Are Historical and Aesthetic Understanding Distinctively Individualizing?

Narrative Description

According to a distinguished tradition in philosophy, historical and aesthetic understanding differ from that found in the sciences. While scientific understanding is inherently generalizing, understanding art or history is a matter of grasping the relevant phenomena in all their individuality. To understand a scientific, or social scientific, phenomenon is at root to place it in a larger grouping of similar phenomena, perhaps bringing them under general laws that relate things of that kind to other kinds. In contrast, understanding a work of art or an historical event lies precisely in seeing what is distinctive to this work or event in particular.

If the tradition is right, the study of art and history offers a form of understanding not matched in other disciplines. But is it right? Our project attempts to provide part of the answer. Only part, because we will not attempt to assess the tradition’s claims about scientific understanding. Nor will we attempt to establish whether all historical and aesthetic understanding is individualizing. We will address the following questions:

What is individualizing understanding: what would it be to understand a phenomenon in all its individuality?

Whatever the possible answers, is it true that some or all of them are central to understanding works of art and other aesthetic phenomena?

Do some or all of them play a significant role in the understanding offered by the study of history?

Insofar as historical and aesthetic inquiry allow for understanding in this form, what do we learn about their subject matters, and about the relations between the two inquiries?

Background

The *loqui classici* for the claims that historical and aesthetic understanding are distinctively individualizing is the work of Benedetto Croce (1902) and R.G.Collingwood (1938, 1939, 1946). For each, the ultimate source of the idea is their engagement with Hegel’s thought (1807, 1835, 1837). A central task of Hegel’s philosophy is correctly to conceive the relation between the particular and the universal. Some of those influenced by him, including the British Idealists and some American pragmatists, saw an expression of misconceptions of that relation in the tendency of much scientific thinking to betray the concrete specificity of things by insisting on pursuing general understanding of them. Indeed, this concern may be seen to underpin a good deal of ‘continental’ philosophy, as in the cases of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1973), and Paul Ricoeur (2004), and in so-called post-analytic and neo-Wittgensteinan philosophy (Stanley Cavell, Robert Pippin, James Conant, *et al.*). Croce and Collingwood find an antidote to these errors in historical inquiry and in our engagement with the aesthetic aspect of things.
In the philosophy of history there has been relatively little uptake of the idea of individualizing understanding. (Though see Hacking 2007 and some of the work of Richard Rorty.) Important traditions in historical writing of very long standing have focused their attention on the explanation of historical change. These traditions have often assumed an apocalyptic form (Burrow 2009), understanding change by appeal both to claims about the overall direction of historical development, past and future, and to theories about the underlying forces driving that change. Since the nineteenth century this debate has become entangled with another concerning history’s claims to be a science, attempted vindications of that ambition often turning on the search for procedural rules for interpreting evidence. Marxism is one important tradition of this kind, along with Weberianism, but various positivisms deriving from von Ranke would also count. These positivist traditions have been destabilized by critique both of their procedural claims and of the value of the grand narratives that they support. That critique has been driven by various factors: revulsion at the political import of the traditions’ predictive claims (Popper 1957); an emphasis on the role of the historian’s own subjectivity in shaping her activities and views; and, of particular prominence in Anglo-American historiography during the 1990s, the nesting of worries about subjectivity within the more general post-modern challenge associated with Hayden White (1990). Much recent reflection has in turn been framed as a response to relativizing, and particularly post-modernist, challenges to the general validity of historical arguments (see for example Appleby, Hunt and Jacob (1995), Clark (2004) and more acerbically, Richard J. Evans (2001). Frank Ankersmit (2012) and many others have set out to defend the positivist tradition.

To these long-standing disagreements over history’s proper methods and ambitions, the last half-century has added dispute over its subject matter. Nineteenth-century grand narratives were challenged not only (perhaps not primarily) by critique of the supposed scienticism of their procedures in handling evidence and the resulting prescriptions, but also by the proliferation of alternative narratives. Histories of class, race and gender, of science, reading, the body and global history have created disagreement not only about how to proceed but also over what are the proper questions for practicing historians to address. Some advocate micro-histories as the appropriate response to this complexity, while others have turned towards Big History, or a fuller engagement with contemporary natural science (e.g. Smail’s 2008). This variety of practice, with associated varieties of legitimating claims, is laid out by Burke (1991 and subsequent editions) and Green and Troup (1999). Some forms of historical writing have always been more engaged with subjectivity—the history of ideas, disciplines and mentalities, conceptual history or the analysis of the thought of particular individuals. Here methodological work has been less challenged by the difficulty of the role of the historian’s own subjectivity, but theoretical work in this field is in itself diverse (Koselleck 2004 (1985), Pocock 1975, 2009) and its relevance to other areas of historical enquiry is not always acknowledged.

As this brief review suggests, the central debates in history’s reflection on its own nature and procedures have not given prominence to the idea of individualizing understanding. However, while few have carried the flag for the Croce-Collingwood program, our view is that some of the key disputes described above only make sense if one side or the other makes assumptions closely related to that program’s central ideas. Moreover, we see the wide variety in historical practice, coupled to lack of unity in theorizing about it, as
offering an opportunity: not to try to impose the Croce-Collingwood view as the truth about historical investigation, but to ask whether it captures at least some strands in the complex, multi-faceted activities that historians undertake.

In philosophical aesthetics, in contrast, while there has been a good deal of skepticism about other elements in the Collingwood-Croce tradition, and while the idea of individualizing understanding has never attained the status of orthodoxy, several themes closely related to that idea have attained prominence. Our strategy will be to explore these themes, to see if a general conception of individualizing understanding can be teased from them; while simultaneously testing candidate conceptions against the case of historical thinking.

**Strategy**

There are at least four ideas that, in the aesthetic case, might be offered as strands in the idea of individualizing understanding:

[A] The *object* of aesthetic understanding is the particular work, not some wider class or kind of which it is an instance. (Kant 1790)

[B] The *vehicle* of aesthetic understanding is something other than conceptual thought. To understand (e.g.) a painting is to see it a certain way, a way that supplements mere perception with imagination. To understand a novel is to engage with it imaginatively. No other grasp on its aesthetic character (e.g. by hearing about it, or describing it to oneself on the basis of memory) will suffice. (Kant 1790; Wollheim 1968, 1987; Walton 1970; Scruton 1974; Budd 2008)

[C] Aesthetic understanding does not involve subsuming the phenomenon under general principles. To understand that, say, a painting is good, and what’s good about it, is not a matter of realizing that it has some feature F, while knowing some general rule or principle to the effect that being F always makes a picture better. Rather, aesthetic understanding involves appreciating how each element in the work contributes, in the context of the others, to the aesthetic character of the whole. (Kant 1790; Sibley 1959, 1965; Goodman 1968; Mothersill 1984; Goldman 2006; Hopkins 2006)

[D] The function of art is the articulation of the inner life. To understand a work is to understand the idea or feeling it articulates. Since we can only understand ideas and feelings we already dimly grasp, aesthetic understanding is, in the end, a form of self-understanding. What we understand is our own feelings or thoughts, in all *their* individuality. (Croce 1902, Collingwood 1938, Robinson 2005, Moran 2012)

The connection between these ideas and individualizing understanding is more obvious in some cases than others. Some open up new aspects to our inquiry (for instance, [D] broadens our topic from understanding art/the aesthetic object to understanding other things through art). Nonetheless, we believe each offers a useful route into our general theme. Whether or not any provides a satisfactory terminus to inquiry, each of them
opens the way to thinking creatively about what it is for understanding to be individualizing.

It is another question, of course, whether these ideas will illuminate the practice of historians. For each, serious doubts about its applicability to the historical might be raised. Nonetheless, we think each promises either to deliver a plausible model for how historical understanding might also individualize, or at least to provide a useful starting point from which such a model might be devised.

[A]: Some today dispute that history is defined by some specifically ‘historical’ set of objects it studies (Armitage 2012). On this view, history is more a method that can be applied to any subject matter than a discipline shaped by the range of things it takes as its concern. Moreover, disciplines other than history, such as some branches of scientific inquiry, are of course sometimes concerned with singular events (the Big Bang, or the extinction of the dinosaurs). Nonetheless, even if the category of proper objects of historical study is very broad and embraces radically diverse phenomena, the thought that history tends to concern individual events whereas most scientific inquiry aims at describing event types retains enough plausibility to be worth considering. For example, following decades of a focus on social history, certain strands of intellectual history have pursued the question of a certain irreducibility of philosophical or intellectual claims to their social context (Gordon 2012; McMahon and Moyn 2013), all the while insisting on both the historical specificity of the texts, rhetoric, and arguments, and their singularity amidst the biographical and philosophical trajectories of their authors. The same can be said of trends in the history of science, particularly in historical epistemology (Daston & Galison 2007; Rheinberger 1997, 2010a, 2010b), whose study of historical ruptures, of technical and epistemological environments, and of efforts to discover and sustain concreteness in the sciences are premised on the development of these problems as specific, individual objects of study.

[B]: The idea that historical understanding is attained in key part through the imaginative reconstruction of the events under investigation lay at the centre of Collingwood’s own account of historical practice (1939, 1940). It also features in a good part of the hermeneutic tradition to which Collingwood’s thinking, albeit as something of an outlier, belongs (Dilthey 1860-1903, 1910). But the idea has far wider appeal. While some historians might deny that imagination plays any special role in their activities, others cite it as central, at least to their own practice; and, we hypothesize, yet others, while not thinking of their activity this way, make central use of activities that merit the name.

[C]: The question whether historical understanding proceeds by articulating and exploiting general laws is one lying close to the heart of some of the most vexed debates about the purpose, and methods, of history (see Background, above). The very fact that it is so vexed suggests that one answer to it, that history proceeds without appeal to such generalities, has powerful attraction. But what form does
historical understanding take, if not that of subsuming the phenomena under general laws? Answers to the analogous question in the case of aesthetic understanding provide perhaps the best developed alternative model. (Thus when moral philosophers have attempted to explore whether ethical understanding might also be conceived as free of appeal to general principles, they have always done so by, in effect, borrowing the model developed for the aesthetic case (McDowell 1979, Dancy 2006).)

[D]: Collingwood not only gives imagination a role in historical practice equal to that he found for it in aesthetic understanding; he also sees its deployment in the two as serving fundamentally the same end. The historian, like the appreciator of the aesthetic, makes sense of the object of inquiry by bringing to consciousness aspects of the inner life that produced that object: the work as created by the artist’s exploration of her feelings, the historical deed or object as springing from the practical reasoning of the historical agent. History, at least nowadays, is far less exclusively concerned with actions than Collingwood supposed, and even when it does concern actions there are a wider range of ways of trying to make sense of them than he acknowledged. Nonetheless, his basic thought, that some historical investigation proceeds by making sense of the perspective of the participants in the events under study, that some of that sense-making involves attempting to reconstruct those perspectives ‘from the inside’, and that doing this might further our knowledge of ourselves, as well as of those we study, is sufficiently suggestive to merit further exploration.

We believe that examining the four strands [A] to [D], the connections between them, what they might suggest by way of a conception of individualizing understanding and how that conception might (or might not) fit historical understanding, will give our inquiry a suitably focused starting point. We hope, and expect, that other ideas will also gain prominence as we proceed. Of course, some of the above raises themes that would themselves provide ample material for independent projects. The question how far history articulates general laws is an obvious example. In order to avoid becoming mired in such debates we will adopt a specific methodology.

**Methodology**

While there is no consensus on the precise content or significance of the four strands in the aesthetic case, there is here at least a rich tradition, with an ongoing presence in contemporary work, that has explored them. Their application to the historical case is less straightforward and there is there much less of a continuous tradition that takes them as central and worthy of exploration. Moreover, as noted in the Background section, abstract reflection about historical practice is in a much more divided state than reflection on appreciative practice. Given all that, we propose to adopt different methods for exploring the historical and aesthetic sides of our issue. In the aesthetic case, we will proceed from the top-down, by inviting reflection on, and challenges to, the four themes as emerging from, and applied to, the aesthetic. On the historical side, in contrast, we will attack matters from the bottom up. We will invite historians to reflect on their practice, against the background of the themes the project articulates. They will be invited to consider
what they do, to see if they can recognize in it any of those ideas. The parallel between historical and appreciative exploration, and the thought that they are linked as individualizing, will thus be presented to the historians as an hypothesis to be explored in the light of concrete historical practice. That exploration might involve rejecting those ideas outright, or finding them present only in significantly altered form, as much as finding them helpful.

Process
We will pursue our questions through a series of workshops involving scholars from relevant disciplines: philosophers of history, aestheticians, epistemologists, practicing historians (including some from archaeology), experts on the Hegel-Croce-Collingwood tradition and art historians/critics. While some events will involve a set of presentations that focus more on aesthetic, or on historical, understanding; every workshop will bring together experts from both sides of that divide. In order to foster exchange on our central theme, contributors will be encouraged to explore relevant questions within their field of expertise with an eye to how their conclusions might transfer to the other domain. The workshops will consist mostly of presented papers, but we will also run some sessions as discussions of classic texts in the area. Either way, contributions and reading will be available in advance, and attendees will be expected to read the papers beforehand, minimizing time spent presenting, and maximizing that available for discussion. We will invite various participants to come to more than one event, so as to foster an ongoing conversation on our theme.

We anticipate that, as with any interdisciplinary project, there will be obstacles to mutual understanding, arising out of different interests, vocabularies, conceptual repertoires and methodologies. The question of the conceptual transformation necessary for conceiving the problem as set today vis-à-vis as set by Collingwood and Croce is itself an important part of what we aim to achieve. To do this, we will explore various terminologies in stating our brief to participants, and have in mind certain mediating concepts that might bridge divides in understanding. We will also seek to involve historians whose work is pursued outside traditional academic departments of History, in particular archaeologists, since in recent years academic archeology has shown some interest in the aesthetic, both as a feature of the object of study and as important to the study’s conception of itself.1 Beyond these particular strategies, however, we do not see that we can usefully formulate a master plan for handling the challenge of establishing mutual comprehension. We will instead have to tackle the issues as they arise. We are encouraged to think this can be done by the facts, first, that our team is interdisciplinary and has found routes to mutual comprehension in formulating this bid; and second, that Croce and particularly Collingwood were themselves both philosophers and accomplished historians. Their thinking bridged the very divide we, in our attempt to explore a contemporary role for their ideas, confront.

1 See, for instance, the current AHRC-funded project ‘The Ethics and Aesthetics of Archaeology’(https://www.dur.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/?mode=project&id=609).