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METAPHYSICS AS HISTORY: ON KNOX ON COLLINGWOOD

Hugo Anthony Meynell, F.R.S.C.*

R. G. Collingwood (1889-1943) was one of the most original thinkers of his generation. At the time he taught and wrote—Oxford in the 1920s and 30s—analytical philosophy, under the leadership of Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore, was beginning to establish its ascendancy in English universities and was making professional philosophers proud of the irrelevance of their work to what most people would think were burning questions of morality, politics, and the living of one's life. The movement was justifiably opposed to undue pretentiousness in philosophy; it also disliked system-building, was friendly both to science and common sense, and had more or less contempt for the "idealism" that had prevailed among the previous two generations or so of English-speaking philosophers.

Collingwood was vehemently opposed to these new fashions. Though hardly an idealist himself, at least in his mature thought, he had great respect for such paradigmatic cases of idealism as Hegel and F. H. Bradley, and for such system-builders among his contemporaries as A. N. Whitehead and Samuel Alexander. He always thought that a philosopher should attempt to construct a system, and maintained—as philosophers of earlier times had generally done—that philosophy ought to be relevant to the general problems of human living. He argued that the reasons generally given or assumed for adopting the contradictory view were spurious. If philosophers could not provide, for example, sound reasons for being a liberal democrat rather than a fascist in the Europe of the 1930s, things had come to a pretty pass.

Collingwood was generally regarded as a brilliant but eccentric reactionary by his colleagues. Still, in the wake of a widespread impression at the present time that "analytical philosophy" in general—however broadly conceived and whether taken in its positivist or ordinary-language form—has had its day, Collingwood's work is being taken with steadily-increasing seriousness. There is now an international society devoted to the study of his work.

Collingwood considered T. M. (Malcolm) Knox his principal disciple and, as it were, heir-apparent. Knox therefore seemed just the right person to prepare Collingwood's *The Idea of Nature* and *The Idea of History* for publication after his untimely death. Within the circle of Collingwood's devotees, among whom I certainly count myself, Knox is not a much-favored figure. Yet I believe there is something to be learned from his view that Collingwood underwent a conversion to "radical historicism" between 1936 and 1939 and that this change of viewpoint was importantly mistaken. I also maintain that, if adjusted to meet Knox's points, Collingwood's thought tends to approximate to the "transcendental Thomism" outstandingly exemplified in the work of Bernard Lonergan. The historically relativist tendencies in Collingwood's later work, to which Knox rightly took exception, have been hailed in some quarters as anticipating elements in the thinking of the later

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Wittgenstein and Thomas Kuhn. I find this an ambiguous recommendation. I should say immediately that I hold no brief for Knox's editorial practices; nor for the pseudo-respectability which is said to have prevented him from consulting Collingwood's second wife Kate, on matters which could have been relevant to his editorial task.[1]

I

As Knox sees the matter, though Collingwood always claimed that philosophy should be systematic, his own writings make up not so much a system as a series of systems, of which the first, up to and including *Speculum Mentis* (1924)[2], was considered immature by Collingwood himself. The second begins with *An Essay on Philosophical Method* (1933), and continues with *The Idea of Nature*, which dates on the whole from 1934,[3] and much of *The Idea of History* (from 1936).[4] The final phase is represented by the *Autobiography* (1939), the *Essay on Metaphysics* (1940), and *The New Leviathan* (1942). *The Principles of Art* (1938) has some features redolent of the second phase, some of the third.[5] Crucial to the transition from the second phase to the third, is the development of Collingwood's conception of the relation between philosophy and history. In the *Autobiography*, he said that his aim as a philosopher had been to bring about a *rapprochement* between the two disciplines.[6] Knox considers that Collingwood actually achieved this aim in what he wrote at the zenith of his powers, during the second phase.

In the *Essay on Philosophical Method*, Collingwood argues that the subject matter of philosophy is more like history than nature;[7] since both philosophy and history, as distinct from the investigation of nature as pursued by the natural sciences, are essentially concerned with the human mind. For Knox, it is the great merit of *The Idea of History* that it "forces on the attention of philosophers the epistemological problems to which the existence of history gives rise, and … shows how philosophical questions can be illuminated and solved by an historical approach." One can even say that, since the publication of *The Idea of Nature* and *The Idea of History*, philosophers "will be able to continue ignoring history only by burying their heads in the sand."[8]

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[1] See Fred Inglis, *History Man. The Life of R. G. Collingwood* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 316. "It is hard nowadays not to feel sorry for Knox. He is so rightly convicted of sanctimonious error and sheer misunderstanding towards Collingwood. He ignored Kate, he disapproved of Collingwood's late style, he even destroyed some of the papers after transcribing them, but he was devoted and he was assiduous." But I was glad to find support for my main contentions in Alan Donagan's article, "Collingwood, Robin George" (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York and London: Macmillan 1967, Vol. I).

[2] Oxford: Clarendon. The same will apply to the other works of Collingwood cited, unless differently assigned.

[3] It was published in 1945, edited by T. M. Knox (London: Oxford University Press).

[4] Published in 1946, ed. Knox. I quote from the 1966 edition.

[5] *The Idea of History*, vii (from Knox's "Editor's Preface").

[6] Knox, "Preface", vii.

[7] Ibid, viii.

[8] Ibid. Collingwood was quite strongly influenced on these matters by he work of Benedetto Croce, although, according to Knox, it would be wrong to call him a disciple of Croce.

In the *Essay on Philosophical Method*, "distinctions are drawn between historical study and philosophical criticism, between historical thought as concerned with the individual and philosophical thought as concerned with the universal." The core of the account of philosophy presented there is "the doctrine that philosophical concepts are specified on a scale of forms related to one another as lower to higher in a process of development." We cannot understand the physical world properly without making use of the concept of evolution; and we cannot understand the British Constitution without taking into account the historical process from which it emerged. Similarly, Collingwood argued, "we must not treat pleasure, utility and moral goodness as mere specifications of goodness, existing side by side (like the biological species of pre-evolutionary biology) since a simultaneous creation; we must discover their genetic interconnexion and exhibit them as stages through which the conception of goodness has developed."[9] So philosophy is like science in dealing with universals; like history "in that the specifications of this universal are linked together somewhat like the stages in an historical process."[10]

Knox claimed that he had documentary evidence to the effect that, before 1936, Collingwood thought that metaphysics, in the sense of study of the One, the True and the Good, was something quite distinct from history; but by 1939 he thought that it could be subsumed under history. So Knox felt compelled to conclude that Collingwood's views had changed radically, even though no such change is recorded in the *Autobiography*, and though others insist that the development of Collingwood's views on the matter was gradual, and always in the same direction. At the earlier stage, he still maintained that a philosopher should try to construct his own cosmology, as well as describing the conceptions of nature maintained by other philosophers; that as well as setting out the views of other philosophers on philosophy in general, he should work out a philosophy of his own. As Knox sees it, the price of Collingwood's later subsumption of philosophy under history, his assessment of it as a form of history, is philosophical skepticism.[11] There were indeed skeptical (and dogmatic) strands in Collingwood's earlier philosophy; but Knox thinks that these had been temporarily overcome in his thought between 1932 and 1936.[12]

What are we to say about the facts discovered and theories successfully propounded by scientists—say, the achievements of Newton, Adams or Pasteur? According to Collingwood, at least in the late phase of his thought, "(E)very scientist who says that light is split up by the prism, or that fermentation is prevented by a certain degree of heat is still talking history: he is talking about the whole class of historical facts which are occasions on which someone has made these observations. Thus a "scientific fact" is a class of historical facts, and no one can understand what a scientific fact is unless he understands enough about the theory of history to understand what an historical fact is." This applies to scientific theories as well. Such a theory "not only rests on certain historical facts and is verified or disproved by certain other historical facts, it is itself an historical fact, namely, the fact that someone has propounded or accepted, verified or disproved that theory." Suppose that we wish to know,

[9] Ibid, viii-ix.
[10] Ibid, ix.
[11] Ibid, x-xi.
[12] Ibid, xi.

for example, what the classical theory of gravitation is. Then "we must look into the records of Newton's thinking and interpret them."[13]

II

I intend to cover a good deal of ground in what follows; so it may be worth offering the reader a preliminary sketch of the topics I intend to discuss and why. Collingwood's thought as a whole, especially as represented by his "logic of question and answer," appears to me to be moving in the direction of the right position in epistemology and metaphysics, and so of philosophy as a whole, particularly in light of Lonergan's transcendental Thomism. The later philosophy of Collingwood takes some steps which are retrograde in relation to this overall direction; these correspond closely to the deficiencies pointed out by Knox. To show this, I give a very brief account of cognitional self-transcendence, of the apparent capacity of human beings, by dint of the proper use of their minds on the basis of their experience, to come to know a world which exists, and largely is as it is, prior to and independently of that experience and this use of their minds. There follow consequences, pursued in the rest of the paper, for Collingwood's conception of history as the most general "science of mind" which should absorb philosophy; for his aspersions on "realism"; for his notion of the historian's business as the "re-enactment" of past thought; for his critique of politics and society; and for his conception of the role of religion and its bearings on science. Since my remarks in what follows will be largely critical, I would like to pay tribute immediately to the enormous range and fertility of Collingwood's thought, and to his virtues as a stimulus to thinking even where one is driven to conclude that he is wrong.

As I see it, the conversion to radical historicism indeed happened—but it did surprisingly little harm. It is as though the Trojan horse had been brought into the city, but the Greeks who emerged were cordoned off so that the damage they did was limited. How far the historical relativism was anticipated by the earlier Collingwood's thought, and how far it represents a break with it, is a matter which I prefer to leave to Collingwood specialists. Since writing the last three sentences, I have been glad to find my view largely confirmed by Alan Donagan. "Collingwood did not acknowledge what must have been obvious to his readers, that in the *Autobiography* and the *Essay on Metaphysics* he had jettisoned the metaphysics of the *Essay on Philosophical Method*." All the same,

> …(a)lthough in his *Autobiography* Collingwood repudiated his earlier idealist conception of philosophy, his views about religion, natural science and history remained virtually unchanged. Nor were his views on art altered by his later historicism in metaphysics. This suggests that his change of mind in 1938 may be less fundamental than has been thought.[14]

In a forthcoming article,[15] I argue for the following conclusions, which I must now present in summary form. Collingwood's doctrine of "presuppositions" and his "logic of question and answer" are on the right lines; but, in the light of Lonergan's "generalized empirical method", they need rather substantial modification. As Collingwood sees the

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[13] Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature*, 177.

[14] Donagan, "Robin", 143. He adds that Knox's preface to *History* is "indispensable" for a proper understanding of this issue (144).

[15] To be published by the *Ibero-American Journal of Philosophy*.

matter, some of our presuppositions are justified by others; but some are absolute. It is the business of the metaphysician to study the absolute presuppositions of particular epochs; thereby functioning more as a historian. Aristotle was consequently in error when he said that metaphysics was the study of "being qua being"; such a study is impossible. In accordance with Lonergan's "generalized empirical method", there are no "absolute presuppositions", since all presuppositions can be justified as it were from the ground up, as derivable from the contradictories of judgments which self-destruct. Questions may be divided into (at least) two kinds: questions for intelligence, and questions for reflection.[16] Questions for intelligence ask for a possibility or hypothesis ("what may this be?", or "why may that be so?) with regard to an item or a range of our experience. Questions for reflection are those which may be answered "yes", "no", or "perhaps" (is this so? does that exist?). The second presupposes an answer to the first. At this rate, I argue that Aristotle's view—that metaphysics is the study of "being qua being"—is in a sense to be preferred after all. "Reality" or "the actual world" is and can be nothing other than what is to be known by a reiteration of the two kinds of questions to experience as illustrated by the whole of science, natural and human, and also by history as usually conceived. Let us, following Lonergan, call the capacity to ask and answer the first kind of question "intelligence"; and to ask and answer the second kind of question, "reasonableness."

At this rate, Knox's criticisms of the final phase of Collingwood's thought come out as basically correct. I would add that modifications which Collingwood might have made to meet the criticisms would have turned him into a kind of transcendental Thomist in the manner exemplified by Lonergan.[17] The concerns of Knox, and to a lesser extent those of Peter Johnson,[18] correspond exactly to the correctives that would be applied to Collingwood's metaphysics, and so to his theory of science (and indirectly to his ethics and his normative political theory), on a transcendental Thomist account. In accordance with the transcendental Thomist position, it is the basic thesis of metaphysics that reality in general is what is to be known as the result of putting the two kinds of question to experience; while the conclusions of the sciences, natural and human, consist of what is to be known by putting them to particular ranges of experience.

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[16] There is a third kind of question, that for deliberation (what am I to do, on the basis of the judgment at which I have arrived?); but that is not immediately relevant to the present context.

[17] The distinction between the questions, *quid sit?* (what may it be?) and *cur ita sit?* (why may it be so?) on the one hand, and *an sit?* (whether it exists or is so?) on the other, fleetingly noted by Aristotle, is at the basis of Thomas Aquinas's epistemology, which grounds his metaphysics of "essence" and "existence". See Lonergan, *Verbum. Word and Idea in Aquinas* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1968). He did not treat epistemological questions systematically and at length, however, since philosophers of his time were not obsessed with epistemological questions as they have been apt to be since Descartes and Kant. Aquinas was applying, in an uniquely thorough and comprehensive manner, a distinction already well known among the Aristotelians of his time; at what point it became established among them, I do not know. On this matter, I have benefited greatly from conversations with Professor Ernest McCullough.

[18] See Peter Johnson, *R. G. Collingwood. An Introduction* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2005), chapters 9 and 10. Johnson's main point there is that the tendency to historical relativism blunts the edge of the profound socio-political criticism to be had in *The New Leviathan*, and in Collingwood's many shorter essays on political philosophy. Cf. Collingwood, *Essays on Political Philosophy*, ed. David Boucher (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

Surely, all the great figures in the history of science have held what amounts to the same presupposition—that by putting the two kinds of question to our experience, we can come closer to stating the truth about the world, which already contained oxygen, genes, electrons, pulsars, and Higgs bosons, before we ever conceived of such things; and presumably will be found to have included even more weird and wonderful things as we approach closer to the ideal term of the Grand Unified Theory. There is a continuity here which is underestimated by Collingwood, as it has been more recently by Thomas Kuhn, with his notion of mutually incommensurable "paradigms" which replace one another over time.[19] According to what one might call the meta-paradigm of intelligent and reasonable inquiry into experience, we can appreciate why Galileo was right in his dispute with his Aristotelian rivals in regard to experiments in free fall. They triumphantly pointed out small divergences from what was observed in what was predicted in Galileo's theory; failing to notice, or at least to acknowledge, the fact that the divergences of what was observed from their own predictions were much greater.[20] And while it is no doubt true that scientists do not bother to justify a prevailing paradigm to their fellow-scientists, what is "taken for granted" within a paradigm can easily be justified, in terms of the meta-paradigm of intelligent and reasonable inquiry into experience, if need be. For example, anyone who doubts that water is a chemical compound, rather than an element, can be shown the school experiment where an electrical current is passed through water, and the level of water goes down while gases appear at the two terminals, each reacting to further experiment in different ways.

Human beings have the apparent capacity, on the basis of evidence available to their senses and the proper use of their minds, to gain knowledge of, or arrive at well-founded and true judgments about, things and states of affairs which exist or obtain, and are largely as they are, prior to and independently of human beings and their experiences and mental operations. One may take as examples of such things and facts, igneous and sedimentary rocks, helium atoms, and apatosauri; that Jupiter has moons, that uranium is a radioactive element, and that the European chiffchaff is a migratory bird. Let us call this capacity "cognitional self-transcendence".[21] This would also seem to be possible in relation to historical inquiries. By the right use of their minds upon the available evidence, present-day historians are able to establish that Julius Caesar conquered Gaul in the fifties of the first century B. C. E., and that he was assassinated in 44; yet that he did and underwent these things is in no way dependent on the evidence available to us or on the mental processes which we perform here and now. Short of extreme subjective idealism, in accordance with which things come into existence only when human individuals or social groups come to affirm that they do, these things and states of affairs existed or obtained before any human being asserted that they did on the basis of the available evidence. (Some qualifications have to be made in the case of the historical example; but it will be seen by the sympathetic reader that the general point is not affected.)

If cognitional self-transcendence is possible and actual, there seems to be no good reason why moral self-transcendence should not be so as well. It is of the essence of moral wrongness that human beings should not take pleasure in the agony of other sentient

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[19] See T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962 [second edition, 1970])

[20] See John Gribbin, *Science. A History. 1543-2001* (London and New York: BCA, 2002), 77.

[21] See Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), 45, 233, 289 etc.

creatures. Hence the burning of live cats as a public spectacle, as practiced by medieval Parisians, was wrong;[22] as is the punishing of employees or political dissidents on the grounds that they are telling you inconvenient truths that you do not wish to hear. There is good reason for saying that genocide is wrong, not just "wrong for" the kind of person that you or I choose to consort with. If I ask, "*why* is it wrong to allow the school bully to corner all the lollipops available on the playground?", you may reply, "Because it is unfair"; its unfairness is something about the situation, not about how you or I happen to feel about it.

Collingwood appears in some passages to deny the possibility of moral self-transcendence—as when he talks about Aristotle on slavery, and Kant's morality in relation to German pietism.[23] But for all the qualifications which he makes elsewhere,[24] this would seem to debar these thinkers from relevance to the situation and concerns of our own times. He says that it is pointless to criticize a thinker for being too much a person of his own time; as if "a more powerful thinker than Plato would have lifted himself clean out of the atmosphere of Greek politics, or as if Aristotle ought to have anticipated the moral conceptions of Christianity or the modern world." But human nature remains sufficiently the same for Plato's comparison, in the *Gorgias*, of prospective leaders in a democracy to doctors and confectioners competing before a jury of children, to be frighteningly relevant to our own times. Is a presidential candidate who tells people unpalatable truths for their own good more likely to gain the favor of the electorate, than one who tells them what they want to hear? And I should say that much the same applies to Aristotle's comments on the importance for political stability of the existence of a large middle class.[25] Some moral and political thinkers, like Plato and Aristotle, Hobbes and Marx, seem more capable, in this sense, of transcending their own time than do others. And heaven help us citizens, if our political leaders do not have some equivalent of Plato's "Idea of the Good" before their minds! Otherwise, what else can we expect from them but cynical opportunism?

If cognitive and moral self-transcendence are indeed possible, it would surely be odd if the presuppositions underlying them were not true, or those incompatible with them false. Besides, I do not see what it would be to have a presupposition, without assuming that it was true. On both these matters, I take issue with Collingwood in the last phase of his thought.

III

The logical positivists, notoriously, divided meaningful discourse exhaustively into propositions which are true or false by definition, and those which are true or false due to actual or potential verification or falsification by experience. In this they were anticipated by David Hume with his distinction between "relations of ideas" and "matters of fact." Immanuel Kant argued for a third class of judgments; as well as analytic *a priori* judgments which were true by virtue of the meaning of their constituent terms, and synthetic *a posteriori*

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[22] I borrow this useful example from the work of Sam Harris.

[23] Collingwood, *History*, 229.

[24] Almost immediately afterwards, he concedes that when they are at their best they can be a help to us. One is inclined to ask, " "best" by what standard?"

[25] By a singular historical irony, on the very day that I write the first draft of this sentence, I read of rioting in Athens due to the fact that very rich Greeks do not take their fair share of the tax burden (*24 hours*, Calgary edition, 021112).

judgments which were to be affirmed or denied as the result of experience, there were synthetic *a priori* judgments. Inspired by Hume's skeptical arguments concerning our knowledge of cause and effect, Kant pointed out that while "all effects have causes" is true by definition, "all events have causes" is not. But we do not know it as a result of experience, since we have not observed all causes or effects. And yet it is necessarily involved in the vast majority of what we claim to know, as a matter of common sense, or in science or history. Collingwood, although apparently he had no use for Kant's synthetic *a priori*,[26] had in common with Kant that he wanted to keep open such a third class of items that were knowable. In effect, in accordance with Lonergan's account, two methods of (non-analytic) verification[27] are to be distinguished: (1) that by reference to experience, as emphasized by classical empiricism; (2) that by reference to the "synthetic *a priori*" derivable from the contradictories of self-destructive judgments.

A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*, which is of course a classic exposition of logical positivism, came out in 1936, and greatly impressed Collingwood.[28] In concession to Ayer, Collingwood admitted that the "absolute presuppositions" which are for him the business of metaphysics, since they could not be justified in terms of either of the logical positivist criteria, were neither true nor false. But all the same, as he saw it, they had to be tenaciously maintained. Knox compares his position on Christian theism, and the basic principles of natural science which he claims to be closely dependent on it, with that of Kierkegaard or Barth on Christianity. But I am sure that neither of these theologians would have been at all happy about Collingwood's concessions to the logical positivists with regard to truth.

I think Collingwood is profoundly right in making a connection between truth on the one hand, and justifiability in principle on the other. One is reminded of the Scholastic maxim, *quod gratis affirmatur gratis negatur*.[29] I believe that the answer to the resulting dilemma is to maintain that there are no "absolute presuppositions" in Collingwood's sense; that all true presuppositions can be justified as it were from the ground up, as derivable from the contradictories of judgments which self-destruct in the manner illustrated by the liar paradox. I have argued this in the forthcoming article to which I have already alluded. To recapitulate the argument very briefly: I cannot non-self-destructively assert that I never make a judgment for good reason; judgments for good reason head towards truth; to make a judgment for good reason is to have attended to the relevant evidence in experience, to have envisaged the possibilities or hypotheses which might account for this experience, and to affirm as probably or certainly true in each case the judgment which does seem best to account for it. Among Collingwood's "absolute presuppositions" are Christian theism, and the principle underlying scientific investigation, that we are confidently to expect a single self-consistent explanatory account of all phenomena; these Collingwood regards as closely

[26] See Simon Blackburn's article, "Collingwood, R. G.", in the *Routledge Dictionary of Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

[27] Popperians would prefer to speak of "corroboration" in this context, and I have no objection. A theory is "corroborated" so far as attempts are made to falsify it empirically, and while it might well have been falsified by such tests, in fact it survives them.

[28] Shortly after it came out, Collingwood came across some of his colleagues chuntering about it in an Oxford bookshop. "Gentlemen," he interjected, "that book will be read when your names are forgotten."

[29] What is affirmed gratuitously is denied gratuitously.

bound up with one another.[30] I shall return later to the question of how these consequences might be thought to be derivable from the presuppositions which I have sketched.

The term "metaphysics" (*meta ta physica*, "after the physics") is serendipitous, whatever its actual historical origins; one pursues various forms of inquiry into the nature of things ("physics" in the etymological sense) first; and then inquires what is presupposed in them about the relation of our knowledge to the world in general. We come by it by pursuing the ordinary first-order forms of inquiry—common-sense, scientific, into other minds, into the past, and into that combination of the last two which counts as "historical" in Collingwood's sense; then we ask, in his manner, what is presupposed in this. What is presupposed is that the phenomena of nature are to be explained (rather than shrugged off as just happening to happen) within a single self-consistent scheme; and that by means of our experience, and mental operations appropriately applied to experience, we can get to know about a world which largely exists, and largely is as it is, prior to and independently of ourselves, and of our experiences and mental operations (evidently we, together with our experiences and our mental operations, are only a tiny part of that world). But no more with metaphysics than with science, in spite of Collingwood in the latest stage of his thought, do we have to confine ourselves to a history of what our predecessors have said; in both cases, we have to establish what is so or likely to be so, on the basis not only of what they have said, but of our own consideration of the relevant matters. Collingwood's "logic of question and answer" is perfectly right as far as it goes, but needs to be supplemented, if my arguments are right, in the manner that I have outlined. But the transcendental Thomist may heartily agree with Collingwood that the issue with metaphysics is not to get rid of it, in the manner of positivists and some linguistic philosophers, but to get it right.

Collingwood writes of a future "science of mind" which, in the third and final stage of his thought, he identifies with "history"; philosophy will then be reducible to history. He hopes that "history" in this sense, once developed, will provide a basis for the direction of human affairs at all levels.[31] Now it is central to my argument here that this identification of "the science of mind" with "history" is crucially misleading, and that Collingwood was duly misled. Accepting, as I believe we should, Collingwood's claim that an autonomous "science of mind", which does not amount to a reduction of "mind" to the categories proper to the physical sciences, is something to be aimed for, we should properly distinguish two parts or aspects of such a "science". I shall say more about this distinction later on.

There is now, much more than in Collingwood's day, a heavy industry, built on the conviction, I had almost said the faith, that minds are nothing more than the behavior, or perhaps the electro-chemical content of, rather complicated material objects such as

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[30] One may compare Albert Einstein. What the scientist is seeking for, he says, is "a basis, as narrow as possible, of fundamental concepts and fundamental relations which themselves can be chosen freely (axioms). The liberty of choice, however, is of a special kind", which is not like that of a writer of fiction. "Rather, it is similar to that of a man engaged in solving a well designed word puzzle. He may, it is true, propose any word as the solution; but, there is only *one* word which really solves the puzzle … It is an outcome of faith that nature—as she is perceptible to our five senses—takes the character of such a well formulated puzzle. The successes reaped up to now by science do, it is true, give a certain encouragement for this faith" ("Physics and Reality", *J. F. I.*, March 1936, 353-4).

[31] According to Inglis (*History Man*, 139), *The Principles of History*, written early in 1939, represents Collingwood's maturest statement of his position on this matter.

ourselves. It is, to say the least of it, no longer true that, as Collingwood himself put it,[32] materialism is confined to the attics and lumber rooms of thought. But that reductive materialism cannot be true is easily shown by a transcendental argument. If it were true, it would never really be the case that anyone ever said, thought or wrote anything because they thought that there was good reason to suppose that it was so. But this, of course, must apply to reductive materialists themselves, and to the reductive materialism that they defend. The best counter-move to this argument that I know, is to the effect that such arguments are smart-alecky. Some may wonder, however, whether this means much more than that they are only too convincing, and consequently disliked by some who happen to rank high in the intellectual pecking-order.

For Collingwood, science is to be described as setting a question whose answer is history.[33] I had rather say that common-sense knowledge, science and history all set the question, the possibility of self-transcendence, to which one aspect of the science of mind—let us label it SMA—which is constituted by epistemology and metaphysics, provides the answer. The actual history of thought, in the usual sense of that phrase—how Plato or Berkeley, Kepler or Darwin, Hobbes or Marx, Collingwood or Lonergan, actually thought—may be distinguished from this as SMB. Collingwood is quite right, I believe, so far as he implies that SMA is to be arrived at by determining the presuppositions of other forms of inquiry into what is the case. Certainly, SMB is at least a very important aspect of history, if not actually to be identified with history.[34]

Again, SMB is profoundly *relevant* to SMA, for all that they are not *identical*. It would be very strange, for all that not a few have appeared to believe it, if, on the deep question of the relation of human thought to the real world, we had nothing to learn from our predecessors.[35] Here an excellent precedent was set by Aristotle and Hegel, both of whom made a point of giving an appreciative account of the work of their predecessors. In this respect they were the antithesis of the logical positivists, who dismissed earlier philosophies as almost entirely nonsense. This is not to imply, by any means, that there is nothing important to be learned from logical positivism itself. It is instructive to see it, in fact, as forming the thesis of a Hegelian triad. The logical positivists propounded foundations which turned out to be wrong, since, notoriously, the "verification principle" which is the cornerstone of their theory self-destructs (it is neither true by definition, nor to be confirmed by experience, that all meaningful propositions are either true by definition, or confirmable or falsifiable by experience). But the antithesis, which has largely prevailed among analytical philosophers since the demise of logical positivism, to the effect that there are no

[32] I regret to say that I can no longer place the remark, which I came across several decades ago.

[33] Cf. Inglis, *History Man*, 135.

[34] Collingwood would *identify* it with history; but this, for what it is worth, seems to go against ordinary usage. It is quite usual to talk of paleontology as "the history of the earth", though it has nothing directly to do with thought, but rather with how things were before there was any (human) thought. However, it has to be admitted that, quite in accordance with Collingwood's manner of speaking, paleontology is also referred to as "pre-history". I should add my opinion that any dispute which may arise on this particular point is merely terminological, and that nothing of substance hangs on it.

[35] That they make this assumption is a frequent matter for complaint by Collingwood against his contemporaries.

foundations of knowledge, appears to be at least as unsatisfactory; are we really to say that the theory of evolution is no better founded than the view that a literally true account of how the world reached its present state is to be read from the Book of Genesis; or that there are two giant planets outside the orbit of Saturn than that there not? Transcendental Thomists would claim that their theory of knowledge and truth, and of the basic constitution of the world that is to be affirmed by true judgments, provides a satisfactory synthesis. It appears to me that Collingwood approaches this position, indeed comes tantalizingly close to it, with his "logic of question and answer"; and indeed that he would have arrived at it, and so become a transcendental Thomist, if he had distinguished sharply between the two types of questions that I mentioned above.

The case of Wittgenstein is instructively comparable, though he did not pick up the vital clue about the importance of questioning. If my account of these issues is on the right lines, Wittgenstein will have made a fundamentally retrograde step between the first and second stages in his philosophy. The *Tractatus* provides an account that is brilliantly wrong, as Wittgenstein later admitted himself, of how thought or language represents the world, and consequently of how mind can be a mirror of nature. The *Philosophical Investigations* gives up the problem of how mind can represent a world which exists prior to and independently of it, and language is presented—very usefully if one remembers that the other task is still to do—as a "toolbox" of practical and social devices.[36]

If you deny the possibility of cognitional self-transcendence, then you deny the presupposition of most of our knowledge-claims, including those of common sense ("It is raining", "There is a woman in a red coat sitting within ten feet in front of me") as well as of natural science ("hydrogen is the most abundant element in the universe", "common salt is a compound of sodium and chlorine"). But if you accept it, there is no special difficulty about our knowledge of the past or of other minds—our historical knowledge. This complex of issues is often referred to as the problem of "our knowledge of the external world." As late as 1946, Bertrand Russell could write that philosophy had as yet found no solution to this problem.[37] Yet on the basis of transcendental Thomism, the problem is easily solved—though at a price. It is one thing simply to report one's experience; another to affirm intelligently and reasonably that something is the case on the basis of that experience. However, the real world, as what is to be known by application of the transcendental precepts rather than as simply "out there", turns out to be "external" in a sense that would never have been dreamed of by the naïve realist; and this may have metaphysical consequences which are unpalatable to many people. (That is one of the principal lessons to

[36] In *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), Wittgenstein writes of "our spades being turned" when we try to justify certain judgments; and that these judgments differ from place to place and from time to time. Perhaps where our spades are turned is when it comes to questioning whether God has actually revealed, in a document supposed to be binding on all human beings in all places and times, that one should chop the right hands off convicted thieves. Why should someone not claim this to be an "absolute presupposition", or for that matter part of a Kuhnian "paradigm"?

[37] Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1946), 635: "Empiricism and idealism alike are faced with a problem to which, so far, philosophy has found no satisfactory solution. This is the problem of showing how we have knowledge of other things than ourself and the operations of our own mind."

be learned from Lonergan's *Insight*). I shall mention some of these consequences at the end of this paper.

IV

I agree with Collingwood that the actual way in which what he calls "realism" developed had disastrous results for moral and political philosophy, against which he raised a lone prophetic voice. He is surely right that the philosophical establishment perpetrated a monstrous *trahison des clercs* in this matter, leaving us in a situation where we can do no better than say "boo!" to fascism and "hooray!" to democracy.[38] But I think that the basic thesis of this "realism", that we do not alter a thing or event by coming to know about it, is quite correct when it comes to science or history. Yet I don't see why the central doctrine of realism, as Collingwood himself characterized it, should have the consequence that he alleges for ethics and politics. I can well maintain that von Maanen's star or the emperor Charlemagne are not affected by our coming to know about them, while insisting all the same that rational reflection on morality or politics may make a great deal of difference, and mainly for the better, on one's moral and political action. In the former kind of case, I think confusion is apt to be generated by the fact that, both in science and in history, questioning and creative hypothesizing are necessary if one is to come to know what is true on the basis of the relevant data provided by experience. Thus in one sense, sure enough, we "constitute" the world by our theories on the basis of our experience; but in another, we find it ready "constituted" for us.

Collingwood says that we cannot get out of our position in history any more than we can leap out of our own skins;[39] and there is a sense in which he is clearly right about this. But there is another sense in which, given self-transcendence, we can do precisely this; from within our historical situation, by the appropriate use of our minds upon the relevant evidence, we can come to state what is the case, and even what is good or bad, prior to and independently of our historical situation. Because he never engages the issue of self-transcendence head-on, Collingwood has to engage in a number of ingenious but unconvincing maneuvers in order to make up for it. Prominent among these is his conception of "re-enactment." How are the thoughts of other persons at other places and in other times supposed to be available for us to "re-enact" them? As Collingwood sees it, thoughts are not confined to positions in space and time, as are sensations, emotions and feelings[40] (which he regards as the proper province of the psychologist); and this enables the historian to "re-enact" them here and now. (Of course, if cognitional self-transcendence is possible, *nous n'avons pas besoin de cette hypothèse* of "reenactment"). Collingwood is right to point out that, on his conception of "history", every normal person in society is a historian,

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[38] Cf. Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 35-50.

[39] Expressing Collingwood's position, Peter Johnson writes: "We can no more stand outside history than we can reach beyond language" (Johnson, *Introduction*, 121). But we can with good reason say things like, "When science has advanced further, we will have found out things about the world which are inexpressible within our present scheme of scientific concepts." We have here and now, one might say, a second-order conception of reality, expressible in language, in terms of which we can state that our present first-order concepts are likely to be inadequate, and in general how and why they are so.

[40] He compares them in this respect with the "eternal objects" of Whitehead's philosophy.

as we can hardly get along at all without knowing to some extent the thoughts of other persons within our communities.

For Collingwood, to re-enact the thought of another is of itself to subject it to criticism in the light of one's own ideas. Lonergan, on the other hand, distinguishes sharply, and I believe rightly so, between recovery of the meaning of the thought, speech or action of an agent on the one hand (the second of his "functional specialties", "interpretation"), and its subjection to criticism on the other (his fourth, "dialectic"). In his *Autobiography*, Collingwood very properly takes to task his philosophical contemporaries, such as G. E. Moore, for purporting to refute the claims of some past philosopher, say Berkeley, without taking the trouble to determine what those claims really were. In Lonergan's terms, they were engaging in the fourth functional specialty, without the necessary preliminary work in the second.[41]

What of Collingwood's claim that science is in some sense ultimately derivable from history? I concede that it is a matter of human history that such-and-such a theory was first conceived by a certain person at a certain place and time; that such-and-such observations were made or experiments performed in order to test it; that there was so much more or less unseemly academic wrangling in the course of the theory's reception; and so on and so on. But it does not follow that the facts or states of affairs discovered by means of these theories and experiments are themselves dependent on human history. If hydrogen and uranium, quasars and white-dwarf stars, trilobites and plesiosauri, exist or existed at all, they exist or existed prior to and independently of human history. At least, they did so short of a subjective idealism which almost no-one would swallow ("Well, all we really mean when we say that they exist is that human beings have had and may have certain experiences, and have engaged and may engage in certain mental operations.")

Collingwood maintains "that natural science as a form of thought exists and always has existed in a context of history, and depends on historical thought for its existence." He infers "that no one can understand natural science unless he understands history: no one can answer the question what nature is unless he knows what history is."[42] If I am right in what I have argued, this is true in one sense, false in another. I should emend the conclusion of *The Idea of Nature* by saying that one cannot properly get the hang of either "nature" or "history", unless one sees both in terms of what I have called that aspect of the study of mind (SMA) which may be called epistemological, and grasps the way in which this issues in a metaphysics or account of "being qua being". That they are propounded on the basis of observations or experiments conducted by human beings, at particular moments in history, does not alter the fact that, unless one is to resort to extreme subjective idealism,[43] the facts were the case, and the theories were true, prior to and independently of their discoverers and the successors who have confirmed their findings. There was a planet Neptune, and it was the case that fermentation is prevented by a certain degree of heat, prior to and independently of the discoveries by Adams and Pasteur.

[41] See Lonergan, *Method*, chapters 5, 7, and 10.

[42] Collingwood, *Nature*, 177.

[43] According to which individuals or social groups make states of affairs to be the case—for example, the fact that the nearest star is between three and five light years distant from the solar system, or that smallpox is caused by a virus—by coming to "know" about them.

A "science of mind" which consisted of the epistemology and metaphysics founded on the four "transcendental precepts", could provide the firm basis needed for that normative science of human affairs so brilliantly heralded by *The New Leviathan*. J. L. Austin is reputed to have declared, "Importance is not important; truth is." I acknowledge that it is both true and important that truth is more important than importance, but importance is important too; and it is surely somewhat to be deplored if, in an era renowned for politicians who are at once world-shaking and frightful, like Hitler and Stalin, the best and most prestigious philosophers have only trivial comments to make on the subject of politics, and can at best cry "Boo!" to the tyrants. In his tremendous delineation and commendation of civilization, and corresponding denouncement of barbarism, in *The New Leviathan*, Collingwood is writing about what is absolutely good and bad, better and worse; and the whole thrust of his argument depends on this. The wind is completely taken out of the sails of the book, if one qualifies this by saying that there is another standpoint, "paradigm", or point of view, incompatible with this one but just as defensible in its own terms, for which barbarism is better than civilization, or at least no worse.

If the assumptions of theism, and of nature as a single intelligible order, and of the existence of a causal nexus between events, are not absolute presuppositions, as claimed by Collingwood, then how can they be justified, or for that matter impugned? As so often in thought, skepticism and dogmatism seem to reinforce one another; if we cannot do without "absolute presuppositions", but in the nature of the case we cannot justify them, we will have the more unquestioningly to assert them. (It is not for nothing that Collingwood, in his approach to this issue during the final phase of his thought, reminded Knox of Kierkegaard and Barth.) But it does not appear to me that a thoroughgoing rationality can content itself with this attitude. And what is to be done with those who affirm absolute presuppositions which contradict our own, on matters of fact or value? Is not our world as a matter of fact torn apart by the resulting differences?

I can only summarize very briefly here what I have argued elsewhere at length.[44] Very roughly, if reality or the actual world is nothing other than what is to be known by indefinite application of the transcendental precepts, then it is an intelligible order which explains the world of our experience, and can be progressively known by re-iterated putting to experience of the same two kinds of questions that I have already distinguished. Despite some influential accounts of the nature of causality, there is no *a priori* reason why such an explanatory scheme need be deterministic, or why irreducibly statistical forms of explicability should not characterize the world of nature.[45] Natural science presupposes this; theism, that the existence of all else is due to an intelligent will, explains it. In fine, theism accounts for that intelligibility of the universe, including its causal connectedness (which need not be deterministic), which science at once presupposes and confirms. The Christian faith may be

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[44] See Meynell, *The Epistemological Argument Against Atheism* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2011). For a magisterial exposition and defense of the relevant arguments, see Lonergan, *Insight*, chapters i – iv, xix-xx.

[45] In spite of Spinoza, Hume, and Einstein. In evading the apparent consequences for human freedom of determinism as applied to the philosophy of nature, the "solutions" of Leibniz and Kant are more ingenious than convincing. Heinz Pagels seems closer to the mark, with his wonderful suggestion that "The God that plays dice has set us free" (*The Cosmic Code* [New York: Bantam Books, 1983], 112).

commended as what such a being might be expected to do in order to cope with the human plight; and to be confirmable in its historical truth-conditions by objective historical investigation.[46]

In religion and philosophy as well as science, as Collingwood sees the matter, the more advanced shows its progress over the less by retaining its insights while going beyond them. In spite of the arguments of Thomas Kuhn, it is easy to see this pattern exemplified in the relation of Einstein's physics or quantum physics to that of Newton. But one may see a similar pattern in the relation of Christianity to Judaism in the conception of God, and of some elements of Aristotle's philosophy in relation to Plato's.

> Philosophy progresses in so far as one stage of its development solves the problems that defeated it in the last, without losing its hold on the solutions already achieved … Thus, supposing it true that Plato grasped the necessity for an eternal object, the world of Ideas or Idea of the Good, and also for an eternal subject, the soul in its double function of as knower and mover, as solutions for problems with which his predecessor's work had left him confronted: but was baffled to say how these two were related; and suppose Aristotle saw that the problem … could be solved by thinking of them as one and the same, pure intellect being identical with its own object, and its knowledge of that object being knowledge of itself; then, so far (though conceivably not in other respects), Aristotle's philosophy would mark a progress on Plato's, granted that by that new step Aristotle sacrificed nothing that Plato had achieved … In religion, progress is possible on the same terms. If Christianity, bating no jot or tittle of what Judaism had won by its conception of one God, just and terrible, infinitely great over against man's infinite littleness and infinitely exacting in his demands on man, could bridge the gulf … by the conception that God became man in order that we might become God, that was a progress, and a momentous one, in the history of the religious consciousness. In such senses and in such cases as these, progress is possible.[47]

I do not see what exception a transcendental Thomist need take to this resplendent passage.

V

As I have touched on many issues in the foregoing, it may be as well for me to summarize my conclusions:

1. There is something of significance to be learned from T. M. Knox's criticisms of Collingwood. These show that certain doctrines characteristic of the last stage of his thought were in error; but they by no means impugn Collingwood's stature, or his usefulness as a stimulus for us early in the twenty-first century.

[46] According to the *Essay on Metaphysics*, such institutions as theological colleges have the role of inculcating a society's absolute presuppositions; though Collingwood laments that in our society they have largely forgotten that they have this vitally important role, and consequently are in danger of losing it.

[47] Collingwood., *History*, 332-3. This also seems to be the account given in Collingwood's *Essay on Philosophical Method*.

2. Collingwood's "logic of question and answer" is a crucially important discovery, or rather re-discovery; but it needs extending in one significant respect.

3. Collingwood's identification of "history" with the "science of mind" is at least very misleading; it is better to distinguish between two aspects of "the science of mind", the first covering epistemology and metaphysics; the second describing how people have actually thought, a topic which is properly "historical".

4. A useful approach to Collingwood, and means of assessing his fundamental strengths and weaknesses, as to be found by consideration of the notions of "cognitional" and "moral self-transcendence"; whereby, by the proper use of our minds upon the relevant evidence in experience, we may come to know what is the case, and even what is good, prior to and independently of such experience and use of our minds.

5. On the basis of the generalized empirical method of Lonergan, and the transcendental Thomism which ensues from it, I can confidently and consistently maintain that civilization is absolutely better than barbarism, and not just "better from" one historical perspective; just as I can claim that it is absolutely the case, and not just the case for people of my cultural background, that helium is an inert gas; that the closest star is within five light-years of the sun; that dinosaurs once flourished on earth but have become extinct; or that King Henry VIII really existed whereas King Lear did not.