

Seminar 4: 10th May 2023, 2–3:30pm

FROM R. G. COLLINGWOOD TO A. MACINTYRE: HISTORICAL ENQUIRY AND SURVIVAL
OF CONCEPTS

Baudouin de Guillebon, University of Louvain-la-Neuve

I want to apologize if it is not completely clear because this work is in progress. One of my research interests is to understand more clearly what the philosopher A. MacIntyre means when he writes in *After Virtue* (1981) that he would use “Collingwood’s method”. In other words, to clarify his debt towards Collingwood as he put it in the Prologue of the Third Edition of *After Virtue*: “Vico was the prophetic originator of that kind of historical enquiry and my own greatest debt in this area was to R. G. Collingwood”. In fact, MacIntyre hardly explains anything about his debt, so we must read cautiously his work, in order to disclose any inspirations of Collingwood’s thought. Although not so much work has been done regarding to the relations between those two philosophers, I need to mention here M.J. O’Neill article entitled “An ‘Argumentative Ally’ Collingwood’s influence in Macintyre’s *After Virtue*”. This article is a large scope study, a kind of list of common features between Collingwood and MacIntyre, namely historicism and their methodological assumptions. It is not my purpose here to repeat what the author underlines, neither I am willing to criticize what O’Neill wrote, I’d rather take another way to show the link between the two philosophers.

As the comparison between two prolific writers is a gigantic enterprise, sometimes even a futile attempt, I want to focus on a peculiar notion which occurs in both philosophers’ work, a notion which seems at first sight foreign to philosophy: the notion of survival. In MacIntyre’s study in method and moral philosophy, this word “survival” appears as a key concept of a larger method which would enable the philosopher to explain and clarify conceptual confusion better than the analytical and phenomenological methods. So, if we understand clearly what a “survival” is we could shed light on both Collingwood’s and MacIntyre’s method.

However, in my opinion, the problem is that “survival” is a complex concept located at the crossroads of several sciences: anthropology, history, metaphysics and ethics. Besides, Collingwood and MacIntyre don’t seem to give the same definition of this word. As a matter of fact, from its origin in a book of Edward Tylor in the 19th century until its new definition in Anscombe and MacIntyre works, “survival” seems to have been a rather problematic word, sometimes used as a banner for tradition, sometimes as a synonym for “superstition”, sometimes as a critic towards irrationalism. Thus, if this concept of survival must be one of the fundamental presuppositions of a Collingwood’s and MacIntyre’s common method our study must be an attempt to understand the historical process of this word and to understand how an anthropological concept could be of any interest in the philosophical field.

I/ Superstition or Survival, a new concept elaborated by Edward

Tylor

It is in *Primitive Culture* (1871), that Tylor gives a complete definition of what he called survival: "Among evidence aiding us to trace the course which the civilization of the world has actually followed, is that great class of facts to denote which I have found it convenient to introduce the term 'survivals'. These are processes, customs, opinions, and so forth, **which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home**, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved." And Tylor gives examples of survival: an old Somersetshire woman whose hand-loom dates from the time before the introduction of the flying shuttle or the Midsummer bonfire and so on.

Those survivals are here mostly defined as "processes, customs, opinions" so in terms of practice, habits. And the reason why those practices survive is because some people practice it: even if these things seem out of fashion, or absurd, a habit of mind, a tradition helps them to survive. Therefore, we find here a definition of survival which is closed to the word "superstition": They are only repeated in a spirit of tradition. Maybe they once had a meaning, but those practices seem now foolish. Behind this critic emerges one presupposition: the idea of Progress.

- The reason why Tylor studies these survivals is to eradicate them by what he calls a "reasonable explanation".
- And we must get rid of them, says Tylor because: they "are opinions belonging properly to lower intellectual levels".

Therefore, the work of **ethnography** and the science of culture "is essentially a reformer's science". Meaning that each survival found in our culture must answer in front of the ethnographic court of its origin, and its rational value.

The purpose of this notion of survival is multiple: first, it is for Tylor a proof of the progress of our civilization, because what survives is pre-rational beliefs, superstitions easily criticized by reason. Second, and more interesting for us, the notion of survival helps both the historian to reconstruct the past, and the ethnography to understand the present. In *On The Survival of Savage Thought in Modern Civilization* Tylor suggests that our civilization is filled with mere survival, presuppositions which sources are forgotten, practices which rationality no longer belong to our world.

So, Tylor settles the basis of a debate between rational practices or beliefs and superstitions or irrational practices. Survival is the keyword of this debate: someone who practices something without questioning the origin or the presupposition of it could be found guilty of practicing a survival. It is important to notice that for Tylor, a survival is largely understood as a dead thing, an action with no life of its own because done without intelligibility, which means that a rational action needs a rational context to be intelligible.

II/ Collingwood's notion of survival: from anthropology to philosophy

1) Collingwood's starting-point

Therefore, when R.G. Collingwood refers to Tylor in his work on *Fairy Tales*, he has this notion of survival in his mind. As he intends to criticize the methodology of what he calls the "anthropological school", he seems at first sight really convinced by Tylor's method. In fact, what Collingwood acknowledges in Tylor point of view is that: "The weirdness and irrationality which we find in these materials must be due, not to what they are in themselves, but to the relation in which we stand to them. This is the meaning of the doctrine which Tylor next proceeds to expound, his doctrine of survivals. Civilized people have developed out of savage ones; and civilization contains many elements which, taken at their face value, are condemned as irrational and described as superstitions; but it would be better to drop that word and describe them as survivals, for they are things whose proper home and meaning must be sought in the context of an earlier civilization."

We stand here at the core of our problem: Collingwood acknowledges Tylor's efforts to avoid a superiority standpoint. By changing "superstitions" in "survivals", Tylor seems to enhance our vision of past societies, or primitive societies. Furthermore, Tylor shows that the problem of understanding is not a problem of irrationality of the practices, but a lack of evidence to understand what the foundations of those practices are.

We need to quote here again Collingwood's explanation of Tylor's method, because it will be very useful to understand the relation with MacIntyre's method: "Meaningless customs must be survivals [...] they had a practical, or at least ceremonial intention when and where they first arose, but are now fallen into absurdity from having been carried on into a new state of society, where their original sense has been discarded."

Collingwood agrees with that idea, but it seems for him that it is not enough. If this method avoids the rational versus irrational explanations, or the inferiority versus superiority cultural heritage, some questions need to be clarified: for example, how can we explain a survival? In other words, why a survival survives in a culture? Do we need those survival? Does anthropology have to get rid of those?

Before giving an answer to that, Collingwood in *Fairy Tales* pointed out the fact that after Tylor, anthropological science has getting worse. Frazer's *Golden Bough* no longer believe in this doctrine of survival: "Lastly, there is something defective in the spirit in which the whole subject is approached. In the preface of one his volumes, Frazer describes his great work as a record of the long tragedy of human folly and suffering. Such words show that he approaches his subject matter as a thing external to himself and the civilization which he feels as his own: without any attempt to work himself into the spirit of it and to recreate in his own mind the experiences whose outward expression he is studying."

Here is the turning point: Tylor's theory has been followed by Frazer and modified. 19th century presuppositions have won, anthropological science becomes a positivist method. Magical beliefs, fairy tales are identified as "human folly", and we can't find in other civilizations any link with us, because they are external to us.

2) A new method based on philosophy and history is needed.

But the goal of anthropology for Collingwood is self-knowledge. And for Collingwood the problem of anthropology in the thirties is a problem of attitude and method. Attitude towards other people, and the presuppositions of this method must be renewed: "The reason why anthropology is an important study for civilized men is not, as might have been thought in the heyday of imperialism, because civilized men have to rule over savages and must learn, therefore, to understand them. It is because the civilized man contains a **savage within him**, in the special sense in which **any historical present contains within itself its own past**, and must therefore study this savage – not savages in the abstract, but the savage that he himself in this sense is – for the same reason for which all history is studied, namely to make possible **a rational human life in the present day.**"

It is, in Collingwood's theory of survival, a new standpoint. Collingwood is not just criticizing anthropological method and trying to reshape its foundations, **but he is making a relation between the work of anthropology and the purpose of philosophy**. Furthermore, Collingwood transforms the notion of "survival" by giving it a new meaning: what survives is not seen here as something dead, **but something which still lives in the present**. The present day is the bearer of its past, a past which is never a dead thing.

This new philosophical meaning of survival is eminently historical for Collingwood because history is the best enquiry to know ourselves. And it is a conception opposed to what he calls the "genuine survival". So, the first definition of a survival, the anthropological one is clearly negative: survival is a traditional, we would say folkloric repetition of a practice or a game. As Collingwood speaks of a "mere inert survival" as opposed to "strong ideas".

The new definition is more complex: "So far, we have been considering magical customs found in relatively primitive societies, but not existing among ourselves. It is true that here and there survivals or remergences of them do exist."

Here, the thing that survives is no longer inert, passive. It is something which resists against the new form of culture. It is impossible for Collingwood to think of beliefs, customs and thoughts which would be merely passive. A genuine survival, one like the anthropologists would described doesn't seem to exist in Collingwood's philosophy because, as he writes: "The human mind may be receptive, but receptivity is not passivity: it is an effort of active thought". So, even a traditional custom, for Collingwood is active. Traditional stories are always retold as well as science which is never transmitted like a dead body.

Therefore, the notion of survival as a fragment without intelligibility is no longer valid for Collingwood, because tradition is: "a creative process, in which the transmitter is more than a medium through which the story conserves itself (or, if it be a distorting medium, fails to conserve itself and suffers degradation); **he is a sharer in the work of invention**. This is the only conception of tradition which will fit the known facts of human history".

3) The metaphysical statement

This examination of tradition is important because it allows Collingwood to say that if survivals still survive, it is because our habits of thoughts still survive too. This is the metaphysical statement of Collingwood. Against the positivist idea which tries to erase all superstitions in our society, Collingwood answers in *An Essay on Metaphysics* by reassuring his contemporaries of the presence of survival in our society: "Ours is an age when people pride themselves on having abolished magic and pretend that they have no superstitions. But they have as many as ever. The difference is that they have lost the art, which must always be a magical art, of conquering them. So, it is a special characteristic of modern European civilization that metaphysics is habitually frowned upon and the existence of absolute presuppositions denied."

From an anthropological background, Collingwood uproot the concept of survival and use it to elucidate a metaphysical problem. If the work of Metaphysics is to examine the absolute presuppositions, it seems also to meet the anthropological interest: Primitive Culture survives in our society, and Primitive presupposition too. This is what Collingwood calls in the *New Leviathan* the Law of Primitive Survivals: "9.51. When A is modified into B there survives in any example of B, side by side with the function B which is the modified form of A, an element of A in its primitive or unmodified state."

What is important here is the expression "side by side". It means that the Primitive A is never completely erased: it survives.

Hence, this strong continuity of survivals is, for Collingwood, a necessary condition of a civilization, and we need to examine survivals in our society, in order to better understand what is savage in our manners, what relates us to primitive culture. But sometimes survival could be problematic and maybe harmful. This is the last meaning of the word, and we find it in *An Essay on Metaphysics*, when in the Epilogue Collingwood quotes the bitter words of Russell: "The law of causality, I believe, like much that passes muster among philosophers, is a relic of a bygone age, surviving, like the monarchy, only because it is erroneously supposed to do no harm." Collingwood writes too in chapter XXXI : "Fifty years ago, anthropologists were content to note the fact that 'survivals' occur. Since then, they have seen that the occurrence of such things constitutes a problem, and a difficult one. 'Students have made some progress in ascertaining what causes folklore to decay, but what causes the surviving elements to survive? What vacuum does the survival fill?... These questions... remain a problem for the future.' What causes the survival of language which taken literally implies the survival of supposedly obsolete thought-forms is, I submit, the fact that these thought-forms are not so dead as they are supposed to be."

So, for Collingwood, we need to get rid of the Tylor-Frazer's conception of survival as irrational beliefs which still exist without any justification. We need to study them to understand first that savage spirit still exist in our civilized world. Second, that sometimes presuppositions still exist even when we think they belong to the past, for example the Law of Causality. So, survival must be studied as rational thoughts of the past encapsulated in the present, thanks to what we can better understand the past and better understand the present. So, we need not to erase them, but to clarify them and understand them.

Furthermore, Collingwood's opinion about survival in language is that these survivals are very alive. How can things survive, if we refer to Collingwood's philosophy, if they are not related to living presuppositions and to thoughts that are alive? It seems that Collingwood can't rationally speak of dead survivals, it is a contradiction in terms for him.

Thanks to Collingwood, survival is now introduced in the philosophical context, and we need to see how MacIntyre and Anscombe use it for new purposes.

III / MacIntyre and Anscombe: survival as a dead body or a possibility of a revival?

I will not speak here of Anscombe, but I just want to remind you of the second thesis of Modern Moral Philosophy : “The second is that the concepts of obligation, and duty – *moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say – and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of “ought”, ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible; because they are survivals, or derivative from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives and are only harmful without it.” That's why, for Anscombe, the answer to our modern moral distress is to be found in history. We notice too that, like Russell, Anscombe relates the notion of survival to “harmfulness”. Second, that she seems to use “survivals” just like Tylor used to do: something which used to have a rationality but still exist without it, and becomes in that way irrational.

However, what interests me here is that MacIntyre seems to have the same opinion.

1) MacIntyre and the survival of concept:

Indeed, in MacIntyre's thought, the notion of survival appears related directly to Moral Language. MacIntyre is not interested in the anthropological study of survival of customs or practices. What bothers him is what he calls in *A Short History of Ethics* : “these surviving moralities.” Here is an extract of the last chapter of *ASHE* : “In our society the acids of individualism have for four centuries eaten into our moral structures, for both good and ill. But not only this: we live with the inheritance of not only one, but of a number of well-

integrated moralities. Aristotelianism, primitive Christian simplicity, the puritan ethic, the aristocratic ethic of consumption, and the traditions of democracy and socialism have all left their mark upon our moral vocabulary.”

This is more or less the same well-known thesis in *After Virtue*, when he writes in chapter 10 : “A key part of my thesis has been that modern moral utterance and practice can only be understood as a series of **fragmented survivals** from an older past and that the insoluble problem which they have generated for modern moral theorists will remain insoluble until this is well understood. If the deontological character of moral judgements is the ghost of conceptions of divine law which are quite alien to the metaphysics of modernity and if the teleological character is similarly the ghost of conceptions of human nature and activity which are equally not at home in the modern world, we should expect the problems of understanding and of assigning an intelligible status to moral judgements both continually to arise and as continually to prove inhospitable to philosophical solutions.”

So, in a very anscombian fashion, MacIntyre points out that the problem of survival is that it **brings confusion in our modern moral vocabulary**. Moreover, survival is completely anachronic, because when you perform an action according to a moral conception of the past, you can't truly act according to this moral, because the condition of action has changed: if you change a society, you change its morality.

Therefore, MacIntyre is defining the survival in moral language as something bulky, cumbersome, a source of misunderstandings. And what MacIntyre suggests is that : “What we need here is not only philosophical acuteness but also the kind of vision which anthropologists at their best bring to the observation of other cultures, enabling them to identify survivals and unintelligibilities unperceived by those who inhabit those cultures.”

- ➔ Here we seem to come back to our starting point: MacIntyre is very much following the method of Tylor and Frazer. We need to notice every survival, named them and then erased them, because they are conceived as “unintelligible”, what Tylor would call “irrational”. That's the reason why MacIntyre compares our use of moral vocabulary to the use of Taboo.

2) Collingwood and MacIntyre: same method, different purposes?

What MacIntyre finds in Collingwood's method, it is the possibility to elucidate and clarify a concept thanks to its history. This is the reason why he quoted Collingwood and Hegel at the beginning of *After Virtue*. Nevertheless, when MacIntyre tries to underline the very existence of survival in our modern moral philosophy, he seems to depart from Collingwood's method.

In fact, MacIntyre seems to go back to Frazer's definition of survival by identifying "survival" and "irrationality". Yet, in Collingwood's thought of survival, there is something different: because there is this intuition that if something still exists, it is because the constellation of presuppositions that gave birth to it still survives. There is no free survival. If a concept is used in a proposition, it is because it gives an answer to a question (Logic of question/answer). But, in MacIntyre and Anscombe, **a concept without no rationality could be used**, and this irrationality is not perceived by the person who uses it. Very much like Tylor speaking of survivals of customs.

The main goal of this use of survival for MacIntyre is to dismiss analytical philosophy, phenomenology and others continental method of philosophizing. Because all this method won't perceive the "survival" in our language. Even if they could give a perfect analysis of a concept or express the structure of intentionality neither phenomenology nor analytic philosophy could see what is wrong with such a set of concepts.

Here, MacIntyre and Collingwood share the same method: the rapprochement between history and philosophy is necessary to understand and located the philosophical problem. But, we need to distinguish MacIntyre's purpose and Collingwood's : MacIntyre use the word "survival" to show the irrationality of intuitionists moral philosophers. To compare their use of moral concepts with the use of Taboos. However, for Collingwood, what survives has a reason to.

Finally, if we found in Collingwood a negative and a positive meaning of survival (Negative : mere survival, simply repeated. Positive : Law of Primitive survival), can we find the same in MacIntyre ? I want to suggest here, as a conclusion and it would give me the opportunity to introduce what I want to focus on during my future research, that in MacIntyre's thought survival is conceived as negative when it is applied to intuitionists, but it **could be applied positively** when it concerns Aristotelianism. Sometimes, concepts, or theories survives and "bore the marks of those encounters" to quote the famous article of MacIntyre *Epistemological Crisis* (1977). And, when this survival persists despite centuries of critics, when it resists to attacks even out of their context, maybe it is interesting to study it and give it the possibility of a revival. It seems to be the purpose of MacIntyre study: "It is to say that Aristotelianism always has possibilities of revival in new forms in different cultures".

But the question remains open: what gives to some survival the capacity of being revived? What do we have to do to give back its rationality to an unintelligible concept? Collingwood and MacIntyre share the intuition that our contemporary moral philosophy has suffered from a disease, see for example, Collingwood "propaganda of irrationalism" in *An Essay on Metaphysics* and MacIntyre "disquieting suggestion" at the beginning of *After Virtue*.

Both philosophers try to elaborate a philosophical method which could take the measure of such a catastrophe, which could use history to see where and when the catastrophe appeared and still appears, because for both of them: the past is still living in the present. That's why their philosophical method is very different from the analytical one, or

the continental (existentialism or phenomenological), because it rests on historical, anthropological, and sociological basis.

The study of the notion of “survival” enables me to distinguish the main features of this method, with different consequences. MacIntyre and Collingwood emphasizes on the necessity of history of ethics to understand that moral concepts are not eternal but related to practices of a community. And those practices must be studied, for Collingwood metaphysics must study the absolute presuppositions that are the basis of these practices. But irregularity can appear, because our world is a world of process: sometimes things survive out of the society that gives birth to them. It could be things like wheels, or walls, subject-matter of archeology. It could be stories, customs, riddles : subject-matter of anthropology. But it also could be concepts, presuppositions, form of thoughts. And what could we do about that? We need not to suppress them, say Collingwood, but understand how they can survive in our world, what tradition continue to support them, and see if they can correspond to the absolute presuppositions of our time. This is the role of metaphysics. But for MacIntyre those things are problematic, following Anscombe, he says that moral concept belonging to other times, can’t remain. They have to be eradicated. Or, we must create a revival. Because, if something survives it could be that it is a good concept. This is the beginning of the interest of MacIntyre in the notion of tradition: maybe Aristotelianism survival are still living in our society, first because we need them. Second: because they have the power to be revived.