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Ymko Braaksma<sup>1</sup>

# 'The Babblings of Pragmatism'

*Reconstructing R.G. Collingwood's Rejection of  
F.C.S. Schiller's Pragmatism in **Speculum  
Mentis***

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**Abstract:** Despite R.G. Collingwood's lifelong attempt to bring about a 'rapprochement' between theory and practice, his relation to pragmatism, the school that has the same central ambition, has hitherto been understudied. In particular, it remains unclear in the secondary literature why Collingwood felt necessitated to reject pragmatism himself. This paper partly remedies that gap by showing that, in *Speculum Mentis*, Collingwood interprets the pragmatist position as seeing relatively clearly into the nature of knowledge as consisting of questions and answers, but ultimately relying on a bifurcation of thought and will, a dualism it precisely set out to refute in the first place. Pragmatism, in other words, is incoherent. Moreover, Collingwood himself rejects the dualism between thought and will as well. Furthermore, I

1 y.braaksma@rug.nl I thank Rik Peters and Martin Lenz for detailed comments on the material from which this paper was constructed. I also thank the audience of the 2019 British Idealism Conference at Gregynog, Wales, where I first presented some of the ideas contained in this text. I am particularly indebted to James Connelly, who made a few very useful suggestions and kindly offered practical help on some matters.

argue that Collingwood's criticism is best understood as dealing with F.C.S. Schiller's version of pragmatism. By relating Collingwood's sparse remarks on the subject to the position of Schiller, enough meaning to the former can be given so as to render his refutation of pragmatism intelligible.

### Introduction

The beginning of the twentieth century marked a turbulent period in the history of anglophone philosophy. After dominating British thought for multiple decades, idealists such as F.H. Bradley (1846–1924) and Bernard Bosanquet (1848–1923) found themselves embroiled in contentious debates with thinkers of a realist stripe, Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) and G.E. Moore (1873–1958) being the most prominent antagonists. Whereas Bradley and Bosanquet hold that it is the aim of thought to contemplate the Absolute, coherence being the criterion of truth, Russell and Moore argue that the goal of thinking is to produce beliefs that correspond to the world external to mind. From overseas, a third contender for philosophical domination emerged. Inspired by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), the American pragmatists William James (1842–1910) and John Dewey (1859–1952), along with their Britain-based compatriot F.C.S. Schiller (1864–1937), altogether deny the presupposition common to both idealism and realism: that thought has a goal of its own. For the pragmatists, rather, thinking is no more than one function of the human organism which, as a whole, has as its aim to live prosperously. It follows that a belief is true, not if it coheres with the rest of the Absolute or corresponds to the external world, but if it helps the organism solve practical problems.<sup>2</sup>

It was under these unstable circumstances that R.G. Collingwood (1889–1943) entered the philosophical scene.

2 See: William Mander, *British Idealism: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011), esp. pp. 439–52.

Starting his career under the influence of realist teachers such as John Cook Wilson (1849–1915) and E.F. Carritt (1876–1964), Collingwood disentangled himself from his philosophical upbringings after the First World War, ultimately developing an original position that is hard to pigeon-hole.<sup>3</sup> His relations to idealist and realist views are items of frequent self-reflection in Collingwood's own writings, and also widely studied topics in the secondary literature.<sup>4</sup> About his position *vis-à-vis* pragmatism, on the other hand, much less is known. It is the aim of this paper to contribute to remedying this gap in our understanding of Collingwood's philosophical development.

In line with his lifelong ambition to bring about 'a *rap-prochement* between theory and practice', Collingwood, throughout his career, expressed thoughts that have a pragmatist ring about them.<sup>5</sup> For instance, the very first sentences of *Speculum Mentis* (1924) state that all 'thought exists for the sake of action. We try to understand ourselves and our world only in order that we may learn how to live'.<sup>6</sup> In *An Autobiography* (1939) Collingwood asserts that 'historical problems arise out of practical problems ... the plane on which, ultimately, all problems arise is the plane of 'real' life'.<sup>7</sup> And in *The New Leviathan* (1942) practice is prioritized over theory: 'Real thinking ... always starts from practice and returns to practice; for it is based

- 3 See: Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action: The Philosophies of Croce, Gentile, De Ruggiero and Collingwood* (Exeter: Academic Imprint 2013), esp. chs. 5, 7, 9 & 10.
- 4 See e.g. R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* [1939]. With a New Introduction by Stephen Toulmin (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1978), pp. 15–52; R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* [1946]. Rev. edn. With Lectures 1926–1928, ed. with intro. Jan van der Dussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994), pp. 134–41 & 151–64; Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, chapter 5 & Peter Skagestad, *Exploring the Philosophy of R.G. Collingwood: From History and Method to Art and Politics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic 2020), pp. 10–3.
- 5 Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 147.
- 6 R.G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis: Or the Map of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), p. 1
- 7 Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 114.

on 'interest' in the thing thought about; that is, on a practical concern with it'.<sup>8</sup>

However, we would be too quick to conclude from this that Collingwood was some kind of pragmatist. In a few scattered and frustratingly brief remarks he repudiates pragmatism and what he conceives to be its accompanying theory of truth. In *Speculum Mentis*, Collingwood speaks of 'the babblings of pragmatism' and rejects their alleged view that knowledge is not true but useful, a rejection he repeats in his autobiography.<sup>9</sup> The question arises how Collingwood's philosophical views allow for both a clear rejection of pragmatism and him putting forward theses that resemble pragmatist ones.

Given this tension within his writings, it should not come as a surprise that the secondary literature is as yet undecided about Collingwood's relation to pragmatism. Some hold that Collingwood is, in the words of Angela Requate, an 'undercover pragmatist'.<sup>10</sup> As Louis Mink says more modestly: 'I think that it is likely that the future

8 R.G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan: Or Man, Society, Civilization & Barbarism* [1942]. Rev. edn.: with intro. and additional material ed. David Boucher (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 18.13.

9 Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 182 & Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 36.

10 Angela Requate, 'Was Collingwood an Undercover Pragmatist?', in: *Diálogos*, 30 (1995), pp. 93-116. See for similar views: Angela Requate, *Pragmatischer versus Absoluter Idealismus. G.W.F. Hegel's und R.G. Collingwood's Geschichtsphilosophie* (Cuxhaven: Junghans, 1994); Requate, 'R.G. Collingwood's Pragmatist Approach to Metaphysics', in: *International Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 29, no. 2 (1997), pp. 57-71; Angela Requate, 'R.G. Collingwood and G.H. Mead on the Concept of Time in History', in: *Collingwood Studies*, vol. 5 (1998), pp. 72-89; Stein Helgeby, *Action as History: The Historical Thought of R.G. Collingwood* (Exeter: Imprint Academic 2004), p. 78; Jan van der Dussen, *Studies on Collingwood, History and Civilization* (Cham: Springer 2016), p. 143; Colin Koopman, 'Genealogical Pragmatism', in: *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, vol. 5 (2011), p. 535; Colin Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 226-7 & Kenneth Laine Ketner, 'Our Addictions', in: *Contemporary Pragmatism*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2004), p. 159 & Skagestad, *Exploring the Philosophy of R.G. Collingwood*, pp. 13, 19, 80, 92, 105, 111, 113, 118-19, 123, 126, 137 & 173.

historian of our time will see Collingwood along with pragmatists ... as tributaries of a common stream'.<sup>11</sup> Others, however, are staunchly opposed to such a view. In this vein, Guido Vanheeswijck asserts that Collingwood 'would never have chosen the way of pragmatism'.<sup>12</sup> And likewise, Giuseppina d'Oro insists that there exist 'crucial differences' between the positions of Collingwood and the pragmatists.<sup>13</sup>

What the above views have in common is that they take a predominantly philosophical approach towards Collingwood's relation to pragmatism. That is, they offer an interpretation of Collingwood's ideas and use this interpretation to show that Collingwood's view either is or is not compatible with the thinking of the pragmatists. Although not reproachable in principle, such methods do result in a neglect of more historical questions, such as: 'Why did Collingwood *himself* reject pragmatism?' Besides such questions seeming prior to the philosophical ones of the interpreters cited above, it is also to be expected that the answers to the former will illuminate the latter.

This paper, then, focuses on Collingwood's own rejection of the pragmatists. His most sustained engagement with them is found in *Speculum Mentis* and my account is thus primarily concerned with that book.<sup>14</sup> 'Sustained'

- 11 Louis O. Mink, *Mind, History, and Dialectic: The Philosophy of R.G. Collingwood* (Bloomington/London: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 12.
- 12 Guido Vanheeswijck, 'Reviewed Work: *Pragmatischer versus Absoluter Idealismus. G.W.F. Hegel's und R.G. Collingwood's Geschichtsphilosophie* by Angela Requate. Review by: G. Vanheeswijck', in: *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, vol. 57, no. 4 (December 1995), p. 754. The original text is in Dutch, the translation is mine.
- 13 Giuseppina d'Oro, *Collingwood and the Metaphysics of Experience* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 37.
- 14 For other short remarks on pragmatism, see: R.G. Collingwood, *Ruskin's Philosophy: An Address Delivered at the Ruskin Centenary Conference, Coniston, August 8th, 1919* [1922], in: *Idem, Essays in the Philosophy of Art*, ed. and intro. A. Donagan (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1964), pp. 26–7; R.G. Collingwood, 'Are History and Science Different

here, however, is a relative term. Only a couple of sentences are devoted to pragmatism in *Speculum Mentis*, so the reconstruction of Collingwood's argument will take up some space. The conclusion of this reconstruction is that Collingwood is in all likelihood attacking Schiller's version of pragmatism, notwithstanding Peter Skagestad's recent conjecture that Collingwood might have had James in mind when writing *Speculum Mentis*.<sup>15</sup> I will argue, furthermore, that Collingwood does not reject pragmatism wholesale, but is mainly criticizing Schiller's philosophy as being insufficiently elaborated. *Speculum Mentis*, therefore, can be partly read as a correction of Schiller's position, turning the pragmatist babblings into a serious philosophy wherein theory and practice are *really* united.

I proceed by first introducing Schiller and his peculiar form of pragmatism (I). Second, I turn to *Speculum Mentis* and show how far Collingwood agrees with Schiller and in what sense their respective positions are irreconcilable (II).

### I. Schiller's pragmatism

Ferdinand Canning Scott Schiller was born in 1864 in Germany, and died in 1937 in Los Angeles. He worked at Oxford University in England, and Cornell University and the University of Southern California in the United States. Additionally, he was president of the Aristotelian Society, treasurer of the Mind Association and a fellow of the British Academy.

Kinds of Knowledge?', in: *Mind*, vol. 31, no. 124 (1922), p. 445. Moreover, we learn from *An Autobiography* that Collingwood's first book, *Religion and Philosophy* (1916), contains an implicit refutation of William James' psychological thought about religion. See: Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 93 & R.G. Collingwood, *Religion and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan & co., 1916), esp. p. 42.

15 Skagestad, *Exploring the Philosophy of R.G. Collingwood*, pp. 118–9.

Philosophically speaking, Schiller was the foremost defender of American pragmatism in Europe. He was engaged in many heated debates with members of other philosophical schools, such as Bradley and Russell. Schiller was known for his extremely polemical style, which surely has not contributed to the acceptance of pragmatism in Great Britain.<sup>16</sup> He once said of Bradley, for example, that ever

since he made his *début* ... by triumphantly dragging the corpse of John Stuart Mill round the beleaguered stronghold of British philosophy, he has exercised a reign of terror based on an unsparing use of epigrams and sarcastic footnotes, 'more polished than polite'...<sup>17</sup>

Such rhetorical tactics were not always appreciated by Schiller's allies. After yet another of Schiller's retorts at Bradley, James wrote to his friend: 'So few people would find these last statements of his [Bradley's] seductive enough to build them into their own thought. But you, for the pure pleasure of the operation, chase him up and down his windings ... as if required to do so by your office'.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, it cannot be underestimated how influential Schiller was in the dissemination of pragmatism. He defended it in multiple books and dozens of articles, many of which were published in prestigious journals such as *Mind* and *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*.

By both historical opponents and later commentators, pragmatism is often said to be essentially a theory of

16 See: Mark J. Porrovecchio, F.C.S. *Schiller and the Dawn of Pragmatism: The Rhetoric of a Philosophical Rebel* (Washington DC: Lexington Books, 2011) & Cheryl Misak, *The American Pragmatists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 91–6.

17 F.C.S. Schiller, *Studies in Humanism* (London: Macmillan & co., 1907), p. 115.

18 William James, Cambridge, to F.C.S. Schiller, 18 May 1907, cited in: Porrovecchio, *Schiller and the Dawn of Pragmatism*, p. 134n55.



truth.<sup>19</sup> Especially in the case of Schiller, however, this is not entirely correct. In multiple places he makes it clear that his account of truth is firmly grounded in and follows from a philosophy of mind inspired by evolutionary biology. This latter view has it that thought is merely one component of the undivided human organism, and can only be divorced from other parts—such as feeling and will—by the function it performs, and not in some metaphysical way. The organism *as a whole* aims at adapting to its environment in order to live prosperously, and thought has its specific duty to perform in this effort. Schiller explains it as follows in ‘Axioms as Postulates’ (1902): ‘the organism is *one*’ and ‘cannot afford to support a disinterested and passionless intelligence’. Rather, ‘thought must be conceived as an outgrowth of action ... while the brain which has become an instrument of intellectual contemplation must be regarded as the subtlest, latest and most potent organ for effecting adaptations to the needs of life’.<sup>20</sup> In *Studies in Humanism* (1907), Schiller repeats that all ‘three faculties [feeling, will, thought] are at bottom only labels for describing the activities of what may be called indifferently a unitary personality, or a reacting organism’.<sup>21</sup>

That this biological account of thought is more fundamental than the pragmatist theory of truth for Schiller

- 19 E.g. Bertrand Russell, ‘Pragmatism’ [1909], in: John G. Slater (ed.), *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell 6: Logical and Philosophical Papers 1909–13* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 261; Samuel Alexander, ‘Collective Willing and Truth (II)’, in: *Mind* vol. 22, no. 4 (1913), p. 182; G.E. Moore, ‘Professor James’s “Pragmatism”’ [1907], in Doris Olin (ed.), *William James: Pragmatism in Focus* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 162–3; Cheryl Misak, *The American Pragmatists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. x; William Mander, *British Idealism: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 449; Jane Duran, ‘Russell on James’, in: *Russell: The Journal of the Bertrand Russell Archives*, no. 14 (1994), p. 32.
- 20 F.C.S. Schiller, ‘Axioms as Postulates’, in: Henry Sturt (ed.), *Personal Idealism: Philosophical Essays by Eight Members of the University of Oxford* (London: Macmillan and co., 1902), pp. 84–5, Schiller’s emphasis.
- 21 Schiller, *Studies in Humanism*, p. 129.

comes most prominently to the fore in an exchange between him and Bradley. Having become sceptical of the power of thought to penetrate to the level of the Absolute, Bradley in 1908 proposes what he calls 'a practical creed', according to which '...there is in the end no truth for us save that of working ideas. Whatever idea is wanted to satisfy a genuine human need is true, and truth ... has no other meaning ... The one question in the end is whether the ideas work.'<sup>22</sup> Bradley thinks that pragmatists might 'like to appropriate surreptitiously' the 'advantages' of his practical creed and goes as far as to wonder whether 'Am I and have I been always myself a Pragmatist?'<sup>23</sup>

In 'Is Mr. Bradley Becoming a Pragmatist?' (1908), Schiller answers that question negatively. He admits that Bradley's practical creed involves a theory of truth that 'sound[s] very pragmatic.'<sup>24</sup> But these 'working ideas' are only miserable substitutes for the ultimate truth which we ostensibly aim for but cannot get a hold of. Bradley keeps affirming the belief that thought aspires to the Absolute, sees that this ideal cannot be achieved, and only then comes up with a 'practical creed' so that at least our daily lives can be carried on. But a *true* pragmatist arrives at her theory of truth via a radically different route, Schiller holds. The real pragmatist bases her theory of truth on a positive, biological conception of thought. Bradley, in contrast, introduces his 'practical creed' as a consequence of the negative view that Absolute truth is impossible to have. 'The true analogue' of Bradley's ideas, Schiller thus claims, 'is not the pragmatic Criticism, but the Humian [sic] scepticism, which also sought to atone for its philo-

22 F.H. Bradley, 'On the Ambiguity of Pragmatism', in: *Mind*, vol. 17, no. 66 (1908), p. 230.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 230 & 226.

24 F.C.S. Schiller, 'Is Mr. Bradley Becoming a Pragmatist?' in: *Mind*, vol. 17, no. 67 (1908), p. 381, my emphasis.

sophic failure by laxity of practice'.<sup>25</sup> From Schiller's perspective, then, *not* your notion of truth makes you a pragmatist, but *the analysis of thought* on which it is premised.<sup>26</sup>

In the rest of his work, Schiller goes on to work out the consequences of his Darwinian outlook in multiple directions. In metaphysics, he holds that reality consists of two aspects: experience on the one hand, and 'certain assumptions, connecting principles, or fundamental truths' on the other.<sup>27</sup> With the latter, he has in mind things akin to the Kantian categories such as 'cause' and 'substance'. However, Schiller disagrees with Kant and others about the nature of such principles underlying experience.

For Schiller experience as a whole – including its fundamental truths – consists of 'experimentation' and 'reaction'.<sup>28</sup> In order to structure our chaotic, primary experience, we propose to look at reality in a certain way. What if we assume, for example, that every event has a cause? Does this postulate work? If not, we discard it and try to order reality in a better way. If yes, the principle turns from a postulate into an axiom; we accept it as a general truth and keep using it to get a grip on what we experience. Our experiment has been successful and its result

25 Ibid., p. 381. Schiller is here, of course, referencing David Hume (1711–76), who comforts us that sceptical doubts only cause 'momentary amazement and irresolution and confusion' but 'no conviction' so that our daily life is not inconvenienced by them. See his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* [1748], ed. with intro. and notes Peter Millican (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), ch. 12, Section 15, Note 32, Hume's emphasis omitted.

26 It is noteworthy that Dewey is of the same opinion as Schiller with regard to the kernel of pragmatism. He says that 'the essential point of pragmatism is that it bases its changed account of truth on a changed conception of intelligence', and that 'since truth is the adequate fulfilment of the function of intelligence, it is clear the whole question turns on the nature of the latter'. Whoever sees pragmatism as merely proposing a theory of truth fails 'to take its contention seriously enough'. John Dewey, 'Reality and the Criterion for the Truth of Ideas', in: *Mind*, vol. XVI, no. 63 (1907), p. 325n.

27 Schiller, 'Axioms as Postulates', p. 51.

28 Ibid., p. 55.

now turns into a reaction; an unconscious habit of thought with which we order the world. Here Schiller clearly deviates from Kant. Whereas for Kant the categories are universal and necessary conditions of rationality, for Schiller they are only postulates that have proven successful. Far from being necessary, this means that our axioms might be done away with if other postulates turn out to work even better.

Again, for Schiller, the whole of reality consists of experimentation and reaction. Therefore, he says, the possibility of an external reality, available to us to evaluate whether our beliefs are true, is precluded. The world is to an unascertainable extent of our own making. Made, that is, by our successful experiments. In Schiller's words:

[E]ven our most passive receptivity of sensations can, and should be construed as the effortless fruition of what was once acquired by strenuous effort, rather than as the primal type to which all experience should be reduced.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, a postulate, for Schiller, is always practical. We ask whether every event has a cause, because it would be *good* if this was the case. It would be very useful indeed to be able to predict future events with our conception of causation in hand. In the end, therefore, all truths originate with our practical desires.

Does the above mean that anything goes for Schiller? Can we make reality into anything we would like it to be? No, this is not the case. We perform experiments on the basis of our desires, but these experiments might fail. In our experience there is a 'resisting something' to which our experiments must conform.<sup>30</sup> To call the resisting factor in experience 'the external world', however, would be a bridge too far according to Schiller, for 'while there can be no dispute as to the fact of this resistance, there may be not a little as to its nature, and no slight difficulty about

29 Ibid., p. 56.

30 Ibid., p. 59.

defining it with precision'.<sup>31</sup> In any case, a truly external reality, external to human experience, that is, would be out of reach for us per definition.

This point forms an essential part of Schiller's dispute with realists and idealists alike. For Schiller, these two groups of philosophers form two sides of the same coin. Both believe that there is a reality that transcends human experience which determines whether any one of our beliefs is true or not. For realists this is the external world, for idealists the Absolute. But from Schiller's viewpoint the assumption of an ultimate reality of either kind is futile. Against the correspondence theory of truth, Schiller holds that we can never compare the world and our *thought about* the world with each other. The world is only known in thinking and cannot be separated from it without making it *unknown* and hence *incomparable*. Whether a belief corresponds to an external reality, therefore, we are never in a position to know.<sup>32</sup> And the upshot of Bradley's conception of the Absolute is the same, or so Schiller holds:

For though he [Bradley] has reserved for it [the Absolute] the title of Sole and Supreme Reality, it is only used to cast an indelible slur on all human reality and knowledge. It 'absorbs', 'transcends', 'transmutes', etc. all our knowledge and experience. It is therefore quite ... unknowable.<sup>33</sup>

The Absolute is an entity that goes way beyond our limited human experience, and can never be fully known by our finite minds, as we have seen Bradley acknowledge above. But if this is true, Schiller holds, the Absolute is just as incapable of being the arbiter of truth as the external world of the realist. For how could we relate our beliefs to

31 Idem.

32 See for more or less the same argument against realism by Collingwood: *An Autobiography*, p. 44.

33 F.C.S. Schiller, *Humanism: Philosophical Essays* (London: Macmillan and co., 1903), p. 191.

the Absolute, if the latter must remain unknown to us?<sup>34</sup> Realism and absolute idealism, Schiller concludes, face 'precisely the same' problem.<sup>35</sup>

In their place, Schiller wants to put a logic which holds in the highest regard the fact that truth must always be situated within concrete human experience if it is capable of being known at all. Not the external world or the Absolute are the arbiter of truth, but our own practical purposes:

[W]hether an assertion is 'true' or 'false' is decided uniformly and very simply. It is decided, that is, by its consequences, by its bearing on the interest which prompted to the assertion, by its relation to the purpose which put the question. To add to this that the consequences must be good is superfluous. For if and so far as an assertion satisfies or forwards the purpose of the inquiry to which it owes its being, it is so far 'true'; if and so far it thwarts or baffles it, it is unworkable, unserviceable, 'false' ... To determine therefore whether any answer to any question is 'true' or 'false', we have merely to note its effect upon the inquiry in which we are interested, and in relation to which it has arisen.<sup>36</sup>

To use a simplified illustration, for Schiller 'That is a chair' is true if it furthers one of my purposes. For example, I might want to rest my feet and, as a result of that, ask whether this object that I see is a chair, it being the case that chairs can be used to rest feet. If I am subsequently able to sit in the object, and as a result I don't have to stand or walk for a while, it is true that it is a chair for Schiller.

The example shows that meaning as well as truth is dependent on purpose. We might expect a lot of practical consequences from one object, but which ones are relevant to me depends on the specific inquiry I am conducting. As Schiller says:

If ... I can sit in the 'chair' ... I shall trouble little whether it ought to be called a 'sofa' or a 'stool'. Of course, however, if

34 See Schiller, *Studies in Humanism*, pp. 181–2.

35 Ibid., p. 181. Also see F.C.S. Schiller, 'The Rationalistic Concept of Truth', in: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 9, (1908–1909), esp. pp. 97–8.

36 Schiller, *Studies in Humanism*, p. 154.

my interest was not that of a mere sitter, but of a collector or dealer in ancient furniture, my first judgment may have been woefully inadequate, and may need to be revised.<sup>37</sup>

And this is precisely the reason why Schiller is extremely critical of formal logic. In his controversial book *Formal Logic: A Scientific and Social Problem* (1912), he attacks the discipline for failing to take into account the purpose-relatedness of meaning. The logician studies the formal features of a proposition or judgment, but the latter lose their meaning if not applied to a concrete case: 'They [logicians] did not see that ultimately in every case of actual thinking the question involved was bound to be that of expressing a *particular* meaning, and that therefore the form employed had to be relative to a particular purpose.'<sup>38</sup> As formal logic is unable to discern the real meaning of propositions, it also becomes impossible to say whether any judgments actually made are true or false. The result is that logic, and by extension philosophy, is no longer relevant to practical life, a situation much regretted by Schiller.<sup>39</sup>

Such are the contours of Schiller's specific form of pragmatism. In the next section we will see how far this position on thought, reality and truth goes in the right direction from Collingwood's perspective.

## II. Collingwood on pragmatism in *Speculum Mentis*

In the decade or so leading up to the publication of *Speculum Mentis*, Schiller remained by far the most vocal protagonist of pragmatism in Britain. James, frontrunner

37 Ibid., p. 193.

38 F.C.S. Schiller, *Formal Logic: A Scientific and Social Problem* (London: Macmillan and co., 1912), pp. 5–6, Schiller's emphasis. Also see F.C.S. Schiller, Bernard Bosanquet & Hastings Randall, *Symposium: Can Logic Abstract From the Psychological Conditions of Thinking?*, in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society: New Series*, Vol. 6 (1905–1906), pp. 224–6 & Jones, Bosanquet & Schiller, *The Import of Propositions*, pp. 385–6, 394–7 & 421–2 & Schiller, 'The Present Phase of 'Idealist' Philosophy', pp. 42–3.

39 Schiller, *Formal Logic*, pp. 394–409.

of the movement, passed away in 1910. Peirce had been almost entirely absent from the discussions across the Atlantic ocean and died as a virtually unknown thinker in 1914. On the other hand, Dewey continued to be extremely active as an educationist and philosopher and would live until 1952. However, he ceased to publish in British journals such as *Mind* and *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. This situation left Schiller as the main banner carrier for pragmatism, and he fulfilled this task dutifully by continuing to take on both realism and idealism. In 1920 Schiller debated Russell on 'The Meaning of 'Meaning'', reiterating his now familiar point that what 'anything means depends on *who* means it, when, where, why, on what occasion, in what context, with what purpose, with what success'.<sup>40</sup> A year later Bosanquet published his last book, *The Meeting of Extremes in Contemporary Philosophy*, in which he attacks pragmatists, realists and 'neo-idealists' alike. Of this work, Schiller wrote a scathing review.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, Collingwood and Schiller personally knew each other. Collingwood's diary, kept from 1912 to 1922, indicates that he met Schiller for dinner on 30 January 1915. According to James Patrick, 'R.G.C. [Collingwood] called' Schiller 'good company', and Patrick describes their relation as a 'friendship'. It lasted at least until 24 October 1920.<sup>42</sup> Further, Collingwood and Schiller both participated in a joint session of *Mind* and the *Aristotelian Society* on the question whether 'Are History and Science Different Kinds of Knowledge?' (1922).<sup>43</sup> In other words,

40 F.C.S. Schiller, 'The Meaning of 'Meaning'', in: *Mind*, vol. 29, no. 116 (1920), p. 391, Schiller's emphasis.

41 F.C.S. Schiller, 'An Idealist *In Extremis*', in: *Mind*, vol. 31, no. 122 (1922), pp. 144–53.

42 James Patrick, 'The Oxford Man', in: R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography and Other Writings: With Essays on Collingwood's Life and Work*, ed. David Boucher & Teresa Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 226&n.

43 Collingwood, 'Are History and Science Different Kinds of Knowledge?' & F.C.S. Schiller, 'Are History and Science Different Kinds of Knowledge?'



there is no doubt that Collingwood must have been aware of the existence of Schiller's pragmatism.

In *Speculum Mentis*, Collingwood first introduces pragmatism in the chapter on art, in the section titled 'Knowledge as Question and Answer':

People who are acquainted with knowledge at first hand have always known that assertions are only answers to questions. So Plato described true knowledge as 'dialectic', the interplay of question and answer in the soul's dialogue with itself; so Bacon pointed out once for all that the scientist's real work was to interrogate nature, to put her, if need be, to the torture as a reluctant witness; so Kant mildly remarked that the test of an intelligent man was to know what questions to ask, and the same truth has lately dawned on the astonished gaze of the pragmatists.<sup>44</sup>

At first sight, it seems surprising to find the pragmatists in such illustrious companionship, and all the more on this specific place in Collingwood's argument. In his autobiography Collingwood introduces the innovative logic of question and answer, according to which the meaning and truth of a proposition are relative to the question it was meant to answer. He says that this logic follows from the view that the activity of knowing is always composed of the two correlative and interdependent aspects of questioning and answering.<sup>45</sup> Admittedly, the pragmatists are mentioned in quite a sarcastic tone in *Speculum Mentis*. But still, they *are* there credited with co-discovering the fundamental insight on which Collingwood would later base his revolutionary logic.

But is this really so surprising if we compare Collingwood's view to the ideas of Schiller? Let us look at the main aspects of the notion that knowledge always con-

in: *Mind*, vol. 31, no. 124 (1922), pp. 459–66. In these texts, however, we find next to no direct interaction between the two.

44 Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, pp. 77–8, my emphasis.

45 Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, pp. 29–36.

sists of questions and answers and see if we can find similar considerations in Schiller.

First, the mind's primary attitude towards reality is that of questioning or *hypothesizing*. We have already seen that, for Collingwood, 'assertions are only answers to questions'. What is important is that he equates questioning to intuition, representation and, most prominently, supposal and hypothesis: 'supposal ... is *identical* with questioning', as Collingwood puts it.<sup>46</sup> Like Collingwood, then, I will use these terms interchangeably.

Secondly, the attitude of questioning or hypothesizing is opposed to that of answering or asserting by treating its objects as *possible* instead of *real* or *unreal*. If I ask, for example, whether there is a cat on the mat, or say 'let's suppose that there is a cat on the mat', I am, at least for the time being, leaving open whether it is in fact the case that there is a cat on the mat. Only in the answering phase of thought such an assertion will occur. Now, Collingwood introduces hypothesis in the chapter on art for a reason. As supposing is the act of thinking about the possible instead of the real, it is closely connected to the imagination. In the words of Collingwood: 'we never ask a question without to some degree contemplating the non-existent, for asking a question means envisaging *alternatives*, and only one at most of these alternatives can really exist'.<sup>47</sup>

Thirdly, all of this means that in knowledge the mind is active rather than passive. As Collingwood observes, this puts him into conflict with classical forms of empiricism. 'The activity of questioning', Collingwood says,

is a puzzle to empiricist theories of knowledge because in it we seem to contemplate an object which does not necessarily exist, and empiricism believes that it is only because an object really exists that it has, so to speak, the force to imprint itself upon our mind or engage our attention.<sup>48</sup>

46 Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 186, my emphasis.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 78, my emphasis.

48 *Idem.*

Hence, a 'crude empiricism imagines that knowledge is composed wholly of assertion' but 'those who look upon it as an affair of discovery and exploration have never fallen into that error'.<sup>49</sup> In other words, for Collingwood, we do not gain knowledge by passively letting the facts impinge themselves on us, but by actively envisaging alternative realities and discovering which one is to be called true. In the terms of Bacon, cited by Collingwood, nature must be interrogated as a reluctant witness, rather than simply listened to as a reliable source.

Lastly, Collingwood stresses that questioning never exists '*in vacuo*'. It is always based upon facts already in our possession, that is, assertion: 'To ask any question, even the silliest or most irresponsible, we must already possess information'.<sup>50</sup> At the very least, Collingwood says, 'any hypothesis presupposes at least one fact, namely our own freedom and competence to frame hypotheses in general'.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, we can see that the question 'Is there a cat on the mat?' presupposes that there is in fact a mat on which a cat may be found.

Now let us turn to Schiller. Can we find the main aspects of the view of knowledge as question and answer in his work? Yes, we can. In 'Axioms as Postulates', Schiller precisely insists on the need to differentiate between two forms of thought that map onto Collingwood's distinction between hypothesis and assertion. The central goal of Schiller's text is to warn for the mistake of identifying the whole of our knowledge as consisting of assertions, or 'axioms' in Schiller's terminology. What we must never forget is that *every* assertion or axiom starts of as a 'postulate', which Schiller also frequently identifies with 'hypothesis' and sometimes with 'question'.<sup>52</sup> We conceive a postulate or hypothesis as *possibly* true, and only when it is brought

49 Ibid., p. 77.

50 Ibid., pp. 77 & 79.

51 Ibid., p. 184.

52 Schiller, 'Axioms as Postulates', pp. 106–8.

to bear upon experience and then gets verified does it turn into an axiom. As Schiller puts it, the organism

needs assumptions it can act on and live by ... These assumptions it obtains by postulating them in the *hope* that they *may* prove tenable ... But the world does not always grant our demands. The course of postulation does not always run smooth. We cannot tell beforehand whether, and to what extent, a postulate can be made to work.<sup>53</sup>

Again, as Collingwood, Schiller's stresses the importance of the possible. 'The world is always ambiguous, always impels us at certain points to say 'it may be', 'either ... or', etc.'<sup>54</sup> Hence, for example physicists 'never hesitate to calculate into existence new 'ethers' and modes of matter and to endow them with whatever qualities ... their imagination suggests'.<sup>55</sup> Consequently, according to Schiller, to

conceive an inquiry as a question ... is ... implicitly to conceive it as having a plurality of possible answers, all of which have to be examined. All these answers are initially hypotheses, and a choice has to be made between them. This renders the recognition of alternatives a paramount necessity for a logic of discovery.<sup>56</sup>

Schiller is also well aware that his pragmatism, for the very reason that it gives pride of place to postulates and the possible, conflicts with empiricism as usually regarded. As Collingwood, Schiller puts the point in Baconian terms: if we want to know the world 'we must put the question to nature and nature to the question'.<sup>57</sup> We cannot 'remain unresistingly passive, to be impressed,

53 Ibid., p. 91. Cf. 'what we want to know in the science will determine the questions put, and their bearing on the questions put will determine the standing of the answers we attain' (Schiller, *Studies in Humanism*, p. 152).

54 Schiller, 'Axioms as Postulates', p. 56.

55 Ibid., p. 60.

56 F.C.S. Schiller, 'Scientific Discovery and Logical Proof', in: Charles Singer (ed.), *Studies in the History and Method of Science* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1917), p. 260.

57 Schiller, 'Axioms as Postulates', p. 106.

like the tabula rasa of the traditional fiction, by an independent 'external world' which stamps itself upon us.<sup>58</sup> Again, '[e]xperience is experiment, *i.e. active*. We do not learn, we do not live, unless we try. Passivity, mere acceptance, mere observation (could they be conceived) would lead us nowhere, least of all to knowledge'.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, the idea that questions or postulates are not conceived out of thin air is present in Schiller as well. Virtually as Collingwood, he says that thought never operates '*in vacuo*': 'intelligence always operates upon the basis of previously established fact ... our hypotheses are suggested by, and start from, the facts of already established knowledge'.<sup>60</sup>

Above I have relied heavily on citation. The purpose of this exercise is to show just how close Collingwood's analysis of knowledge parallels Schiller's views. It is necessary to demonstrate this, because Collingwood's claim that the 'truth' of the proposition that knowledge consists of questions and answers 'dawned upon the astonished gaze of the pragmatists' is unintelligible in itself: in *Speculum Mentis*, Collingwood nowhere explains why he thinks that the pragmatists have this insight. Given the quotations provided above, however, it is highly probable that Collingwood bases his estimation of pragmatism on the work of Schiller, who was personally known by Collingwood and the most prominent pragmatist voice in Britain.

58 Ibid., p. 55.

59 Schiller, *Studies in Humanism*, p. 191, Schiller's emphasis.

60 Schiller, 'Axioms as Postulates', pp. 59 & 107. Cf.: 'In a sense he [the scientist] will start from what he knows, or thinks he knows. For it is psychologically impossible to do anything else. The knowledge he believes himself to have cannot but affect all his ideas, and he cannot get away from it. His boldest speculations, his most hazardous hypotheses, will have *some* relation, however subtle and recondite, to the knowledge at his disposal. It will influence all his thoughts and guide all his guesses' ('Scientific Discovery and Logical Proof', p. 257).

His initial goodwill towards the pragmatists notwithstanding, Collingwood ultimately regards their position as 'a confused attempt to overcome the dualism of thought and action'.<sup>61</sup> Before going into the reasons Collingwood has for considering pragmatism a failure, it must first be noticed that he is not at all unsympathetic towards the goal of its project. To the contrary, he himself rejects the very dualism that the pragmatists seek to blow up: 'Thought and action, truth and freedom ('ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free') are inseparable, and are in fact correlative aspects of an indivisible reality'.<sup>62</sup> For Collingwood, thought and action are so closely connected that a false theory not only defeats the goal of thought, but also impedes successful practice. He claims that

the characteristic mark by which a form of experience is shown to be satisfactory is simply that it is possible. We ask only for a life that can be lived, a programme that can be carried out. Art, science and the rest are schemes of life by adopting which we are promised happiness and truth. Any scheme which is in itself contradictory or nonsensical cannot redeem these promises, because it cannot be put into execution; but if there is any scheme of life which is inherently consistent and therefore, ideally speaking, practicable, we may safely assume that this is the scheme to adopt.<sup>63</sup>

In other words, a philosophy that is incoherent is not only theoretically unacceptable, it will also lead to unsuccessful action; 'it cannot be put into execution'. *Vice versa*, a

61 Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 182.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 44. Cf. '...the mind, having formed a false conception of itself, tries to live up to that conception. But the falseness of the conception just means that it cannot be 'lived up to'. There is therefore a permanent discord between what the mind thinks it is and what, on the strength of that conception, it does: even though this behaviour is not at all the same thing as the behaviour of a mind that knows itself truly. The result is an open inconsistency between theory and practice; and this inconsistency, as ground for dissatisfaction, is the starting-point of the attempt at truer self-knowledge' (*Ibid.*, p. 250).

philosophy that is entirely consistent is true, and 'practicable' as well. Thought serves the masters of both truth *and* happiness.

Collingwood goes as far as claiming that 'all thought exists for the sake of action' and that, hence, *Speculum Mentis* is written as the solution to a practical problem.<sup>64</sup> He laments the situation of his day in which art, religion, science, history and philosophy are seen as independent and self-sufficient activities. Collingwood, to the contrary, believes that these are only functions of the mind, and that they are all co-equally present in every experience. Hence, e.g. the artist is always at the same time a philosopher and a historian as well. And equally, every mind whatsoever consists of all these functions and has demand for their products. Throughout history, 'men have surrounded themselves with beauty [art], they have found peace in God [religion], they have come appreciably nearer to a solution of the world's mystery [philosophy]'.<sup>65</sup> If we neglect this fact, everybody will think it is natural to live a solitary life and the 'producers and the consumers of spiritual wealth are out of touch'.<sup>66</sup> Thus the ultimate motive of *Speculum Mentis* is to show the incoherence of every form of experience if it is taken purely on its own terms, in order to solve the practical problem of the disintegration of the modern mind.

So, despite a similar commitment regarding the relation between thought and action, why does Collingwood consider pragmatism a failure? To give an answer we need to look at the chapter on science. It is here that Collingwood first gives a characterization of pragmatism, instead of just mentioning it. According to Collingwood, if 'one first adopts the economic theory of the concept ... and jumps to the conclusion that the analysis applies to knowledge in

64 Ibid., p. 15.

65 Ibid., p. 20.

66 Idem.

general, one becomes a pragmatist'.<sup>67</sup> The economic theory of the concept is the idea that concepts are not predicated in order to describe reality truthfully, but to practically deal with it successfully. In other words, concepts are not 'true' in the traditional sense of the word, but 'useful', that is, true in the pragmatist sense of the word.

Now, in order to understand Collingwood's rejection of pragmatism, it is critical to grasp his analysis of 'usefulness' or 'utility'. In ethics, this is the view that 'to be means to an end is the invariable characteristic of all action ... all actions, no matter what, aim at something other than themselves, which may be called their end or good'.<sup>68</sup> According to 'the economic theory of the concept' the same applies to at least some kinds of knowledge, and according to pragmatism it applies to knowledge in general. In other words, for pragmatism, 'to be means to an end is the invariable characteristic of all *knowledge* ... all forms of *knowing*, no matter what, aim at something other than themselves, which may be called their end or good'. What, then, for pragmatism, is the end that knowledge is aimed at? Collingwood does not say in *Speculum Mentis*. But in an unpublished manuscript titled 'The Conflict Between Religion and Science' (1921) he makes it clear that it is 'desire' or 'passion'. In that text Collingwood claims that '[p]ragmatists tell us that all our knowledge is rooted in desire and that we must desire before we know; they say that *truth itself is only that which satisfies our passion*'.<sup>69</sup>

67 Ibid., p. 182. 'The economic theory of the concept' is a term Collingwood borrows from Benedetto Croce (1866–1952). See Benedetto Croce, *Logic as the Science of the Pure Concept* [1909], trans. from the *Italian* of Benedetto Croce by Douglas Ainslie (London: Macmillan & co., 1917), p. 550.

68 Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 171.

69 R.G. Collingwood, 'The Conflict Between Religion and Science' (1921). Unpublished manuscript in possession of James Connelly, 4, my emphasis. This manuscript was only recently returned to Collingwood's daughter, Mrs Teresa Smith, after it was loaned to J.W. Rusk by Collingwood's widow and literary executor Kathleen Collingwood. I thank James Connelly for kindly providing me with access to the relevant passage.



Is Collingwood right in this characterization of pragmatism if we look at Schiller? In my view, yes. In 'Axioms as Postulates', Schiller explicitly says that 'Θεωρία [theory] must not be separated from πράξις [praxis], but related to it *as means to end*'.<sup>70</sup> And what holds for 'theory' in general, holds for concrete instances of thinking as well. For example, 'we must use the postulate (or hypothesis) *as a means to an end* that appears desirable'.<sup>71</sup>

Now, the crux of Collingwood's analysis of utility is that it sees action or thought as useful towards an end *outside themselves*. This aspect we clearly find in Schiller as well. For him, we postulate a hypothesis in order to fulfil a desire or need. We then test the postulate for whether it truly does fulfil such a need. Only if it does, a postulate becomes an axiom. As Schiller puts it succinctly, '[w]e conceive the axioms as arising out of man's needs as an agent'.<sup>72</sup> To fulfil the needs of the agent is the end of thinking, then. And this end is located *outside* thinking itself. For Schiller, as we have seen in the first section of this paper, 'the agent' is in the first place a biological organism with an accompanying psychology. Its needs, then, are not consciously conceived, but rather given to it by its physiological and psychological constitution. The direction of thought 'is ultimately *determined* ... by the needs of life [biology] and the desires [psychology] which correspond to those needs. Thus the logical structures of our mental organisation are the product of psychological functions'.<sup>73</sup>

So Collingwood is right to characterize pragmatism – at least as defended by Schiller – as conceiving knowledge as means to an *external* end. Why does this make pragmatism problematic? Because the upshot of this view is that the

70 Schiller, 'Axioms as Postulates', p. 85, my emphasis.

71 Ibid., p. 107, my emphasis.

72 Ibid., p. 86.

73 Ibid., 57, my emphasis. Cf. 'purpose is as clearly a psychological conception as meaning is professedly a logical one ... It is, in fact, a biological function' (*Studies in Humanism*, p. 113).

pragmatist position is ultimately incoherent. It starts of as an attempt to overcome the dualism between thought and action, or thought and will. We have seen that Schiller tries to accomplish this feat by turning thought itself into an activity in the form of postulation. To this attempt Collingwood is sympathetic. However, if we think of thought and action in terms of utility, Collingwood complains, we precisely reinstate the dualism between will and thought: 'The utilitarian view of action ... results ... in the false abstraction of the will from the intellect'.<sup>74</sup> And this is exactly what we have seen happening in Schiller. He conceives postulation as a means to fulfilling desires, and these desires are ultimately biological, that is, situated outside thought. In the end then, Schiller returns to a position where there is a strict separation of will from thought where he started from the intention of overcoming just that dualism. In short, his position is incoherent.

For Collingwood, then, Schiller's assertion of the unity of the organism is more like a matter of faith than a belief that is persuasively argued for. In practice it turns out, Collingwood has shown, that Schiller's pragmatism precisely involves a fundamental cleavage between two functions of the organism, a dualism Schiller set out to resolve in the first place and that Collingwood rejects out of hand. Pragmatism, in the end, consists to a large extent of 'babblings'.

### Conclusion

Despite Collingwood's lifelong attempt to bring about a 'rapprochement' between theory and practice, his relation to pragmatism, the school that has the same central ambition, has hitherto been understudied. In particular, it remains unclear in the secondary literature why Collingwood felt necessitated to reject pragmatism him-

74 Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 172.

self. This paper has partly remedied that gap by showing that, in *Speculum Mentis*, Collingwood interprets the pragmatist position as seeing relatively clearly into the nature of knowledge as consisting of questions and answers, but ultimately relying on a bifurcation of thought and will, a dualism it precisely set out to refute in the first place. Pragmatism, in other words, is incoherent. Moreover, Collingwood himself rejects the dualism between thought and will as well. Furthermore, I have argued that Collingwood's criticism is best understood as dealing with Schiller's version of pragmatism. By relating Collingwood's sparse remarks on the subject to the position of Schiller, enough meaning to the former can be given so as to render his refutation of pragmatism intelligible.