“Talk about talk”. That was how the well-known Oxford philosopher, Gilbert Ryle, defined a dominant strand in European philosophy in the inter-war period. He was commenting, of course, on the search for a rigorous basis to verify statements and, in particular, on the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle. Logical positivism was championed in Britain by Ayer, notably in his 1936 classic on *Language, Truth and Logic*. Stated most baldly, it claimed that propositions took only two forms, analytic and synthetic. Analytic propositions, such as those in logic and mathematics, were those in which the predicate was contained in the subject ("the triangle had three sides"); they were true because of the way their constituent terms were defined and their denial involved self-contradiction. By contrast, synthetic propositions were statements about the real world and their truth could be tested by scientific means (i.e., by the statement of an hypothesis, the establishment of criteria of falsification and the testing of the hypothesis against data); their denial did not involve self-contradiction. The need to distinguish between different kinds of proposition ("talk about talk") became central to this type of philosophical activity.

Pressed to extremes, the implications of logical positivism were radical. It appeared to show that, unless they could be categorised as analytic or synthetic, propositions were vacuous or even nonsensical. On this basis all propositions in metaphysics and ethics, and much of political philosophy and aesthetics, could be binned. Further, the scientific method became not just one way of reducing a particular type of uncertainty about the real world, but the paradigmatic approach to intellectual problems of all kinds. Indeed, if one were not alert, one might be persuaded by positivism into thinking that scientific method was the only valid method of intellectual enquiry.

Two important British philosophers – Collingwood and Oakeshott – rejected, almost without reservation, these tendencies in contemporary thought. Robin George Collingwood was born in 1889 and educated at home until he was 13, largely by his father (a painter and archaeologist) who had done Greats at Oxford. Collingwood’s father kept his Oxford books in the home, and Collingwood was reading about the beginnings of modern science was he was six and Kant’s theory of ethics when he was eight. After five years at Rugby, he entered Oxford in 1908 and became a tutor in philosophy in 1912. Apart from a brief spell of public service towards the end of the First World War, when he helped in the preparations for the peace negotiations, he was an Oxford don for virtually all of his adult life.

Collingwood was an unusually gifted and clever man. Moreover, he was both aware of his own gifts and driven by a strong sense of duty. In the 1920s he worked hard, as much on the history and archaeology of Roman Britain as on philosophy. The unusual combination of the historical work with philosophical reading may have been responsible for the development of a distinctive body of ideas about the nature of intellectual activity. These ideas set him apart from other philosophers and he had difficulty finding an outlet. At this stage in his life he published relatively little about the subjects for which he is now famous. Instead he concentrated on history and archaeology, and in 1930 his book on *The Archaeology of Roman Britain* appeared. In 1934 he was elected to the British
Academy largely for his contribution to archaeological studies, but found himself liberated to write about a wider range of topics.

Unhappily, his health began to deteriorate. According to his *Autobiography* (published in 1939), "By this time I had in my head a great deal which I believed the public would value; and the only way of giving it to the public was by writing books." Three heavyweight philosophical works emerged, *An Essay on Philosophical Method* in 1933, *The Principles of Art* in 1938 and *An Essay in Metaphysics* in 1940. But his output was interrupted by a series of strokes. By the late 1930s he must have realized that time was running out. The purpose of his *Autobiography* may have been to give "the public" an explanation of what he had been trying to do, a key that would unify his apparently various productions. He managed to bring out one more big book, *The New Leviathan*, in 1942. After his death in January 1943, his literary executor – T. M. Knox – arranged for the publication of two further substantial volumes, *The Idea of Nature* in 1945 and *The Idea of History* in 1946. Collingwood had almost completed these when he died. There is little doubt that these works are his, not Knox's, although a debate has developed about the extent of Knox's intervention with Collingwood's papers.

The titles of Collingwood's books say much about his agenda, but – if there were still some ambiguity about his intentions – *An Autobiography* must be the primary source. It is a furious, cranky, entertaining page-turner, and in the 1960s and 1970s was widely read for its fury, crankiness and entertainment value when the reputation of Collingwood's more serious books was modest. The alarming truth is that the *Autobiography* can be read for fun. (Of an Oxford philosophy seminar, he wrote, "One of the company reads a paper, and the rest discuss it with a fluency directly proportional to their ignorance."; of the propositional logic worked out by Russell and Whitehead, "this school, with all its ingenuity and pertinacity, is only building card-houses out of a pack of lies."; of Bertrand Russell’s and his associates’ attempts at philosophy, "...when they and their friends are dead no one will ever know how their lives were spent. What I myself know about it I shall certainly not repeat."; and much in a similar vein.)

The intemperate tone of the *Autobiography* may have been one reason for the long period in which Collingwood's writings were neglected. But his anger is surely easy to understand. In 1939 he felt that he had many worthwhile things still to say, but he knew how little time and energy he had left to say them. He was living at the most difficult moment in the history of Europe and he was compelled – in his own words – "to cackle" about the big subjects which troubled him. Fascism and socialism appeared as the only valid political options to most of his intellectually self-conscious contemporaries. Not only did he reject both, but also he thought that the ascendency of these unpleasant systems of belief could be blamed on the moral vacuum created by the philosophical trends of the previous 40 years. Logical positivism and its associates were not of purely technical interest in an exclusively philosophical sphere. Instead they (and their realist precursors in Oxford philosophy) had to be indicted for misleading and corrupting the young. The First World War had been, again in Collingwood's words, "an unprecedented triumph for natural science". But the "plain fact" was that "the gigantic increase since
about 1600 in [man’s] power to control Nature had not been accompanied by a corresponding increase…in his power to control human situations”.

The task of The Essay on Philosophical Method and An Essay on Metaphysics was to recover metaphysics from arid verificationism, and to restore ethics to a central place in the teaching of philosophy; the aim of The Idea of History was to establish the autonomy of history from science and to assert the superiority of historical understanding to scientific method as a guide to action; the agenda of The Idea of Nature was to puncture the pretensions of scientific method, by showing that historically there had been radical changes in man’s approach to understanding nature; the purpose of The Principles of Art was to argue that works of art enhanced culture by expressing emotions in a way that mere craftsmanship (and scientific ingenuity) could not; and the goal of The New Leviathan was to describe the conditions of civilisation, where a “civilisation” was a context in which reasoned debate between individuals of different standpoints could evolve without bigotry and bloodshed. Throughout, his enemies were positivism and analytical philosophy. He rejected the claims that metaphysics was vacuous and futile, and that philosophy had nothing to do with religion, ethics, aesthetics and politics. Seen in these terms, Collingwood’s big books were a remarkably ambitious and integrated response to the challenges of the 1930s and 1940s.

Appreciation of Collingwood’s work has grown rapidly since the early 1990s. A Collingwood Society was established in 1994, and six issues of Collingwood Studies were published under its auspices between 1994 and 1999. He has been bracketed with other British idealists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and more recently research into Collingwood has often been part of wider discussion of such idealist thinkers as Green, Bradley and Bosanquet. Gary Browning’s Rethinking R. G. Collingwood: Philosophy, Politics and the Unity of Theory and Practice is the latest addition to an expanding literature.

The title of Browning’s book cleverly recalls a theme of Collingwood’s thought, that (to quote from The Idea of History) history “is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian’s own mind” and so is a never-ending process of rethinking. However, the title has another agenda, to announce the book’s new interpretation, its rethinking, of Collingwood’s relationship with other philosophers. A standard view until now has been that the Italian idealist philosopher, Croce, had a strong influence on Collingwood’s tendency to apotheosise history at the expense of science and philosophy. However, Collingwood’s range of reading was so extensive and diverse that to single out any individual previous thinker seemed to be a mistake. Instead Browning identifies Hegel as Collingwood’s mentor. The dominant place of Hegel in Collingwood’s work is argued both from the books themselves and from research into unpublished material. According to Browning, “Collingwood’s manuscripts…unpublished in his lifetime…and now housed in the Bodleian Library highlight the extent of Collingwood’s multi-faceted engagement with Hegel.”

There may be something in what Browning says. Collingwood’s account of historical method – in which the historian’s preconceptions affect the way that he searches for and
assembles evidence, and in which any historical production is therefore a compromise between the historian and the facts — could be described as dialectical. It is also true that Collingwood — like Hegel — was preoccupied by how culture, aesthetics and science had changed historically. But the extent of Browning’s claims for Hegel is surprising and seems difficult to reconcile with what Collingwood wrote. For example, Chapter 5 of Rethinking Collingwood deals with ‘Aesthetics: art, mind and community’ and is predominantly concerned with The Principles of Art. Hegel is mentioned 47 times in 22 pages. But in the almost 350 pages of The Principles of Art Hegel is mentioned once, and even that reference is brief and in passing.

It is difficult to name significant 20th century thinkers who were more forthright about their objectives than Collingwood. If Hegel and Hegelianism really had been such vital influences on him, it ought to be evident in An Autobiography. But An Autobiography mentions Hegelianism only once and it does so in the most dismissive terms. Acknowledging that his studies at Oxford has begun under Green, Bradley and Bosanquet, Collingwood remarks that “contemporary opponents” described the movement as Hegelian. According to Collingwood, “This title was repudiated by the school itself, and rightly so”, since “[t]heir philosophy, so far as they had one single philosophy, was a continuation and criticism of the indigenous English and Scottish philosophies of the middle 19th century.” The next few sentences explain that Green and Bradley — although familiar with Hegel — had rejected him, and that their work should be seen as “criticisms of Mill’s logic, Bain’s psychology and Mansel’s metaphysics”.

Browning’s remarks on The New Leviathan, the last of his substantial works to appear wholly as Collingwood intended, are particularly implausible. He states, of the “theory of a free polity and a liberal civilization” contained in The New Leviathan, that it is “emphatically Hegelian, due to its combination of historical and philosophical forms of rethinking”. In fact, in the few paragraphs of The New Leviathan concerned with Hegel Collingwood took the opportunity to denounce him in the most brutal fashion. After noting that Hegel had reintroduced the Platonic word “dialectical” to the modern world, he said that this involved “at least one very bad mistake”. Using language similar to several contemporaries in Anglo-American philosophy (notably Popper in The Open Society and its Enemies), Collingwood said that Hegel’s “dialectical world is a world where everything argued itself into existence”, and described the whole line of thinking as not just “theology”, but “anthropomorphic theology of a quite low type”. A few sections later the attack became even sharper. “No student of history is in doubt as to the bankruptcy of the Hegelian dialectic regarded as an historical method”.

Given the texts, it is difficult to believe that Collingwood was in thrall to Hegel. There is nothing wrong with rethinking past thinkers. The parts of their work which were most relevant 50 or 100 years ago may not be the most relevant today, while their intellectual milieu may have been reinterpreted in the light of extra evidence or additional research on forgotten evidence. But any rethinking has to take place within certain parameters. Someone needs to tell Professor Browning that — if he wants to rethink Collingwood — he ought at least to pay some attention to what the chap actually said.
Oakeshott had a less stressful life than Collingwood. As Oakeshott was born only 12 years after Collingwood, they were more or less contemporaries. But – in contrast to the older man – Oakeshott enjoyed excellent health throughout a long life. He was still contributing, often with great verbal robustness, to discussions of the Carlyle Club in the 1980s. (The Carlyle Club was a dining club whose membership consisted largely of Oakeshott admirers, and which had three meetings a year in Cambridge, Oxford and London.) Collingwood and Oakeshott knew each other, although the extent of their acquaintance is uncertain and they do not seem to have been close friends. Anyhow, there is little doubt that they read each other carefully. When they reviewed the other’s work, the verdicts were enthusiastic. Oakeshott’s first major work on Experience and Its Modes was published in 1933, and sold only a few hundred copies over the next few years. But in The Idea of History Collingwood devoted almost as much space to it as he did to such giants as Hegel and Marx. He praised it because it “not only represents the high-water mark of English thought upon history, but shows a complete transcendence of... positivism”.

As Paul Franco notes in an excellent introduction to Oakeshott’s work, his Experience and its Modes has “striking resemblances” to one of Collingwood’s early books, Speculum Mentis. They both survey forms of experience (art, religion, science, history) and, at first reading, this seems rather banal. The point was to identify and describe different pathways to knowledge, as a prelude to challenging the positivist view that scientific method was the only valid approach. In the 1940s and 1950s an active debate developed among British historians about the purpose of history, with the status of general historical laws being one among a number of contentious issues. Could the social sciences make predictions in the same way as the natural sciences? Oakeshott participated in this debate in a sharply critical appraisal of E. H. Carr’s History of Soviet Russia, as well as a number of reviews of history books. These were expanded over the years into a handful of essays on the nature of historical enquiry and finally brought together in his 1983 volume On History, which Franco praises as “one of the most profound treatments of history in the twentieth century”.

But for most of his readers Oakeshott’s two greatest books were his 1962 Rationalism in Politics and his 1975 On Human Conduct. Rationalism in Politics was a collection of elegant and highly readable essays which dated back to the late 1940s. Their target was the claim that political action should be based exclusively on science and reason. Oakeshott emphasized the continuing validity of tradition in social and political life, and argued that the misapplication of reason might lead to never-ending and needlessly destructive upheaval. Much of On Human Conduct was written after Oakeshott’s retirement in 1969 and is less accessible. As he complained in a letter to Kenneth Minogue, “what I though I had clear is, when I come to it, as clear as mud”. Comparisons with Collingwood’s New Leviathan are inevitable, since the two books are the authors’ most large-scale attempts to define their political philosophies. Both Collingwood and Oakeshott were repelled by fascism and communism, and that they wanted to specify the conditions of successful liberal democracies. A fair comment is that Oakeshott’s distinction between two different conceptions of a political community – as an
“enterprise association” and a “civil association” – has had a greater impact on the wider discussion of public issues than anything in New Leviathan.

The question might be asked, “are these the two great thinkers of British twentieth-century conservatism (or even Conservatism)?”. Oakeshott was certainly feted in Conservative circles towards the end of his life, but probably both he and Collingwood would have said that their aims were never partisan in a party-political sense. In fact, in the late 1930s Collingwood was savage in his denunciation of the National Government’s appeasement of Hitler and its failure to intervene against the fascists in Spain. (The last page of An Autobiography included the sentence, “I know that fascism means the end of clear thinking and the triumph of irrationalism.”) There was even a rumour that he had become a communist. But – as James Connelly explains in a definitive analysis of Collingwood’s position in his recent Metaphysics, Method and Politics – he was a Conservative most of his life and the widely-discussed lurch to the left in the late 1930s may be exaggerated.

Instead of applauding particular political initiatives or personalities, Collingwood and Oakeshott wanted to protect the advanced liberal democracies from extremisms of all kinds. In the 1930s and 1940s they believed that philosophy had lost relevance by its preoccupation with narrow-minded analytical and linguistic matters, and that it had wrongly promoted scientific method over other kinds of intellectual enquiry. They argued that philosophy (or “professional thinking”, to use one of Collingwood’s favourite terms) should instead relate to human experience in all its aspects and put history at least on a par with science. As they saw it, professional thinkers had the right not only to talk about talk, but to cackle about ethics, aesthetics, literature and politics, and even about the metaphysical presuppositions behind thinking in all these fields of activity.

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