discredited. Even in the countries which have succumbed to fascism or Nazism, most people believe in “liberal-democratic ideals.” Yet the fascists and Nazis have “a driving power, a psychological dynamism,” that their opponents lack. While liberals can hardly be troubled to defend liberalism, the fascists seem to fight with the power not of men, but of demons (191). Neither the Marxist claim that fascism is a class movement, nor the populist suggestion that it is the creature of big business, nor the publicist’s confidence that it owes its success to propaganda is sustained by fact. The truth is that while liberal arguments, in our day, are merely cerebral, the fascist “thinks with his blood,” and that makes him irresistible, “silly” though his thoughts may be (192). Fascism, which “harks back consciously to the Roman Empire” and its “worship of a ‘Leader,’” appeals to what Collingwood calls “the pagan survivals” that have been allowed by Christianity in Italy and Germany (195).

Our neglect of emotion is also the theme of the sixth essay of the second part, taken from a manuscript called “Fairy Tales,” which describes our “utilitarian civilization.” Collingwood observes that our thoroughgoing rejection of magic, which expresses emotion, leaves us proud to be “sensible, rational, businesslike”; we hold that every act is justified by its utility (197). What is not useful we tend to suppress. We are afraid to embrace our emotions, finding them a worrisome residue of our savage past. As we discountenance emotion, we are apt to discredit its expression in art and religion as useless things (198). We misunderstand the customs of savages, supposing that they must be based on the same utilitarian calculus that moves our own actions. Yet if magic helps us to “resolve emotional conflicts” and to make necessary adjustments in our practical lives, our rejection of emotion may prevent us from understanding ourselves (199).

The seventh essay of the second part, extracted from an address to Belgian students in 1919, considers what Collingwood calls “the Prussian philosophy” (202). He begins by denying that imperialism “is fundamentally evil,” distinguishing instead between “right imperialism—the rule of the more civilized over the less civilized,” which he calls “a necessary element in the education of mankind”—and the “false and evil imperialism” of the Germans, who would impose the tyranny of one civilized people over another (201). German imperialism caused the Great War, but he finds its genesis in the Prussian philosophy, which diminishes the individual and exalts the state. “This strange philosophy”

was expressed but not embraced by Hegel, who “was too great a thinker to believe in it entirely.” Marx made his proletarian dictatorship as absolute as Hegel’s rational state. In the Prussian view, the state was “conquering and imperialistic”; its will could “only be defined as a will to power,” in Nietzsche’s “very formula” for the Prussians’ “crude message” (202–3).<sup>8</sup> Schopenhauer’s pessimism was a sign that the Prussians were undergoing a “spiritual disease,” which Collingwood attributes to Hegel’s philosophy. He flatly claims that “this spiritual disease” caused the Great War and that “only the eradication of this theory” could bring peace (203). The error of the Prussian philosophy is in its belief in the unlimited power of the state: for power must always have limits. Even the power of the Christian God was limited by the moral law which he created and would not break. Collingwood therefore recommends international law and the League of Nations as proper antidotes to the omnipotent state (204). But he warns that “the Prussian philosophy is not crushed”; when it rises again, it will threaten “disaster and death, the destruction of civilization” (205). In the civilized nations’ task of civilizing the world, every nation (even Belgium) must play its part; but we must not yield to the Prussian disease of supposing that the state should be omnipotent. Collingwood concludes by posing this stark alternative: either we embrace “mutual service and devotion, abnegation of self, of class, of race, nation, and language in the service of civilization and of the world,” or we “see Europe a desert, silent, unpeopled, uncultivated; riddled with the craters of shells and scorched black with the fumes of poisonous gases.” In his view “there is no third alternative” (206).

Collingwood’s penultimate essay—the longest of the second part—leads up to the same danger by considering what he calls “three laws of politics.” Originally delivered as a Hobhouse Memorial Lecture, it served as the basis for what Collingwood later published, in less readable form, as the twenty-fifth chapter of *The New Leviathan*.<sup>9</sup> He defines a society as a community whose members determine together how they will live. The first law of politics is that there are rulers and ruled, those who make laws and those who obey them (209). The second law explains that the division between rulers and ruled is “*permeable*.” At a minimum it must be so because of the fact of death, which means that the ruling body must replenish itself or be extinguished (210). Only “*recruitment of competent persons from the ruled class*” can supply the eventual defect of rulers. Since, however, the ruling class does not supply these vacancies automatically, it must make provision for accepting people who begin among the ruled into its own ranks (211). The third law is that rulers are those who take the initiative, as Collingwood divines from the original meaning of the Greek word *archē*. The ruler sets an example to be imitated by his subjects (212).

In a long but tersely written digression by this digressive writer, Collingwood illuminates what he means by the three laws. The digression begins by considering Harold Laski’s complaint against T. H. Green, who refused to call Tsarist Russia a state because of its strong inclination to despotism. Colling-

wood sides with Laski, arguing that Green was “confused.” What he confused was the “*scientific*” meaning of “state” with the practical question of how Russia ought to be treated. In other words, Green mixed up values (“practical statements,” in Collingwood’s terminology) with facts (“scientific statements”). Green, whose “indignation got the better of his scientific bent” because he found Russia’s treatment of thinking men abhorrent, acted like someone who, when he was asked “what sort of meat had been offered him,” had replied, “‘It is a perfectly beastly sort of meat’; telling you not what the meat [is],<sup>10</sup> but what his practical reaction to it is.” Collingwood suggests that the cobbler should “stick to his last,” and that as a political scientist Green had no business making a condemnation of Russia. At the same time, he mentions that the Chamberlain government concealed “the horrors of the concentration camp” from the public “to prevent indignation from flaring up into an inopportune and hopeless war.” He asks whether “this deception” was criminal or not, which reminds us of the division between ruler and ruled, of the need for the rulers to recruit from among the ruled, and of the importance of examples set by the rulers (213–14). Collingwood seems to be hinting that Chamberlain and his men were wrong to try to hide the villainy of the Nazis from people who would later have to fight them—that as political rulers they can be faulted not for criticizing their enemies, as the political scientist Green did, but for failing to criticize them. Collingwood’s conclusion seems to be that political scientists and statesmen should be held to different standards. But he leaves his position very murky, perhaps because it would be hard to show why this criticism of Chamberlain is any more scientific than Green’s criticism of Russia.

After a second digression on the meaning of the word “state,” in which Collingwood suggests that the turning point in its history was Machiavelli’s realization that rulers should enlist the active energy of the ruled (215), Collingwood asks why rulers achieve ascendancy over their subjects. Though superior intelligence provides a rational basis for rule, “H. G. Wells wrote a fantastically unpleasant story” to show that, although in the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed man should rule, the blindness of the many might keep them from acknowledging the superior fitness of the one-eyed man (217). Madness competes with rationality in claiming the right to rule—most of all the creative kind of madness that puts Orthodox Christians in mind of the demonic. Plato’s tyrant has the appeal of this false currency; and, by “a reversed action of the Third Law of Politics,” the madman engenders more madness by his example. For sanity requires exertion: “it is much easier to speak and act and write crazily than to do it intelligently; you just let yourself go, and there you are.” The impressionable democratic mob finds new leaders who carry the madness to new extremes; shouting with a mob “is the easiest thing anybody can do” (221). Collingwood admits that he never expected the sudden collapse of the French in 1940. In retrospect, he finds its cause in the legacy of the French weakness for Napoleon, which divides them from England and makes them

susceptible to the blandishments of leaders who sympathize with German tyranny (222). He concludes the essay by claiming that his discussion was “altogether neutral” between political systems; but he disclaims any scientist’s ability to predict the issue of the Second World War, then in progress. As for German philosophers like Hegel and Marx, who thought they could foretell the future, “more fools they.” The future, Collingwood assures his readers, “has to be made by us, by the strength of our hands and the stoutness of our hearts” (223).

The book’s final essay is a draft preface to *The New Leviathan*, Collingwood’s attempt to elucidate what he took to be “the revolt against civilization” in his own time (224). (This preface was replaced by a shorter one when the book was published in 1942.) He understands civilization as a condition of “law and order, prosperity, and peace.” Civilized men live under “definite rules”; they win their livelihood without taking it from others; and they come to agreement with their fellows rather than relying on violence to enforce their own will (224). Rebels against civilization claim, from the left, that it fails to live up to its own ideal by allowing some men to exploit others; from the right, that “the very ideal of civilization is false,” since only civilized cowards forbear from exploiting their fellows (225). Germany, which prefers barbarism on account of the latter claim, is “fighting for the destruction of civilization.” England fights against Germany; but “what we are fighting for, nobody knows.” The government says only “that we are fighting to defeat the enemy,” which is hardly illuminating. Collingwood seeks to provide his “own answer.” In order to show that “we are fighting in defence of civilization,” he has to know what civilization is. To answer that question forces him to ask what a society is, but before he can understand a society, he must know what a man is (226). So *The New Leviathan* will limn a theory of man, society, and civilization, but only in the brief compass required in the present crisis to prepare a man to consider the revolt against civilization, and what a civilized society might do to defend itself. By this account *The New Leviathan* is a piece of war writing, though not war propaganda: Collingwood means to offer his reader “just what the present emergency demands, and no more.” He concludes the draft preface by paying homage to Hobbes, whose “*Leviathan* was the first book in which the idea of a civilized society was consciously and systematically expounded” (228). According to the plan established by its editor, the new volume of Collingwood’s essays leaves off where *The New Leviathan* begins, encouraging us to embark on Collingwood’s final and most neglected work. Boucher, in turn, makes *The New Leviathan* the centerpiece of his own study of Collingwood’s political philosophy, which he undertook as a companion volume to the book here reviewed (3 n. 10).

The editor is to be commended for having brought together the disparate essays of this volume and making them a whole, somewhat as Collingwood’s student T. M. Knox did earlier in compiling *The Idea of History*. With a par-

tiality that may be forgiven he concludes his own study with the remark that while "many academics" have warned us "of the dangers which confront modern civilization," no one has done it "so eloquently, and few so passionately and incisively, as R. G. Collingwood."<sup>11</sup> Our own appreciation of Collingwood must be more modest. In the theoretical first part of the new volume, he combines variations on James Mill's account of utility, Hobbes's account of right, and Hegel's account of duty in a welter of ideas more thought provoking than consistent. In the more practical second part, he advances a trenchant, if not always persuasive view of the dangers facing liberalism. There is enough of Collingwood in this book to convince the reader that he was a serious thinker and a devoted teacher. But some such judgment as Henry Jones wrote in his reader's report on Collingwood's manuscript "Truth and Contradiction," now published in the first appendix to this book, might well be applied to *Essays in Political Philosophy* as well:

I have read every word of it, and done so with lively interest; which is as good a testimonial as I could give to a book. But I cannot feel that I have a clear estimate of its worth. Not that it is unintelligible, nor that its problems are unfamiliar, or its doctrine strange; but that it has such contradictory qualities. (230)

## NOTES

1. *The Social and Political Thought of R. G. Collingwood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

2. One notable feature of these essays is Collingwood's critique of psychology. Psychologists tend to offer a comprehensive account of human action, but he sternly confines their empirical science to describing the actions of men insofar as they are not determined by reason. Though Collingwood dismisses the psychologist's argument that our reasons for choice are all unconscious, he admits that the psychologist may be able to help a man to understand and correct "capricious actions" if they "are 'morbid' actions, that is to say actions that interfere with the life he is trying to lead" (81; cf. 58–59). Unfortunately, however, psychology can alter healthy actions as easily as morbid ones, just as a surgeon can amputate a healthy limb; so "for everyone except those who suffer from really serious psychological disease the only sensible advice is James Thurber's: 'Leave your mind alone'" (82–83). Here Collingwood writes from experience: Boucher reports that he "took psychology seriously enough to undergo a full 50 sessions of psychoanalysis before considering himself qualified to comment on it" (81 n. 3).

3. One should compare Collingwood's brief discussion of duty in *The New Leviathan*, which concludes that "a man's duty on a given occasion is the act which for him is both possible and necessary: the act which at that moment character and circumstance combine to make it inevitable, if he has a free will, that he should freely will to do": *The New Leviathan, or Man, Society, Civilization, and Barbarism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), 124.

4. My argument about the adequacy of Collingwood's understanding of history was suggested by Leo Strauss, "On Collingwood's Philosophy of History," *The Review of Metaphysics* 5, no. 4 (June 1952), 559–86.

5. Collingwood's account of his life ends with a ringing promise to "fight in the daylight" against fascist irrationalism: *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), 167.

6. Compare the second paragraph of Churchill's preface to his autobiography: Winston S. Churchill, *My Early Life: A Roving Commission* (London: Thornton Butterworth Ltd., 1930), 9.

## 80 · *Interpretation*

7. See his famous remark that a part of him “used to stand up and cheer, in a sleepy voice, whenever I began reading Marx”: *An Autobiography*, 152; but see also, in the introduction to *Essays in Political Philosophy*, Boucher’s convincing argument against the common view “that about the time that Collingwood wrote *An Autobiography* his political views had swung sharply to the left” (7–30).

8. See Strauss, “On Collingwood’s Philosophy of History,” 563.

9. See *The New Leviathan*, 184–91.

10. The text reads “it” here in place of “is,” presumably in error.

11. Boucher, *The Social and Political Thought of R. G. Collingwood*, 243.