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## R.G. Collingwood, Analytical Philosophy And Logical Positivism

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## R.G. COLLINGWOOD, ANALYTICAL PHILOSOPHY AND LOGICAL POSITIVISM

### 1. COLLINGWOOD AND ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

R.G. Collingwood is not normally associated with analytic philosophy, neither negatively nor positively. He neither regarded himself, nor was regarded by his contemporaries and their successors, as an analytical philosopher. However, the story is more interestingly complex than this, both because Collingwood is one of the few pre-analyticians in the UK who continues to be of interest to current analytical philosophers, especially in relation to the philosophy of art and history and his conception of metaphysics, and because he mounted a critique of analytical philosophy in the years of its emergence.

Although Collingwood is frequently labelled an idealist, this misrepresents both his position and his own self-perception. Indeed, it was only ever with great reluctance that R.G. Collingwood accepted any philosophical label, whether 'idealist' or 'Hegelian': he always preferred to think of himself as beating his own philosophical path. In his *Autobiography* Collingwood claims that there was never an 'Hegelian' school in Oxford:

When I began to read philosophy there in 1910, Oxford was still obsessed by what I will call the school of Green . . .

The philosophical tendencies common to this school were described by its contemporary opponents as Hegelianism. This title was repudiated by the school itself, and rightly . . . Green had read Hegel in youth, but rejected him in middle age . . . Bradley . . . knew enough of Hegel to be certain that he disagreed with his cardinal doctrines (Collingwood 1939: 15-16).

As for Collingwood himself, he was brought up in Oxford as a realist in the tradition of Cook Wilson, his tutor at University College being E.F. Carritt. Later, under the influence of the Italian idealists Croce, Gentile and De Ruggiero, he moved towards a form of idealism, and this phase culminated in the production of *Speculum Mentis* in 1924. In that work we find something akin to a Hegelian phenomenology, modified by reflection on Italian philosophy. In *Speculum Mentis* Collingwood identifies art, religion, science, history and philosophy as the forms of experience. This corresponds in part to Hegel's trio where art, religion and philosophy comprise absolute spirit. But the exact sequence maps more accurately onto Gentile's absolute forms of the spirit, which take the form of a triad consisting of art, religion and knowledge. Collingwood takes the triad, retains art and religion and divides knowledge into three moments. In his modified scheme, art is the subjective or imaginative and 'supposing' moment; religion is the objective or 'assertive' moment; within knowledge, the subjective or questioning is science; the objective or answering moment is history; and the absolute synthesis is philosophy.<sup>1</sup> But Collingwood saw no need to worry his readers with the detail of his influences:

by greatly adding to the bulk of this volume I could easily have pointed out the affinities of my position with that of eminent writers past and present, and so, perhaps, have recommended it to readers who rightly shrink from any philosophy which is advertised as new. If I have consistently refrained from doing this it is only because I want my position to stand on its merits rather than on names of great men cited as witnesses for its defence. But if the reader feels that my thesis reminds him of things that other people have said, I shall not be disappointed: on the contrary, what

will really disappoint me is to be treated as the vendor of new-fangled paradoxes and given some silly name like that of 'New Idealist' (Collingwood 1924: 12-13).

Or for that matter 'old idealist'. But in private he didn't appear to mind so much about these labels; indeed, he remarked to De Ruggiero that 'I now find that *Speculum Mentis* is exciting a good deal of attention ... and is regarded as possibly opening a new movement in English philosophy. People, intending praise, say as T.H. Green was to Kant and Hegel, so is R.G.C. to Croce! And Gentile!'<sup>2</sup>

One of the founders of the analytic school in Britain was L. Susan Stebbing, with whom Collingwood had a couple of early skirmishes. She reviewed both *Speculum Mentis* and *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* (1925) and later, in 1940, *An Essay on Metaphysics*. In *Speculum Mentis* Collingwood had remarked that 'to suppose that one word, in whatever context it appears, ought to mean one thing and no more, argues not an exceptionally high standard of logical accuracy but an exceptional ignorance as to the nature of language' (Collingwood 1924: 11). This prompted Stebbing to riposte that 'presumably, to expect that such important words as true, identical, real should have a clear and unambiguous meaning, is to be a "verbal pedant" who uses "jargon" that is neither English nor "plain." The critic is thus given to understand at the outset that he must not expect precision of statement whether or not there be clearness of thought' (Stebbing 1924: 567). This indicates a fundamental difference in their views of meaning and language, something that reappeared in later disputes with Gilbert Ryle and Curt Ducasse.

Collingwood published *An Essay on Philosophical Method* in 1933, the year of the founding of the journal *Analysis*. In the *Essay* he criticised the failure of the analytical school to address the issue of their own presuppositions (Collingwood 2005, Ch. VII). He argues that the methods and procedures of the analytic school rest on unacknowledged and unanalysed presuppositions. He suggests, further, that it leaves nothing for philosophy to do: by comparison with critical philosophy, which at least had the function of controverting error, analytic philosophy has only:

... the task of analysing the knowledge we already possess: taking the propositions which are given by science

and common sense, and revealing their logical structure or 'showing what exactly we mean when we say', for example, that there is a material world. ... If a person holding a view of this type were asked to state his philosophical position, he would probably begin by stating a series of propositions belonging to the sphere of common sense ... the task of philosophy, on this view, is to analyse such propositions as these; and consequently a philosopher holding this view would presumably describe as part of his philosophical position not only the data of analysis, the propositions of common sense ... but the results of analysis ... But the analytic view of philosophy implies a third class of propositions: neither the data of analysis ... nor its results ... but the principles according to which it proceeds; some of them logical ... some metaphysical. The analytic philosopher, invited to state his philosophical position, would perhaps include in the statement propositions of all these three classes. But, on such a view of philosophy, it is not quite clear that data, results, and principles have an equal right to be included. The data of analysis are only the subject-matter upon which philosophical thought exercises itself ... to think of it as an element in his philosophical position is to relapse into that very view of philosophy as criticizing or corroborating common sense against which this theory is expressly in revolt. The results of analysis would seem to be in the same case. For the analysis of a common-sense proposition states what exactly that proposition means; and if the datum of analysis is a common-sense proposition, its result, being identical with it in meaning, is a common-sense proposition also (Collingwood 2005: 142-4).

There is, however, one class of propositions that ought to be included but generally is not, namely what Collingwood has referred to as the 'third class of propositions... which comprises the principles on which analysis proceeds'.

These principles constitute a theory concerning the nature and method of philosophy; this is a philosophical theory, and a constructive one; and, therefore ... it is clear that

his first duty is to expound these. Yet he, like the critical philosopher, not only neglects this duty but makes a merit of neglecting it and asserting that he has no constructive or systematic theory of his own (Collingwood 2005: 144-5).

He goes on to remark that some, Susan Stebbing in her article on the 'The Method of Analysis in Metaphysics', for example, have started to remedy this defect. She has reminded us that the method has been used for over twenty years, but that no one has 'seen fit to raise' the issue. Stebbing has attempted to state these principles, but admits that 'nearly all the great philosophers of the past' have implicitly denied them, (Stebbing 1933: 66) and makes no attempt to rebut these denials or offer reasons why the assumptions should be granted. Collingwood concludes that analytical philosophy rests upon principles which constitute a constructive philosophical position:

But a great part of the attraction of the analytic method lies in its claim to have done away with the old idea of constructive philosophy; and the only comment which can now be made on that claim is that analytic philosophy does indeed involve a constructive philosophical doctrine, but, true to its character as a form of scepticism, declines the task of stating it (Collingwood 2005: 146).

As always, although under different terms and guises, Collingwood demands the clear enunciation of underlying principles and castigates his philosophical opponents for failing to give an account of theirs, or even for seeking to deny their existence. As will become apparent later, this is also the essence of his attack on logical positivism.

## 2. SKIRMISHES WITH RYLE AND DUCASSE

Eighteen months after the publication of Collingwood's *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, Gilbert Ryle launched in *Mind* a critique of the central contention of the chapter on 'Philosophy as Categorical Thinking', which consisted in saying that there was a specific philosophical sense in which the ontological argument held true: the sense that, as subject and object coincide in philosophical thought, to think philosophically is to prove the existence of the object of philosophical thought. Al-

though Collingwood was at pains to distinguish this claim from the traditional ontological argument in which it is held to prove the existence of God, his use of the term was provocative and unnecessary in establishing the rather limited claim he wished to make, which was merely that philosophical reasoning is self-reflexive in the sense that its propositions must also apply to itself: in philosophy one cannot step outside reason. Ryle objected both to what he saw as an anachronistic and perverse resurrection of the ontological argument - which (in his view) wilfully flew in the face of modern developments in logic - and to the lesser claim that philosophical claims and statements were also about themselves. I shall not pursue this here, but confine myself to a few remarks on the related dispute over the nature of language.<sup>3</sup> Collingwood resists the view that language consists in definitions, that is, the claim that language is essentially technical in origin. Technical definition presupposes language rather than grounds it. A related claim is that technical language in philosophy is undesirable and best avoided:

The duty of the philosopher as a writer is therefore to avoid the technical vocabulary proper to science, and to choose his words according to the rules of literature. His terminology must have that expressiveness, that flexibility, that dependence upon context, which are the hallmarks of a literary use of words as opposed to a technical use of symbols (Collingwood 2005: 207).

The Ryle–Collingwood correspondence took place in 1935, at the stage of Ryle's career when he subscribed to a view of language dominated by the idea of an ideal language and a denotational theory of meaning according to which all statements have meaning in the same way, namely the way in which 'Fido' means Fido (the dog). In this theory words and sentences are treated as names. Collingwood was never, whether in his earlier or later writings, under the spell of either an ideal language or the denotational theory of meaning. His view of language in fact bore similarities to that adopted by the later Wittgenstein and the later Ryle, but at the time of these early skirmishes both adhered to the denotational view and the assumption that language should strive for a sort of 'scientific' accuracy. Collingwood thought the latter to be at once impossible and misplaced in philosophy.

The same issues arose in Collingwood's quarrel with Curt Ducasse. In 1931 Collingwood reviewed *The Philosophy of Art*, in which Ducasse expresses his wish to avoid 'the vagueness and logical looseness which have been the bane of philosophy' – a comment which Collingwood quotes in his review. Ducasse, when he came to review *An Essay on Philosophical Method* a few years later, accuses Collingwood of inaccuracy and looseness, arguing that his attack on the technical theory of language was wrong, and that Collingwood's claim that in the case of philosophical concepts coordinate species overlap was based on a simple failure to understand the term 'coordinate species'. In Ducasse's view, given that the definition of coordinate species logically excludes the possibility of overlap, Collingwood is either wrong in his claim about overlap, or he is surreptitiously relying for his examples on what is true for non-coordinate species whilst claiming that the results hold for coordinate species.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. AN ESSAY ON METAPHYSICS AS A RESPONSE TO LANGUAGE, TRUTH AND LOGIC

The emergence of logical positivism constituted a full frontal onslaught on Collingwood's philosophical position; further, it emerged at the moment he was elected to the Waynflete Chair in Metaphysical Philosophy. How did he respond?

In *Part of My Life*, A.J. Ayer provides anecdotal evidence of Collingwood's attitude towards logical positivism, evidence showing both that he understood the significance of the new movement, and the extent to which he opposed it:

Gilbert Ryle told me that on a visit to Blackwell's he had overheard Prichard and Joseph saying that it was scandalous that the book had found a publisher. This does not imply that they had read it. Collingwood, who happened also to be in the shop, turned to them and said 'Gentlemen, this book will be read when your names are forgotten.' I suspect that this was less a tribute to me than an expression of his contempt for them. He did, however, take the book seriously enough to devote part of his lectures to refuting it. He ended one lecture by saying, 'If I thought Mr Ayer

was right, I would give up philosophy.' When the audience arrived for the next lecture, they were startled to find that it had been cancelled. The story ends lamely: he had been stricken with influenza (Ayer 1977: 166).

Of course Collingwood was right in his assessment of the fortunes of Prichard and Joseph: they remained virtually unheard of for many years (although Prichard's influence on Austin and others should not be under-estimated). It might be remarked, though, that Prichard is now returning to notice (together with W.D. Ross) under the aegis of the renewed interest in intuitionism and particularism in ethics.

*An Essay in Metaphysics* can be seen to be an attempt to show that on Ayer's own principles logical positivism had to accept the existence of certain entities whose existence it officially denied. Without relying on discredited philosophical authorities or on the voice of its opponents, he sought to mount an attack showing that logical positivism contained the seeds of its own destruction, just as he had earlier sought to show that the analytical school had failed to account for the principles on which it rested.

The genesis of *An Essay on Metaphysics* owes much to the influence on Collingwood of three factors: his election to the Waynflete Professorship; the work of Ayer and Michael Foster; and his studies in anthropology, philosophy of history, and the history of science. He was acutely aware of the different modes of thought and feeling of people separated in both time and space. Collingwood found himself in a position in which his own heightened sensitivity to the history and variability of basic concepts in science and civilization coincided with an especially ferocious attack on metaphysics at the moment he became Professor of Metaphysics. It is hardly fanciful to suppose that these factors, taken together, both prompted the writing of *An Essay on Metaphysics* and also influenced the general shape and character of its content and argument. Foster's work perhaps shaped or reinforced some of Collingwood's own views; Ayer's provoked Collingwood to articulate them forcefully.

Foster was propounding views arguing for both the inescapability of fundamental presuppositions in scientific work and the close relationship between these presuppositions and Christianity (see Foster 1934); Ayer, in contrast, was engaged (in a paper which appeared in the preceding issue of *Mind*) in a 'Demonstration of the Impossibility of Meta-

physics'. Collingwood took Ayer's challenge to metaphysics (and, by extension, the possibility of himself professing what he was paid to profess) seriously. But how was he to rebut it? One can imagine him reading the volume of *Mind* containing Foster's and Ayer's articles and seeing one as the answer to the other. But despite his substantial agreement with Foster, he chose to adopt a fresh strategy and argue the case from a different angle.

His strategy was to accept much of Ayer's argument, but to argue that something important is left standing after Ayer's demolition experts have done their work. What? 'Absolute presuppositions' is the answer. The next step (although not a necessary step – the force of the argument against Ayer is unaffected by the label) was to christen the activity of elucidating and articulating them 'metaphysics'. If this seemed a little thin, the argument could be bolstered with historical examples and strong claims for the centrality within natural science of those presuppositions. This is exactly what he encountered in Foster's articles where we find the unearthing of presuppositions, the claim that natural science is possible only on the basis of absolute presuppositions which cannot be justified by science itself, together with a tracing of the process by which these presuppositions emerged historically in the context of Christian belief and practice. From the conjunction of Ayer's negative criticism, Collingwood's determination to show that something can be salvaged for metaphysics, and Foster's articles, emerges *An Essay of Metaphysics*.<sup>5</sup>

Collingwood's first draft of the *Essay* was *The Function of Metaphysics in Civilization* (1937-8). That it was written in response to Ayer is clear:

... (this is a point at which the logical positivists are right) there is no possible method of verifying a metaphysical proposition. For any verification is a process resting on presuppositions; hence presuppositions as such can never be verified. The logical positivists, of course, draw the wrong conclusion from this. Confusing the case of a proposition which needs verification and fails to get it with the case of a proposition which doesn't get it because owing to its function in the structure of thought it can't need it, they infer that metaphysical propositions being unverifiable are nonsense. From this the right inference would be that since metaphys-

ical propositions are presupposed by all our ordinary thinking, all our ordinary thinking is nonsensical too; but they don't draw that inference because they completely fail to understand the nature of metaphysics (Collingwood 1998: 408-9).

Two observations are pertinent here. First, that Collingwood is right to claim that absolute presuppositions are not like normal propositions whose truth can be verified or demonstrated in a straightforward way. This is because they do not stand within our everyday thought but rather constitute the boundary of that thought; as such, the methods for determining truth and falsehood which apply to everyday propositions do not apply to them. Secondly, Collingwood is quite clearly restricting the term 'true' to 'what can be verified'. This is because Collingwood accepted Ayer's verification principle for the sake of argument (Collingwood 1998: 165). Thus, in the *Essay on Metaphysics* the terms 'truth' and 'falsity' mean no more than 'what can or cannot be empirically verified', and this is a concession to Ayer's verification principle. But his agreement with Ayer does not signify acceptance of all of Ayer's conclusions. His concern, on the contrary, is to show that, even granted Ayer's verification principle, metaphysics is still both possible and necessary and that if we deny the existence of absolute presuppositions we deny the very grounds of our own thinking. He is arguing that a class of meaningful statements exists which are neither analytically true nor empirically verifiable. Thus, if the term 'true statement' means one that is empirically verifiable, the conclusion must follow that absolute presuppositions are neither true nor false. Ayer, of course, regards them as meaningless; Collingwood does not. However, given that he adopts this approach for the sake of argument in the course of his polemic against Ayer and others, and that what he is essentially drawing attention to is the different roles that absolute presuppositions and empirically verifiable propositions play in our thought, we should not go on to conclude that there is *no* possible sense in which absolute presuppositions can be true. The only conclusion we can validly draw is that, if the term 'true' is restricted in this way, they cannot be true, but that, if the restrictions are removed, they can be true or false – but their truth or falsity has to be established in a different way than that of empirically verifiable propositions.

When he came to write the final version of *An Essay on Metaphysics* in 1938-9, Collingwood's thought had developed a little further. The main difference is that unlike in his earlier formulation he devises an entirely new argument for the existence of absolute presuppositions, one first adumbrated in *An Autobiography*. This is the argument from question and answer. Here he argues that every statement is the answer to a question and that each question presupposes the answer to a previous question. However, if one probes deeply enough, one reaches a presupposition which is not a relative presupposition, but an absolute presupposition in that it is not the answer to any question.

By a relative presupposition I mean one which stands relatively to one question as its presupposition and relatively to another question as its answer. ... An absolute presupposition is one which stands, relatively to all questions to which it is related, as a presupposition, never as an answer (Collingwood 1998: 29, 31).

Absolute presuppositions are not derived from experience, but something we bring to experience in the 'conversion of it into science and civilization' (Collingwood 1998: 197). Hence, they have a special place in our thinking and cannot be 'proved' or 'verified' according to an external criterion or test. What he terms 'relative presuppositions' are answers to questions and can be verified. They are 'normal' propositions; absolute presuppositions, by contrast, because they are not answers to questions at all, but rather what makes the activity of questioning possible, cannot be characterised as true or false in the way those terms apply to normal propositions. The distinctive feature of absolute presuppositions is marked by insisting that they are not really propositions at all. They are what must be presupposed in formulating propositions:

We do not acquire absolute presuppositions by arguing; on the contrary, unless we have them already arguing is impossible to us. Nor can we change them by arguing; unless they remained constant all our arguments would fall to pieces. We cannot confirm ourselves in them by 'proving' them; it is proof that depends on them, not they on proof (Collingwood 1998: 173).<sup>6</sup>

It is not my intention here to defend Collingwood's position against

criticism: that is another enterprise, and mine here is simply to indicate Collingwood's response to logical positivism, not to defend it.<sup>7</sup> So let me demonstrate the truth of my claim that his response was governed by tactics by considering his other activities over the same period. In *An Essay on Metaphysics* Collingwood stepped outside the shield of his philosophical affinities to defend them from attack; but he was still active behind the scenes in promoting the cause – an impression which one would never gain from a straight reading of the *Essay*.

#### 4. BEHIND THE SCENES: HEGEL

A corollary of Collingwood's response to the rise of analytical philosophy and its offshoots and allies is that after *Speculum Mentis* (1924) he ceased to use idealist language. Whether he should ultimately be characterised as an idealist or not, or whether he was an idealist in his early career and ceased to be one later, is another matter. What is clear, however, is that his language changed and that the later published writings contain little of the idealist terminology he used until 1925. For example, there is no reference to 'spirit' in published writings after 1925, although he continued to use the term in private manuscripts for another ten years. Again, in *An Essay on Philosophical Method* he does not use the terms 'dialectic' (except in referring to others), 'concrete universal', or the 'absolute'. Whether reviewers were right to praise it as 'one of the finest restatements in contemporary British philosophy of a Platonic and Hegelian metaphysic viewed from a modern standpoint' or not, his language was certainly not out of that stable (Knox 1933). In my view this was partly a tactical abstention from a language that would have been unhelpful and misunderstood in the new philosophical discourse of the 1930s, and partly serious dissatisfaction with the language he had inherited.

Despite his reluctance to use the language of idealism publicly, Collingwood was privately active in promoting the study of Hegel (to take but one example). In 1933 he wrote a detailed and sympathetic report for the Clarendon Press on Foster's *Political Philosophies of Plato and Hegel* (1935). A few years later he took a close interest in G. R. G. Mure's work on Hegel. This large volume, following Collingwood's suggestions, was published as two separate volumes: *An Introduction*

to *Hegel* (1940) and *A Study of Hegel's Logic* (1950). In his report he commented that:

The book is a very fine one . . . Mure is a first rate man, and let us not forget it. His introduction will make a magnificent separate book under that name. I have read all the introductions to Hegel in all the ordinary languages (if there are any in Hungarian or Russian I haven't read *them*) and this is far the best. It doesn't pot Hegel, it illuminates him.<sup>8</sup>

A year later, in May 1940, Collingwood acted as the champion for Knox's translation of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. He wrote to Knox that 'of your enclosures I have only read the Hegel paper: you can guess with what delighted approval. J.A. Smith (God rest his soul) used to declaim against the habit of treating Hegel as a dead dog. Carritt is a deeply-dyed offender. You have done justice to him.'<sup>9</sup> On seeing a draft of the translation in 1938, he suggested in correspondence with the Press that the *Zusätze* be retained as they 'are regarded as of great importance by all Hegel devotees.' Later, writing to Kenneth Sisam at the Clarendon Press, Knox wrote that:

In a formal and official letter I have avoided mentioning Collingwood's name, but I may tell you privately that he has been interested in this project and that I have had several conversations with him about it. In particular, he is the Delegate who has advised me to submit the thing again now and not to hide it, as I had intended to do, until the war was over. . . . it is no secret that Collingwood is much more of a Hegelian scholar than Ross is . . .<sup>10</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSION

It was indeed no secret to anyone at the time where Collingwood's philosophical affinities rested. However, he always objected most vehemently to the reductive tendency inherent in the careless use of general labels and talk of philosophical schools. He did not want his views to be assimilated to an 'idealist' school to which he did not regard himself as belonging: that way, he thought, lay for him philosophical oblivion. He chose instead to express himself independently, without reliance

on philosophical authorities of whatever provenance. He attempted to mount independent critiques of analytical philosophy and logical positivism and to develop his own arguments. In so doing he carved out for himself an area of philosophical independence and thereby ensured that his work continues to be read despite the exigencies of philosophical fashion.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See H.S Harris's introduction to G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, p.18.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to de Ruggiero, November 16<sup>th</sup> 1924.

<sup>3</sup> For a full account, see the editors' introduction to *Collingwood 2005*.

<sup>4</sup> According to standard Aristotelian logic, it is simply an axiom that the coordinate species of a genus are mutually exclusive. See, for example, (Parry & Hacker 1991: 131-2) where they state in their discussion of logical division that 'Coordinate classes must be mutually exclusive; The coordinate classes must be jointly coextensive with the class they divide; Each stage of a division should be based upon one principle of division.' On this basis, to assert that coordinate species overlap is either to speak nonsense or to have misidentified the species.

<sup>5</sup> He later published 'Christian Theology and Modern Science of Nature' in two parts (1935-6).

<sup>6</sup> Collingwood gives various examples of absolute presuppositions. They include 'all events have a cause', the principle of the continuity of nature in time and space, the existence of God, the principle that mathematics is applicable to the natural world and hence that natural science is essentially an applied mathematics, and so on. Copious examples may be found throughout both *An Essay on Metaphysics* and *The Idea of Nature*.

<sup>7</sup> See Connelly 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Letter to the Clarendon Press, 16<sup>th</sup> June 1939.

<sup>9</sup> Letter to T.M. Knox, 6<sup>th</sup> January 1940. The paper referred to is 'Hegel and Prussianism'.

<sup>10</sup> Letter to the Clarendon Press, 15th March 1940.

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