

History as Mind Atoned:
A Reading of R.G. Collingwood

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Abstract

This thesis advances a new reading and interpretation of the philosophy of Robin George Collingwood (1889-1943). It explores Collingwood's conception of Western civilization—which he sometimes identified with liberalism—as a civilization that is ultimately rooted in the Christian faith and animated by a conception of freedom of the will as the achievement of historical consciousness. The organizing hypothesis is that Collingwood gave a central place to Christian faith in Western civilization. He assumed that, so far from being aberrant or infantile, religion was one of the chief forms of consciousness along with art, science, history and philosophy, that religious insight was the key to understanding human history, and that without the vital spark it kindled, civilization could not survive. Self-knowledge was a dialectical movement from this religious insight towards a higher-order historical consciousness of the self in possession of free will, which involved consciousness of others as possessing free will of their own.

The well-being and vitality of Western civilization, and its preservation in the face of the forces of barbarism, is shown to depend in Collingwood's view upon continuous nourishment from its Christian 'absolute presuppositions', and, more broadly, from what Collingwood described as 'the central doctrine of Christianity', the idea of the Incarnation and Atonement. In his hands, this idea was translated into terms of universal significance: mind, history, and community were explicated in those terms and fell into one pattern of explanation, in which false oppositions were exposed and transcended through the reconciliation of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, thought and mind, mind and man, man and man, man and God.

The thesis presents Collingwood's enquiries into religion, art, history, philosophy and politics and his arguments for a reformed metaphysics and a reformed conception of history as aspects of a single picture that was structured by his vision of the Incarnation as the (self) revelation to man that 'he can become God, can be what he ought to be.' What this meant for Collingwood was giving life to the divine spirit in man, by becoming or being 'the right

kind' of person, one capable *qua* moral agent of acting dutifully and *qua* historian of entering into the minds of the persons whose actions he or she was studying. Such a person embodies in fact, to a greater or lesser degree, the Collingwoodian ideal I call in this thesis *the atoned mind*: for he is to that degree at one with himself and other men, and is *eo ipso* free. The thesis demonstrates this through an effort to circumvent dominant analytic and technical readings of Collingwood on the one hand, and on the other hand, to embrace a reading of Collingwood's historicism not as a problem to be solved, but as the solution to a problem imposed by a naturalistic philosophy of history. Only when the Atonement is taken seriously as thought, is it possible to begin to understand the nature of the ideal that underpins the European Christian mind, and why Collingwood insisted that Western liberalism is an expression of Christianity in theory and in practice.

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Author's declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Dedication

To the memory of Mahmoud Sayed-Ahmed Khattar, my father.

Abbreviations

After the first citation, the following works will be referred to in footnotes using the abbreviations below.

AA *An Autobiography* (1939)

EM *An Essay on Metaphysics* (1940)

EPM *An Essay on Philosophical Method* (1933)

EPP *Essays in Political Philosophy* (1989)

EPR *Faith and Reason: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (1968)

IH *The Idea of History* (1946)

NL *The New Leviathan* (1942)

PE *Philosophy of Enchantment* (2005)

PH *The Principles of History* (1999)

RP *Religion and Philosophy* (RP)

SM *Speculum Mentis* (SM)

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Introduction

At first glance R. G. Collingwood is a figure of contradiction. He occupied one of the most important seats of philosophical learning in the England of his day, but he regarded himself as an ‘outlaw’ in his profession, abused and neglected by his contemporaries.¹ In an age of increasing disciplinary specialization, his mind was equal to a wide range of concerns, inviting the criticism that he was an eclectic and perhaps dilettantish thinker. During his life his renown probably owed more to his work as an archaeologist of Roman Britain, and to the three books he published on that topic, than to any of his philosophical productions. His philosophical style was at odds with the protocols governing the practice of ‘analytical’ philosophy, then ripening under the name ‘realism’, that was already on its way to becoming the dominant mode of philosophising in Collingwood’s Oxford and the wider Anglophone world.² Collingwood was associated in many minds with the ‘Idealism’ of F. H. Bradley and his followers—though he disavowed the label himself—and with positions about metaphysics that the rising analytical school wished to demolish. He was so far out of step with his contemporaries that they scarcely considered his positions worth rebutting—a published exchange with Gilbert Ryle over the so-called ‘ontological argument’ being the depressing exception which proves the rule.³

Collingwood was an admired teacher but, while he lived, he founded no ‘school’. He was a prolific writer, but his posthumous fame as a philosopher and historian of ideas was built, at least initially, on works he left incomplete and that were published after his death in forms that reflected the concerns and specifications of their editor, T. M. Knox, as much as or

¹ Bodleian Library, dep. 27. Letter to Guido de Ruggiero, 4 October 1927. Here and subsequently Collingwood’s manuscripts which were deposited at the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford will be cited by box number [e.g. dep. 27], title [or relevant description], and page number [where appropriate].

² See Peter Hylton (1990). *Russell, Idealism, and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press and Stewart Candlish (2007). *The Russell/Bradley Dispute and its Significance for Twentieth-Century Philosophy*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

³ Gilbert Ryle (1935). ‘Mr. Collingwood and the Ontological Argument’, *Mind* 44: 137- 51; and Ryle (1937). ‘Back to the Ontological Argument’, *Mind* 45: 53-57. The exchange is analysed in Giuseppina D’Oro (2003). ‘Collingwood and Ryle on the Concept of Mind’, *Philosophical Explorations: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Mind and Action* 6: 18-30 and reprinted with related correspondence in R. G. Collingwood (2005). *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, revised edn. Ed. James Connelly and Giuseppina D’Oro. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 253-326.

more than they did Collingwood's own. Knox believed that illness had disturbed the balance of Collingwood's mind, that his later writings were sometimes incoherent, and that they needed his careful management to avoid irreparable damage to Collingwood's reputation. The book that Collingwood believed would go down to posterity as his masterpiece, a product of these later years, *The Principles of History*, he never finished. The books he did see through to publication sold in relatively modest quantities, yet he spoke of their significance as public weapons in a battle for the survival of civilization with a fervency and grandiosity that can strike even sympathetic readers as grandiloquent and perhaps even as slightly ludicrous.⁴

Collingwood died almost eighty years ago. Today he is a small industry as well as a person. Interest in his life and his thought has grown steadily in the years since his death. In the last generation especially, searching treatments of the man, his thought, and his legacy have poured forth, so that the volume and scope of the interpretive literature and commentary on his life and work is by now of a considerable size and quality. The burgeoning interest in Collingwood and the nature and scale of his intellectual achievement owes much to what Marnie Hughes-Warrington has described as the 'herculean efforts'⁵ of a dedicated band of admirers committed to the continued exposition and advancement of Collingwood's thought. Hercules, she does not add, took up his labours to expiate the sin of murdering his wife and children in a fit of temporary insanity. The admirers of Collingwood have far less cause to feel guilty about their endeavours, but perhaps some small unease follows from the knowledge that in his *Autobiography* (1939) Collingwood expressed the wish that anyone interested in what he had written should not write about him or his ideas, whether favourably or critically, but instead about the subject, showing that they could write about it better than he could himself.⁶ It was probably unrealistic to expect this wish to be respected

⁴ See e.g. Stefan Collini (2006). *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, ch. 14, which is fond but sceptical (and from which source information about the probable sales of Collingwood's books is drawn). A harsher and more mocking note is struck in Maurice Cowling (1980). *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 159-190, especially at 160-161

⁵ Marnie Hughes-Warrington (2015). 'Metaphysics as History, History as Metaphysics'. *Philosophical Topics*, 43(1/2), 279-284. Hughes-Warrington mentions David Boucher, James Connelly, and Rex Martin in particular as pioneers in building and burnishing Collingwood studies over recent decades.

⁶ That is to set the bar rather high. Collingwood (1939). *An Autobiography*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 118-119.

even before the self-conscious construction of a 'secondary literature' as a central purpose of academic writing, like Collingwood, became an industry. Yet it must be said that, on the whole, the secondary literature on Collingwood is distinguished not only by its quality but also by the deference shown to its subject's wishes in its reticence about aspects of his life which are deemed to be irrelevant to his ideas.⁷

Much of that literature has been devoted to resolving the contradictions that confront the glancing eye. Important recent studies tell us that, so far from being an outlaw and outlier in philosophy, Collingwood's conception of its nature and task was akin to Kant's;⁸ that he was following lines laid down by Hegel and elaborated by Bradley;⁹ that he 'belonged to a tradition that included Vico, Hegel and Croce';¹⁰ that he ought to be understood 'in the context of the legacy of Romanticism and the development of historical thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' associated not only with Croce but also with Ortega y Gasset, with whose thinking his own has striking affinities;¹¹ that his philosophical

⁷ An exception is Fred Inglis (2009). *History Man: The Life of R. G. Collingwood*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, which, for all its merits, brings out very well both the difficulties inherent in writing a satisfying 'contextual' history of Collingwood's ideas and some of Collingwood's reasons for directing admirers away from his own life towards independent study of the matters that passionately concerned him. This thesis is concerned only with getting to grips with Collingwood's thinking, not with his life and wider activities.

⁸ Giuseppina D'Oro (2002). *Collingwood and the Metaphysics of Experience*. London: Routledge. See also Guido Vanheeswijck (2014). 'The Kantian Heritage of R. G. Collingwood and P. F. Strawson: Two Varieties of Descriptive Metaphysics', *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 31: 271-292

⁹ Compare David Boucher (1995). 'Human Conduct, History, and Social Science in the Works of R. G. Collingwood and Michael Oakeshott', *New Literary History* 24: 697-717 and Gary K. Browning (2003). 'Rethinking Collingwood, Rethinking Hegel'. *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* 47/48, 17-33 and (2004). *Rethinking R.G. Collingwood: Philosophy, Politics and the Unity of Theory and Practice*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan. For Bradley, see F. H. Bradley (1968). *Presuppositions of Critical History*, ed. Lionel Rubinoff. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 51: 'Bradley [writes Rubinoff] is one of the chief sources of the twentieth-century ideas of history, whose most significant expression thus far is to be found in the thought of R. G. Collingwood. The two central ideas in Collingwood's theory of history both have their antecedents in Bradley'. More recently, see Colin Tyler (2019): "All history is the history of thought": competing British idealist historiographies, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, DOI: 10.1080/09608788.2019.1684239.

¹⁰ Stein Helgeby. (2016). *Action as History: The Historical Thought of R.G. Collingwood*. Exeter: Imprint Academic, [i].

¹¹ Richard Murphy. (2008). *Collingwood and the Crisis of Western Civilisation: Art, Metaphysics, and Dialectic*. Exeter: Imprint Academic, [i]. See also Stephen Leach (2007). 'Collingwood and the Reform of Logic and Metaphysics', *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies* 13, pp.27–52, which makes similar claims about affinities between Collingwood and Ortega.

fellow travellers were the Italian idealists Croce, De Ruggiero and Gentile;¹² that he was, instead, a disciple of the German historian and philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, and a continuator of the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics, upon which his own work would go on to exert 'a seminal influence' in the second half of the twentieth century.¹³

Other studies have emphasised how Collingwood's breadth of mind and interests enabled him to offer a *connected* view of many questions spanning multiple, superficially diverse fields of study. His writings in and about anthropology,¹⁴ art,¹⁵ and archaeology,¹⁶ have been said to be united by a single style and direction of argument that is likewise present in his writings about history and philosophy. It has been argued *a fortiori* that Collingwood's thought, rather like Hegel's, makes all the departments of his thought answer to one intellectual signature¹⁷; or, with a somewhat diminished role for Hegel as a direct influence, that there is nevertheless a distinctive vision of the world as a whole which is mediated into a powerful and coherent 'political philosophy of civilisation'.¹⁸ Commentators have looked behind Collingwood's deceptively simple style to unveil preoccupations which move him closer to his immediate philosophical contemporaries in England as well as on the European continent and which place him ahead of the curve, as it were, rather than lagging behind it, standing at the crossroads of a declining tradition of idealism and the rising analytical school

¹² Rik Peters (2013). *History as Thought and Action: The Philosophies of Croce, Gentile, de Ruggiero and Collingwood*. Exeter: Imprint Academic. In *An Autobiography*, Collingwood disowned Gentile, who had become a Fascist.

¹³ John P. Hogan (1989). *Collingwood and Theological Hermeneutics*. New York: University Press of America, 1.

¹⁴ David Boucher (2002). 'Collingwood and Anthropology as a Historical Science'. *History of Political Thought* 23: 303-25, James Connelly (2003). 'R. G. Collingwood: From Anthropology to Metaphysics'. *Ethnographic Studies* 11: 3-23, Giuseppina D'Oro (2013). 'Understanding Others: Cultural Anthropology with Collingwood and Quine'. See the writings collected in R. G. Collingwood (2005). *The Philosophy of Enchantment: Studies in Folktale, Cultural Criticism, and Anthropology*, ed. David Boucher, Wendy James and Philip Smallwood. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

¹⁵ See Aaron Ridley (1998). *R. G. Collingwood*. London: Phoenix Books, and Christopher Dreisbach (2009). *Collingwood on the Moral Principles of Art*. Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press.

¹⁶ Stephen Leach (2009). *The Foundations of History: Collingwood's Analysis of Historical Explanation*. Exeter: Imprint Academic, esp.ch. 2.

¹⁷ Louis O. Mink (1969). *Mind, History, and Dialectic: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, and Lionel Rubinoff. (1970). *Collingwood and the Reform of Metaphysics: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

¹⁸ James Connelly. (2003). *Metaphysics, Method and Politics: The Political Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*. Exeter: Imprint Academic.

and acting as a signpost to the future.¹⁹ They have deployed the tools of the analytical school²⁰ to probe what are now seen to be Collingwood's powerful criticisms of its conceptions of philosophy and logic, and to align Collingwood with the later Wittgenstein,²¹ an alliance which surely would have surprised Wittgenstein himself.²²

Many of these studies have taken issue with Knox's account of successive stages in Collingwood's intellectual career and a late slide into a destructive historical relativism accelerated by the mental incapacity and spasms of truculence brought on by his illness.²³ Knox postulated three such stages: an early period culminating with the publication of *Speculum Mentis* in 1924, a middle period when Collingwood was at the height of his powers, bookended by the *Essay on Philosophical Method* (1933) and parts of *The Idea of History* (ca. 1936), and a final phase of dogmatism and decline.²⁴ The idea that Collingwood lost his mind and his equanimity with it somewhere in the late 1930s no longer seems tenable, if it ever was, still less so in light of the renewed attention paid to *The Principles of History*. Once thought lost, even in its incomplete state this document is now construed, *pace* Knox, as a powerful statement and development of ideas that Collingwood had spent

¹⁹ See James Connelly (2018). 'The Development of Collingwood's Metaphilosophical Views', in Karim Dharamsi, Giuseppina D'Oro and Stephen Leach, eds. (2018). *Collingwood on Philosophical Methodology*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 35-76.

²⁰ Pre-eminently the multiple works by Giuseppina D'Oro. Compare *Collingwood and the Metaphysics of Experience*, with the same writer's (2005). 'Collingwood's "Solution" to the Problem of Mind-Body Dualism', *Philosophia* 32: 349-68; (2012) 'Between the Old Metaphysics and the New Empiricism: Collingwood's Defence of the Autonomy of Philosophy', *Ratio* 25: 34-50; (2013). 'The Philosopher and the Grapes: On Descriptive Metaphysics and why it is not "Sour Metaphysics"', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 21: 586-99 and (2015). 'Unlikely Bedfellows? Collingwood, Carnap and the Internal/External Distinction', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 23: 802-17. For a bibliography of D'Oro's writings about Collingwood (to 2015), see James Connelly, Peter Johnson and Stephen Leach, eds. (2017). *R. G. Collingwood: A Research Companion*. London: Bloomsbury, 250-51.

²¹ See e.g. Marnie Hughes-Warrington (2003). *How Good an Historian Shall I Be?: R.G. Collingwood, the Historical Imagination, and Education*. Exeter: Imprint Academic; Guido Vanheeswijck (2005). 'Does "I Know" Tolerate Metaphysical Emphasis?: R. G. Collingwood's Affirmative Answer to Wittgenstein's Rhetorical Question', *The Review of Metaphysics* 69: 317-46; and Vasso Kindi, 'Presuppositions and the Logic of Question and Answer', in Dharamsi, D'Oro, and Leach (2018). *Collingwood on Philosophical Methodology*, 111-30.

²² Debating whether or not to apply for the Chair in Philosophy at Cambridge vacated by G. E. Moore in 1939, Wittgenstein apparently despaired upon discovering that 'Collingwood of Oxford' was one of the electors: 'Can you imagine him voting for me?' a friend recalls him remarking. Printed in Rush Rhees, ed. (1984). *Recollections of Wittgenstein*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 141.

²³ W. Jan van der Dussen (1981). *History as a Science: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 3-5; and Connelly (2003). *Metaphysics, Method and Politics*, 17-26.

²⁴ See R. G. Collingwood (1946). *The Idea of History*, ed. T. M. Knox. Oxford: Clarendon Press, [Preface], vii.

two decades cogitating.²⁵ Whether and how far it has the potential to play the role Collingwood predicted it would play for posterity is a different matter; but one about which informed speculation and firm judgement has now become possible.²⁶

Speculation about what Collingwood was doing, or thought he was doing, in representing his writings as public weapons in a fight for civilisation has been more hesitant. If scholars habitually pause to record Collingwood's description of himself as a 'professorial goose', cackling to save European civilisation as the sacred geese of Rome cackled to save the Capitol,²⁷ they have tended to see his purposes in speaking in these terms as self-evident—whether narrowly, as a philosopher's contribution to the war effort²⁸ or more broadly, as the living embodiment of his own idea, to be discussed more fully in subsequent chapters, that all thought exists for the sake of action. Either way, alternative explanations have rarely been pursued within mainstream Collingwood scholarship.²⁹

Outside the mainstream, the situation is slightly different. Inglis makes one theme of his unauthorised biography of Collingwood the quest to 'discover the unity of a life in the multiplicity of its absorbing and creative practices, and *to communicate the needfulness of such a unity to a sufficient audience* and in the happy names of goodness and meaning. This oneness of action and vision... could only be achieved, in a single mind, or in a society as a whole, that won its emancipation, and hence secular redemption, by a knowledge of itself as wrung from its history'.³⁰ This secular redemption is somehow—Inglis makes no readily

²⁵ See David Boucher (1997). 'The Significance of R. G. Collingwood's "Principles of History"', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58: 309-330 and W. Jan van der Dussen (1997). 'Collingwood's "Lost" Manuscript of The Principles of History', *History and Theory* 36: 32-62, for accounts of its rediscovery and importance. Together with the editors' introduction to R. G. Collingwood (1999). *The Principles of History, and other writings in Philosophy of History*, ed. W. H. Dray and W. Jan van der Dussen. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

²⁶ For which see the editors' introduction to R. G. Collingwood (1999). *The Principles of History*.

²⁷ R.G. Collingwood (1940). *An Essay on Metaphysics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 343.

²⁸ Collingwood's broader attitudes and activities are discussed in Peter Johnson (2003). *A Philosopher and Appeasement: R. G. Collingwood and the Second World War; A Philosopher at War*, vol. 2. Exeter: Imprint Academic.

²⁹ See e.g. E. W. F. Tomlin (1961). *R. G. Collingwood*. London: Longmans, Green & Co., 35. The same passage is quoted by Murphy, Leach, and Connelly, who provides the fullest set of reflections in these terms on Collingwood's purposes in (2003). *Metaphysics, Method and Politics*, 177-89.

³⁰ Inglis (2009). *History Man*, 31. My emphasis. Bruce Haddock (2013). 'The Historicity of Thought' in David Boucher and Teresa Smith (Eds.). *R.G. Collingwood & Other Writings with essays on Collingwood's life and work*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 336-352, likewise speaks of Collingwood's 'wider redemptive agenda'.

discernible attempt to explain how—connected to the ‘exiguous version of Christianity’ espoused by T. S. Eliot that Collingwood is said to have shared.³¹ Collingwood, on this account, saw himself as a man of destiny, called to point the way to salvation as the end of days approached. As such he belongs with Eliot, Christopher Dawson³² and other ‘anti-pagan’ Christian prophets of doom who associated modernity with the loss of belief in God, and the loss of belief in God with the loss of inhibition, the replacement of authority with pure might, the collapse of traditional institutions and mores, and the subjection of every existing church, polity and corporation to the control and corrosion of the forces of unreason and barbarism. In Austin Farrer’s succinct, and slightly acid summary, Collingwood was calling on the public ‘to rally round the Athanasian Creed and save scientific civilisation’.³³

An obvious difficulty with this account is that it seems to make much more of Christianity than Collingwood himself made of it. The explicitly Christian themes and expressions of commitment that mark out the earlier phase(s) of Collingwood’s intellectual career, whatever weight is to be attributed to them, recede from the early 1930s almost to vanishing, whilst the ‘radical historicism’ to which he is said to have succumbed, if taken seriously, seems to be wholly incompatible with a Christian view of history which contemplates life and existence *sub specie aeternitatis* and discovers its meaning in Christ’s incarnation, passion, and resurrection.³⁴ If Christianity survives at all as an aspect of Collingwood’s philosophy, the consensus view holds, it does so in a highly diffused form, whether as synonymous with civilisation,³⁵ or metaphysics,³⁶ or tradition,³⁷ or the historical

³¹ Inglis (2009). *History Man*, 345. ‘Probably’ shared, is how Inglis’ puts it.

³² Collini (2006). *Absent Minds*, 346. For Collingwood and Dawson, see Philip Irving Mitchell (2018). ‘Civilizational Sickness and the Suspended Middle: R.G. Collingwood, Christopher Dawson, and Historical Judgment’, *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 21: 85-113.

³³ Robert MacSwain (2016). *Scripture, Metaphysics, and Poetry: Austin Farrer’s The Glass of Vision with Critical Commentary*. London and New York: Routledge, 87.

³⁴ Thus Dawson, for one, concluded that Collingwood was not a Christian, but had instead re-interpreted Christianity to fit with his own philosophy; which seems to be the view of Cowling and others also. Compare Christopher Dawson (1956). *The Dynamics of World History*, ed. John J. Mulloy. New York: Sheed & Ward, 401 and Cowling (1980). *Religion and Public Doctrine*, vol 1., 189-90. More will be said about the Christian view of history in ch. 2, below.

³⁵ As in Murphy (2008). *Collingwood and the Crisis of Western Civilisation*.

³⁶ Rubinoff (1970). *Collingwood and the Reform of Metaphysics*, 53.

³⁷ Connelly (2003). *Metaphysics, Method and Politics*, 299-315.

process,³⁸ or the culture of scientific rationality.³⁹ Thus, even where Christianity is deemed important, it is treated as a problem to be resolved, or dissolved, within a wider system of ideas;⁴⁰ or, if unresolved, as a residuum in Collingwood's thinking that exemplifies or illustrates the inconsistencies between his earlier and later philosophy.⁴¹

The argument advanced in this thesis is that there is consistency alongside inconsistency. Collingwood's conception of Western civilization—which he sometimes identified with liberalism—is ultimately rooted in the Christian faith and animated by a conception of freedom of the will as the achievement of historical consciousness. My organizing hypothesis, baldly stated, is that Collingwood gave a central place to Christian faith in Western civilisation.

I take it that this was true in at least two senses. The first was that Collingwood shared Hegel's sense that Christianity had given birth to that civilization. As Hegel had put it in the *Philosophy of Right*,

The right of the subject's *particularity* to find satisfaction, or – to put it differently – the right of *subjective freedom*, is the pivotal and focal point of the difference between *antiquity* and the *modern age*. This right, in its infinity, is expressed in Christianity, and it has become the universal and actual principle of a new form of civilization*. Its more specific shapes include love, the romantic, the eternal salvation of the individual as an end, etc.; then there are morality and conscience, followed by

³⁸ Michael P. Hinz (1994). *Self-Creation and History: Collingwood and Nietzsche on Conceptual Change*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 197.

³⁹ MacSwain (2016). *Scripture, Metaphysics, and Poetry*, 87. Compare James Connelly (1997). 'Natural Science, History and Christianity: The Origins of Collingwood's Later Metaphysics', *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies* 4: 101-32.

⁴⁰ James Patrick (1985). *The Magdalen Metaphysics. Idealism and Orthodoxy at Oxford, 1901-1945*. Macon, GA., Mercer University Press, 80-83. See also David Bates (1996). 'Rediscovering Collingwood's Spiritual History (In and Out of Context)', *History and Theory* 35: 29-55.

⁴¹ See David Boucher (1989). *The Social and Political Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 214 for a statement of the problem, and by way of illustration compare Lionel Rubinoff (1975). 'The Relation between Philosophy and History in the Thought of Benedetto Croce and R. G. Collingwood', and Alan Donagan (1975). 'A Comment on Lionel Rubinoff's "Croce and Collingwood on the Relation between Philosophy and History"'. Both in *Thought, Action, and Intuition: As a Symposium on the Philosophy of Benedetto Croce*, ed. L. M. Palmer and H. S. Harris. Hildesheim: George Olms, 9-47, 75-85.

the other forms, some of which will come into prominence below as the principle of civil society and as moments of the political constitution, while others appear within history at large, particularly in the history of art, the sciences, and philosophy.⁴²

This sense is pervasive in *Speculum Mentis* (1924), the most Hegelian of Collingwood's works.⁴³ There he assumed that, so far from being an aberration, religion was one of the chief forms of consciousness along with art, science, history and philosophy, and that religious insight was the key to understanding human history.⁴⁴ In later work he would reiterate that without the vital spark it kindled, civilization could not survive. Self-knowledge was a dialectical movement from this religious insight towards a higher-order historical consciousness of the self in possession of free will, which involved consciousness of others as possessing free will of their own.

The well-being and vitality of Western civilization, and its preservation in the face of the forces of barbarism depended in Collingwood's view upon continuous nourishment from what he would come to call its Christian 'absolute presuppositions', and, more broadly, from what he described in his early work, *Religion and Philosophy* (1916), as 'the central doctrine of Christianity', the idea of the Incarnation and Atonement, called such 'according as the emphasis is laid on God's self-expression through humanity or man's redemption through the spirit of God'.⁴⁵

This is the second place in which Christian faith figures. In Collingwood's hands, the idea of the Incarnation and Atonement was translated into terms of universal significance: mind, history, and community were explicated in those terms and fell into one pattern of

⁴² G. W. F. Hegel (1991). *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans H. B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, §124, Remark, 151-52. I have preferred T. M. Knox's translation of the same passage to Nisbet's at one crucial point (*) for the sake of clarity, as Knox uses the word 'civilisation' whereas Nisbet does not, speaking instead of 'the world'.

⁴³ Bodleian Library, dep. 27. Letter to Guido de Ruggiero, 24 August 1923, describing the book in outline: '[I]n claiming to be intuiting an external world thought is *velut in speculo* [like a face in a mirror] tracing its own features, and hence the title of the book... All very commonplace and familiar: mostly stolen from Hegel'.

⁴⁴ R. G. Collingwood (1924). *Speculum Mentis, or the Map of Experience*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 153.

⁴⁵ R. G. Collingwood (1916). *Religion and Philosophy*. London: Macmillan, 147.

explanation, in which false oppositions were exposed and transcended through the reconciliation of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, thought and mind, mind and man, man and man, man and God. Again this sounds rather like Hegel, who spoke in the introduction to the *Philosophy of Right* of 'recogniz[ing] in the semblance of the temporal and transient the substance which is immanent and the eternal which is present',⁴⁶ but if Collingwood drew much from Hegel, he differed from him in presenting a dialectic that, certainly when it came to politics, was open and unresolved, haunted by the continual possibility that society might break down into a non-social community.

The thesis presents Collingwood's enquiries into religion, art, history, philosophy and politics and his arguments for a reformed metaphysics and a reformed conception of history as aspects of a single picture that was structured by his vision of the Incarnation as the revelation to man that 'he can become God, can be what he ought to be.'⁴⁷ This did not mean, for Collingwood, taking Christ to be one's Lord and Saviour. Nor did it merely mean imitating the moral goodness of the man Jesus by following rules he laid down for the good conduct of a life. Rather it was a matter of giving life to 'the divine spirit in man'⁴⁸ by becoming or being 'the right kind' of person, one capable *qua* moral agent of acting dutifully and *qua* historian of entering into the minds of the persons whose actions he or she was studying. Such a person embodies in fact, to a greater or lesser degree, the ideal I call 'the atoned mind': for he is to that degree at one with himself and other men and is *eo ipso* free. Hence the title of the thesis, *History as Mind Atoned*.

My claim that the Incarnation was fundamental to Collingwood's thinking brings us back to the 'obvious difficulty' mentioned above, which may be put, rather starkly, like this: if it matters so much to his philosophy, why does he discuss it so rarely and intermittently?

The answer is that, paradoxically, if perhaps fittingly, its presence is revealed by its absence. It is *because* it played a fundamental role in his philosophy that Collingwood mentioned it so

⁴⁶ Hegel (1991). *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Preface, 20.

⁴⁷ Bodleian Library, Dep. 3., R. G. Collingwood (1923). 'Action', 11.

⁴⁸ Collingwood (1923). 'Action', 37.

fleetingly. At this point it is worth recalling what Collingwood had to say about what it was to have a philosophy in a short address on *Ruskin's Philosophy*, published in 1922 but delivered some years earlier:

[Y]ou will generally find that there are certain central principles which the man takes as fundamental and incontrovertible, which he assumes as true in all his thinking and acting. These principles form, as it were, the nucleus of his whole mental life: they are the centre from which all his activities radiate. [...] But for the most part we do not know that we possess it: still less do we know what are the convictions which constitute it. The fact seems to be that a man's deepest convictions are precisely those which he never puts into words. Everything which he says and does is based upon his grasp of these convictions; but just because his grasp of them is so complete, so unquestioning, he never finds it necessary to express them at all.⁴⁹

These convictions form, as Collingwood puts it, a 'ring of solid thought', the 'nucleus of the individual's mind', or as he might have put it later, a constellation of absolute presuppositions.⁵⁰ They are 'fundamental and incontrovertible', 'assume[d] as true in all his thinking and acting',⁵¹ detectable only through the careful consideration of his thinking as a whole, as apparently offhand remarks and passing thoughts are recognized anew, once we know what we are looking for, as glimpses of what otherwise need not (and perhaps should not) be uttered explicitly: that God, who in Himself passeth all understanding, is revealed and known only through the Son; that the Incarnation is the key to all knowledge and self-knowledge.

Accordingly we find Collingwood claiming, as David Bates noticed,⁵² that the artist, though working individually, is in fact the spokesman for the community, voicing the 'secrets' it

⁴⁹ R. G. Collingwood (1922). *Ruskin's Philosophy: An Address delivered at the Ruskin Centenary Conference. Coniston. August 8th, 1919.* Kendal: Titus Wilson & Son, 6-7.

⁵⁰ Collingwood (1922). *Ruskin's Philosophy*, 6. Suggestively, Collingwood writes even then of this ring of thought being subject to strains (7), the same language he would later use in relation to absolute presuppositions.

⁵¹ Collingwood (1922). *Ruskin's Philosophy*, 6.

⁵² Bates (1996). 'Rediscovering Collingwood's Spiritual History', 47.

cannot itself express;⁵³ the philosopher is the ‘organ’ of the corporate consciousness, ‘called’ to give expression to society’s self-criticism;⁵⁴ the church is the ‘living embodiment’ of the Holy Spirit;⁵⁵ the state is ‘an incarnation of political action’;⁵⁶ individuality is a ‘vehicle’ of thought;⁵⁷ tradition is a ‘force’ that does not depend on conscious memory for its transmission;⁵⁸ duty is an ‘atonement’, a concrete, individual act that manifests the universal good in time;⁵⁹ the emotional aspect of duty is love of God; that ‘our emotional attitude towards the universal is love’; and that ‘[t]he love of God is the sea into which all our passions and appetites flow . . . from whom all love comes and to whom it all returns’.⁶⁰ Everything begins with Him and returns to Him. The universal and the particular are reconciled in Him. The Incarnation is the figure that unites what exists in and as an individual in a single moment of time with what is outside, or beyond, or across time.

It is in this spirit that *History as Mind Atoned* seeks to develop an account of Collingwood’s philosophy that does not separate subject and object, mind and reality, God and man. The thesis it advances is one that is congruent with, and further elaborates, Collingwood’s assertion in the ‘Prologue’ to *Speculum Mentis* (1924) that ‘[o]ur solution [to the disunity of mind], then, can only be in principle the Christian solution’.⁶¹ My aim in what follows is less to mount a technical defence of Collingwood’s ideas, than to follow out the logic of his solution through various of his writings. In the process, the charge of historicism against Collingwood – which has occupied significant portion of recent Collingwood scholarship – will be rejected as one which presupposes an abstract universal that stands over against the historicity through which truth reveals itself. Similarly, the charge of relativism against the

⁵³ R. G. Collingwood (1938). *The Principles of Art*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, ch. 14, esp. 336. Eliot is named as an example.

⁵⁴ R. G. Collingwood (1940). *The First Mate’s Log of a Voyage to Greece in the Schooner Yacht Fleur de Lys in 1939*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 63-64.

⁵⁵ Bodleian Library, dep. 1/4, R. G. Collingwood (1920). ‘The Church’, 20.

⁵⁶ R. G. Collingwood (1989). ‘Political Action’ (1928/29), in *Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. David Boucher. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 109.

⁵⁷ IH, 303.

⁵⁸ R. G. Collingwood and J. N. L. Myres (1934). *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 252.

⁵⁹ R. G. Collingwood (1942). *The New Leviathan: or, Man, Society, Civilization and Barbarism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 17.52, 121-22.

⁶⁰ Bodleian Library, Dep. 8, R. G. Collingwood (1933). ‘Lectures on Moral Philosophy’.

⁶¹ SM, 38.

idea of ‘absolute presuppositions’ will be shown—in part—to be a result of an unwarranted separation between the whole and the parts, or more to the point, between faith and reason.

In representing Collingwood’s thought this way, the thesis may seem to be following closely in the footsteps of much of the recent research that discusses Collingwood’s thought as a unified whole, which exhibits in its essentials a fundamental continuity between his early and his later work. While, inevitably, there are points of similarity, there are also points of difference. One difference is that I prefer to construe the unity I envisage as one current flowing through the tides of thought that comprised Collingwood’s mind, as opposed to a thread that ties all his thought together.

The ruling analogy is very important. The thesis attempts to ‘think with’ Collingwood, as it were, by ‘diving in’ to his mind and moving with this current as it ebbs and flows and exerts a pull upon his thinking across many works, published and unpublished, early and late. The picture developed is one that changed through time in its outer aspects while yet remaining the same, as the current washed some elements away and returned carrying in new elements to replace them, sustaining its identity, its inner character, through all these changes of appearance.

Accordingly, the thesis is not organized chronologically, because the claims it makes are related to one another logically, not chronologically, and it passes over disputes about different stages or periods in Collingwood’s thought without extended comment, because there is no sequence, however carefully conceived, that does not involve some overlap.⁶² As a result, themes recur in different chapters and there may be some repetition in the claims

⁶² As observed in R. G. Collingwood (1926). ‘Some Perplexities about Time: with an Attempted Solution. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 26: 135-50, at 141: ‘In actual history, events overlap; you cannot, except by a confessed fiction, state the point at which the event called the Middle Ages ends and the event called the Modern Period begins. This is not because our notions of the distinction between the mediaeval and the modern worlds are vague and confused. There is no sequence of events, however clearly conceived, that does not show the same overlap; and it is only when our knowledge of events is superficial and our account of them arbitrary that we feel able to point out the exact junction between them, or rather, feel that there is an exact junction if only we knew’.

made in different chapters as the current I am following out washes to and fro' through the same mental space. I read Collingwood, in line with my ruling analogy, as engaging ceaselessly in the attempt to capture and re-enact the thoughts by which he came into his own as a philosopher and a historian.

The structure of the thesis is as follows. Chapter one offers a brief account of Collingwood's life and major publications, his reception, and what Connelly has called the 'Collingwood controversies' that shape the current literature about his thought. I begin to locate my thesis, and its key claims, in the 'space of perspectives' created by one of those controversies, over the character of 'absolute presuppositions'. In chapter two, I continue to follow out this line of activity with reference to another 'Collingwood controversy', in this case the controversy over 're-enactment'. This division in one sense is arbitrary, since the two controversies shade into one another at several points, and they converge, as my discussion about them converges at the end of this chapter, on the question of Collingwood's historicism and the allegation of relativism that has been levelled at him. But to keep the material under control, I have treated them separately, not least because each has generated its own critical response from commentators on Collingwood. These responses, again, are part of the space of perspectives within which I seek to situate my own argument.

This phrase, 'the space of perspectives', comes from Collingwood himself. In his essay on 'The Nature and Aims of A Philosophy of History', he pointed out that each historian 'sees history from his own centre, at an angle of his own: and therefore he sees some problems which no other sees, and sees every problem from a point of view, and therefore under an aspect, peculiar to himself. No one historian, therefore, can see more than one aspect of the truth; and even an infinity of historians must leave an infinity of aspects unseen. Historical study is therefore inexhaustible; even the study of quite a small historical field must necessarily take new shape in the hands of every new student'.⁶³

⁶³ R.G. Collingwood (1925). 'The Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History'. In R. G. Collingwood (1965). *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, ed. William Debbins. Austin, TX and London: University of Texas Press, 34-56, at 53-54.

Collingwood was quick to add that this was not a relativistic or subjectivist doctrine, 'unless it is [subjectivism] to maintain that a hundred people looking at the same tree all see different aspects of it, each seeing something hidden from the rest'.⁶⁴ It was not that there were one hundred trees: if the perception of the hundred observers was not radically faulty, all saw one and the same real tree; but, Collingwood continued, they could never detach themselves 'from the distinct starting-points at which they took up the process of perceiving. So the various "perspectives" of historians are arranged in a "space of perspectives"; each historian [in yet another example of Collingwood's 'Incarnational' thinking] is a monad that mirrors the universe from a point of view that is irrevocably not any other's point of view'.⁶⁵

It followed that

in so far as he reflects upon his own historical thinking, the historian learns the merely monadic nature of his own thought. But a monad has no windows [...], and the historian as such cannot do the work of co-ordinating the infinity of possible perspectives. He can only travel from one perspective to another. He can never get outside his own point of view and see it as a monad among monads. [...] This is because of [...] the objectivity of history. The historian thinks about his object, not about his own awareness of his object; he thinks not about his point of view but from his point of view. But in reflecting, that is philosophising, about his own thought he recognises that he is a monad, and to realise that [predicament] is to transcend it. [...] Hence to philosophise about historical thinking is to transcend the monadism of historical thought, to desert monadism for monadology, to see not merely a perspective but the space of perspectives.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Collingwood (1925). 'The Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History', 54.

⁶⁵ Collingwood (1925). 'The Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History', 54.

⁶⁶ Collingwood (1925). 'The Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History', 55-56.

I have quoted these words at length for two reasons. The first reason is that they strike me as true. The second reason is that they have guided the way I have structured and presented this thesis, both in its outline and in its essence. In the first part I establish a space of perspectives in relation to which my own claims can be situated. In the second part I follow out a line of thought I trace through and across a range of Collingwood's texts, concerned there with the logical relations between the different claims he is making, presupposing the frame of reference the first part has established. It may be helpful to think of this division in terms of the difference between a vision and the means of realising that vision: the first part looks at Collingwood's philosophy, the nucleus of his mental life; the second part looks at one way in which Collingwood mediated his vision of the world into a set of claims about various aspects of it.

In chapter three, Knowledge and Metaphysics, I begin this process through an exposition of the account given in *Speculum Mentis* (1924) of the unity of mind or consciousness as Collingwood saw it. This chapter serves two main purposes. First, it is a reminder that religious consciousness is as essential to the unity of mind as are the other major forms of consciousness Collingwood identified, viz. art, science, history and philosophy. Second, since mind as knowledge turns on what the mind absolutely presupposes about reality as a whole, an account of knowledge as consciousness naturally invites and mandates an exposition of Collingwood's account of metaphysics, the science which is concerned not with "Absolute Being" but with uncovering the absolute presuppositions of mind or knowledge.

Working out what Collingwood took metaphysics, and the problem it posed, to be is the logical preface to chapter four, Historiography and Collingwood's metaphysics, a chapter which could be described (following Collingwood) as a *rapprochement* between history and metaphysics, that is, between mind and metaphysics. There I offer an account of Collingwood's philosophy of history and the place of metaphysics within it against the backdrop of history without metaphysics, developing a comparison with the prominent work of Quentin Skinner to elucidate what is distinctive in Collingwood's account. I advance

the argument that when history is equated with mind, it is no longer possible to evade the question of the moral end of history, an end which can only be understood as part of the answer to the question “what is history?”, a question which can be equally stated as “what is mind?”. This chapter also addresses the place of originality and authority in history to reveal the indispensability of deeply held beliefs in mind as history, and the cost to history—and with it civilisation as ‘a thing of the mind’—of eschewing an account of how deeply held beliefs animate mind as history.

In chapter five, Religion, I turn to Collingwood’s explicitly theological writings. I provide an exposition and analysis of his theological views, and his wider thoughts about religion, to clarify the terms of the argument that ultimately brings together God and Man, the whole and the finite and the meaning of free will upon which liberalism turns. This leads directly on to the final chapter, chapter 6, Civilization as Incarnation, which offers my own perspective on Collingwood’s concern for the fate of Western liberalism, and the threats he perceived to Western civilization, discussed so insightfully by Boucher, Connelly, Murphy and others. But I make more than they do of the role of Christianity in his thinking, drawing on Rudolf Bultmann’s reading of Collingwood to demonstrate the manner in which Collingwood’s philosophy of history, grounded in the philosophy of the Atonement, underwrites his political theorising too. My argument is that it is a mistake to seek to wring the faith out of liberalism, as it were, for in doing so, I suggest, the ‘vital spark’ upon which, Collingwood argued, civilisation depends is extinguished. The thesis concludes with a summary of its key points and a brief elaboration of my hopes for the place it might come to occupy, suitably refined, in future Collingwood studies.

To summarise. *History as Mind Atoned* brings together two concepts with which Collingwood dealt at length, namely history and mind, with a third, the Atonement, that unites and completes them, in an attempt to answer the question “what is history?”. The question is an important one to address because much turns and depends on what “history” is understood to mean in the context of Collingwood’s commitment to methodological reforms, and, in particular, when his commitment to a reformed metaphysics, is taken

seriously. To speak of Collingwood's commitment to metaphysics is to speak of his commitment to clear and high-grade thinking without which civilization 'as a thing of the mind'⁶⁷ would suffer damage that is potentially fatal. And to acknowledge, and to keep in mind, Collingwood's reforms in metaphysics is to recognize two aspects of metaphysics as a science as understood and propounded by Collingwood.

The first is that metaphysics is a historical science; the second is that the end of metaphysical analysis is the recovery and articulation of a special kind of assumptions which are "absolute". These assumptions, which Collingwood calls 'absolute presuppositions',⁶⁸ are logically prior to all thinking. To put it differently, since 'absolute presuppositions' are the foundations of the mind, a reading of Collingwood's philosophy of history would not only equate history with the knowing mind (as Collingwood posited in *An Autobiography*) but with a certain kind of civilization in which the unity of consciousness is made possible by the 'absolute presuppositions' of such a civilization. With reference to Western European liberal civilization, these 'absolute presuppositions' which find their expression in society, culture, and religion are the 'absolute presuppositions' of Christian faith.

In stating that *History as Mind Atoned* traces out an answer to the question "what is history?", I do not mean that it is a 'technical' answer to that question, offered in the style or form of a stipulative definition. My working assumption is that the analytic approach to Collingwood which is increasingly prevalent obscures as much as it reveals when it comes to understanding Collingwood's commitment to methodological reforms in philosophy, his own personal commitments to Christianity, the manner in which they fertilized his thought, and his idea of history. In this respect *History as Mind Atoned* takes its cue from writers who seem to me to be engaged in the attempt to think *with* Collingwood, or to 're-enact' his thought, such as David Bates, James Patrick, Bruce Haddock, Leon Goldstein, and Rudolf Bultmann. That the works of these writers are rarely referred to directly or extendedly in

⁶⁷ NL, 1.21.

⁶⁸ EM, 61-62.

mainstream Collingwood scholarship does not seem to me to be a reason to ignore or to marginalize their work; but rather—and in a Collingwoodian spirit?—the opposite.

Chapter One: The Space of Perspectives I — Collingwood and absolute presuppositions

R. G. Collingwood's life and career⁶⁹

Robin George Collingwood was born 22 February 1889 at Cartmel Fell in Lancashire. He received his early education at home, under the guidance of his father W.G. Collingwood who was John Ruskin's 'secretary and biographer'.⁷⁰ With the emphasis placed as much on 'knowing how' as 'knowing that',⁷¹ the Ruskinian education R.G. Collingwood received under his father's tutelage was hugely influential in shaping his own pedagogical views, so much so that in his final publication during his lifetime, *The New Leviathan* (1942), he maintained his advocacy of education by parents, expressing firm opposition to the professionalisation of education.⁷² It was at his father's behest, Collingwood recalls in *An Autobiography* (1939), that he 'began Latin at four and Greek at six'.⁷³ His father also gave the young Collingwood 'lessons in ancient and modern history'.⁷⁴ Collingwood's early years at home—summarised succinctly in *An Autobiography* and depicted there in fairly idyllic terms—also introduced him to art and music; both his parents painted, and his mother was 'a good pianist', although Collingwood himself never mastered the piano.⁷⁵ Art, in particular, played a fundamental role in Collingwood's upbringing and the development of his philosophy.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ R.G. Collingwood was born Robin Collingwood, and 'took the second name George on his baptism in 1905'. James Connelly et al. (2015). *R. G. Collingwood: A Research Companion*. London: Bloomsbury, 3.

⁷⁰ David Boucher (1989). *The Social and Political Thought of R.G. Collingwood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2.

⁷¹ Collingwood describes how he spent much of his own time as a child reading about the natural sciences, and learning 'to recognize rocks, to know the stars, and to understand the working of pumps and locks and other mechanical appliances up and down the house'. Collingwood (1939). *An Autobiography*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1.

⁷² R.G. Collingwood (1942). *The New Leviathan, or, Man, Society, Civilization and Barbarism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, chapter XXXVII, 308-317. Hereafter referred to as *The New Leviathan*.

⁷³ AA, 1.

⁷⁴ AA, 1.

⁷⁵ AA, 2-3.

⁷⁶ Connelly et al. (2015). *R. G. Collingwood: A Research Companion*, 3.

Collingwood's interest in philosophy emerged at a very early age, and is recorded in *An Autobiography* in a striking passage which recounts his coming upon—at the age of eight—'Kant's Theory of Ethics',⁷⁷ an encounter which he recalls in quasi-mystical terms:

I was attacked by a strange succession of emotions. First came an intense excitement. I felt that things of the highest importance were being said about matters of the utmost urgency: things which at all costs I must understand. Then, with a wave of indignation, came the discovery that I could not understand them. [...] Then, third and last, came the strangest emotion of all. I felt that the contents of this book, although I could not understand it, were somehow my business: a matter personal to myself, or rather to some future self of my own. It was not like the common boyish intention to 'be an engine-driver when I grow up', for there was no desire in it; I did not in any natural sense of the word, 'want' to master the Kantian ethics when I should be old enough; but I felt as if a veil had been lifted and my destiny revealed.⁷⁸

There is every temptation to normalise this passage and to read it simply as an unusually vivid description of a precocious young boy's attraction to the charms of philosophy; but it seems to be more than that. A sense of the numinous, uncanny or supernatural (mark the word: 'not in any *natural* sense') hangs over it and exposes for a moment what is, or was, otherwise hidden, both from Collingwood and from the readers he was addressing. A window has been opened, through which Collingwood's future self is seen to be identical with his boyish self and (on the principle of the transitivity of identity) *vice versa*. The Collingwood of the *Autobiography*, one might say, is re-enacting the thoughts of the eight-year old Collingwood, just as the eight-year old Collingwood is glimpsing his own future self through the lines of Kant's text. Read in these terms, the passage offers important vindication of the belief Collingwood had confessed to his notebooks in 1933-34, that it was

⁷⁷ Immanuel Kant (1785). *Kant's Theory of Ethics, or Practical Philosophy* [*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (1785)]. Trans. T.K. Abbott. London: Longmans, Green, & Co.

⁷⁸ AA, 3-4.

possible to admit that there might be 'clairvoyant experience of the past, the spatially remote, and the future in our own world'.⁷⁹

This notion of past and future co-existing and coinciding in the present calls to mind irresistibly the opening lines of Eliot's *Burnt Norton*: 'Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future / And time future contained in time past'. These lines may themselves owe something to Eliot's knowledge of Collingwood and his published writings, which went back to *Religion and Philosophy* (1916), which Eliot had reviewed sympathetically but in one respect sharply critically in 1917.⁸⁰ More will be said about Eliot's criticisms of Collingwood in the next chapter, for they are both revealing and instructive in making sense of Collingwood's thinking about history, offering powerful intimations of how and why, as I am arguing, the Incarnation is so central to the very fabric of his thought as a whole. But that is to anticipate. For the present, we should continue to narrate the landmark events of Collingwood's life.

At the age of thirteen Collingwood went to a grammar school and a year later went to Rugby where he spent the next five years.⁸¹ Collingwood's reflections in *An Autobiography* (1939) on his time at Rugby are mostly of an educational experience in a setting which -for him- hampered rather than enthused the desire for knowledge, and especially for 'thinking'.⁸² For Collingwood, Rugby was a 'bad example' of the 'public-school system',⁸³ and one which he seemed relieved to leave behind for Oxford which felt, as he put it, 'like being let out of prison'.⁸⁴ Collingwood gained a first in Classical Moderations (1910) and a first in *Literae Humaniores* (1912) and became a fellow of Pembroke College, and remained

⁷⁹ Bodleian Library, dep. 18, R. G. Collingwood (1933-34), 'Notes toward a Metaphysic', Book B, 121, 80a, note.

⁸⁰ T. S. Eliot (1917). Review of R. G. Collingwood, *Religion and Philosophy*. *International Journal of Ethics* 27: 543. For the intellectual relations between the two, compare Inglis (2009). *History Man*, passim and, in clearer focus, Guido Vanheeswijck (1996). 'R. G. Collingwood, T. S. Eliot, and the Romantic Tradition'. *Collingwood Studies* 3: 76-95. Eliot had studied under Collingwood, attending some of the lectures on Aristotle's *De Anima* discussed in AA, 27. For Eliot's early 'Idealism', see James Patrick (2000). 'Eliot and the New Idealism: Poetry and History at Oxford 1914-1915'. *Collingwood Studies* 7: 1-31.

⁸¹ Marnie Hughes-Warrington (2003). *How Good an Historian Shall I be? : R.G. Collingwood, The Historical Imagination and Education*. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 3.

⁸² AA, 8.

⁸³ AA, 10-11.

⁸⁴ AA, 11-12.

there as member of faculty until 1935, where he undertook a heavy teaching load for most of his years as an academic. Teaching, though demanding, offered Collingwood the opportunity to develop his own thoughts in his lectures.

The earlier years of Collingwood's career as a thinker were marked by the influence of the Oxford realists, especially E. F. Carr and, above all, John Cook Wilson. Cook Wilson was described by his obituarist as being 'by far the most influential philosophical teacher in Oxford', adding that no one 'had held a place so important' since T. H. Green.⁸⁵ Cook Wilson's teaching was directed against the idealist views associated with Green, in particular the view that knowledge consists in a coherent set of mutually supporting beliefs, like a web in which no single strand is basic or logically prior to the others;⁸⁶ the view that objects exist only within the consciousness that apprehends them, or are constituted by that consciousness;⁸⁷ and the view that the apprehending mind synthesises ideas and makes the connections between them of which it is conscious – in sum, that reality is constituted by intellectual activity.⁸⁸

Against these views Cook Wilson argued, first, that the basis of knowledge was an apprehension of objects and the conviction of their existence apart from us that was immediate, non-inferential, and not open to doubt; and therefore that, second, the independence of the objects of knowledge from the mind that was conscious of them was presupposed by the very act of knowing. Third, he argued that connections between objects, such as squareness, for example, were intrinsic to the objects themselves, not something for which the mind was responsible: 'in the judgement of knowledge and the act of knowledge in general we do not combine our apprehensions, but apprehend a combination' and it is 'the nature of the elements themselves' which 'determines which

⁸⁵ H. W. B. Joseph (1916). 'Professor John Cook Wilson'. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 7, 555–565. For T. H. Green, see Colin Tyler (2010). *The Metaphysics of Self-realisation and Freedom: Part 1 of The Liberal Socialism of Thomas Hill Green*. Exeter and Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic.

⁸⁶ See Gerald F. Gaus (1994). 'Green, Bernard Bosanquet and the Philosophy of Coherence', in C. L. Ten, (Ed.). *The Routledge History of Philosophy, Volume VII, The Nineteenth Century*. London: Routledge, 408–436.

⁸⁷ See H. V. Knox (1900). 'Green's Refutation of Empiricism'. *Mind*, New Series, 9, pp. 62–74.

⁸⁸ See Peter Hylton (1985). 'The Metaphysics of T. H. Green', *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 2 (1), 91–110.

unity they have or can have'.⁸⁹ This set of positions comprised the key building block of the doctrine that came to be called realism, in opposition to the idealism to which it was contrasted. Until around 1916 Collingwood professed himself a realist.⁹⁰ However, his realism was progressively undermined by his close engagement with continental philosophy, especially the work of Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile. In 1913 he published an English translation of Croce's *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* and he was later to translate several other works by both Croce and Guido de Ruggiero,⁹¹ who became a close friend.

Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s Collingwood was at the same time pursuing a second career as a practicing archaeologist and historian of Roman Britain, establishing himself as a leading authority in the field. He published *The Archaeology of Roman Britain* in 1930 and several other works on related themes culminating in his text *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (1936) for the Oxford History of England. From 1928 he took upon himself what was effectively a third line of work in the capacity of a Delegate to the Clarendon Press, reading works in several European languages on behalf of the Press. Probably as a result of overwork, Collingwood began to suffer from insomnia, and in 1931 his health would be permanently compromised by complications arising from chicken pox, which affected his blood pressure. Yet, to the outside observer, his career would have appeared to be flourishing. He completed what is nowadays considered by many to be his most important book, *An Essay on Philosophical Method* (1933)⁹² and composed and delivered the lectures on the philosophy of history and the philosophy of nature that formed part of the bases of

⁸⁹ John Cook Wilson (1926). *Statement and Inference with other Philosophical Papers*, 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press; reprint Bristol: Thoemmes Press (2002), 279, 524. This brief account of Cook Wilson's thought draws on Mathieu Marion (2016), 'John Cook Wilson'. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), Ed. Edward N. Zalta <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/wilson/>>.

⁹⁰ See Giuseppina D'Oro and James Connolly (2015). 'Robin George Collingwood'. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), Ed. Edward N. Zalta <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/collingwood/>>.

⁹¹ Collingwood's relations with these Italian thinkers are discussed in Rik Peters (2013). *History as Thought and Action*.

⁹² See Dharamsi, D'Oro and Leach, eds. (2018). *Collingwood on Philosophical Methodology*.

the two posthumous works edited by Knox and published to much acclaim, *The Idea of History* (1946) and *The Idea of Nature* (1945).⁹³

In 1935 Collingwood succeeded J. A. Smith as Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy at the University, which involved a move to Magdalen College. He delivered his inaugural lecture on 'The Historical Imagination' in October of that year. Collingwood had been elected as a Fellow of the British Academy in 1934 and delivered his lecture on Human Nature and Human History there in May 1936, materials from which lectures were likewise incorporated into *The Idea of History* by Knox.⁹⁴ In 1937 he issued yet another major work, *The Principles of Art* (1938). It was while he was correcting the proofs of that text that he suffered the first of the strokes that eventually killed him. All his subsequent work was written under the shadow of death, as cycles of illness and recuperation became the pattern of his life from that time on.

Recuperation often involved sailing trips to sunnier climes. On one trip to the Dutch East Indies in 1938–9 he wrote *An Essay on Metaphysics* (1940), a book which abounds with nautical metaphors, and he began work on *The Principles of History* (not published until 1995), which he regarded as his *magnum opus*, telling his son that it would 'go down to posterity as my masterpiece'.⁹⁵ Another trip, to the Greek islands with a group of Rhodes scholars studying at Oxford, was recounted in *The First Mate's Log* (1940). Back at Oxford, sporting the beard he had grown on the trip, which confirmed the suspicions of colleagues that he had become a radical, he continued to lecture on moral and political philosophy and worked away at *The New Leviathan* (1942) but his work was more and more interrupted by illness, which impaired his ability to flesh out the argument beyond its bare bones in some places and to refine it in others.⁹⁶

⁹³ D'Oro and Connolly (2015). 'Robin George Collingwood'.

⁹⁴ D'Oro and Connolly (2015). 'Robin George Collingwood'.

⁹⁵ Quoted in van der Dussen. (1981). *History as a Science*, 61.

⁹⁶ D'Oro and Connolly (2015). 'Robin George Collingwood'.

Collingwood died at Coniston in January 1943 and was buried in the churchyard there, between his parents and John Ruskin. He was succeeded in the Waynflete Chair in 1945 by Gilbert Ryle, who in so many ways represented all that Collingwood had spent his philosophical life pushing back against.⁹⁷

Interpretative problems and principles

The 'cool'⁹⁸ reception Collingwood's work received in the first two decades after his death might seem to confirm his own self-perception that he was a marginalised figure working against the grain of the philosophical establishment that Ryle embodied. Yet, with the benefit of hindsight, it may be that it was discombobulation as much as hostility or indifference that shaped that initial reception. Contemporaries, with rare exceptions,⁹⁹ simply did not know what to make of Collingwood and found it difficult to assimilate his way of thinking into their own. The exchange with Ryle over the ontological argument, mentioned briefly in the Introduction to this thesis, reads as if Ryle cannot quite work out what Collingwood is saying or why he is saying it and suspects that Collingwood is anyway incapable of understanding or ever admitting why what he is saying is problematical.

In one way this is surprising. Collingwood was not a McTaggart or a Heidegger, in that the vocabulary that he used was largely free of jargon, neologisms, archaisms or highly technical distinctions.¹⁰⁰ His writing style, it is often said, is among the most accessible in all Anglo-American philosophy.¹⁰¹ The accessibility and clarity of his style is in keeping with Collingwood's insistence that philosophy, if it has anything valuable to say, must be able to say what it needs to say in straightforward language. As he puts it in *Speculum Mentis*

⁹⁷ The differences with Ryle are accessibly discussed in Ray Monk (2019). 'How the untimely death of RG Collingwood changed the course of philosophy forever'. *Prospect* magazine, 5 September: <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/how-the-untimely-death-of-rg-collingwood-changed-the-course-of-philosophy-forever-gilbert-ryle-ray-monk-analytic-continental>.

⁹⁸ W. H. Dray (1995). *History as Re-Enactment: R. G. Collingwood's Idea of History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3.

⁹⁹ See, by way of exception, W. H. Walsh (1947). 'R. G. Collingwood's Philosophy of History'. *Philosophy* 22: 153-60.

¹⁰⁰ For a sense of the difficulties, but also what can be achieved, compare P. T. Geach (1979). *Truth, Love and Immortality: An Introduction to McTaggart's Philosophy*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, and Richard Polt (1999). *Heidegger: An Introduction*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

¹⁰¹ Stein Helgeby (2004). *Action as History*, vii.

(1924), '[i]t is my strong belief that a philosophy which cannot be written in plain terms, without reliance on the jargon of any school, must be a false philosophy'.¹⁰² (This may be one reason why, especially in the last generation, Collingwood scholars have tended to engage in exposition in the form of paraphrase and extended quotation when presenting his views: the risk of complicating rather than making more perspicuous Collingwood's positions through an exegetical effort that obfuscates what was originally far more transparent is a very real one, to which his modern admirers are especially sensitive).

Yet Collingwood *was* like McTaggart or Heidegger insofar as he expounded controversial views, sometimes very controversial views. That he did so in a manner that seemed so straightforward and attractive even to his critics left many readers with the niggling sense that there had to be more to it than he was letting on and that something else lay beneath the surface of marble-smooth prose. Dorothy Emmet – who, like Eliot, had attended Collingwood's lectures – captures some of this air of mystery about Collingwood's views in a review of one of the earliest interpretive works on Collingwood's philosophy, *The Later Philosophy of R.G. Collingwood* (1962) by Alan Donagan. As Emmet observed,

[Collingwood] was one of the spell-binders of my own undergraduate days at Oxford; and for some of us our delight in his lectures was spiced up by knowing that our tutors disapproved of him. Yet I do not think we ever quite believed him; it was all just a little too beautiful and clever. There was never anything probing or tentative about Collingwood's views, at any rate as he put them forward in his books and lectures (though the impressive body of his published work in philosophy, along with, I understand, a mass of unpublished and discarded material, could only have been achieved by someone who worked with immense concentration and without sparing himself; this when he was at the same time a practising Romano-British historian, and, in the last years, in a race against mortal illness). Each book says something in a tone of complete assurance and finality, and the style is brilliant.¹⁰³

¹⁰² SM, 11.

¹⁰³ Dorothy Emmet (1963). 'The Later Philosophy of R.G. Collingwood by Alan Donagan'. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 13: 371–72.

This thesis is concerned with the substance behind the style. It draws upon Collingwood's published writings, as well as some of the discarded and unpublished material mentioned by Emmet, including pieces that have since been published, to develop an account of what preoccupied Collingwood the philosopher the most, following him as he formulates and asks what I take to be a question he regarded as fundamental: 'what does or can knowing *mean* for understanding and conducting human life'.

To say that the meaning (and by extension the implications) of knowing was a fundamental concern of Collingwood's is probably as faithful a description as one can propose for what animated his efforts in philosophy in general, even if it is not the whole story. This suggestion gains credence when one considers the prominence given in *An Autobiography* to Collingwood's unequivocal attack on the doctrine of knowledge propounded by the Oxford realists, like Cook Wilson, who held that the objects of existence existed and related to one another independently of the mind and were apprehended directly by the mind, whether by intuition or by perceptual acquaintance.

Realism was a doctrine designed to fit with the methods of empirical science, which claimed to provide knowledge of the natural world. It took for granted that natural science was the model for the highest and perhaps the only true form of knowledge and that all processes were natural processes which operated according to laws that could be inferred from the perceived motions of objects.

Collingwood glossed this doctrine as the creed that 'knowing makes no difference to what is known'.¹⁰⁴ For Collingwood, realism was not merely a school of thought in the academic sense of the word, one reputable but questionable epistemological doctrine among others, but a far more dangerous and more insidious threat to clear thinking of any description about any subject, but especially about history. It was a poisonous fog rolling over and enveloping Western civilisation and it needed to be fought against, because of what he

¹⁰⁴ AA, 44.

believed were its fateful, and perhaps fatal, consequences: it ruled out knowledge of past human thought and human actions, which were not directly apprehensible, and in doing so made it impossible to know what man had done and so what man was, is, or ever could be. In reducing people to mere objects of existence, it opened the way to treating them as objects and, down the line, to extinguishing them from existence.

To ask the question, ‘what does or can knowing mean?’, with Collingwood is to ask the question ‘what is history?’, and indeed, as I have already suggested, ‘what is mind?’, since history is no more and no less—as Collingwood puts it in *An Autobiography*—than the knowing mind. Collingwood’s reform of metaphysics, about which more will be said in chapter 3, reflects and exemplifies this concatenation of questions, because it involves a shift of sense and reference away from ‘existence’ and towards ‘history’ as the marrow of metaphysics. As Collingwood would go on to explain, knowledge was not possible without certain ‘absolute presuppositions’ about reality as a whole and these were subject to strain and to change. What this meant was that knowledge was not possible by reason alone, as Collingwood argued and illustrated in two essays of 1927 on the relationship between faith and reason.¹⁰⁵ The world as a whole was an object of faith, which could only be known through every separate thing that it was the function of reason to explore and assess. In this sense, as Collingwood later remarked in an aside, Anselm’s *credo ut intelligam* held good not only in theology but in every department of human thought.¹⁰⁶ History too, on this view, is made possible by what the mind absolutely presupposes and assumes to be the ‘bedrock’ of all thought: not pure reasoning alone but reasoning which turns on the most deeply held and unquestioned assumptions, without which reality would be no more than a ceaseless flux of external stimuli, and the mind no more than a passive recipient of those stimuli. It is not surprising, in this light, that Collingwood adapted another of Anselm’s sayings, *fides quaerens intellectum*,¹⁰⁷ as a motto for his own enterprise: as he put it,

¹⁰⁵ ‘Reason is Faith Cultivating Itself’ and ‘Faith and Reason’ (both 1927). Printed in R. G. Collingwood (1968). *Faith and Reason: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* by R. G. Collingwood, ed. with an introduction and sectional introduction by Lionel Rubinoff. Chicago: Quadrangle Books.

¹⁰⁶ R. G. Collingwood (1931). Review of Charles Gore, *The Philosophy of the Good Life*, *The Criterion* 10: 560–62, at 561. For illuminating discussion, see Connelly (2003). *Metaphysics, Method and Politics*, 120–23.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Faith seeking understanding’. See Anselm (1965). *Proslogion*, preface, in *Proslogion with A Reply on Behalf of the Fool by Gaunilo and The Author’s Reply to Gaunilo* ed. M. J. Charlesworth. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 104.

‘Reason is faith cultivating itself’. This is a very long way from the realist conceptions of reason and the nature of existence.

It is difficult to overstate the vestigial influence of realism and the natural science model to which it was beholden on the human sciences even today. If few would be bold enough any longer to assert that natural science is the *only* genuine form of knowledge, scientific knowledge is still taken as the paradigm of knowledge, or at least as a significantly privileged form of knowledge by many, perhaps most, epistemologists, philosophers of mind, cognitive psychologists, and cognitive and behavioural scientists.¹⁰⁸ To reject it is moderately shocking even now. To reject it when Collingwood rejected it, as fiercely as he rejected it, was bold indeed; the more so because he had been a self-confessed adherent of that model in his early professional life, something his contemporaries and teachers would have known even before he announced it in his *Autobiography* (1939). The repudiation of realism and the ambition to replace it with an alternative of his own devising was bound to leave him exposed to charges of apostasy and inconsistency across the corpus of his works on the one hand, and to attempts to co-opt him into the camp, school or tradition on which he was suspected of silently relying for his positions on the other, forcing him into admitting where his loyalties lay. Collingwood himself offered some reflections on his resistance to being assigned to this or that school of thought, which are worthy of direct quotation:

[t]his power of enjoying and admiring the work of other philosophers, no matter how widely their philosophies differed from mine, was not always pleasing to my colleagues. Some of them it perhaps deceived into thinking I had no serious convictions of my own; others it annoyed, as a cowardly refusal to defend whatever convictions I had. ‘I wish you’d get off the fence’, said [Cook Wilson’s star pupil, H. A.] Prichard to me once, in a voice of the liveliest exasperation, at one of our weekly discussions, when two rival theories were being canvassed (I forget what they were)

For the meaning and sources of Anselm’s saying, see G. Stanley Kane (1973). ‘*Fides Quaerens Intellectum* in Anselm’s Thought’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 26: 40-62.

¹⁰⁸ Timothy C. Lord (2017). ‘Collingwood, Idealism, Realism, and the Possibility of Historical Knowledge’. *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 11: 342-57, at 344.

both of which I regarded as based on one and the same mistake. Twenty years' familiarity with his mind had taught me that it was no use trying to explain. If I had begun, he would have broken in, and in five minutes refuted *secundum artem* everything he thought I was going to say.¹⁰⁹

These two ways of perceiving Collingwood—as being inconsistent, and as being for Peter *and* for Paul, so to speak, are not surprising when one considers that it was almost the signature of Collingwood's thinking to reject dualisms as false abstractions and to resolve them at a higher level of unity.¹¹⁰ This is characteristic of the 'Incarnational thinking' I attribute to Collingwood. Anyone who is not alert to it will see oppositions, if not contradictions, almost everywhere in Collingwood. It is only by walking alongside Collingwood and sharing in his way of thinking that one comes to see that Prichard's metaphorical fence is an illusion, a projection not simply encouraged, but in a sense required by, the philosophical positions he espoused but which Collingwood eschewed.

None of this is to suggest for a moment that Collingwood never contradicted himself or that his own positions did not change over time.¹¹¹ Even by his own account they did. In *Speculum Mentis* (1924) he offered the chapter on Religion as an update to and a correction of the earlier claims of *Religion and Philosophy* (1916), which, he felt, had been 'too intellectualistic or abstract' and had failed to distinguish adequately between what was implicit and what was explicit in religion¹¹². And in *An Autobiography* (1939), he reflected critically on *Speculum Mentis* (1924), implying that he had reservations about some of its arguments, albeit minor ones. Indeed, it was only of *Essay on Philosophical Method* (1933) that Collingwood spoke in *An Autobiography* (1939) with unmixed approval. On the other hand the insinuation that lurks behind Emmet's left-handed compliment to his 'tone of

¹⁰⁹ AA, 47-48.

¹¹⁰ As noted in David Boucher (1993). 'Human Conduct, History, and Social Science in the Works of R. G. Collingwood and Michael Oakeshott', *New Literary History* 24: 697-717, at 698.

¹¹¹ For a stimulating discussion, which emphasises change over continuity in Collingwood's positions, see Robert M. Burns (2006). 'Collingwood, Bradley, and Historical Knowledge', *History and Theory* 45: 178-203. Dray likewise underscores the point that Collingwood underwent significant changes of mind about many matters in his (1995) *History as Re-enactment*.

¹¹² Collingwood (1924). SM, 108n.

complete assurance and finality', that Collingwood jumped from one fully-realised position to another like a frog navigating lily-pads on a pond, is impossible to square with the large body of manuscript materials he left behind as evidence of a mind working away at a set of problems over time that he had fixed upon early and was wrestling with to the last.

Collingwood, it has been said with justice, was someone who 'did not mind thinking on paper',¹¹³ and the thoughts he committed to paper but did not publish pose a significant interpretative challenge.

Recent Collingwood scholarship, at least since the pathbreaking work of van der Dussen and Dray in the 1980s and 1990s,¹¹⁴ has made ever more extensive use of these materials. The attractions of doing so are obvious enough. It is not just for the insights that manuscripts may shed upon writings destined to become more sharply focused through later refinement but which, 'in their initial and sometimes explosive utterance, offer glimpses of the interpenetration of themes that cross their authors minds perhaps more clearly than do published works'.¹¹⁵ Sometimes the manuscripts fill gaps in what is known, revealing interests or preoccupations that were hitherto veiled or recessive in what a given writer has chosen to put into the public domain. And there is always the feeling, especially common among historians, that the written word is somehow closer to the real intentions of the author than the published word, that in a manuscript truths are confessed in a way that is at once unvarnished and authentic: this is what Collingwood *really* thought, when no-one was watching.

Yet, on reflection, it is not obvious that this feeling is valid. Goldstein is surely right to object that '[w]hen it came to publishing, Collingwood was no shrinking violet',¹¹⁶ no less averse to

¹¹³ R.G. Collingwood (1999). *The Principles of History and other writings in the philosophy of history*. W.H. Dray and W.J. van der Dussen (Eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, xv.

¹¹⁴ Dray made extensive use of unpublished manuscripts in *History as Re-enactment*, which Rex Martin praised as a distinguishing feature of Dray's book in comparison to other studies of Collingwood's philosophy of history. See Rex Martin (1998). Reviewed work: *History as Re-enactment: R.G. Collingwood's Idea of History* by William H. Dray. *The American Historical Review*, 103(1), 147.

¹¹⁵ Robert Wokler (1999). 'The Manuscript Authority of Political Thoughts'. *History of Political Thought* 20: 107-23.

¹¹⁶ Leon J. Goldstein (1998). Review of William H. Dray, *History as Re-enactment: R. G. Collingwood's Idea of History*, *History and Theory* 37: 410.

speaking his mind in print than he was in the lecture theatre or when writing to correspondents or confessing ideas to his notebooks. His decisions to publish certain manuscripts and not others were as much expressions of authorial intention as anything he put down on paper. Published works surely have a distinctive sort of authority in any case. They possess a kind of finality and the assurance that comes from being complete: they are fully realised statements, or have at least the appearance of being such, in a way that manuscript fragments are not. Once manuscripts are allowed a special authority, once they are given the final word, the danger is that they are used as trumps which override what has appeared in print—so that, for example, *The Principles of History* necessarily trumps *The Idea of History* (1946) — or, if not, then as the secret ciphers that unlock and unite the printed works together, works which (so the silent implication runs) cannot otherwise be understood correctly. At the limit we slide, perhaps imperceptibly, into what Collingwood termed ‘pseudo-history’, or ‘scissors-and-paste’ history, in which a number of pre-determined authoritative statements are wrenched out of context and strung together in a premeditated sequence which purports to deliver the indubitable fact of the matter.¹¹⁷

As Robert Wokler once noted, however, manuscripts are no more pregnant with self-evident meaning than are published works: ‘their recoverable sense also reflects the skills of their interpreters. But as well as constituting drafts of other texts [he continued], they can point towards meanings their authors might later refine, sharpen, blunt, suppress, abandon or deem insignificant. They may articulate a free association of ideas and give expression to dreams that wend across disciplines [or elude any easy classification, as with Collingwood’s ruminations upon the possibility of clairvoyant experience]. As distinct from the works to which they give rise, they are genuine *pièces fugitives*, not to be confined to quarters, bursting from their contexts’.¹¹⁸ This suggests, in its turn, that the benefits of using manuscript sources will be maximised if they are used selectively, critically, and with an eye to the logical relations between positions espoused by an author at different points in time,

¹¹⁷ This worry finds its clearest expression in Goldstein (1998). Review of W. H. Dray, 409.

¹¹⁸ Wokler (1999). ‘The Manuscript Authority’, 109.

rather than as mosaic tiles which fill in the spaces in an existing chronological sequence. The first is the way in which I attempt to make use of them here.

Collingwood, of course, worked across disciplines. This poses another significant interpretative challenge, namely the challenge of coming to grips with the deceptively effortless manner in which he moved across and between different intellectual fields and departments of thought, at once apprehending the distinctions that were important, rejecting distinctions without a difference where he detected them, and refusing to distinguish artificially at the borderlands where one discipline was already in the process of turning into another (what he sometimes wrote about as a ‘fallacy of precarious margins’¹¹⁹). Collingwood’s belief in the unity of knowledge suffused his analysis of the various forms of the human experience, where each form, as James Patrick puts it ‘will tend [...] to function from time to time as the single hermeneutic illuminating all the others’.¹²⁰ The reconciliation among the sciences, and in particular the human sciences—pursued by Collingwood most devoutly in philosophy and history—has about it a suppleness and variegation which exegetical eagerness, however sympathetic, can easily overwhelm, substituting in its place a more rigid classificatory approach of the kind which Collingwood himself tried to very hard to avoid.¹²¹ Even his friend Benedetto Croce was admonished for having succumbed in his earlier works to a ‘rigid and arid formalism’ which identified four discrete ‘Forms of the Spirit’: this was the ‘barren and mechanical side of his thinking’ from which the later Croce and his followers had just about managed to extricate themselves.¹²²

¹¹⁹ A key feature of Collingwood’s reform of philosophical method is the recognition of the unavoidable overlap between concepts in philosophy. The fallacy of precarious margins ‘consists in assuming that the overlap which has already affected a certain area of the class in question can be trusted not to spread’. R.G. Collingwood (1933). *An Essay on Philosophical Method*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 48.

¹²⁰ James Patrick (1985). *The Magdalen Metaphysics: Idealism and Orthodoxy at Oxford, 1901–1945*. Georgia: Mercer University Press, 82. Hereafter referred to as *The Magdalen Metaphysics*.

¹²¹ Given that for Collingwood ‘the specific classes of philosophical genus do not exclude one another, they overlap one another. This overlap is not exceptional, it is normal; and it is not negligible in extent, it may reach formidable dimensions’. *EPM*, 31.

¹²² R. G. Collingwood [with Evelyn Underhill and W. R. Inge] (1923). ‘Can the New Idealism Dispense with Mysticism? [Part II], *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes, Vol. 3, Relativity, Logic, and Mysticism*, 161-75 [of 148-84], at 162.

Setting out to explore any single aspect of Collingwood's philosophy, then, brings with it at least three central interpretative challenges. First, there is Collingwood's deceptively simply prose style, the lapidary surface beneath which layer upon layer of shifting sedimentary rock eventually cedes to bedrock. Then there is a body of unpublished material complicating and sometimes seeming to contradict or supplant what is said in his published writings. Then, third, there is the range and interconnectedness of Collingwood's thought, to be set against his sense on the one hand that different considerations apply in different departments of thought and words that mean one thing in one setting (like 'because') mean something quite different in another, on the other the background assumption that reality itself is a unity or undifferentiated whole which is in itself an object of faith and can be known only through its modifications or specifications. And all these challenges merely add to and amplify the challenge of working out what Collingwood thought, what he meant, and the significance of what he meant, as a whole.

Considered as a whole, Collingwood scholarship has tended to centre its attention on two areas in which these challenges converge especially forcefully: his philosophy of history and his reform of metaphysics. An initial preoccupation with his opposition to the monopolizing ambitions of natural science methodology, and his insistence on the differences between scientific and historical knowledge, which in the first generation after Collingwood's death exhausted the space of perspectives almost entirely, has given way to a broader set of preoccupations, albeit one in which the relationship between history, philosophy and science, and his conceptions of each one individually, remain central items of controversy. These 'Collingwood Controversies', as James Connelly has termed them, continue to act as landmarks in the field of Collingwood studies. In order to place my thesis within this field it is necessary to discuss them in a little more detail in this and the next chapter, as the prelude to laying out the outlines of my argument, which chapters 3-6 develop more fully.

The Collingwood Controversies

Connelly summarizes the five main Collingwood controversies as follows.

[t]he first [bad faith] is the charge that Collingwood deceived the reader as to his influences and affinities; the second [historical relativism] is the claim that he underwent a 'radical conversion' to historical relativism; the third [political radicalism] concerns his purported move to the radical left; the fourth [re-enactment] concerns the correct interpretation of re-enactment in historical knowledge; the final controversy [idealism] is the extent to which it is correct to identify him as an idealist.¹²³

Some of these controversies are more relevant to the concerns of this thesis than others. The first is perhaps the one most obviously antithetical to Collingwood's stated wish that those interested in what he had to say ought to write not about him but about the problems that he had been grappling with. The third and the fifth controversies, meanwhile, over the grounds and wisdom of attributing to Collingwood commitments to political radicalism or to idealism at time t_1 which he had not held, or no longer held, at time t_2 are alike insofar as they revolve around attempts to classify or periodize Collingwood's life and thought.

As I mentioned in the introduction, this attempt began with the publication of *The Idea of History* in 1946 and flowed out of the concern of its editor, T. M. Knox, to vindicate his editorial choices. Selectivity was necessary, Knox believed, to correct for the unfortunate fact that Collingwood's writings had fallen off in quality when, in the later part of the 1930s, he lost his way philosophically and politically as his health went into terminal decline. Later scholarship has exposed the premise on which Knox proceeded as essentially dubious—as Jan van der Dussen tartly observes, the *Autobiography* (1939) and *An Essay on Metaphysics* (1940), as well as *The First Mate's Log* (1940) and *The New Leviathan* (1942) and sundry lectures on ethics were all written at around the same time and in the same 'later manner',¹²⁴ and at least two of these works are considered to be philosophical and/or

¹²³ James Connelly (2013). 'Collingwood Controversies'. In David Boucher and Teresa Smith (Eds.). *R.G. Collingwood & Other Writings with Essays on Collingwood's Life and Work*, p. 401. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 401.

¹²⁴ Van der Dussen (1997). 'Collingwood's "Lost" Manuscript of the Principles of History', 39.

literary classics—but it has continued the practice erected on that premise of breaking up Collingwood’s life and thought into different periods.

It is true that Collingwood himself was not averse to breaking up thought in this fashion on occasion. In *The Idea of Nature* (1945) for instance, he wrote of ‘three periods of constructive cosmological thinking’, in which the Greek view, the Renaissance view, and the Modern views had been articulated and through which thought had transitioned from one view to the next, but this was a shorthand.¹²⁵ His considered position was that in ‘the actual history of events there is [...] no nextness; not so much because there is always something between (though in a sense the facts may be put that way—you may distinguish an intermediate period between the Middle Ages and the Modern Period, and so *ad infinitum*) as because there is no clear beginning or ending’. There are just events which are at once parts of events that lasted for a longer time, and capable of being divided into other events that lasted less time.¹²⁶ The issue is not that the division is arbitrary: even if it is, it can be revealing, as Collingwood’s division into three periods of thinking about nature is revealing. It is rather that the division reveals more about the purposes of the person doing the dividing than the subject or subjects whose thought is being divided. A larger worry is that treating thought as an ‘event’, as this approach entails, seems very hard to square with Collingwood’s own conception of thought as action, the distinction he drew between actions and events, and his sense that actions, not events, were the subject matter of history. To put it differently, Collingwood scholars have not always approached the past—in this case, the thoughts expressed by Collingwood in the past—in the manner which Collingwood himself laid down for history as form of enquiry.

Because the first, third and fifth ‘controversies’ are marginal to my purposes, I will leave them to one side at this point and turn instead to the second and the fourth of the controversies, ‘historical relativism’ and ‘re-enactment’. These controversies are directly relevant to the reading of Collingwood I advance in this thesis and for this reason must be

¹²⁵ R. G. Collingwood (1946). *The Idea of Nature*, ed. T. M. Knox. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1-8.

¹²⁶ R. G. Collingwood (1926). ‘Some Perplexities about Time’, 137.

taken into account and worked through. This being said, in taking these two controversies as a cue to survey the existing landscape in Collingwood studies, it is not my aim to settle them. My purpose is the more modest one of filling in the background that enables me to develop a contrast with my own reading of Collingwood's ideas and to demonstrate the way in which that reading puts the controversies in a different light. More specifically, the claims I wish to advance about the moral end of history as atonement of the mind, and of the inextricable link between history, so conceived, and the wellbeing of Western civilization, will, I hope, acquire a much clearer prominence and distinctiveness when seen as part of a landscape of other germane perspectives. The present chapter focuses on historical relativism, the next chapter on re-enactment, but the division is an arbitrary one because, unsurprisingly, the two controversies turn out to overlap in important ways.

Radical conversion and historical relativism

The charge of historical relativism against Collingwood rests on two premises which are connected. First there is the premise that towards the end of his life Collingwood had dissolved philosophy into history, and in doing so dissolved the 'universal' into the 'particular', with all that entailed for the historical particularity and contextual contingency of all human thought. Second, it is supposed that Collingwood's theory of 'absolute presuppositions', which was assumed in *An Autobiography* (1939) and fully expressed later in *An Essay on Metaphysics* (1940), held that all human thought and reasoning turned on a special kind of assumptions which varied between societies and epochs; assumptions of a kind that was not subject to verification. As such, it would not be possible to exalt one philosophy as morally superior to or as marking an advance upon any other, because there was no real historical continuity, no transcendent truth, only what made sense within different, historically specific, worlds of assumption. As a result, Collingwood is identified not only as a 'historicist' but as a relativist too.

These premises were first adopted by Knox, who located the so-called 'radical conversion' of Collingwood to historical relativism—the phrase 'radical conversion' was not used by Knox himself but coined by Rubinoff in the course of rejecting the idea that any such conversion

had taken place—in the period 1936-1938.¹²⁷ Connelly follows Rubinoff in defending Collingwood against the charge of historical relativism and denies that there was ever any ‘radical conversion’. He also challenges the notion that Collingwood dissolved philosophy into history. Rather, Connelly explains, for Collingwood history and philosophy were intimately connected and overlapped, but neither was dissolved or reduced to the other. As Connelly puts it,

[f]or Collingwood philosophy and history were inseparable: philosophy if it was to be concrete had to be historical, and this implied not the absorption of one into the other, but overlap.¹²⁸

Van der Dussen agrees with Connelly that Knox’s initial premise is unconvincing. As he notes, ‘In his *Autobiography*, on which he was working at the same time as on *The Principles of History*, [Collingwood] speaks explicitly about a *rapprochement* between philosophy and history on the one hand, and between theory and practice on the other, not about an identity between them’.¹²⁹

Connelly then goes on to reject the second premise, that is, the idea that an epoch-defining intellectual ‘framework’ of the kind that is imparted by ‘absolute presuppositions’ makes every period a closed and self-contained world which determines the thought of those who inhabit it. This, Connelly contends, is an extreme view, which is not consistent with Collingwood’s arguments. As Connelly explains,

[i]f we take it [the historian’s ‘point of view’] to mean that the thought of the historians and their conclusions are determined in every detail by their epoch and situation, the charge [historical relativism] would stand. However, if it is the assertion that every historian works within an inherited framework of problems and

¹²⁷ Connelly (2013). ‘Collingwood Controversies’, 405.

¹²⁸ Connelly (2013). ‘Collingwood Controversies’, 408.

¹²⁹ Van der Dussen (1997). ‘Collingwood’s “Lost” Manuscript of the Principles of History’, 35.

solutions, it is far less threatening. It is the difference between what [Stephen] Toulmin calls relativism and relationism.¹³⁰

Nevertheless, Connelly does not deny that Collingwood's methodology does little to discourage the charge of historical relativism. Toulmin himself elsewhere referred at one point to 'Collingwood's ultimate relativism'¹³¹ and other commentators concur. Walsh suggests that Collingwood should have been a relativist on his own principles, even if he did not always live up to those principles.¹³² Nathan Rotenstreich assumes that Collingwood's 'confessed historicism' commits him to relativism,¹³³ whilst Errol E. Harris argues that while *An Essay on Metaphysics* (1940) does seem to be advocating 'a relativistic type of historicism', this is not typical of 'his philosophy at its best',¹³⁴ in effect following Knox in valuing Collingwood's earlier writings at a higher rate than his later ones, differing only in believing that the earlier Collingwood survives beneath the surface even in the later writings.

There seems no doubt that Collingwood himself saw that relativism was a deep problem. Ernest Gellner, for one, has praised him for highlighting both the scale of problem it posed and the temptation to succumb to it.¹³⁵ Connelly agrees, writing that the 'temptation' of relativism for Collingwood was both 'clear' and 'strong', and it must be acknowledged that 'Collingwood was much exercised by the relativity of thought and action in history, archaeology, and anthropology'.¹³⁶ But in what, precisely, did the problem consist with Collingwood?

¹³⁰ Connelly (2013). 'Collingwood Controversies', 409. Here Connelly cites Toulmin, Stephen (1972). *Human Understanding*, vol. I, Princeton University Press.

¹³¹ Stephen Toulmin (1972). 'Conceptual Change and the Problem of Relativity'. In *Critical Essays on the Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*, ed. Michael Krausz. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 201-21, at 220.

¹³² W. H. Walsh (1972). 'Collingwood and Metaphysical Neutralism'. In *Critical Essays*, 134-53.

¹³³ Nathan Rotenstreich (1972). 'Metaphysics and Historicism'. In *Critical Essays*, 179-200, at 200.

¹³⁴ Errol E. Harris (1972). 'Collingwood's Treatment of the Ontological Argument and the Categorical Universal'. In *Critical Essays*, 113-33, at 133.

¹³⁵ Ernest Gellner (1974). 'Thought and Time, or the Reluctant Relativist'. In *Selected Philosophical Themes, vol. III: The Devil in Modern Philosophy*. London and New York: Routledge, 150-64.

¹³⁶ Connelly (2013). 'Collingwood Controversies', 413. Connelly notes that Collingwood's awareness and concerns over historical relativism were heightened by his extensive work on anthropology and folklore.

According to Connelly, the fullest and most subtle statement of the problem was offered by Alan Donagan in *The Later Philosophy of R.G. Collingwood*.¹³⁷ It must be said that there is not much subtlety about Donagan's conclusion that Collingwood's formal position was 'too riddled with confusions and contradictions to stay afloat; and that no considerable parts of its wreckage can be salvaged' but his reasons for thinking it so are more nuanced and sophisticated than the blanket terms in which he stated this conclusion.¹³⁸ The kernel of the problem, as Donagan presents it, can be stated briskly: the problem is that Collingwood claims that 'absolute presuppositions' are neither true nor false, whereas [Donagan thinks] they must be either true or false given the other claims that Collingwood is committed to making.

The later Collingwood held that every statement in systematic thought is the answer to some question, and every question arises only on the basis of certain presuppositions. The question, "where is my umbrella?", for example, contains the presupposition that I have an umbrella. Collingwood further distinguishes "relative" from "absolute" presuppositions. Most everyday presuppositions are relative: they can themselves be answers to a question and can therefore be shown to be either true or false, relative to that question. For instance, as in the example given above, "I have an umbrella" is a presupposition of the question, "Where is my umbrella?" but it is also the answer to the question, "Do you have an umbrella?" There are many such presuppositions. But Collingwood says that there are also some presuppositions that cannot be questioned, not because they are certainly true—whether because they are obviously the right answer to a question ("Your umbrella is in the umbrella stand over there") or because they are true as a matter of definition ("All bachelors are unmarried")—but rather because, within the framework of questions and answers to which they belong, it does not make any sense to question them. This is because their assumption is part of what gives the whole framework its meaning, so they cannot be questioned without collapsing into meaninglessness. They are not themselves answers to

¹³⁷ Connelly (2013). 'Collingwood Controversies', 411-412.

¹³⁸ Donagan (1962). *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*, 279.

any more fundamental questions, but rather acts or expressions of ultimate faith or belief, of an interpretative commitment to seeing the world like *this*.

An example that Collingwood gives concerns the frameworks—he calls them “constellations”—provided by the Newtonian, the Kantian and the Einsteinian modes of scientific enquiry, represented by different ideas of nature. Each of these assumes a peculiar notion of causation, and within any one of them, this notion cannot be questioned. It is not that it is thought of as true and argued for; it is simply taken for granted and argued from. It is an absolute presupposition. This much is true of every framework of this kind: there will be at its root a set of presuppositions that are presupposed absolutely within it. However, what is an absolute presupposition in one framework will not necessarily be so in another. Thus, for example, that ‘every event has a cause’ expresses an absolute presupposition in the Kantian framework but it does not do so in the Einsteinian framework, and so the statement ‘every event has a cause’ is not the same proposition, statement, or presupposition in the two cases. Every proposition is relative to a particular constellation of absolute presuppositions, and each constellation is sufficient unto itself and relative to nothing greater or more fundamental beyond it. There is no ‘ultimate’ yardstick against which to measure one constellation against another because each constellation just is the ‘yardstick’ of propositions that are relative to it and not to another constellation. There is no ‘yardstick’ of ‘yardsticks’.

What Donagan argues, against these claims as he has laid them out, is that to presuppose something is of necessity to presuppose it is true.¹³⁹ And since *this* is true, it is also true, *pace* Collingwood, that absolute presuppositions are propositions. For given any allegedly absolute presupposition, one can perfectly properly preface it with the phrase ‘is it true that...’, as when formulating the question ‘Is it true that every event has a cause’.¹⁴⁰ Accordingly the crucial distinction between relative and absolute presuppositions is dissolved at a stroke. On similar grounds Donagan rejects Collingwood’s likening of absolute

¹³⁹ Donagan (1962). *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*, 72.

¹⁴⁰ Donagan (1962). *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*, 76-80.

presuppositions to yardsticks: because presuppositions say something—they are propositions in masquerade—they are quite unlike yardsticks, which are merely units of measurement. Finally, and most damningly, Donagan infers that

[f]rom Collingwood's theorem that absolute presuppositions are neither true nor false it follows that no good reason can be given for preferring one to another. "The questions asked of an ultimate belief by traditional metaphysics are 'Is it true?' 'What evidence is there for it?' 'How can it be demonstrated?' 'What right have we got to believe it if it can't?' But since all these questions presuppose that ultimate beliefs are propositions rather than absolute presuppositions, on Collingwood's premisses they must be dismissed as nonsensical... Any answers to these nonsense questions which traditional metaphysics may provide must also be dismissed as nonsense. They are 'neither metaphysical truths nor metaphysical errors', but 'pseudo-metaphysics'... However, no argument can be stronger than its premisses; and one of the premisses of this argument [...] is false.¹⁴¹

In short, Collingwood, by denying that absolute presuppositions are propositions, puts them beyond criticism, and free rein is given to any kind of fancy or superstition to set itself up as the foundation of science and metaphysics. Indeed every epoch can set up its own. 'Set up' is a phrase that is apt to mislead, in fact, because Collingwood compounds the problem by saying that absolute presuppositions ordinarily are unconscious: we do not know we have them, and cannot self-consciously adopt or divest ourselves of them, least of all, for reasons that will be obvious, on the ground that they are false. By this manoeuvre, Donagan intones, Collingwood

transformed his projected historical science into a sort of depth psychology [that is to say, an immersive account of what groups of people have believed in different periods of time]. To crown these tergiversations, on perceiving his doctrine that absolute presuppositions are neither true nor false to collide with his passionate

¹⁴¹ Donagan (1962). *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*, 269-79.

devotion to European science and civilization, he tried to reconcile his dogmatism with his scepticism by protesting that, although he accepted without question whatever absolute presuppositions his unconscious mind might visit upon him, he was not so credulous as to think any of them true.¹⁴²

This criticism was biting, and it was immediately picked up by reviewers. Emmet, for example, appears to agree with Donagan's charge of historical relativism upon Collingwood's metaphysics and repeats the line that it presents an acute difficulty to his stated commitments to scientific progress and civilisation: 'Mr Donagan most properly asks [she writes] why it is not possible to criticize absolute presuppositions. Indeed, Collingwood clearly believed that the absolute presuppositions underlying modern science were better than those underlying mediaeval or even Newtonian science'.¹⁴³ Judith Jarvis Thomson took up the same point: 'Collingwood's well-known view that metaphysics is, after all, history, is [she proclaimed] carefully, gently, and devastatingly shown up for the confusion it is in Donagan's Chapter X'.¹⁴⁴ Not everyone was quite so convinced by Donagan's criticisms, however.

W.H. Walsh praised Donagan's combination of 'sympathy, insight, and critical acumen'¹⁴⁵ but when it came to his treatment of Collingwood's reforms in philosophical method (the logic of question and answer) and in metaphysics (the theory of absolute presuppositions), although Walsh agreed with Donagan's description of Collingwood ideas as 'a muddle', he suggested that Donagan's apparent refutation of the whole business of 'absolute presuppositions' was based on misunderstanding Collingwood's assertion that 'absolute

¹⁴² Donagan (1962). *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*, 279.

¹⁴³ Emmet (1963), 371. After this largely positive evaluation of Donagan's book, she ends her review with a graceful expression of preference for reading Collingwood's own writings for further insight (a view which I am fully in agreement). In her words, '[a]nyone who wishes to study Collingwood systematically will find Mr. Donagan a most valuable guide. Yet perhaps in the end we are more likely to return to Collingwood's books for some of the brilliant particular comments and particular discussions, such as that on cause in the *Essay on Metaphysics*, the theories of historiography in *The Idea of History*, and the view of philosophical definitions in the *Essay on Philosophical Method*', 372.

¹⁴⁴ Judith Jarvis Thomson (1964). Reviewed Work: *The Later Philosophy of R.G. Collingwood* by Alan Donagan. *The Journal of Philosophy* 61: 784-786, at 786.

¹⁴⁵ W.H. Walsh (1965). Reviewed Work: *The Later Philosophy of R.G. Collingwood* by Alan Donagan. *The Philosophical Review* 74: 121.

presuppositions' were not subject to verification (a misunderstanding, we shall see, that continues to colour some of the more recent Collingwood scholarship). Donagan's contention, as Walsh puts it, is that 'there are no presuppositions which it is logically impossible to doubt', to which he responds that Collingwood's description of some presuppositions as absolute did not mean that they could not be logically doubted but rather that it was '*absurd*' to do so.¹⁴⁶

Walsh's point is, I think, fruitful to use as a bridge to advance my argument for a reading of Collingwood that distances itself from the analytical approach that characterises much of the recent Collingwood scholarship. Walsh seems to me correct to point out that subjecting 'absolute presuppositions' to the rigmarole of analytical dissection *is* absurd. It does appear futile to deploy analytical philosophy to criticize the theory of 'absolute presuppositions' and what these presuppositions in their absoluteness stand for, as it does to attempt to mount an effective defence of the case for 'absolute presuppositions' using the same tools. Connelly may be right to insist that the hypothesis of Collingwood's 'radical conversion' to historical relativism may by now be ripe for abandonment, but it is less clear that the charge of historical relativism against Collingwood can be defused and made safe permanently via a technical distinction between 'relativism' and 'relationism', however precise. This seems to be only another form of yielding to the grounds upon which the charge itself is made to seem a potent one, namely an analytic conception which demands of any philosophy of history that its pursuit of truth conforms to naturalistic philosophy insofar as truth, so conceived, must be apprehensible by reason alone, otherwise it cannot be defended.

Connelly's defence of Collingwood's position, sympathetic as it is, is continued and advanced along more stringent methodological lines more recently by D'Oro and Connelly (2017) in 'Collingwood, Scientism, and Historicism: An Introduction'.¹⁴⁷ In this text, it must be said, the costs of deploying the methods and manner of analytic philosophy in the case

¹⁴⁶ Walsh (1965), 121.

¹⁴⁷ Giuseppina D'Oro and James Connelly. (2017). 'Collingwood, Scientism and Historicism', *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 11(3), 275-288. Hereafter referred to as D'Oro and Connelly. (2017). 'Collingwood, Scientism and Historicism'.

for the defence burden the reader more heavily than Connelly's earlier treatments of the question. For D'Oro and Connelly, Collingwood's 'historicism'—now understood as 'commitment to the methodological autonomy of history qua *Geisteswissenschaft* or science of the mind'—is an argument for 'methodological pluralism' as 'part and parcel of a conception of metaphysics as a science of presuppositions whose task is to make explicit the norms or principles which govern explanation in different forms of inquiry'.¹⁴⁸

On D'Oro's and Connelly's (2017) reading of Collingwood's metaphysics, natural sciences and history each have their own set of presuppositions: that "nature does not change" is the presupposition of the natural scientist, whereas that 'thought in not unchanging' is the presupposition of the historian. This, it is argued, ought not to be construed as the historicist position that all conclusions are relative, but as a form of pragmatism that affords both the natural sciences and history their own methodological autonomy: neither Dionysus nor Apollo, but each in his own season.¹⁴⁹ Such arguments, however, can inadvertently harden into a conception of consciousness as segmented. They also slide over the very definite difference on which Collingwood insisted between 'absolute' and 'relative' presuppositions: it is telling that with the exception of a solitary early reference to metaphysics as the science of "absolute" presuppositions, throughout 'Collingwood, Scientism and Historicism' metaphysics is referred to uniformly as just the science of presuppositions.

Though the argument advanced by D'Oro and Connelly, that the historian and the natural scientist each deploy different sets of presuppositions in their respective practices, makes a powerful case for harmony between the sciences by accommodating methodological autonomy, the significance of "absolute" presuppositions in all thought and all inquiry, something without which Collingwood's metaphysics would melt into air, appears as an unintended casualty of the enterprise. Collingwood argued fiercely for the autonomy of historical method and for its distinctiveness from the methods of natural sciences vis-à-vis

¹⁴⁸ D'Oro and Connelly. (2017). 'Collingwood, Scientism and Historicism', 282.

¹⁴⁹ D'Oro and Connelly. (2017). 'Collingwood, Scientism and Historicism', 283.

history and natural sciences as disciplines. But the reach and end of Collingwood's philosophy of history goes much further than the autonomy of history as a discipline or practice, to the foundations of what constitutes consciousness that is ultimately informed by "absolute" presuppositions. 'Science', as Collingwood was insisting as early as in *Speculum Mentis*, 'is the question whose answer is history'.¹⁵⁰

The absoluteness of absolute presuppositions

The tendency to downplay the importance of the 'absolute' in Collingwood's 'absolute presuppositions' is taken a step further in Rex Martin's 'From Method to Metaphysics'. In his opening sentence, Martin casts aside the terminology of 'absolute presuppositions', which Collingwood deployed in both *An Essay on Metaphysics* (1940) and in *An Autobiography* (1939), in favour of his own argot of 'fundamental presuppositions, organizing principles of knowledge or of practice'.¹⁵¹ Undoubtedly "absolute" presuppositions are fundamental, but Collingwood's expressed point is that they are more fundamental than anything else in thought. 'Absolute presuppositions' are the assumptions without which orderly thinking is simply not possible in the first place. And without some thinking, however primitive, no knowledge—or at any rate no organised knowledge – or science, or practice is possible either.

Martin's argument aims to defend Collingwood against the charge of historical relativism by invoking the idea of 'progress' as applicable to all sciences, including history. He does so by offering a positive version of Donagan's negative criticism: 'fundamental' presuppositions *qua* beliefs (Martin describes beliefs as 'propositional attitudes') are just as amenable to re-evaluation and development as scientific theories are, and indeed have been. Martin is moved to pursue this line of argument by what he views as the disharmony between the logic of question and answer (which Martin understands as a logic of 'meaning and truth') and the notion of presuppositions that are 'absolute' insofar that they neither yield to truth-judgments nor indeed to meaningfulness, since it is upon them that *meaning* depends. It is

¹⁵⁰ SM, 186.

¹⁵¹ Rex Martin (2013). 'From Method to Metaphysics'. In David Boucher and Teresa Smith (Eds.). *R.G. Collingwood & Other Writings with essays on Collingwood's life and work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 353-375. Hereafter referred to as Rex Martin (2013). 'From Method to Metaphysics'.

necessary here to quote at length from Martin's argument to communicate his point clearly:

I would grant, then, that the logic of question and answer, understood as a logic of meaning and truth, was integral to the actual *explication* of fundamental presuppositions in chapter 4 of the *Metaphysics*. But it was not a happy device. For, though that explication provided a handy way of removing truth value from these presuppositions, it also had the effect of removing meaning from them as well. The very reason Collingwood used to deny that such presuppositions can be true or false (viz. that they are not answers to questions) would also be reason to deny that they are propositions in any sense or even that they are meaningful statements.

Martin then continues:

But this won't do. The things Collingwood called absolute presuppositions of science were necessarily conceived by him to be *meaningful*. For, if absolute presuppositions were not meaningful, then they could not be supposed (by anyone who thinks about them) or be presupposed (in some sort of logical relationship) by inferior presuppositions, or be reasoned to and assessed by metaphysicians in their attempts to determine the grounds of scientific enquiry and explanation.¹⁵²

Invoking the idea of 'progress'—akin to the progress taken to be characteristic of the natural sciences—to frame what Collingwood calls "absolute" presuppositions but which Martin, correcting him, refers to as 'fundamental' presuppositions, Martin envisages such presuppositions as embedded in the science and practice which they inform, and from which, therefore, they draw their meaning reflectively, so to speak. In the structure Martin posits for such presuppositions, truth and falsity need no longer be demanded of the 'fundamental' presuppositions. Rather, and as Martin explains '[p]ractices as a whole are

¹⁵² Martin (2013). 'From Method to Metaphysics', 360-361

not typically called true (or false), but, rather sound or unsound, effective or ineffective (given what they're trying to do).¹⁵³

To burnish this conclusion, Martin adduces the example of the British constitution which Collingwood uses at the end of his discussion of 'absolute presuppositions' in chapter VII of *An Autobiography*:

Here [Collingwood] said that 'the beliefs of a given set of people at a given time concerning the nature of the world are exhibited as a single complex of contemporaneous fact, like, say, the British constitution as it stands today' [*An Autobiography*, p. 67].

However, the passage quoted by Martin is only a part of Collingwood's original statement which extends to an assertion that metaphysics is concerned also with enquiring into the 'origins of these beliefs' to which Martin refers. The full passage goes as follows:

But the statements which any competent metaphysician tried to make or refute, substantiate or undermine, are themselves certainly true or false; for they are answers to questions about the history of these [absolute] presuppositions. This was my answer to the rather threadbare question 'how can metaphysics become a science?' If science means a naturalistic science, the answer is that it had better not try. If science means an organized body of knowledge, the answer is: by becoming what it always has been; that is, frankly claiming its proper status as an historical science in which, on the one hand, *the beliefs of a given set of people at a given time concerning the nature of the world are exhibited as a single complex of contemporaneous facts, like, say, the British constitution as it stands to-day; and, on the other hand, the origin of these beliefs is enquired into, and it is found that during*

¹⁵³ Martin (2013). 'From Method to Metaphysics', 374.

a certain space of time they have come into existence by certain changes out of certain others (emphasis added).¹⁵⁴

Thus it becomes difficult to read Martin's attempt to rescue Collingwood from the charge of historical relativism by means of appeal to the idea of 'progress' to confer meaning and plausibility, albeit indirectly, on 'absolute presuppositions', without feeling uneasy about aspects of Martin's argument that risk undoing the whole of Collingwood's metaphysics. To advance an alternative conception of 'absolute presuppositions' which is compatible with the line of argument he wishes to pursue, Martin draws on unpublished writings in which Collingwood equivocates on the question of truth and falsity of absolute presuppositions, in contrast to Collingwood's otherwise clear views on this matter in both *An Autobiography* (1939) and subsequently in *An Essay on Metaphysics* (1940).¹⁵⁵

Yet in the final analysis Martin's attempt to attribute meaningfulness to 'absolute presuppositions' assumes a familiar circularity. Whether it is by subsuming the bedrock of thought into the paradigms of scientific enquiry (as Martin's depiction of "fundamental" presuppositions appears to do) or by denying their necessity altogether in sustaining moral and political conceptions, the risk of sliding into pseudo-metaphysics of a kind where the "absolute" is no longer "absolute" is very real. In Martin's case, the meaningfulness of "absolute" presuppositions becomes, unavoidably, a correlate of the utility ('sound or unsound, effective or ineffective') of the paradigms and practices in which they are presupposed. Similarly, when Michael Beaney, in "Collingwood's Critique of Oxbridge Realism", asserts that

the principle of logic [which is that] every sentence, as used on a given occasion to express a thought, has a content that can be expressed by a different sentence on a

¹⁵⁴ AA, 67. Collingwood's choice of the British constitution as an example of a 'system' is interesting, since although British constitution is unwritten and open to continuous development, it nevertheless is grounded in a kind of political theology, with the monarch being "Sovereign" head of Church and State.

¹⁵⁵ Collingwood used the term "metaphysical presuppositions" as a precursor to "absolute presuppositions" but, presumably, decided that the second term better captured what he wanted to say.

different occasion [...] *can be regarded, rightly, as an absolute presupposition of logic* (emphasis added),¹⁵⁶

one is surprised to find the conflation of ‘absolute presuppositions’ on the one hand, and fundamental principles, paradigms, or similar basic assumptions that are effectively “relative” presuppositions, and which are possible only in virtue of existing thought and argument that turn at bottom on ‘absolute presuppositions’.

Perhaps the most sustained attempt to establish the character and role of absolute presuppositions in Collingwood’s thinking, and to address the allegation of relativism by that means, has come from Giuseppina D’Oro. Her position is stated most clearly in the 2010 essay, ‘The Myth of Collingwood’s Historicism’,¹⁵⁷ and has been restated and developed since. D’Oro’s principal thesis is that absolute presuppositions maintain objectivity in the absence of strong ontological underpinnings, in that the *logical efficacy* of absolute presuppositions is independent of the act of believing or assenting to the content (that which is presupposed) of absolute presuppositions. Thus, whilst Collingwood’s metaphysics moves away from the temptation of ‘casting ontological anchors’ in favour of ‘metaphysical parsimony’, the objective ‘status’ of presuppositions as ‘atemporal necessities of thought’ is preserved. D’Oro’s argument turns on a distinction between the content of a presupposition and its being presupposed, for while the latter is historically-contingent the former is ahistorical by virtue of its *logical efficacy*. As she put it,

‘[a]rguments are valid in so far as they conform to certain inferential rules, not in virtue of being believed to be valid by someone at a certain time and place’.¹⁵⁸

However, by exalting the attribute of *logical efficacy* as the ‘atemporal’ in Collingwood’s metaphysics, D’Oro propounds an understanding of Collingwood which, like Beaney’s,

¹⁵⁶ Michael Beaney (2013). ‘Collingwood’s Critique of Oxbridge Realism’. In David Boucher and Teresa Smith (Eds.). *R.G. Collingwood & Other Writings with essays on Collingwood’s life and work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 262.

¹⁵⁷ Giuseppina D’Oro (2010). ‘The Myth of Collingwood’s Historicism’. *Inquiry*, 53(6), 627-641.

¹⁵⁸ D’Oro (2010), 634.

appears to jar with what is unmistakably Collingwoodian, namely mind as thought. In arguing that Collingwood's metaphysics is 'concerned with what we presuppose, *not* with what we believe' (emphasis original),¹⁵⁹ D'Oro appears to be suggesting that presuppositions stand as timeless thoughts separate from the mind which presupposes them. It may be, as I suggest in the following chapter, that Collingwood was willing to treat thoughts in this fashion. It is less clear that he was willing to treat absolute presuppositions like that.

D'Oro attributes the 'universal ascription of historicism' to Collingwood to what she calls the 'ambiguity' over what he meant by 'presupposition'. The ambiguity, according to D'Oro, arises from the interchangeable use of the term to refer either to the 'psychological state of an agent, or a propositional content'.¹⁶⁰ According to this analysis, it is easy to see how Collingwood's metaphysics could be mistaken, as it was by Donagan, for a kind of 'cultural anthropology', with metaphysics understood as the study of the former.

D'Oro's disambiguation of the term 'presupposition' consists in separating the act of believing from the intellectual content of beliefs, with the latter, not the former, being the subject matter of Collingwood's metaphysics properly understood. D'Oro argues that Collingwood's metaphysics is not relativistic because as a logical inquiry which aims to reveal the 'absolute presuppositions' of thought, it is unaffected by whether, or indeed why, such presuppositions were assented to at a time and a place in history. As she puts it,

metaphysics, as a science of presuppositions, is concerned not with what people believe as a matter of historical or psychological fact, but with what they presuppose in the technical sense.¹⁶¹

In more recent writing, D'Oro argues that far from being relativistic, Collingwood's metaphysics represents a pragmatic approach to the demands erroneously placed upon

¹⁵⁹ D'Oro (2010), 632.

¹⁶⁰ D'Oro (2010), 633.

¹⁶¹ D'Oro (2010), 632.

‘transcendental’ arguments about the nature of reality. Ontological, or ‘truth or world-directed’ transcendental arguments are mistaken in presupposing that truth can be a predicate of the ‘conditions of knowledge’. Similarly, ‘belief-directed’ transcendental arguments end up performing a full-blown retreat into historicism in order to avoid altogether the ‘appearance/reality’ conundrum which the more ambitious truth-directed arguments fail to satisfy anyway. D’Oro’s point is that Collingwood’s metaphysics takes a very different approach by denying that truth can be ascertained of ‘absolute presuppositions’ which are the foundations of reality, or as D’Oro prefers to describe them the ‘conditions of knowledge’. The parsimony in ‘absolute presuppositions’, D’Oro maintains, is driven by Collingwood’s ‘goal’ of liberating the humanities from natural sciences methodology, in that different sciences have different ‘absolute presuppositions’.¹⁶²

The freedom of the humanities, and in particular history and philosophy from the grip of the methods of natural sciences, is undoubtedly one concern of Collingwood’s philosophy. Yet, Collingwood’s theory of ‘absolute presuppositions’ need not be approached only from the point of view of the freedom of the humanities, nor indeed with the desire to situate his metaphysics against dominant theories of transcendental arguments. For both approaches carry the risk of overlooking what I would argue the more important point for Collingwood, that faith is the beginning of all thought. As James Connelly observes almost in passing, Collingwood’s dictum that “reason is faith cultivating itself”, applies with especial force in relation to *An Essay on Metaphysics*.¹⁶³

That text makes plain that all thinking is impossible without ‘absolute presuppositions’. Truth and falsity do not apply to ‘absolute presuppositions’ themselves because it is only by presupposing them that the truth and falsity of competing lines of enquiry can ever be ascertained. Once Collingwood dispensed with propositional logic in favour of the logic of question and answer, his methodological reforms in philosophy had to contend with making meaningful both ‘rationality’ and ‘truth’ in a new logic. In propositional logic, rationality was

¹⁶² Giuseppina D’Oro (2019). Between ontological hubris and epistemic humility: Collingwood, Kant and the role of transcendental arguments. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 27: 336-57.

¹⁶³ Connelly (2003). *Metaphysics, Method and Politics*, 121

imposed on the author insofar as it was seen as providing answers to perennial questions. As for truth, propositional logic held it as a predicate of the proposition, or the answer to an unchanging question.

Collingwood's logic of question and answer addressed directly the question of rationality by holding that a proposition is an answer to defined question in its historical context, and that by following the logic of question and answer the intentions of past agents can be revealed through re-enactment of the past thought. But on the question of truth, although Collingwood maintains that truth belongs to the complex of question and answer, truth in this context is not the 'whole' truth but only a particular verifiable truth.¹⁶⁴ Absolute presuppositions are not truths in that sense since they are not subject to verification, but without them truth could not be verified by reasoning, for it is reason that depends on what the mind absolutely presupposes about the 'whole', that is, the infinite. Absolute presuppositions are what confers rationality on consciousness. And it is to the extent that what the mind absolutely presupposes about the 'whole' is faithful to the infinite, that mind achieves the freedom of which it is finally capable, a point developed more fully in the next chapter. This is because the infinite, as Collingwood put it, is 'nothing but the unity, or as we sometimes say, the "meaning," of finite things in their diversity and their mutual connections'.¹⁶⁵ For Collingwood, complete knowledge is not possible by reason alone since our knowledge of the infinite is not possible externally in the same way our knowledge of the finites -within the infinite- is.

The need for a defence of Collingwood's metaphysics against the charge of historicism only arises from the presupposition of a universal truth that can be apprehended by argument. If Collingwood's reform of metaphysics demonstrated anything, it is precisely the futility of the pursuit of the truth of the infinite by argument alone. On one end of the spectrum of philosophical method, that of abstraction, metaphysics becomes the science of nothing. At the other end of the spectrum, history, metaphysics reaches its natural limit, in the

¹⁶⁴ Connelly (2003). *Metaphysics, Method and Politics*, 97-157.

¹⁶⁵ R.G. Collingwood, 'Faith and Reason', in Lionel Rubinoff (1968). *Faith and Reason: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* by R.G. Collingwood. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 143.

concreteness of ‘absolute presuppositions’, of the need of the mind to absolutely presuppose in order for reality to gain meaning, for knowledge to be possible and indeed for history to be possible as I argue in this thesis. On this view, D’Oro description of Collingwood’s metaphysics as pragmatic holds true, but the rehabilitation of the infinite in moral and political philosophy goes beyond the intellectual and technical critique of Collingwood’s reform of metaphysics to give meaning to history and to give metaphysics a vital role in his defence of the place of Christian faith in the liberalism.

The idea of ‘absolute presuppositions’ is probably one of the most challenging in Collingwood’s metaphysics. But it is difficult to conceive of a fruitful account of what is “absolute” that is hived off from the unity of mind or consciousness as understood by Collingwood, an understanding advanced most directly in *Speculum Mentis* (1924). For in being “absolute” and so constituting the bedrock of meaningful reality, it would be unwise to imagine that one could simply reach in, so to speak, and pluck out a ready example of an “absolute” presupposition, unless the presupposition in question had already been subject to such strains that it had been shaken to breaking point. Perhaps the presence of such presuppositions to the mind is nearest in the exhausting terrain of feelings and emotions of an aesthetic consciousness, or in the sanctuary of certainty which the religious consciousness offers to a nomadic mind in angst; or perhaps they are exposed most nakedly when absolute certainty is assailed by doubt. ‘Eloy eloy lama sabachthani’.¹⁶⁶ They are like the tectonic plates which sit beneath the surface of the earth, never experienced directly or immediately, but nevertheless serving to explain the contours and movement characteristic of the world we do experience, a world which we are apt to treat as self-contained, regular in its operations, and absolute in its own terms but which, in reality, presupposes something else and is shaken violently when, so to speak, the plates shift.

To demand reasoned meaningfulness of “absolute” presuppositions, I have suggested, is to demand reasoned meaningfulness of that without which reason has no grounds to ask the question in the first place; it is to demand reasoned (or scientific) meaningfulness from the

¹⁶⁶ Mark 15: 34.

roots that give science its competence to ask the questions of nature that it asks. The most to be hoped of any answer to that demand may be that it articulates as an absolute presupposition what is in fact a relative presupposition. Nietzsche, who understood better than most how deeply saturated in Christian presuppositions western civilisation was, captured this problem in his own way when he observed that ‘we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar’.¹⁶⁷ “Absolute” presuppositions, as Boucher puts it, ‘are adhered to as a matter of faith’.¹⁶⁸ And it is the exclusion of the required account of faith in knowledge from arguments about what *knowing* means, or could have meant, for Collingwood, that leaves methodological debates somewhat impoverished, despite their undoubted power to elucidate many areas of his thought.

In other words, we cannot in the end get away from faith, and must ask what difference an adequate account of faith, which in this setting means Christian faith, makes to the understanding of Collingwood’s apparent historical relativism which, as I have asserted, appears resistant to normative, technical and methodological analysis. The thesis is an attempt to answer this question. In this sense, it is an ending as well as a beginning, because formulating the question in the terms in which I formulate it here is my solution to the problem that animated my relationship with Collingwood, if that is not to put it too pretentiously, from the moment that I first encountered his philosophy.

I had not planned, nor sought, that encounter at the time when it happened. The encounter—which took place when I was a student on the MA degree programme in Political Philosophy (The Idea of Toleration) at The University of York—was minimal and low keyed. Only two hours of the taught component of the programme were concerned with Collingwood, and I had only managed to read parts of *An Autobiography* by the end of the term in which the module ran. I did not at that time venture much beyond *An Autobiography* (1939) to anything else that Collingwood had written. Yet the personal nature and the accessibility of *An Autobiography* (1939) was inviting, and its appeal never

¹⁶⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche (1954). “Reason” in Philosophy’, §5, in *Twilight of the Idols*, printed in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans and ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Viking Penguin.

¹⁶⁸ Boucher (1989). *The Social and Political Thought of R.G. Collingwood*, 213.

deserted me; and in time, it led me to explore Collingwood's thought further, with an odd mixture of enthusiasm and discomfort.

Trained and a practicing academic in a branch of the natural sciences (microbiology), I found myself drawn towards political theory during the period I lived and worked in my native country Lebanon from 2000 to 2007. With eighteen officially recognised sects in a country that is roughly the size of Wales and located near the eye of a storm—the protracted, violent and seemingly intractable conflict in the Middle East—Lebanon has had more than its share of political tensions and armed conflicts, including a vicious sectarian civil war, regional hostilities, and foreign invasions. But during a brief period of peace—perhaps it would be better to say, after Hobbes, when the war had temporarily fallen asleep—I had the good fortune to live and work in Lebanon and to recognise something which I had not noticed before. The different communities in Lebanon not only conducted their social life differently according to beliefs and customs they had inherited from the traditions that gave meaning to their lives, but their views of nature, of the world around them, of the world as a whole, were different in ways that could not be readily explained by economic and social circumstances alone. It was not difficult for me to recognise too that the methods of natural sciences were ill-equipped to answer the question which had begun formulating itself in my mind: what if someone truly believed in the central Christian doctrine that Jesus was the son of God and that he had died for humanity: how would their view of the whole of the reality around them, material and moral, change?

At that time, I now see, I was almost comically ill-equipped to answer that question. My training in the natural sciences meant that I was initially attracted to, and more at home with, naturalistic accounts of the character of material existence than theological ones. Likewise I was attracted to the various 'liberal' accounts of the moral life provided in the analytical tradition, such as John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971), a 'Gilbert Ryle' figure in contemporary Anglophone moral and political theory. That work, together with Will Kymlicka's *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (1990), seemed *prima facie* to offer the nourishment I thought I had been seeking from the humanities. But what seemed familiar

and compelling at first gradually gave way to unease and from unease I began to experience a growing sense of emptiness: there was a void which natural science's key tools of abstraction and empiricism and Rawls's moral constructivism could not fill. There had to be, I came to think, some higher order 'something' which made liberalism possible; a set of beliefs, a way of seeing the world, so deeply-rooted in the liberal mind that it was not itself an object of conscious thought, something that came before, and was not subject to, the algorithms of the utilitarian calculus, something that resisted natural science's insistence on empirical proof, a way of thinking that connected the past to the present and the future.

It would be false to claim that I had a very clear sense at that time that Collingwood's philosophy contained answers to the questions I was asking. But I had read enough of Collingwood's writings to recognise that he shared the preoccupation that had captured my imagination: the grounds and fate of Western liberal civilisation, the importance of historical thinking to grasping these, and the sense that, somehow, Christianity was fundamental to both. The relationship between Collingwood's conception of historical thinking, its significance for civilisation, and the place of Christianity in that nexus is the focus of the next chapter. That relationship is explored, in the first instance, by reflecting upon Collingwood's notion of re-enactment, and my claims about it are located in the wider space of perspectives that has been carved out in recent Collingwood studies.

Chapter Two: The Space of Perspectives II—Re-enactment, historicism and Christianity

The previous chapter discussed Collingwood's notion of 'absolute presuppositions' and the debates to which that notion has given rise in Collingwood studies. I argued that the 'absolute' character of these presuppositions has not always been registered appropriately and that their role in Collingwood's thinking has become a hostage to rival interpretative approaches. The argument of this chapter is that the same applies to Collingwood's notion of re-enactment, with a result that wider aspects of Collingwood's thinking are misconstrued and important features of his philosophy, not least the roles of Christianity in informing its shape and content, and its bearings in relation to historicism and relativism, are skewed.

Re-enactment perspectives

Like the controversy over Collingwood's notion of 'absolute presuppositions', the re-enactment controversy has become over time more and more a dispute about the propriety of rival methods of interpretation. As a result, the original problem, which concerns the way in which Collingwood understood historical knowledge, has been partially obscured; or at least, the basic issue has become so imbricated in wider issues that the eye can easily be distracted from what is essential by other, related issues. It may therefore be helpful at the outset to state what I take to be the essence of what Collingwood conceived historical knowledge to be. I will provide a fuller exposition of the details of re-enactment as Collingwood discussed them in chapter 4.

Knowledge of the past, for Collingwood, is knowledge of the thought of past agents as the 'inside' of the 'outside' of human actions. Historical knowledge is not merely knowledge of the object of the thought of past agents; rather, historical knowledge is the re-thinking of the same thought as past agents themselves thought, the thought which the historian is interested in. This re-thinking, or 're-enactment', is central to Collingwood's theory of historical knowledge *qua* knowledge of the past.

The obvious irony of the re-enactment controversy is that the interlocutors offering analyses of what re-enactment is, or could be, are themselves engaged in the effort to re-think Collingwood's thought on the topic of re-enactment. Yet, the idea of re-enactment has long appeared confusing, if not impossible, even to sympathetic readers of Collingwood. Van der Dussen says that it is 'difficult to grasp'.¹⁶⁹ Cebik states that it 'makes little if any sense'.¹⁷⁰ Quentin Skinner, otherwise an effusive admirer, treats it as the most obvious flaw in Collingwood's approach: plainly it was impossible to 'get inside the heads' of past agents – 'of course we cannot hope to re-enter the[ir] minds – and the 'conjuring trick' to which this way of speaking seemed to commit the historian had to be rejected out of hand.¹⁷¹

Here Skinner was following a line taken by many hostile early critics, who read Collingwood as ascribing to the historian telepathic powers that enabled him to commune with the long dead.¹⁷² Collingwood's views were dismissed by one commentator as 'indulgence in clairvoyance' and 'mysticism', because this 'exquisite symbiosis' between the historian and the past could only be achieved by going into some kind of trance.¹⁷³ A. J. Ayer, perhaps for the first time in his life, hardly knew what to say: 'that the historian should literally incarnate a multitude of persons seems to me incredible'.¹⁷⁴ If Ayer was about as far removed philosophically from Collingwood as it is possible to be, he was not alone in harbouring doubts about what Collingwood was arguing. W. H. Walsh, who was much closer to Collingwood at many points, summarised Collingwood's position in terms that helped to shape subsequent commentary, drawing upon Collingwood's account of a *rapprochement* between philosophy and history in *An Autobiography* (1939) as well as his posthumous work. Yet he too found re-enactment a very challenging notion indeed.¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁹ W. Jan van der Dussen (1981). *History as a Science*, 317.

¹⁷⁰ L. B. Cebik (1970). 'Collingwood: Action, Re-enactment, and Evidence', *Philosophical Forum* 2: 68-90, at 68.

¹⁷¹ Quentin Skinner (1988). 'Reply to my Critics'. In *Meaning & Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, ed. James Tully. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 231-88, at 274-75. For Skinner's admiration of Collingwood, see his (2001). 'The Rise of, Challenge to, and Prospects for a Collingwoodian Approach to the History of Political Thought', in *Political Thought in National Context*, ed. Dario Castiglione and Iain Hampsher-Monk. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 175–88.

¹⁷² Patrick Gardiner (1952). *The Nature of Historical Explanation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 48 and the same writer's (1952). 'The Objects of Historical Knowledge', *Philosophy*, 27: 211–20.

¹⁷³ Gustaaf J. Renier (1950). *History: Its Purpose and Method*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 44, 48.

¹⁷⁴ A. J. Ayer (1982). *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Random House, 212.

¹⁷⁵ W.H. Walsh (1947). 'R.G. Collingwood's Philosophy of History'. *Philosophy*, 22, 153-160.

Walsh recognized that Collingwood's commitment to history as a 'form of knowledge' was an emphatic rejection of the 'positivist' or 'realist' conception of history adopted by Ayer, in which historical knowledge 'could be reduced to scientific knowledge in the narrower sense of the word'.¹⁷⁶ The historian, Walsh adds, is not concerned with the kind of generalisations, universal laws, and predictions that are characteristic of the natural sciences. Rather, he is concerned with human actions as individual facts. Nevertheless, Walsh finds Collingwood's idea of re-thinking past thoughts, core to the notion of re-enactment, extremely problematical, especially when one considers how challenging it is to re-think the thought of one's contemporaries in the living present. Walsh finds Collingwood's certainty in his own argument, that is to say, his conviction that historical knowledge through re-enactment was both possible and reliable, bewildering. As Walsh puts it,

This [Collingwood's certainty about re-enactment] makes one rub one's eyes, for even if one accepts the general position that the business of history is in some way to re-think the thoughts of persons in the past, the difficulties of carrying out the undertaking must surely be admitted to be formidable. A glance at the adjacent problem of knowing what contemporaries are thinking will suffice to make this clear.¹⁷⁷

The sticking point for Walsh is that even if past thoughts could be re-enacted faithfully by the historian, re-enactment would still be 'historically conditioned' by the present:

The central thing in the historian's experience, according to Collingwood, was the fact that one mind came into contact with another; he had held that the sort of understanding one mind could have of another was unique and self-intelligible, though not to be attained by any easy means, but only after a laborious scrutiny of evidence of all kinds. But though this account of historical thinking perhaps has more

¹⁷⁶ Walsh (1947), 154.

¹⁷⁷ Walsh (1947), 156.

to be said for it than at first sight appears, I cannot myself believe it to be finally satisfactory. Whatever Collingwood says, it is hard to think that the historian does not bring to the understanding of the past some general propositions: and it is precisely with regard to these that the trouble about historical conditioning arises in its most acute form.¹⁷⁸

There must be, according to Walsh, some fundamental conceptions about human nature that make the past, and especially the distant past, intelligible to the historian in the present. And it is these ‘universal judgments’¹⁷⁹ about human nature which Walsh appears to suggest ought to be the particulars of history as a science if the proposition that history is the science of human affairs—as Collingwood contends that it is—is to be made good, if it can be made good at all.¹⁸⁰

While Walsh acknowledges various technical difficulties with the notion of re-enactment, he does not get bogged-down in the technicalities. Instead, he points towards bigger questions: what could make intelligible one mind to another? What fundamental conceptions about human nature are operative in the minds of different agents? In the most extended treatment of the issue of re-enactment yet produced in Collingwood studies, W. H. Dray’s *History as Re-enactment: R.G. Collingwood’s Idea of History* (1995), these panoramic questions are addressed via an extended analysis of the sense and reference of Collingwood’s conception, made necessary, on Dray’s account, by the fact that ‘re-enactment’ did not itself function as a technical term in Collingwood’s writings and so needed to be parsed if all its salient meanings were to be disclosed.

¹⁷⁸ Walsh (1947), 158.

¹⁷⁹ Walsh (1947), 158-60.

¹⁸⁰ Walsh (1947), 160. For a more recent attempt to reckon with the issue of re-enactment, which modifies Collingwood’s position, see Colin Tyler (2009). Performativity and the Intellectual Historian’s Re-enactment of Written Works. *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 3, 167-86.

W. H. Dray on re-enactment

Dray was the author of an important book on *Laws and Explanation in History* (1957), in which he coined the phrase the 'covering law model'. This referred to the idea that an explanation 'is achieved, and only achieved, by subsuming what is to be explained under a general law'.¹⁸¹ In other words, we explain a particular case by 'covering it' with a law and deducing that the case in which we are interested is predicted by that law. In *The Idea of History* Collingwood had traced this form of explanation to the Enlightenment's attempt to construct a science of human nature on principles analogous to natural science.¹⁸² Dray was responding not only to this general form of explanation, but to the more specific arguments of Carl Hempel about historical explanation.

Hempel's influential article, 'The Function of General Laws in History' had argued that 'an explanation [...] is not complete unless it might as well have functioned as a prediction: If the final event can be derived from the initial conditions and universal hypotheses stated in the explanation, then it might as well have been predicted, before it actually happened, on the basis of a knowledge of initial conditions and general laws'.¹⁸³ What Hempel was saying, as Collingwood had noted, was that a key feature of explanation was being able to see 'how things fall into general types and how these general types are interrelated'.¹⁸⁴ This was as true of historical explanation as it was of scientific explanation, which provided the ideal model for all valid explanations in assigning every particular thing to a more general class of things of that same type.

According to Dray, who took his lead from Collingwood, this model was too simple: 'there is an *essential* complexity about what is ordinarily considered explanation; [and] once the demand for explanation arises, an answer which does no more than represent what is to be explained as what we always find happening in such circumstances fails to explain it at

¹⁸¹ W. H. Dray (1957). *Laws and Explanation in History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1.

¹⁸² R. G. Collingwood (1946). *The Idea of History*, 82-86, 206.

¹⁸³ Carl G. Hempel (1942). 'The Function of General Laws in History', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 39, 35-48, at 38.

¹⁸⁴ IH, 205.

all'.¹⁸⁵ When considering an event like the French Revolution, to say that we can classify it as 'what always happens' given its conditions is only to classify it as a species of revolution. In order to *explain* it, the historian will need to go beyond general laws to investigate what makes it unique. This means seeing the past event from the position of the agents involved, and grasping the rationale, or the reasons, on which they were acting, a conclusion Dray derived from Collingwood's doctrine of re-enactment.

In elaborating this conclusion in his monograph about Collingwood, Dray found it necessary to elucidate several different aspects of that doctrine. An immediate difficulty was that Collingwood did not 'exhibit that love of exact language which analytic philosophers have since made *de rigueur* [...] A term like 'reenactment' [Dray went on] functions so little like a precisely defined technical term for Collingwood that there are upwards of a dozen apparent synonyms for it in his writings'.¹⁸⁶ Much of the book is spent disambiguating Collingwood's language to establish exactly what he meant when he said that the only way to understand past human activities was to get inside them by the process of re-thinking or re-enactment because, for Dray, re-enactment in one form or another was indispensable to any adequate account of historical understanding.¹⁸⁷

Dray claimed that Collingwood meant at least the following things by re-enactment: that the object of historical thinking was past happenings that the historian re-created, revived, repeated, or re-evoked in his own thinking; that this process was done consciously and knowingly by the historian; and that by going through this process the historian constructs a picture of things as they really were and of events as they actually happened.¹⁸⁸ These were all controversial claims and reviewers were not slow to engage with them, *pro* and *contra*. Rex Martin, for one, described Dray's book as 'perhaps the single best account of the pertinent ideas of this century's most eminent philosopher of history (certainly of all those

¹⁸⁵ Dray (1957). *Laws and Explanation in History*, 72.

¹⁸⁶ W. H. Dray (1995). *History as Re-enactment*, 27-28.

¹⁸⁷ W. H. Dray (1995). *History as Re-enactment*, 32.

¹⁸⁸ W. H. Dray (1995). *History as Re-enactment*, 242-48.

writing in English)'.¹⁸⁹ Dray had gone deeper into the particulars of the idea of re-enactment than any previous writer, and in doing so laid several ghosts, among them the mistaken criticisms that the theory was 'too much focused on deliberate actions reflectively undertaken', whilst ignoring 'frequent irrationality', and 'physical causes of action'.¹⁹⁰ An especial strength of the book was its considered evaluation and rebuttal of the suggestion that Collingwood was a 'constructionist', that is to say one for whom the 'historical past is nothing but a 'construction' made by the historian and that the 'real' past is, for all historical intents and purposes, simply irrelevant.¹⁹¹

Leon J. Goldstein, by contrast, was critical of Dray's exposition of Collingwood on precisely this point. He took issue with what he identified as the persistent but unwarranted use of the phrase 're-enactive understanding'. Goldstein's criticism was that Dray viewed re-enactment as a method of historical understanding, when, for Collingwood, re-enactment was how historians come to *know* the past. As Goldstein puts it,

He [Collingwood] was engaged in the effort to know how a past which could never be experienced, could never be confronted by historians in a way that one might think that natural scientists confront a nature that is exposed to their experience, could come to be known. As a historian, Collingwood could not fail to be aware of the problems of history's context of discovery, and it seems mistaken [as in Dray's case] to read his most important contribution to the philosophy of history as if it never entered his mind.¹⁹²

Goldstein's point was that re-enactment is the 'central tool in the quest for knowledge', not understanding or explanation of the past.¹⁹³ Goldstein views Dray's account as ascribing to

¹⁸⁹ Rex Martin (1998). Reviewed work: *History as Re-enactment: R.G. Collingwood's Idea of History*. *The American Historical Review* 103: 147-48.

¹⁹⁰ Rex Martin (1998). Reviewed work: *History as Re-enactment: R.G. Collingwood's Idea of History*. *The American Historical Review*, 103(1), 147-148.

¹⁹¹ Rex Martin (1998). Reviewed work: *History as Re-enactment: R.G. Collingwood's Idea of History*. *The American Historical Review*, 103(1), 147-148.

¹⁹² Goldstein (1998), 412.

¹⁹³ Goldstein (1998), 413.

Collingwood a kind of ‘historical realism’ insofar as understanding, or explanation, presupposes a separation between the historian and the past, whereas Goldstein believes that Collingwood’s theory of re-enactment was concerned with how the historian comes to *know* the past, which, according to Goldstein, inevitably leads Collingwood to adopt a ‘constructionist’ position about historical knowledge:

As I have said, realism presumes that we can come to know the object of our inquiry as it is or was independent of our inquiry, independent of our knowing. In history, it suggests that what historians come to know is precisely like what we encounter in the world around us, that what historians come to know has the same epistemic status as does what we encounter in the world around us.¹⁹⁴

Goldstein’s criticism—whether or not it is valid—of Dray’s anti-constructionist account of Collingwood’s philosophy of history is yet another reminder of the challenges involved in reading a philosopher like Collingwood: he had been an adherent of realism in his early professional life, he rejected realism later with the explicit proviso that this did not make him an idealist. Yet these polar oppositions, so uncongenial to Collingwood, die hard among commentators, who reproduce them in their skirmishes over particular points of detail, rather in the way that the Cold War was played out in a series of proxy wars in Africa and East Asia from the 1950s.

Re-enactment is an idea that has been fought over continuously. It has attracted different kinds of evaluation and criticism, ranging from a charge of dualism (based on Collingwood’s distinction between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of thought), to the equation, noted above, of re-enactment with a kind quasi-mystical communion between the historian in the present and the past agents whose thoughts are being re-enacted.¹⁹⁵ These views of re-enactment are further complicated by differences, as the preceding exposition showed, in the manner

¹⁹⁴ Goldstein (1998), 420-421.

¹⁹⁵ For a strong expression of scepticism along these lines, see John Dunn (1978). ‘Practising History and Social Science on ‘Realist’ Assumptions’. In Christopher Hookway and Philip Petit (Eds.). *Action and Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 145-75.

in which the doctrine is approached and analysed, which themselves express disagreement (or uncertainty) about whether re-enactment is 'intended to be a historical method or a description of the conditions of epistemological success'.¹⁹⁶ Walsh's concern, for example, about the possibility of retrieving the thoughts of others and re-thinking the same thoughts presupposes a subject-object divide, and if Collingwood himself did not get as far as resolving the difficulties involved, a Collingwoodian resolution to it would necessitate overcoming such an apparent divide in a unity of some kind, a point which Walsh, for one, appears to recognise.

Although methodological questions about re-enactment do arise, it is perhaps unfortunate that they have consumed so much energy, which has at times diverted attention which otherwise could have been turned to other aspects of Collingwood's philosophy of history.¹⁹⁷ Jan van der Dussen seems to be making this point when he emphasises the secondary status given to 're-enactment' in *An Autobiography* in comparison to the dedication of a whole chapter to the 'logic of question and answer'. Likewise he adduces the fact that the chapter on 'History as Re-enactment of Past Experience' in *The Idea of History* was not intended by Collingwood for publication, and draws attention to the absence of explicit mention of 're-enactment' in what survives of *The Principles of History*. All these pieces of evidence, he argues, suggest that for Collingwood 're-enactment' was something to be assumed in his conception of history as the history of thought, not something he felt it necessary or appropriate to defend by argument. As van der Dussen remarks,

¹⁹⁶ Connelly (2013). 'Collingwood Controversies', 420.

¹⁹⁷ Jan van der Dussen (2013) attributes the over-emphasis in Collingwood studies on re-enactment to the attention *The Idea of History* received at the unique time of its publication after World War II, and within it, the chapter on 'History as Re-enactment of Past Experience' 'attracted special attention'. Van der Dussen is critical of what he views as excessive attention to the doctrine of re-enactment at the expense of the logic of question and answer which he takes to be 'central theme' of 'historical methodology', not to mention the concern over the 'incorrect methodological interpretations that have been given to [re-enactment]', as he put it. However, van der Dussen's argument risks merely shifting the emphasis of technical analysis from one instrument to another. See Jan van der Dussen (2013). 'Collingwood's Philosophy of History in the Year of his *An Autobiography*'. In David Boucher Boucher and Teresa Smith, Eds. (2013). *R.G. Collingwood An Autobiography & Other Writings with essays on Collingwood's life and work*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 305-333.

Collingwood himself would probably have been surprised that in particular this aspect [re-enactment] of his philosophy of history would arouse so much debate, and especially that it had been so often misinterpreted.¹⁹⁸

This remark instances a wider point. To separate out any single element in Collingwood's thinking 'in particular', whether this is the idea of re-enactment, or the idea of absolute presuppositions, is, or can be, illuminating: but the illumination it offers, however brilliant, is like that of a laser beam in comparison to a floodlight. Clarity is achieved by a narrowness of focus that leaves much else that is connected and salient still in darkness. The unintended, and perhaps unrecognised, costs involved in proceeding in this manner are elegantly captured and discussed by Bruce Haddock in his fascinating but eccentric essay 'The Historicity of Thought'.¹⁹⁹

Widening the focus: Boucher and Haddock

Haddock takes a step back from the minutiae of Collingwood's claims and invites the reader to recognize the 'audacity of Collingwood's ambition' in his philosophy of history. For whilst methodological concerns are legitimately raised and fruitfully debated, there is more to Collingwood's 'wider redemptive agenda' which can quickly slip out of view 'if we read him in the narrowest of methodological terms'.²⁰⁰ In particular, Haddock highlights what he sees as the failure to appreciate that Collingwood was overwhelmingly concerned for the fate of British and European civilization. As Haddock puts it,

The wider question of history's significance was barely taken up by philosophers at all. Certainly political philosophers in the 1950s and 1960s showed little interest in what we might call civilizational critique.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ Jan van der Dussen (2013). 'Collingwood's Philosophy of History in the Year of his *An Autobiography*'. In David Boucher Boucher and Teresa Smith, Eds. (2013). *R.G. Collingwood AN Autobiography & Other Writings with essays on Collingwood's life and work*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 320.

¹⁹⁹ Bruce Haddock (2013). 'The Historicity of Thought'. By calling the essay eccentric I do not mean that it is composed of perverse judgments but that it is eccentric to the main streams of Collingwood scholarship.

²⁰⁰ Haddock (2013), 342-344.

²⁰¹ Haddock (2013), 349.

Haddock, albeit in passing, reproves the ‘tortured discussion of methodological questions’ that have preoccupied those interested in ‘the history of ideas since the 1960’s’. For Haddock, knowing with certainty how Collingwood understood the historicity of thought is difficult, if not impossible, since his life was cut short before he could complete his work on *The Principles of History*. Nevertheless, Haddock advocates following Collingwood’s example in that ‘we should establish as clearly as we can exactly what [Collingwood] was claiming’.²⁰²

With Haddock, what this involves is moving the discussion away from methodological concerns by recollecting that for Collingwood there was more ‘at stake’ if ‘history goes to the wall’ at the bidding of realism’s demands for an empirical account of the past than methodological propriety. As Haddock explains,

[i]f history is not to be trusted, it follows that we should have no confidence in our own minds. What passes for thinking might better be described as a series of happenings in our heads, very much along the lines of the prevalent modes of psychology that Collingwood castigates in the *Autobiography*. Securing a basis for historical knowledge is thus much more than a historical task for Collingwood. Our ability to think critically is at stake, and with it our capacity to assume responsibility for our actions.²⁰³

The seriousness with which Collingwood took thinking ‘clearly’ and ‘critically’ in social and political life is the central theme of Haddock’s essay. He invites Collingwood’s readers to look to beyond the paradigms, beyond the ‘fashionable’, so to speak, in ‘social constructivist theories of thought’ when attempting to understand Collingwood’s ‘historicism’, a historicism which does not seem to fit any of the ready-made moulds.²⁰⁴ For Haddock, Collingwood offered potentially much more to political philosophers to engage with and explore than he could be securely credited with on the basis of his published works in

²⁰² Haddock uses the term ‘historicist turn’ cautiously to refer to Collingwood’s philosophy of history. ‘If it is a ‘historicist turn’, Haddock conjectures before going on to ask the question of its implications for moral and political philosophy. Haddock (2013), 335.

²⁰³ Haddock (2013), 336.

²⁰⁴ Haddock (2013), 338.

political philosophy alone; *The New Leviathan*, Haddock remarks, 'reads like a synthesis of work in progress' rather than a fully realised piece. But Haddock finds 'tantalizing hints' across Collingwood's other works of what he 'might have been able to achieve in political philosophy if his priorities had been different'.²⁰⁵ What might that achievement have been?

The enterprise of drawing out the full potentialities of Collingwood's social and political thought owes most to the interpretive efforts of David Boucher. Boucher argued that *The New Leviathan* (1942) was the culmination of Collingwood's life's work, providing an important extension and application of his most important ideas about history, art, and philosophical method within a general conception of the nature of civilisation.

Boucher's argument goes through a series of sequential steps. To think clearly in the present, we need to understand ourselves and the forms of thought through which we define ourselves. These have been created with others and are shared with others, through customs, practices, and collective action in response to shared problems. The necessary clarity can only be recovered, according to Collingwood, if and when liberal civilization recovers consciousness of the agrarian roots from which its key symbols derived, reasserts its Christian origins, and discards its excessive emphasis on utilitarianism, or the economic criterion of action. The useful, in Collingwood's view, is a relatively poor specification of the criterion of action. Collingwood demonstrated this by adducing a scale of forms and analysing utility in terms of that scale. Utility was inadequate in relation to right (regularian action), which simultaneously transcended and embodied it. The right, however, was likewise transcended by the dutiful, which embodied the specifications below itself in a fully realised fashion.

Boucher drew on Collingwood's unpublished lectures on moral philosophy in developing his account of Collingwood's exposition and analysis of utility, right, and duty, which, as one reviewer noted, was represented as his 'most important contribution to moral and political

²⁰⁵ Haddock (2013), 350-351.

theory'.²⁰⁶ On Boucher's account, the scale of forms was central to Collingwood's whole approach: it enabled Collingwood to recognise what was true of each proximate form without setting each form in opposition to its rivals. It was not, for him, a matter of utility versus right or versus duty or of right versus duty. It was rather that duty expressed completely what was true of right and utility, just as right expressed what was true of utility. Each point on the scale summarised all that was true of it up to that point, and the next point on the scale preserved what was true of the lower points. By analogy, *The New Leviathan* (1940) summarised and expressed the truth of everything that Collingwood had been saying about civilization up to that point.²⁰⁷

Boucher's enterprising efforts have been supplemented by a commanding and equally sympathetic reading of Collingwood by James Connelly, who, like Boucher, highlighted Collingwood's overriding concerns for the wellbeing of Western civilization, and the centrality of the unity of consciousness in guarding against the enemies of civilization.²⁰⁸ Connelly's comprehensive exegesis of Collingwood's published and unpublished works sought to bring out Collingwood's vision and continuity of thought, and, as Andrew Lockyer puts it, to 'reveal Collingwood's concepts of civilization in relation to barbarism and his exposition of the dimensions of civilization as rooted in human nature and experience, expressed in traditions, art and religion'.²⁰⁹ Reviewing Boucher's *The Social and Political Thought of R.G. Collingwood* (1989), Paul Franco praised its ambition to present an overarching account of Collingwood as a political philosopher, whose political philosophy was in important ways continuous with the other works for which he was renowned. After all, as Franco noted more politely than Cowling had done, *The New Leviathan* (1940) was one of the more challenging of Collingwood's published books, especially as it was written

²⁰⁶ Paul Franco (1991). Reviewed Work: *The Social and Political Thought of R.G. Collingwood* by David Boucher. *Political Theory*, 19, 134.

²⁰⁷ Boucher (1989). *The Social and Political Thought of R.G. Collingwood*, 27-37, 84-110. These points were developed simultaneously in Boucher's edition of what he termed Collingwood's *Essays in Political Philosophy* (1989).

²⁰⁸ Connelly (2003), esp. 285-315.

²⁰⁹ See Lockyer, A. (2004). Reviewed Work: *Metaphysics, Method and Politics: The Political Philosophy of R.G. Collingwood* by James Connelly. *History of Political Thought*, 25(2), 353-355. See also Richard Murphy (2008). *Collingwood and the Crisis of Western Civilization*. Exeter: Imprint Academics.

and published by Collingwood in some haste ‘under the shadow of both Nazism and failing health’.²¹⁰

Boucher’s effort was a landmark in Collingwood studies. It unashamedly offered a sympathetic treatment of Collingwood as a political theorist, with the stated aim of understanding rather than critiquing Collingwood’s positions. Franco accepted that aim as a legitimate one, but nevertheless rued the absence of a more critical assessment of Collingwood’s political theory, and regretted the fact that Collingwood was not situated more clearly within the landscape of twentieth-century political philosophy.²¹¹ At the same time, Franco found reason to gently rebuke Boucher for falling into one of the common traps in writing about Collingwood that I mentioned at the beginning of the thesis, namely exegetical eagerness. In Boucher’s exposition, Franco suggested, very detailed and sometimes convoluted explanations abound and appear, at points, to distract from the overall argument. As Franco puts it ‘we often lose sight of the forest for the trees’.²¹² One issue obscured in the foliage of description was the issue of Collingwood’s historicism/relativism. According to Franco, Boucher offers this most important issue no more than a ‘perfunctory treatment’.²¹³

Yet it seems to me that to describe Boucher’s treatment of the issue as perfunctory is slightly to miss the point, by treating as a gap what is quite deliberately an emptiness. In choosing to circumvent the debate over Collingwood’s historicism, Boucher was making the point that further oxygenating the debate was unproductive. One could not win the argument either way because citing Collingwood’s writings in support of one position left both sides open to immediate and potentially embarrassing rebuttal by the citation of contradictory statements from the same source. As Boucher puts it,

²¹⁰ Bruce Haddock also describes the challenging nature of interpreting *The New Leviathan* in which, he notes, ‘too much in the way of supporting argument is missing’. See Haddock (2013), 350.

²¹¹ Boucher took steps to provide this contextualisation in *British Idealism and Political Theory* (2000).

²¹² Franco (1991), 135.

²¹³ Franco (1991), 136.

I think that we have to accept, rather than try to explain away, inconsistencies, and that Collingwood was a historicist who could never work out a coherent position in relation to relativism.²¹⁴

This was not to say that Collingwood had no position in relation to relativism. He was very far from embracing ‘the view that Nazi and fascist ideals were as good as those of the people whom these ideals threatened’.²¹⁵ But it was less obvious that his reasons for rejecting that view were impervious to criticism or perfectly consistent with one another over time. By saying nothing, Boucher was passing his own comment upon those Collingwood scholars who could not resist the urge to reconstruct from his writings positions that silently eliminated a gamut of alternative possibilities. Sometimes they did this by making Collingwood the proponent of a method that delivered the same type of result time after time, sometimes by narrowing attention to a single issue and attributing to Collingwood a single, unambiguous response to it. Boucher was not inclined to join in with them.

The negative implication of his positive argument was that that micro-level textual analysis that pored over the possible meanings of particular words and chided Collingwood for failing to stick to one single determinate sense or reference involved a kind of category mistake: that wasn’t Collingwood’s style—he thought in terms of a scale of forms not in terms of stipulative definitions—and so rebuking him for failing to exhibit that style was rather like fans of Millais chiding Picasso for producing poor likenesses in his portraits. These were important admonitions. On the other hand, I would argue that it was not entirely unfair of Franco to demand a fuller discussion of Collingwood’s historicism/relativism than Boucher provided. To determine that a debate has become sterile or interminable does not, in and of itself, establish that the underlying issue that gave rise to the debate can be passed over without extended comment. The ‘charge’ of historicism, levelled against Collingwood, is a serious one, because it asks questions of the

²¹⁴ Boucher (1989). *The Social and Political Thought of R.G. Collingwood*, 214.

²¹⁵ Boucher (1989). *The Social and Political Thought of R.G. Collingwood*, 214.

kind of thinker he was and the status of the conclusions he advanced. The question we must now ask is, what does that charge consist in and, once that is made clearer, how might it be addressed?

Beyond method: Collingwood's historicism and moral and political philosophy

If historicism is to be levelled as a charge, then it seems to me necessary to explain what the charge amounts to, and whether what it amounts to is best met by a technical defence—some examples of which I have already described—or by a different kind of defence altogether. The ‘problem’ of Collingwood’s historicism is unavoidable because of the direct connexion which he argues exists—and which is pivotal in his philosophy—between history and moral and political philosophy in the present. Collingwood’s ‘elusive concept of history’, as Jonas Ahlskog suitably describes it, ‘is the needle’s eye through which every proper understanding of his philosophy of history must pass’.²¹⁶ Ahlskog’s ambitious essay is one of the most recent attempts in Collingwood studies to show us how we might not only aim at, but also pass through the ‘needle’s eye’ in Collingwood’s account of history. Ahlskog’s essay is to this extent well directed and reminds the reader of some of the most important attributes of Collingwood’s philosophy of history. But when it comes to the defence of Collingwood against the charge of historicism, Ahlskog’s defence is essentially to argue the indispensability of historical thinking in philosophy, self-knowledge and, somewhat in passing, the wellbeing of civilization.

Ahlskog’s closing paragraph before the conclusion, however, seems to get as close as anyone has got to getting through the ‘needle’s eye’ (even if his conclusions are not always justified by the arguments of the essay itself):

Historical thinking can unveil the ideas that are absolutely presupposed as conditions for going on as we do and show why this is also subject to change. Second, a philosophical delineation of the subject matter of history will also be required for

²¹⁶ Jonas Ahlskog (2018). ‘Collingwood and the Philosophy of History: The Metaphilosophical Dimension’.. In Dharamsi, D’Oro, and Leach (Eds.). *Collingwood on Philosophical Methodology*, 210.

understanding in what way philosophical thought relates to its own historical context. If one assumes that this relation is causal, meaning that thought is merely a function of its context, then determinism and historicism follows. However, as Collingwood wanted to show with his extensive arguments for the possibility of re-enactment, human thought can reach beyond the confines of its own historical context. The philosophy of history, thus, enables us to understand the ways in which human thought is simultaneously both free and subject to the historical framework of our common human condition. In other words, history gives to philosophy an understanding of its own impurity.²¹⁷

Philosophical thought, Ahlskog says, is historically-conditioned, but this need not mean either 'determinism' or 'historicism', since the subject-matter of history, human actions (*Res Gestae*), are the embodiment of rational or purposeful thought in which human agency is central. Human action is rational, Ahlskog explains, when it meets the 'condition of intelligibility' insofar 'reasons for its performance' can be discerned from the 'epistemic and motivational premises of the agent'.²¹⁸

Although for Ahlskog human agency in action is the ground for refuting accusations of historicism against Collingwood's philosophy of history, he accepts the basic premise of the charge of 'historicism' but counters that the charge is not apposite in the case of Collingwood's conception of history. Following Bernard Williams in describing the 'historicity' of human thought and action as an 'impurity' without which philosophy is all the poorer gets Ahlskog closer to the heart of the matter, which is that 'historicism' as an accusation is merely philosophy doing the bidding of ontology as the science of pure being against Collingwood's metaphysics as the science of absolute presuppositions. Naturalistic philosophy's overriding preoccupation with causality is legitimated when the defence of Collingwood shifts silently onto hostile metaphysical ground and Collingwood's views are assimilated to a brand of naturalistic metaphysics he set himself against. The shift is

²¹⁷ Ahlskog (2018), 223.

²¹⁸ Ahlskog (2018), 212.

sometimes imperceptible, but the effect is always to place Collingwood in alien territory, in which his views will always seem confused or, at best, deeply ambiguous.

It is true that Collingwood did not always signal explicitly the occasions on which he used the word 'history' to mean an enquiry into the past and the occasions on which history meant a form of consciousness or, more to the point, mind; but Collingwood was not a linguistic or analytical philosopher and ought not to be held to criteria he was not seeking to satisfy. It is rare that his meaning is not clear when a given claim is read in the context of the wider argument in which it is implicated. A similar equivocation, however, is apparent in Collingwood studies, where the term 'history' is used to refer to an enquiry into the past as well as mind and here the risk of confusion is amplified simply by reason of numbers. For this reason, disambiguation may well be helpful in avoiding unwarranted confusion. To this end Collingwood's account of history might be referred to as philosophy of mind, leaving the 'philosophy of history' to mean the philosophy of the past, an enquiry into the various accounts of what we take the past to represent or to mean.

If Collingwood's 'historicism' is to be explained in terms that are sensitive to his own way of thinking, it is difficult to see how that could be done without taking centrally into account his own conception of 'historical consciousness' or complete freedom; a conception of freedom so radical that it is the antithesis of all abstraction. To put it differently, using one of Collingwood's methodological terms, 'historical consciousness' and pure being occupy the two ends of a 'scale of forms' that extends from the nothingness of ontology at one end to the atoned mind of Collingwood's metaphysics at the other end. Our task as interpreters of Collingwood is to see things as he saw them, remaining alert to the possibility that we are importing into his thinking conceptions that owe more to our presuppositions than to his. Unfortunately, it is usually both easier to recognise and harder to forgive this fault in others than in ourselves.

Both Boucher and Haddock leave interpreters of Collingwood wondering what to make of his historicism, yet both at the same time recognise the centrality of Christian doctrine in

Collingwood's 'wider redemptive agenda' for moral and political philosophy in Western liberal civilization. For Haddock, Collingwood's position 'is emphatic, even dogmatic in the literal meaning of the word', especially when one reads Collingwood's unequivocal assertions in 'Fascism and Nazism' about religion being the 'vital warmth at the heart of a civilization'. But Collingwood, Haddock conjectures, left us with little assistance when it came to understanding how he supposed all this worked:

These look like causal claims [Haddock writes] though Collingwood makes no attempt to show why we should grant his view. I do not say that he is necessarily wrong about this, rather that we cannot be sure what he is claiming. The examples he cites in the text [of 'Fascism and Nazism'] are illustrative, persuasive no doubt to (at least some) contemporaries who share his concerns, yet they are beside the point to anyone who does not. He treats 'liberal or democratic principles' as a 'function of Christianity'. He thus interprets the crisis of European politics in the 1930s as, first and foremost, a crisis of religion. Italian fascism, he says, 'is a function [...] of the pre-Christian paganism which has survived under the toleration and protection of Italian Christianity'; while in Germany 'pagan survivals have always been extremely vigorous'. Whether these views are helpful is not the issue here. What we should note is his insistence that only strong religious sentiment enables peoples to conceive of a notion of 'absolute value'. And relentless criticism of religion, from the Enlightenment onwards, has deprived European cultures of an inestimable grounding.²¹⁹

All of which brings me to the conclusion that standard defences of Collingwood's historicism—however well intentioned—can all too readily find themselves turning into apologies for naturalistic philosophy (even Haddock, otherwise so attuned to Collingwood's way of thinking, slips into speaking of 'causal claims' as if there was only the one kind familiar from the natural sciences) and usually ones which accept *a priori* the premise upon which the accusation of historicism is levelled, that is, the premise that historicism

²¹⁹ Haddock (2013), 347.

undermines philosophy's quest for a universal and verifiable truth. Thereafter, the task of the defence becomes akin to plea-bargaining rather than challenging the premise upon which the charge is made in the first place. That is to say, since whatever finite 'truth' arrived at through reason alone could only be relative to the infinite whole, it becomes incumbent upon a philosophy so inclined to explain its grounds for tolerating its own historicism, or its 'impurity' as Ahlskog calls it. A philosophy which sanctions the contingent in thought is, by degrees, a philosophy of abstraction; it is the scientific consciousness laying false claim to the whole of truth. The antidote is not any attempt to acquiesce in what it is willing to tolerate and to admit, in one-sided fashion, the historical nature of mind; rather the antidote—which this thesis propounds—is the unity of mind in its historical consciousness of the self and the not-self within the infinite whole.

In order to demonstrate that such unity is possible, and that it is what Collingwood was urging, it is necessary to say more about the relationship between Christianity and historicism in general, and in Collingwood more particularly. We shall see that there is more assistance to be had in Collingwood than Haddock found there. But, first of all, it will be helpful to clarify the challenge posed by historicism to Christianity, not least because this is something the 'Collingwood controversy' over historicism does not always register adequately. This will allow us, in its turn, to gain a better grip on the nature and scale of the 'problem' of relativism and of the ways in which Christianity fits in to the picture.

Christianity and Historicism

Historicism was a school of thought that emerged in Germany in first half of the nineteenth century and dominated German historical scholarship into the first half of the twentieth century.²²⁰ A towering figure in the school was Leopold von Ranke, hailed as 'father of historical science' and the 'founder of the modern model of scientific history'.²²¹ Such

²²⁰ An expert discussion is offered in Georg G. Iggers (1995). *Historicism: the History and Meaning of the Term. Journal of the History of Ideas*, 56, 129-152. A wider survey is provided by Paul Hamilton (1996). *Historicism*. London: Routledge.

²²¹ See Georg Iggers (1962). The Image of Ranke in American and German Historical Thought. *History and Theory* 2, 17-40. For Ranke in broader context, see Georg G. Iggers (1983). *The German Conception of History. The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*. Revised edn. Middletown, CN:

phrases may suggest that Ranke wanted to bring the study of history into line with the positivism of modern natural science, but this popular misinterpretation fails to recognise the historical meaning of Ranke's famous dictum that the scientific study of history would study the past 'wie es eigentlich gewesen', 'as it actually happened'.²²² What Ranke was arguing was that the study of how the past had 'actually happened' should be based on a recognition of the individuality of historical agents and their actions. In other words, Ranke emphasised both the unique historicity and the autonomy of individual agents and actions. The principles of individuality and historicity were the background for his famous concern with historical sources—from their preservation to their critical use. The sources were products of their time. They expressed the values and interpretations of reality of their authors. The job of the historian was to understand the goings-on of the past, which were shaped by different kinds of individualities, persons and states in particular, in the terms in which they had happened, by analysing the sources they had left behind in a critical manner and recovering their meaning.

Historicism, as a method and as a doctrine, threatened to dissolve the certainties, or more sharply, the uncritical pieties upon which belief in God depended. It also threatened to place the central doctrines of Christianity beyond human understanding. The best way to see how and why it did so is to proceed by way of a series of questions. If history, and only history, taught human beings what they might be, what role was there for Christianity as a body of transhistorical truths? If, as historicism suggested, every epoch merely expressed itself, its own transient impressions, feelings, wishes, beliefs, and so on, what role for truth in general and Christian truth in particular? Had not Christ and his disciples merely expressed the impressions, feelings, wishes, and beliefs of their own age? Was it not necessary, in that case, to see Christ as a man nurtured by the Jewish heritage in Palestine during the Hellenistic period who, following an itinerant ministry that was ended by his sudden and violent death, came to be acknowledged as the central figure in the life and

Wesleyan University Press, 63-89 and the essays collected in Georg G. Iggers and J.M. Powell, eds.(1990). *Leopold von Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

²²² Leopold von Ranke (1824). *Sämmtliche Werke*, vol. 33/34: *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker*. Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, repr., p. vii.

worship of a religious community that grew out of Judaism and took his name as definitive of its central doctrines. In what sense, if any, could the Incarnation of God in the person of His son, miraculously entering history as the Saviour and Lord of the whole world, fall into the class of facts of Christianity's history that a historicist account of it might be imagined to disclose?

And did not this way of speaking, or rather thinking, in any case make the historian an observer or spectator, not an active sharer of life past, and as much a captive of the forces that governed his own times as the past agents in whom he was interested were captives of theirs? Or, if not, how could this fact ever be established on historicism's own premises. These difficulties, which approach paradox, were summed up by a later critic as follows: the individuality that historicism originally presupposes 'originate[d] in a source [God, in the person of His son] truly transhistorical'. It springs from a mystery, from 'a depth which historical observation and investigation can never discover. It springs not from conditions prearranged in the succession of temporal stages [as a Hegelian view of things might insinuate] but from a fire kindled by a stroke, as it were, when the lightning of Eternity hits the temporal plain which history describes'.²²³

Many English theologians wrestled with these difficulties. Among their number, H. L. Mansel (1820-71) was one of the first to register the scale of the difficulties from the standpoint of orthodox Christianity. Mansel was a predecessor of Collingwood's as Waynflete Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford, a distinguished philosopher and logician as well as a theologian. He was an encyclopaedically well-informed (and mostly) critical commentator on German philosophy from Leibniz to Hegel and a particular critic of its pernicious influence on Christian theology, as exemplified by the writings of the left-Hegelian David Friedrich Strauß. Strauß had deployed the tools of historical and philosophical criticism to develop a purely anthropological interpretation of Christian doctrine. In his *The Life of Jesus* (1835–36) he called upon the methods of historical analysis to dismantle what he saw as the myth of

²²³ Richard Kroner (1946). History and Historicism. *Journal of Bible and Religion*, 14, 131-34, at 134.

Christ's divinity.²²⁴ Mansel feared the inexorable permeation of English religious thought by German ways of thinking.

In short time his fears would prove to be well-founded. The marriage of Hegelianism with Christianity that he deplored came to fruition in Oxford and was propagated more widely via the writings of Green, the Cairds, Wallace and others²²⁵ while a strongly historicist version of Strauss's arguments was delivered to an Anglophone audience, anonymously, by the Cambridge historian J. R. Seeley in *Ecce Homo* (1866).²²⁶ Seeley played up the humanity of Jesus and the moral value of his teachings and played down his miraculous birth and performance of miracles. The criticisms Mansel mounted in anticipation of these developments, in his Bampton lectures of 1858, published as *The Limits of Religious Thought Examined*, are striking both for the acuity with which Mansel diagnosed the underlying issues these difficulties brought to light and for the ways in which his analysis opened up lines of thought that would be pursued by later writers, including Collingwood.²²⁷

Mansel suggested—whether or not the suggestion was correct, this is not the place to enquire— that Hegel's own writings had left obscure whether he really meant to assert or deny the existence of Christ as a man and whether 'he designed to represent the Incarnation and earthly life of the Son of God as a fact, or only as the vulgar representation of a philosophical idea'.²²⁸ But this 'halting between two opinions', which attempted to combine historical fact and philosophical theory under the cloud cover of 'dark'

²²⁴ David Friedrich Strauß (1846). *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*. Trans. George Eliot. 3 vols. London: John Chapman.

²²⁵ Many of the relevant writings are discussed in William J. Mander (2011). *British Idealism: A History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Additional materials printed from manuscripts are presented in Colin Tyler (2008). *Unpublished Manuscripts in British Idealism: Political Philosophy, Theology and Social Thought*. 2 vols., Exeter: Imprint Academic.

²²⁶ J. R. Seeley (1866). *Ecce Homo: A Survey of the Life and Work of Jesus Christ*. London: Macmillan & Co.

²²⁷ Henry Longueville Mansel (1858). *The Limits of Religious Thought Examined*. London: John Murray. Collingwood discussed Mansel's philosophy, in passing, as the unidentified target of F. H. Bradley's criticisms, in his essay on Bradley's metaphysics. See 'The Metaphysics of F. H. Bradley: An Essay on *Appearance and Reality*' (1933), printed in R. G. Collingwood (2005). *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, 229-52. For broader accounts of Mansel, see Kenneth D. Freeman (1969). *The Role of Reason in Religion: A Study of Henry Mansel*. Dordrecht: Springer, and Dane Neufeld (2019). *Scripture, Skepticism, and the Character of God: The Theology of Henry Mansel*. Toronto: McGill-Queen's University Press.

²²⁸ Mansel (1858). *The Limits of Religious Thought*, 157.

'grandiloquent' statements which eluded determinate meaning,²²⁹ was rejected by Strauß. Strauß drove a wedge between the historical and the philosophical Jesus and his arguments were intended to set the former aside entirely to make way for the latter. What orthodox Christianity held to be true of Jesus was in reality true, and only true, of the human race as a whole: the incarnation was not complete until the whole of humanity exemplified the ideal of perfection that the life of the historical Jesus was said to embody. Humanity was the union of two natures, 'God become Man', the infinite manifesting itself in the finite. By kindling within himself the idea of humanity, every individual could participate fully in the 'divinely human life of the species'.²³⁰

Mansel railed against these 'unmeaning abstractions which, aiming at a higher knowledge, distort, rather than exhibit, the [...] Infinite' and display 'contempt for the historical and temporal'.²³¹ He saw them as arising from the hubristic attempt to make human reason the measure of all things, to obliterate the distinction between the comprehensible and the incomprehensible by discarding as incomprehensible whatever could not be established as a valid claim by the test of reason. A purely rational account of Christianity, he averred, was impossible, because human reason could not formulate or entertain any positive conception of the infinite, while revelation had declared that God was infinite. Without God, there was no theology and no Christianity, and thus the rationalist critique of Christianity was self-defeating and self-deconstructing. Mansel argued that the existence of God was not established by reason, nor indeed was an object of knowledge, properly speaking, but was, rather, a presupposition of our thinking.

Mansel claimed that much if not all thinking was dependent on presuppositions that were not themselves capable of being established or defended on rational grounds. He pointed to a parallel between the theologian's presupposition of God and the metaphysician's presupposition of the principle of causation to illustrate his point of view. Both, Mansel wrote, were

²²⁹ Mansel (1858). *The Limits of Religious Thought*, 158.

²³⁰ Mansel (1858). *The Limits of Religious Thought*, 160-61.

²³¹ Mansel (1858). *The Limits of Religious Thought*, 150, 155.

principles inherent in our nature, exhibiting, whatever may be their origin, those characteristics of universality and certainty which mark them as part of the inalienable inheritance of the human mind. Neither can be reduced to a mere logical inference from the facts of a limited and contingent experience. Both are equally indispensable to their respective sciences: without Causation, there can be no Philosophy [...]. Yet to this day, while enunciating now, as ever, the fundamental axiom, that for every event there must be *a Cause*, Philosophy has never been able to determine what Causation is [...] at every pause in the contest, the answer has been still the same: 'We cannot *explain* it, but we *must* believe it'.²³²

Mansel's point was that in a similar way one presupposes the existence of God, even though his existence cannot be properly understood. All thinking functions within a framework of presuppositions, some of which, like these two, are ultimate and irreducible. Mansel went on to assert, what reason alone could not comprehend, that the God whose existence we presuppose was identical to the living and acting God who 'hungered in the wilderness' and thirsted upon the cross; who 'mourned over the destruction of Jerusalem, and wept at the grave of Lazarus'.²³³ In revealing Himself in Jesus—Mansel quoted Christ's words to Philip: 'He that hath seen me hath seen the Father; how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father?'—God did not reveal that self as it actually is.²³⁴ His revelation was adapted to the limited finite capacities of His creatures and designed to regulate human life in relation to Him who could not in this life be fully comprehended.²³⁵ Mansel spoke much of the 'evidences' of revelation,²³⁶ meaning the facts of its promulgation and the effects it produced among human beings. The miracles were such evidences, and as such facts, and they could be treated as such because of the central miracle of the resurrection. Any detraction from their supernatural character, or from their status as historical facts, would result in the

²³² Mansel (1858). *The Limits of Religious Thought*, 172-73.

²³³ Mansel (1858). *The Limits of Religious Thought*, 163.

²³⁴ Mansel (1858). *The Limits of Religious Thought*, 155, quoting John 14:8-9.

²³⁵ See Mansel (1858). *The Limits of Religious Thought*, 164, echoing 1 Cor. 13:10: 'The time may indeed come, though not in this life, when... the light which now gleams in restless flashes from the ruffled waters of the human soul, will settle into the steadfast image of God's shining face on its unbroken surface'

²³⁶ E.g. Mansel (1858). *The Limits of Religious Thought*, vii, 29, 32-33, 39, 97, 180, 248, 256, 264,

demolition of Christianity. Thus, historicism had to be dismissed along with Hegelianism. If not, Christianity would find itself impaled on one or other horn of a lethal dilemma.

Mansel's points were taken up, revised and developed in the next generation by Brooke Foss Westcott (1825-1901). Westcott was a biblical scholar, social reformer and theologian, who became bishop of Durham from 1890 until his death.²³⁷ In his work, *The Gospel of the Resurrection* (1866), Westcott began where Mansel began, with the postulate that the existence of God was a presupposition, or as he put it, a 'primary intuition': it was 'assumed to be true' in all that was said and thought, though it did 'not admit of a formal proof'.²³⁸ Likewise he took up Mansel's point about the rational incomprehensibility of a God who was at once infinite and personal. 'We speak of God as Infinite and Personal', wrote Westcott,

The epithets involve a contradiction, and yet they are both necessary. In fact the only approximately adequate conception which we can form of a Divine Being is under the form of a contradiction²³⁹

Westcott put these points to work in a way that moved beyond Mansel. The Incarnation in particular was the means by which Westcott sought to overcome the dilemma Mansel's lectures had identified, providing a bridge between finite and infinite, man and God, what could be known and what must be believed, what changed and what was unchanging. 'The truth itself is infinite', Westcott explained,

and it is simply because the powers of man are imperfect and finite that any development is necessary. He can only realise step by step, and by successive efforts, what *is* indeed from the beginning. According to the position in which he finds himself, he takes now this, now that fragment of the whole, because it meets his wants. Every embodiment of the truth must be wrought out in this way. And the

²³⁷ For Westcott's life, career, and wider thought, see Graham A. Patrick (2004). *The Miners' Bishop: Brooke Foss Westcott*. Peterborough: Epworth Press.

²³⁸ B. F. Westcott (1866). *The Gospel of the Resurrection*. London: MacMillan, 20-21.

²³⁹ Westcott (1866). *The Gospel of the Resurrection*, 21.

nearest approximation which we can form to the complete truth is by the combination of the partial realisations of it which history records.²⁴⁰

This development of knowledge is made possible through Christ's incarnate presence in history, and the incarnation becomes, in this sense, 'an epistemological category'.²⁴¹ In Westcott's words, 'By the Incarnation it gives permanent reality to human knowledge; by the Resurrection it gives permanent reality to human life'.²⁴² Truth, in the absolute sense, becomes partially realizable in history because humanity in general is affirmed and made perfect, so to speak, in the incarnation.

Westcott measured this development of knowledge in history in two ways. The first was closer to Hegel and Strauß than Mansel would have countenanced. 'The slow unfolding of life [he wrote] enables us to discern new meaning in [Christ's] presence. In His humanity is included whatever belongs to the consummation of the individual and of the race, not only in one stage but in all stages of progress, not only in regard to some endowments but in regard to the whole inheritance of our nature enlarged by the most vigorous use while the world lasts'.²⁴³ This 'vigour' and 'consummation' expressed the best of humanity, elevated and sustained in Christ's becoming man, and propelled humanity towards ultimate reconciliation with God. The second measure, which was closer to Mansel's way of thinking, was scripture, in which God's providential plan for mankind was revealed through Christ's passion and resurrection. These two measures functioned together as criteria for assessing the progress of human life in all its aspects. The incarnation provided 'a pivot from which all knowledge could now be arranged an illuminated'.²⁴⁴ It could do so because it was more than an event, even the central event, in the history of salvation: it was 'a Truth'. As Westcott went on to expatiate, it was 'a fact not in the sense that it is past but that it is eternal.'

²⁴⁰ Westcott (1866). *The Gospel of the Resurrection*, 239.

²⁴¹ Neufeld (2019). *Scripture, Skepticism, and the Character of God*, 160.

²⁴² B. F. Westcott (1891). *Essays in the History of Religious Thought in the West*. London: Macmillan, 348.

²⁴³ Westcott (1891). *Essays in the History of Religious Thought*, 353. Colin Tyler has discerned a similar position in the writings of Edward Caird (though he does not discuss the Incarnation when setting out Caird's position in short). See Tyler (2019): "All history is the history of thought", 6-8.

²⁴⁴ Neufeld (2019). *Scripture, Skepticism, and the Character of God*, 161.

[T]he fulfilment of the Incarnation in time is the revelation of that which is beyond time; the absolute, may we not say the necessary, seal to us men of the certainty of the ideas which we are led to fashion under human conditions of the righteousness and love of God, of the grandeur of the heritage for which we were born, of the melancholy sentence of failure which is written against us, of the hope which we cannot forego that we shall yet see God, see God and live.²⁴⁵

The fact of the Incarnation, he concluded, demonstrated to us 'how that unity to which physics and history point is not to be found only in a dispersive connexion of multitudinous parts, but is summed up finally in One Who is God'. At the same time 'it supplies a solid foundation for the loftiest aspirations which man ever fashioned for himself in the personal consciousness of unsatisfied longings. As a Fact, and eternal Fact, realised in time, may we receive it, hold it, reflect upon it' and draw inspiration, strength and wisdom from it.²⁴⁶

Whether this conclusion suffices to overcome the dilemma to which Mansel drew attention is another matter. What Mansel said of Strauß may be said fairly of Westcott, that in the final analysis his account of widening wisdom placed the philosophical Jesus above the historical Jesus, or at the very least, blurred the lines between philosophy and history to vanishing by suggesting that the Incarnation was constantly unfolding in and through time. As a later writer who wished to sure up the difference put it in a book review of 1917, 'philosophy depends upon the whole course of history', but the Christian religion, rightly understood, 'depends upon one important fact', namely the Incarnation. History and philosophy could dispute the details and significance of Jesus's human existence, but only theology could account for Jesus's divine existence. That Jesus was the son of God was a fact beyond the scope of history or philosophy to verify, and so, in effect, Mansel had been right: any attempt to validate Christianity primarily in terms of history or philosophy was bound to fail.

²⁴⁵ B. F. Westcott (1886). *Christus Consummator*. London: Macmillan & Co., 157.

²⁴⁶ Westcott (1886). *Christus Consummator*, 159.

The writer in question was T. S. Eliot. The book he was reviewing was *Religion and Philosophy*, by his teacher R. G. Collingwood.²⁴⁷

Christianity, Re-Enactment and Historicism in Collingwood

Eliot's review was respectful and, in many respects, positive. But it implied that Collingwood had sacrificed Christianity at the altar of philosophy and history. Similar intuitions have been operative since. In a series of works, Alan Donagan has argued that Collingwood was never able to accept the truth of Christianity on its own terms, seeing it as merely as imagery the real meaning of which could and should be stated and defended philosophically. As a result, his philosophy was incomplete and broken-backed: Collingwood was an avowed Christian, but he was a philosopher first and a Christian second. As such he belied in his own life and practice the theoretical claims he made about the disease of the divided life and the divided mind, and removed the only ground upon which their unity might have stood, namely Christianity truly understood. There is much to ponder in this reading of Collingwood, but it dwells largely on the negative effects for Christianity of Collingwood's philosophy and *vice versa*.²⁴⁸ By contrast this thesis is concerned with the *positive* effects and considers the ways in which Christianity fertilized Collingwood's thinking.

Collingwood assumed that Christian doctrine was true—Christianity was, he said, 'the one true and perfect religion, the only religion which gives the soul peace and satisfaction'.²⁴⁹ Yet he devoted most of his intellectual energies from 1923 to writing about other things, especially about philosophy and history. This pair of facts invites a question: what was the relationship between Christian truth, philosophy and history as he understood it, and was

²⁴⁷ Eliot (1917). Review of R. G. Collingwood, 543.

²⁴⁸ See Alan Donagan (1962). *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 284-306 and the same writer's (1994). 'Collingwood and Philosophical Method'. In *The Philosophical Papers of Alan Donagan, vol. 1: Historical Understanding and the History of Philosophy*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 192-209, esp. 207-9. Compare Peter Johnson (2012). *A Philosopher at the Admiralty: R. G. Collingwood and the First World War; A Philosopher at War*, vol. 1. Exeter: Imprint Academic, esp. ch. 3.

²⁴⁹ R. G. Collingwood (1924). *Speculum Mentis*, 145.

his understanding correct? An answer to the second part of the question might begin by saying, it depends what your assumptions are.

As we have seen, assumptions had figured prominently in some theological writing before Collingwood. The same was true of historical writing, especially the writings of F. H. Bradley. Bradley had emphasized that critical thinking discloses there is no testimony or recorded experience which indicates incorrigibly any fact from the past, but in order to know it we combine such evidence there is with the understanding our own experience has provided. It follows that we import content from our own minds into any inferences we make about past actions; and because experience varies from period to period, so do the conceptions people import and the historiography they produce. Collingwood's younger contemporary, Michael Oakeshott, agreed with Bradley that it was impossible to separate 'what has come to us' from 'our interpretation of it'.²⁵⁰ Collingwood would take a similar line. He argued that the historian's 'web of imaginative construction [...] cannot derive its validity from being pegged down [...] to given facts', and concluded that it is 'the historian's picture of the past, the product of his own *a priori* imagination, that has to justify the sources used in its construction.'²⁵¹ In short, the historian provides a continuous and coherent picture, in which source material is justified to the degree that it is capable of being made intelligible by the historian's thinking. The result is a conception concerning the past rather than a direct knowledge of it. Or as Bradley put it, 'in every case that which is called the fact is in reality a theory'.²⁵²

Theories proceed from assumptions, or as Collingwood preferred to say, presuppositions, and presuppositions are prelogical, unexamined and unjustified. The important question about them is, what do they produce? That depends on the content of the historian's mind.

²⁵⁰ Michael Oakeshott (1933). *Experience and its Modes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 94.

²⁵¹ IH, 244, 245.

²⁵² F.H. Bradley, 'The Presuppositions of Critical History' (1874) in his *Collected Essays*, 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, vol. i, 1-70 at 17. This paragraph draws upon Ian Harris (2010). 'The Anglican Mind of Maurice Cowling'. In Robert Crowcroft, S.J.D. Green and Richard Whiting, eds., *The Philosophy, Politics and Religion of British Democracy. Maurice Cowling and Conservatism*. London: I.B.Tauris, 223-269. See Tyler (2019): "All history is the history of thought", 11-18, for the argument that much of Collingwood's thinking about absolute presuppositions is already in Bradley.

Evidence about the past is part of that mind. That has the effect that figures from the past exist as conceptions in his or her mind: in that respect the figure is not dead but is a constituent in the judgements one makes.²⁵³ This presence of conceptions about the past as operative in the mind makes it impossible to divide an historical religion from current thinking. The current thinking of the Christian historian, which includes Christ, therefore, has a role in his historical thinking, and this instantiates the more general truth that 'there is no single history [...] which does not derive its individual character from the particular standpoint of the author.'²⁵⁴ When the standpoint is Christian, belief in Christ is inextricably fused with our thinking in and about history and with morality. As Lionel Rubinoff acutely observed of the position Collingwood outlined in *Religion and Philosophy* (1916),

Collingwood emphasizes the importance of coming to know, by means of historical thinking, the mind of Jesus from whom the creed of Christianity is derived. For Collingwood, this means believing in the historical reality as distinct from the myth of Jesus. In re-thinking the mind of the actual Jesus the philosopher is re-living a life that serves as an example of how a human life may satisfy the highest possible moral standards. Only then can a person be expected to imitate that life. The historical life of Jesus, which only history can establish, is thus the guarantee that man can be perfect if he will.²⁵⁵

What was more, Collingwood went on, it was in 'the struggle towards [that perfection that] the religious man somehow feels he is in personal touch with a risen Christ'. We can now see why Collingwood would say that this feeling was 'an integral part of the Christian consciousness' and that '[t]he belief that Christ really lived colours the whole consciousness of the believer'.²⁵⁶ The same point was made in an essay of the same year, 'The Devil'. True religion, by which he meant Christianity, lay in 'making ourselves in God's image; for God

²⁵³ F. H. Bradley (1914). 'What is the real Julius Caesar?'. In *Essays on Truth and Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, ch.14.

²⁵⁴ Compare F. H. Bradley (1874). 'Presuppositions', 20 and Collingwood (1925). 'The Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History', 55-56.

²⁵⁵ Lionel Rubinoff (1970). *Collingwood and the Reform of Metaphysics*,

²⁵⁶ Collingwood, R.G. (1916). *Religion and Philosophy*. London: Macmillan, 53-54.

alone exists, and man is only struggling into existence for good or evil. In order to attain to any existence worth having, we must bear in mind that truth, reality, God, are real things existing quite independently of our individual life and private opinions'.²⁵⁷ Or again,

Man's life is a becoming; and not only becoming, but self-creation [...]. All his life is an effort to attain real human nature. But human nature, since man is at bottom spirit, is only exemplified in the absolute spirit of God. Hence man must shape himself in God's image [...]. This self-creation must also be self-knowledge; not the self-knowledge of introspection, the examination of the self that is, but the knowledge of God, the self that is to be. Knowledge of God is the beginning, the center, and end, of human life.²⁵⁸

In this way, Collingwood took forward and radicalised the 'pivotal' idea of the Incarnation witnessed in Westcott. The Incarnation, in Collingwood's hands, became a metonym for *all* re-enacted thought and *all* self-knowledge. In thinking, he proclaimed, we follow the 'impulse of the divine spirit' and at the limit, our minds, as Christ's followers 'actually become [...] one with his mind, his mind lives in [ours] and [ours] in him. This must be true [Collingwood went on] of every one who learns from him and follows him. The union with God which he enjoys is imparted to them; they become he, and in so doing they equally with him become God.'²⁵⁹ In other words, the self-creation of which he spoke was the lifting up of man into God and, with it, the commutation of the sentence of failure that the Fall had passed upon man. Every thought was a kind of resurrection which brought back to life, here and now, a thought that had once lived in the past in the mind of another. As he would later put it,

Time is transcended in history because the historian, in discovering the thought of a past agent, re-thinks that thought for himself. It is known... not as a past thought,

²⁵⁷ R. G. Collingwood (1916). 'The Devil'. In *Faith and Reason: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* by R. G. Collingwood, ed. with an introduction and sectional introduction by Lionel Rubinoff. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968, 211-33, at 211-12.

²⁵⁸ Collingwood (1916). 'The Devil', in *EPR*, 231-32.

²⁵⁹ *RP*, 159-60

contemplated as it were from a distance through the historian's time-telescope, but as a present thought living now in the historian's mind. Thus, by being historically known, it undergoes a resurrection out of the limbo of the dead past, triumphs over time, and survives in the present²⁶⁰

It seems that this was also what Collingwood had in mind when he argued that

the spirit of truth is not circumscribed by the limits of space and time. If a real community of life is possible between two men who share each other's outward presence and inward thoughts, it is possible no less between two who have never met [...]. The earlier in point of time lives on in the life of the later, each deriving the benefit from such intercourse [...]. Thus there is a certain spiritual intercourse between men who have no outward point of contact whatever.²⁶¹

It is by this communion of minds that we come to know God and be one with Him through our knowledge of his Son, which is at once the re-enactment of His thought and part of our own self-creation. Knowing Him is the model for all genuine historical thinking, and *all* knowing, which is to say, all high grade thinking, comes back to Him. Later, Collingwood would ruminate upon how the 'spirit' that gives life and continuity to history was mediated by the individual mind. Spirit could not be observed as an object since it incarnated itself within our own 'thoughts'. This complex relation was plotted in Collingwood's notebooks on metaphysics from the 1930s, as he worked out the mechanics of the way in which human action could be identified with a transcendent identity about which nothing could be said directly. Collingwood wrote that 'the *nisus* which is *in* us in the form of conscious & free will is only one specialized form of a *nisus* operating throughout the universe, and we are so to

²⁶⁰ R. G. Collingwood (1937). Review of 'Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer' by Raymond Klibansky and H. J. Paton. *The English Historical Review* 52: 141-146, at 143.

²⁶¹ RP, 160-61. Recall the story Collingwood told about his 'earlier self' first encountering Kant, discussed in the introduction to this thesis.

speak the deputed agents of all existence, appointed for the purpose of realising spirit',²⁶² or, in other words, of realizing our divine nature in and through our humanity.²⁶³

Once this position is assumed, it follows that the history of salvation embodies itself figurally at every moment in history. Historicist thinking, in this perspective, is revealed to be ultimately self-effacing. It becomes necessary to dispense with all temporal particularity and the concrete singularity of time and place, because every epoch is beheld by God in the same way. As every epoch, so every man. History as the history of salvation confronts every man with the same duties to fulfill, the same human tasks to tackle, the same moral problems to solve. Every life paradigmatically encapsulates the drama of the Incarnation: temptation, sin, repentance, penance and regeneration or refusal to repent, despair, and damnation are the ever present, alternative stations of his earthly course. They define the history of each soul in its individual *and* exemplary aspect, in its temporal *and* its timeless character.²⁶⁴ Every life, in partaking of this drama, is an effort to attain real human nature.

A Brief Word about Relativism

Collingwood worked through the consequences of this position in his writing about philosophy and history from 1924 onwards. *Speculum Mentis*, published in that year, was the crucial first step. It was a beginning rather than an ending. It came as close as Collingwood ever came to suggesting, *a la* Hegel, that human life necessarily played itself out in a single continuous unfolding sequence which went through certain successive stages. Religion, it was stated there, was one of these stages, a 'myth' which needed to be transcended. Yet in the same text, Collingwood praised 'the religious insight' as pivotal for

²⁶² Bodleian Library, dep. 18, R. G. Collingwood (1933-34), 'Notes toward a Metaphysic', Book D, 70, discussed in Bates (1996). 'Rediscovering Collingwood's Spiritual History', 53.

²⁶³ This fits perfectly with the idea that *nisus*, as understood by Collingwood, is a force which drives development from a lower to higher form on a scale of forms. See the editors' discussion in R. G. Collingwood (1999). *The Principles of History, and other writings in Philosophy of History*, lxxxiv-lxxxv, note 149. Wider discussion of Collingwood's deployment of this notion is provided in Browning (2004). *Rethinking R.G. Collingwood*, 60-68 and van der Dussen (1981). *History as a Science*, 196-99.

²⁶⁴ See Kurt Tetzeli von Rosador (1986). Christian Historical Drama: The Exemplariness of *Murder in the Cathedral*. *Modern Drama* 29: 516-31, esp. 518. This may be one reason why Collingwood conceded, perhaps with Eliot's review in mind, that he should have laid more emphasis on 'the uniqueness of Christ'. See SM, 108, n. 1.

understanding human history, 'because it liberates the soul [...] and leads from the things that are seen and temporal to the things that are unseen and eternal'.²⁶⁵ We have just seen why this was so. The relation between seen and unseen, temporal and eternal, expressed in exemplary terms in the Incarnation, describes the course that Collingwood's thought continued to follow until his death. Collingwood never believed that the unseen and eternal could be known in and for itself—God could be approached only via his son, for His own essence was unknowable and inaccessible to human perception²⁶⁶—but it could be known in and through its actual manifestations in past thought, re-enacted in the present.

One implication of this insight, as we have seen, was that God was everywhere in history, so to speak. In his reflections on Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918-23), Collingwood acknowledged the force of this point: like God, the historian should regard each historical period as equally justified. Each era had its glory, value, and meaning, but it did not follow that all periods were equally valuable. Evaluations could be made across eras, so every age could be judged as declining or progressing. This judgment, however, varied according to the historical judge's particular concerns, problems, and criteria of evaluation.²⁶⁷ Progress was not a law of history; rather, it was a judgment made at a place or time from a particular perspective. In later work Collingwood would continue to insist that progress was a moral narrative that described the solution of particular problems at a particular time.²⁶⁸ We cannot determine that another culture or era will agree with our judgment of decadence or improvement; perhaps they would not, but this in no way invalidates our judgment.²⁶⁹ It merely underlines the point that it is our judgment, not theirs. As Collingwood observed in a letter to Knox, written in 1936, 'St. Augustine looked at Roman history from the point of view of an early Christian; Tillemont, from that of a

²⁶⁵ SM, 153.

²⁶⁶ Hence Collingwood's statement that God 'is not an object of man's thought but a life incarnate in man himself': see R. G. Collingwood (1927). 'Reason is Faith Cultivating Itself', in EPR, 119.

²⁶⁷ R. G. Collingwood (1927). 'Oswald Spengler and the Theory of Historical Cycles'. In R.G. Collingwood (1965). *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, 77.

²⁶⁸ Collingwood (1927). 'Oswald Spengler and the Theory of Historical Cycles', 85-87.

²⁶⁹ Collingwood (1929). 'A Philosophy of Progress'. In R.G. Collingwood (1965). *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, 106, 111, 119. For discussion, see W. Jan van der Dussen (1990). Collingwood and the Idea of Progress. *History and Theory* 29: 21-41.

seventeenth-century Frenchman; Gibbon from that of an eighteenth-century Englishman; Mommsen from that of a nineteenth-century German. There is no point in asking which was the right point of view. Each was the only one possible for the man who adopted it'.²⁷⁰

This recognition of historical relativity, for Collingwood, did not entail ethical relativism because the 'absolute presuppositions' (as Collingwood came to put it) of a particular age did not determine the thoughts of every individual within it. According to Collingwood, every thought and every action 'begins with an immediate, indemonstrable, and irresistible feeling that we are filled and sustained by some power as yet unexpressed, which is to reveal itself through our action'.²⁷¹ This act, or thought, was always individual. It could not be subsumed under covering laws and was not determined by a governing constellation of absolute presuppositions because, even though all 'concrete thought is in its immediacy temporal' it is 'in its mediation extra-temporal': it connects to something beyond the now.²⁷² The intellectual architectonics of every period provide the context in which thought and action occur, and enable individuals to formulate questions to which their thoughts and actions stand as answers, but they do predetermine the questions or the answers and they certainly do not narrow the logical range of possible questions and answers to one.

On Collingwood's view, it is the job of the historian to get inside the head of an Augustine, a Tillemont, a Gibbon, a Mommsen, to look at the situation through their eyes, and to come to a judgment about why they thought and acted as they did. This was the only way to understand them. There was no timeless standard by which their different thoughts and actions could be arbitrated. But in studying them in their historical individuality the historian not only came to understand them as they understood themselves: He affirmed his own and their place in a universal history, namely the ongoing effort of man to achieve that self-understanding that is at the same time the expression of divine truth and the divine spirit in every individual.

²⁷⁰ IH, xii. Knox there describes the source of the passage as a manuscript but later clarified the matter: see van der Dussen (1981). *History as a Science*, 394, note 273.

²⁷¹ R. G. Collingwood (1927). 'Reason is Faith Cultivating Itself', in EPR, 119.

²⁷² SM, 301. See Bates (1996). 'Rediscovering Collingwood's Spiritual History', 40-41 for discussion.

The present chapter began by considering the character and importance of re-enactment in Collingwood's thought. The controversy with Collingwood studies about its sense and salience was the springboard for a wider discussion, which examined the charges of historicism and relativism laid against Collingwood. It then examined the difficulties posed to Christian thinking by historicism. It located Collingwood's understanding of Christianity in a wider context of Christian theology which developed in response to the challenge of historicism. It showed how earlier writers, especially Mansel and Westcott, had written in terms that help to illuminate Collingwoodian Christianity. In particular, it argued that Collingwood took a central item of Christian doctrine, namely the Incarnation, and turned it to his own purposes.

The Incarnation became the key to historical understanding and to self-understanding: it provided a model in which the sins of ignorance and stupidity were remitted, past faults forgiven, and long dead thoughts resurrected anew. In the face of this idea, the charge of historicism dissolves, and the accusation of relativism begins to look equally misplaced. Collingwood did think that thought and action were relative to context, but they were also relative to something beyond them, something transcendent, about which one could not speak coherently. Here again, the Incarnation provides the model: we cannot know the Infinite God except in human form of Jesus Christ his son.

Collingwood, I have argued, had come to assume all this by 1924. Earlier I said that the important question about assumptions is, what do they produce? The answer to that question is taken up in the second part of thesis. There I explore the way in which Collingwood worked towards and worked through the implications of the view he had taken up for human knowledge, philosophy, history, and politics. My aim is to provide as detailed a picture as I can of the logic and the consequences of the Incarnational thinking I attribute to Collingwood in his wider thought. To this end, I turn first to Collingwood's thoughts about human knowledge.

Chapter Three: Knowledge and Metaphysics

Introduction

The two preceding chapters explored two central controversies in existing Collingwood studies. The purpose of this exploration was to delimit the space of perspectives within which the view of Collingwood's philosophy I am seeking to develop is situated. That offers one necessary means for gauging whether and how far my view implies the revision of existing understandings of his philosophy, something which will only be fully clear once the thesis has been argued to the end. Yet it is obviously not possible to gauge whether and how far that view makes sense of Collingwood's philosophy in its own terms by the same means: the claim that the earth is flat, after all, implies the revision of existing understandings. To vindicate such claims requires a slightly different approach, which places the emphasis more directly on the evidence, meaning here Collingwood's texts and the logical relations between the claims he was making, referring to the secondary literature only to the extent that it helps to illuminate and distinguish the claims I am making myself.

The hypothesis about Collingwood I wish to defend is that he wrote from a Christian standpoint and assumed that human life was to be understood in Christian terms. He understood those terms through the figure of the Incarnation, which represented for him the ideal realisation of the divine in humanity. By treating the Incarnation figuratively—not as a unique event in which God came into time as historical happening but as a living event which continues to live in and through us whenever we think, for we think through Him, with Him, and in Him—it became possible to recast all human knowledge and perception in terms of this reality. It enabled Collingwood to say, as I noted in the previous chapter, that in virtue of the Incarnation, man's life is 'a becoming; and not only becoming, but self-creation... an effort to attain real human nature' and that this 'self-creation' at the same time self-knowledge, meaning by this 'the knowledge of God, the self that is to be'. Knowledge of God, therefore, was 'the beginning, the center, and end, of human life.'²⁷³ In *Religion and Philosophy*, and in essays written around that time, Collingwood tried to show

²⁷³ Collingwood (1916). 'The Devil', in *EPR*, 231-32.

that the Christian standpoint he had adopted was sanctioned by philosophy. He simply ended up re-describing Christianity in philosophical terms: this was the gist of Eliot's criticisms and Collingwood seems to have concluded that they had some weight behind them. In later work he distinguished more precisely the different modes of understanding that religion and philosophy comprised and offered an account of the relations between these modes. This was not a repudiation of the Christian ideal of knowledge as knowledge of Christ, but rather explanation in place of re-description: an account of the process of self-understanding in history that the Incarnation represented, against the background of reality as a whole. Collingwood attempted to explain this process philosophically for the first time in the pages of *Speculum Mentis*. He made other attempts, but these refined rather than replaced the original presentation.²⁷⁴

This chapter aims to elucidate the frame of reference Collingwood developed there, the frame within which he contemplated reality as a whole. At the heart of Collingwood's thinking was the consciousness of experience as underpinned by necessary and indispensable assumptions that are absolute by their very nature. Accordingly, he treated knowledge as consciousness, and metaphysics as a historical science. My central purpose is to explain how Collingwood understood what it means to know, and how knowledge was ultimately shaped by deeply-held assumptions the content of which is revealed by the historical work of true metaphysics. As a prelude to the elucidation that follows, the reader is invited to put to one side, as far as it is possible to do so, pre-conceptions about *history* being merely the chronology of events of the past, *religion* only as organised ritual obeisance (or organised deception, depending on one's preferences) that involves the uncritical acceptance of certain dogmas or beliefs, and *civilization* as a free-standing conception that denotes nothing more or other than the continued and mechanical functions of structures and institutions in society. As we shall see, these preconceptions were alien to Collingwood's mind.

²⁷⁴ Mink (1969). *Mind, History, and Dialectic* and Rubinoff (1970). *Collingwood and the Reform of Metaphysics* suggest that subsequent developments were minimal. Leon J. Goldstein (1970). *Collingwood's Theory of Historical Knowing. History and Theory* 9: 3-36, argues that Collingwood abandoned this frame of reference in his later work. It will be clear that I tend to agree more with Mink and Rubinoff.

Knowledge as consciousness

In *Speculum Mentis* (1924), or *The Map of Knowledge* Collingwood concerned himself directly with the meaning of human experience. In this work he exposes and explores the interplay between thought and reality through the problematization of what he distinguishes as the five chief forms of consciousness, namely, art, religion, science, history and philosophy. Collingwood's decision to organise human experience, consciousness or knowledge, under these headings is intended to aid in the task of understanding, and not as final or definitive statement of all possible forms of experience. It is, as he describes it, a 'provisional'²⁷⁵ classification, whose arbitrariness is merely in keeping with 'existing and traditional philosophies'.²⁷⁶ As Collingwood explains,

We are accustomed to group our problems in certain ways, under the headings of art, religion, science, history, and philosophy: there is no harm in it, and it gives us a convenient starting-point. But it is only harmless so long as we recognize that it is provisional.²⁷⁷

Collingwood describes *Speculum Mentis* as a 'critical review of the chief forms of human experience',²⁷⁸ a description which, while it is accurate in one sense, in another sense fails to do full justice to the positive content of the positions he was espousing or the platform from which he was espousing them. *Speculum Mentis* was his first concerted attempt to devise a 'philosophical system'²⁷⁹ that is by the very nature of the endeavour neither complete nor final.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁵ Collingwood, R.G. (1924). *Speculum Mentis, or, The Map of Knowledge*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 57.

²⁷⁶ SM, 57.

²⁷⁷ SM, 57.

²⁷⁸ SM, 9.

²⁷⁹ SM, 9.

²⁸⁰ In *An Autobiography* which was published in 1939, Collingwood looks back upon *Speculum Mentis* and has interesting things to say about it. Despite describing it as 'a bad book in many ways', this harsh judgement is modified and moderated in the related footnote, inserted after reading the book afresh for the 'first time since it was published'. Collingwood found that the work contained a 'great deal of genuine thinking', and 'not a great deal that needs to be retracted'. Collingwood's recognition that his position in the book needed to be 'supplemented and qualified' he attributes to the growth of his thought over time, and the confidence that the position can be expressed more skilfully. (AA, 56-57).

One obtrusive feature of that attempt, as Collingwood would emphasise in the prologue to the work, was his resistance to being classified or confined to any existing school of philosophy, whilst at the same time recognising that many of the formulations and assumptions in play in his own treatise would call to mind the Idealism of Bradley and others, which was characterised, we have seen, by the belief that the known cannot be independent of the knower.²⁸¹ Collingwood distanced himself from such easy affiliation by insisting that ‘one learns what one has it in one to learn, not what one’s teachers have it in them to teach’,²⁸² arguing, for instance, that a real rose and an imaginary rose are both, as he put it, ‘objective because they are the objects of a perceiving mind and an imaginary mind respectively’.²⁸³ Such observations are telling of the degree to which he believed in the freedom and independence of the mind—certainly the independence of his own mind if not always the minds of his colleagues—and its capacity to shape its own reality through reflection. For Collingwood, philosophy of mind is the same as a philosophy of thought; both are the account of the genesis of thought and its development through forms of consciousness, the most fully developed of which, as we will come to see in subsequent chapters, is the ‘historical consciousness’.

Speculum Mentis (1924) is the story of the five forms of experience Collingwood had identified, the extent of their independence of one another, and the order in which they stand to one another. The method of exposition that Collingwood pursues, which is at the same time a method of thought, might best be called Socratic.²⁸⁴ He begins, without positing a theory of any description, with what, as a matter of fact, we ‘all know’ about art, religion, science, history, and philosophy, believing that the truth is somehow to be found in what we already know, even if that truth is not exactly (indeed it may turn out to be quite

²⁸¹ Collingwood acknowledges that a reader of *Speculum Mentis* might recognise an *Idealist* influence, whilst at the same time describing any thought of him being called as ‘New Idealist’ as ‘silly’ (SM, 13). He repeats the rejection of any attempt to depict *Speculum Mentis* as ‘idealistic’ more than a decade later, in *An Autobiography* (AA, 57).

²⁸² SM, 12.

²⁸³ SM, 11.

²⁸⁴ As noted by Connelly (2003). *Metaphysics, Method and Politics*, 16, 81, 87n, which speaks of ‘the Socratic principle which runs throughout Collingwood’s writing’. Compare, more narrowly, Dreisbach (2009). *Collingwood on the Moral Principles of Art*, 41.

far removed from) what we at first take it to be, as long as we ask the right questions of ourselves. This starting point immediately opens up a range of questions, because in stating what we know, we make use of words and expressions that call for analysis. The upshot of that analysis is the discovery that the separateness and autonomy claimed by and for these forms of experience is an illusion: each form of experience is at bottom identical with all the others, being the mind's knowledge of itself, which exists in being explored and is not separate from the mind doing the exploring.

This emphasis on an underlying unity is the unifying thread in the argument. In *Speculum Mentis*, Collingwood seeks to make intelligible the unity of human experience as part of an infinite whole.²⁸⁵ For Collingwood, this is not merely an intellectual quest, or an exercise in theorizing, since whenever and wherever this unity is undermined, so the practical life of the individual who exists in society with others is diminished and damaged. Thus, the purpose of self-knowledge, argues Collingwood, is not only, as he had earlier announced, to come to know God. It is also the fulfilment of 'a vigorous practical life',²⁸⁶ for in the words which Collingwood chose to open the book, '[all] thought exists for the sake of action'.²⁸⁷ But the achievement of fulfilment is undermined by an attitude of fragmentation of human consciousness, as each putatively autonomous form allures with specious promises of wholeness from within, monadic freedom from all else, and completeness, and yet is exposed through its limitations as self-contradictory. All are found by Collingwood to be stunted, self-deceiving and self-destructive promises that no single form of consciousness can deliver in isolation from the other forms. The result of this separation—the origins of which Collingwood traced back to the Renaissance—was not so much freedom but isolation and canalization into 'specialized'²⁸⁸ activities which, when interrogated systematically (even by their proponents) were found to be incomplete and partial abridgements of the full meaning of human experience.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁵ SM, 65.

²⁸⁶ SM, 16.

²⁸⁷ SM, 16.

²⁸⁸ SM, 34.

²⁸⁹ SM, 34.

Collingwood did not deny that art, religion, science, history and philosophy were distinguishable forms of consciousness, each with its own nature and limits, each convinced of its own capacity to deliver completeness and fulfilment. But without their harmonious interdependence 'the unity of the mind'²⁹⁰ suffered, and with it, civilization suffered too. As Collingwood put it,

In the middle ages the artist was perhaps not much of an artist, the philosopher was by our standards only mildly philosophical, and the religious man not extremely religious; but they were all men, whole of heart and secure in their grasp on life. To-day we can be as artistic, we can be as philosophical, we can be as religious as we please, but we cannot ever be men at all; we are wrecks and fragments of men, and we do not know where to take hold of life and how to begin looking for the happiness which we know we do not possess.²⁹¹

Collingwood's attempts to address this desperate state of affairs, which he described at the time as the malady of the century, began before *Speculum Mentis* (1924) and would continue after it in a series of treatises and essays which investigated the relationships between the different forms of consciousness and attempted to explain how and why the differences between them were invisible barriers that needed to be broken down for people to be and to feel at one with themselves and with each other, rather than the wrecks and fragments that they had become. That is to say, he associated his own philosophy with a civilising mission, in the sense that it upheld civilisation as he understood it, just as he associated rivals to it with threats to civilisation about which their exponents were either blasé or unaware. *Speculum Mentis* (1924) made claims, too, about the relationship between religion, meaning by that term a certain conception of Christianity, and the civilisation Collingwood wished to defend, the roots of which were explored in the previous chapter.

²⁹⁰ SM, 27.

²⁹¹ SM, 35.

That conception came into play early in *Speculum Mentis* (1924) via its ‘fundamental principle’,²⁹² that ‘the only life worth living is the life of the whole man’.²⁹³ This principle presupposed ‘the absolute worth of every individual’ and Collingwood now felt ready to say that ‘Incarnation, redemption, resurrection of the body, only repeat[ed] this cardinal idea from different angles’.²⁹⁴ It found expression, again, in the idea ‘on which Christianity insists’,²⁹⁵ that ‘just because of the absolute worth of every individual, [the individual man] is nothing without his fellow men; [and in the idea] that the holy spirit lives not in this man or that but in the church as the unity of all faithful people.’²⁹⁶ By institutionalising this principle Christianity delivered the kind of unity—salvation, to put the matter in theological terms—which human consciousness needs and after which it thirsts and seeks. It followed, as we would expect, that the solution to the malady of the century ‘can only be in principle the Christian solution’,²⁹⁷ by which Collingwood meant ‘some new interpretation of Christianity was the only hope for the world’s future’.²⁹⁸ What this formula meant was not unpacked at any length or in much detail in *Speculum Mentis* (1924). What it amounted to *in nuce* I have stated in the Introduction and in the previous chapter. What it came to in the final analysis, in the light of Collingwood’s writings as a whole, will be discussed towards the end of this thesis. But to get to that point in the argument of the thesis, and to make what it amounted to properly intelligible, it is necessary to say more about the argument of *Speculum Mentis* (1924), and the relationship it postulated between religion, philosophy, history and the other forms of experience.

The mind ‘creates itself’

One of the most important assumptions at work in Collingwood’s ‘construction of a map of knowledge’²⁹⁹ in *Speculum Mentis* - and indeed the rest of his works - is the recognition that

²⁹² SM, 36.

²⁹³ SM, 36. This had been a theme in Ruskin too. See Murphy (2008). *Collingwood and the Crisis of Western Civilisation*.

²⁹⁴ SM, 36-37.

²⁹⁵ SM, 37.

²⁹⁶ SM, 37.

²⁹⁷ SM, 38.

²⁹⁸ SM, 38.

²⁹⁹ SM, 39.

each form of experience is 'a kind of knowledge, an activity of the cognitive mind'.³⁰⁰ And it is only by taking seriously the intellectual content of each of the forms of experience that it becomes possible to understand its meaning and formative place in human thought. Collingwood draws parallels between the order of the forms of experience and the development of a person: from childhood through adolescence to maturity, and, more speculatively, with a sketch of the development of human beings from the primitive life of a palaeolith through a neolith to the emergence of the scientific mind (which he attributes to Greek civilisation).³⁰¹ One might put it like this: what Collingwood was doing in *Speculum Mentis* was charting the dialectic by which freedom is transformed from caprice, or the freedom of the child at play, into complete freedom of the will, what we might call, for want of a better phrase, the 'grown-up' freedom to do as one ought of one's own volition.

Another key feature of the five forms of consciousness, and one that Collingwood underlined over and over again, is that they are not 'mere species of a genus',³⁰² but rather 'have a natural order of their own'.³⁰³ For none of them admits any except its own claim to truth; to do otherwise is to give ground to all or any of the others.³⁰⁴ Collingwood's conception of the forms of consciousness is consistent with his resistance to abstraction as a putative means to higher forms of knowledge. For Collingwood, abstraction stood between, and was an obstacle to, the mind's attainment of the kind of consciousness of which it is capable and to which it aspires, because abstraction always implies separation, whether through classification or categorisation. This hostility to separation (and perhaps to abstraction too) is reflected in Collingwood's concept of mind. He does not view the mind as separate from consciousness; rather it is identical with it, or as Collingwood puts it, the mind 'creates itself'.³⁰⁵ The question then becomes, how does it do so?

³⁰⁰ SM, 39.

³⁰¹ SM, 52.

³⁰² SM, 55.

³⁰³ SM, 52.

³⁰⁴ SM, 55.

³⁰⁵ SM, 65.

In its most rudimentary form, the process of self-creation of the mind is the work of imagination guided by beauty as its principle and law.³⁰⁶ Aesthetic consciousness is thus the playground of the mind whose experience is 'the creation or apprehension of works of art.'³⁰⁷ Indifferent to the reality or unreality of what it imagines,³⁰⁸ aesthetic consciousness is unburdened by questions of right and wrong, truth and falsehood, and is free to turn its imagination to whatever objects it desires. 'Art, as pure imagination, imagination without assertion',³⁰⁹ exists capriciously and individualistically unconcerned with its surroundings; it is as if art were 'a question which expects no answer: that is, a supposal'.³¹⁰

But this apparently primitive form of experience is the source of all knowledge: 'the cutting edge of the mind'.³¹¹ In search of meaning, the aesthetic consciousness moves from one object of imagination to another, '*discontinuous*' in what it mistakenly takes to be the truth, namely, 'truth in the guise of beauty'.³¹² But the capricious freedom of this 'monadic' life of art is no substitute for the rational freedom by and through which society comes into being; the freedom which begins by making explicit the work of the mind to itself, and concludes with the discovery of freedom of the will through historical consciousness.

Art, then, is 'the night and womb' of the mind,³¹³ its place of rest from the demands of the rational life. But aesthetic consciousness, whose expression is the work of art, is not merely intuition or emotion; it has within itself 'thought in the form of intuition'.³¹⁴ But a consciousness that evades assertion is a consciousness without a fixed abode, and the only way it can put down roots is by transcending itself, like 'a mother that must die in giving birth, only to be born again every time a human being comes into the world.'³¹⁵ This is the birth of religious consciousness, where the object of imagination is asserted as reality, and

³⁰⁶ SM, 65.

³⁰⁷ SM, 64.

³⁰⁸ SM, 61

³⁰⁹ SM, 79.

³¹⁰ SM, 79.

³¹¹ SM, 90.

³¹² SM, 110.

³¹³ SM, 92.

³¹⁴ SM, 94-95.

³¹⁵ SM, 86-87.

all else in opposition to it. Or as Collingwood preferred to put it, '[n]ow religion is essentially assertion, belief. To believe this is to deny that.'³¹⁶ In religion, the mind recognises the predicament of knowledge: the distinguishing between truth and falsehood, good and evil, and fundamentally between God and man.

In *Speculum Mentis* (1924) Collingwood discusses religion as an indispensable form of consciousness whose expression in practical life takes on a number of different guises, distinguishing, as he had not done in *Religion and Philosophy* (1916), between its explicit and its implicit content. In one guise, religion may appear to be dis severed from the reality which it had asserted and given birth to in the first place. But the apparent marginalisation of religion is in reality its further development from assertion into an articulated system of explicit thought. Art and religion are expressions of implicit thought. And whilst art cares little for the difference between 'the technique of expression'³¹⁷ and that which is expressed, religious consciousness turns a work of art into a symbol through its assertion as reality. In doing so, Collingwood suggests, religion mistakes the symbols of reality for reality itself. Both art and religion, then, having asserted a work of art as reality, find themselves mistaking the symbols of reality for reality itself, that is to say, mistaking them for the realised conclusions of explicit thought. As Collingwood explains,

The total absorption in the technique of expression is art; the first consciousness of the claim of thought, misinterpreted by identifying thought with its own expression, language with reality, is religion.³¹⁸

Collingwood had given a striking example of this mistake in *Religion and Philosophy* (1916). The doctrine of the Incarnation, on Collingwood's account there, postulated the existence of 'a certain historical person who was both divine and human. He was truly and actually divine with the full characteristics of Godhead, and fully and completely human in all the individuality of manhood. He was not, however, a compound of two different personalities,

³¹⁶ SM, 114-115.

³¹⁷ SM, 155.

³¹⁸ SM, 155.

but one single personality'.³¹⁹ Collingwood went on to reject two competing and mutually exclusive attempts at explaining this identity, the first holding that man as man is already divine, the second that one man alone, the Jesus of history, was truly and fully divine. Both were shown by him to be inadequate as explanations went, because they evaded rather than unraveled the paradox at the heart of the Incarnation, the one divinizing human nature, the other postulating a man whose nature was unlike any other man's but the same as God's. They explained away, as opposed to explaining. Indeed, at root both sorts of pseudo-explanation suffered from the same defects, because they committed exactly the kinds of philosophical error (the tendency to think in terms of genus and species, the tendency to abstraction) that Collingwood detected and wished to expose and to banish from all the crevices of thought. In his view,

'[a]s long as human and divine nature are regarded simply as different sets or groups of qualities, to assert their inherence in one individual is really meaningless, as if we should assert the existence of a geometrical figure which was both a square and a circle. This does not mean that those who asserted "two natures in one person" were wrong ; but it does mean that they were trying to express a truth in terms that simply would not express it'.³²⁰

The truth they were trying to express in symbolic terms as the absolute unity of God and Christ was the unity of experience and the form of knowledge appropriate to it, in which 'God is the reality of the world conceived as a whole which in its self-realisation and impulse towards unity purges out of itself all evil and error. History regarded in that way—not as a mere bundle of events but as a process of the solution of problems and the overcoming of difficulties—is altogether summed up in the infinite personality of God ; and we can now see [Collingwood concluded] that it is equally summed up in the infinite personality of the God-Man'.³²¹ This formulation is dense to the point of opacity, but it contained the raw materials of the position with which Collingwood had been operating and had now found

³¹⁹ Collingwood, R.G. (1916). *Religion and Philosophy*. London: Macmillan, 148.

³²⁰ RP, 159.

³²¹ RP, 166-67.

the means to express more perspicuously in *Speculum Mentis* (1924): that religion, or rather Christianity, was the solution to a problem that it was incapable of stating correctly in its own language; that it stated the problem in terms that elevated the figments of its own imagination to reality; that the alienation that the Incarnation promised to overcome was real, but that religion *qua* religion could not and did not touch directly upon the reality of the truth which its images meant and so was to this extent insufficient. Religion, in short, mythologized reality and took its own language literally instead of metaphorically.³²² The immediate way out of the position in which religion found itself, in which abstractions were personified and ideal distinctions were presented in the guise of concrete objects, was a turn to science.³²³

It is with science that the mind becomes conscious of explicit thought, and not merely of the language (or the vehicle which is the work of art in aesthetic consciousness, or the symbols as literal language in religious consciousness) which is necessary for the expression of thought.³²⁴ Scientific consciousness marks the recognition by the mind of the rational nature of thought, and with it the 'mastery'³²⁵ of thought over 'the means of expression.'³²⁶ Science liberates thought from its entrapment in the imagery of art and from its primitive symbolic form in religion. But if the achievement of scientific consciousness resides in its reflective and questioning nature, its Achilles heel is its denial of the consequences of its inheritance; in a sense, a denial of its own history.

Scientific consciousness is the mind exercising its revealed freedom to understand reality. But this freedom is never complete, because of its 'bias towards abstractness',³²⁷ which it inherited from preceding forms of consciousness, namely art and religion, in this dialectical unfolding and complication of forms Collingwood was describing. This bias is the hallmark of scientific consciousness, or as Collingwood put it, abstractness is '[t]he specific character of

³²² SM, 153.

³²³ SM, 159.

³²⁴ SM, 155.

³²⁵ SM, 155.

³²⁶ SM, 155.

³²⁷ SM, 160.

science'.³²⁸ Abstraction is the means by which science constructs a system of thought which purports to offer a complete understanding the world, and it is part of the essence of abstraction to separate 'things that are inseparable'.³²⁹

The implications of the abstractness of science are far reaching. Collingwood did not deny the utility of science and its achievements: its capacity to understand nature, and therefore to enlist nature as the servant of modernisation in various aspects of life, was not nugatory. But for Collingwood, to abstract was, in the end, to falsify reality and to dismember concrete or historical fact.³³⁰ Scientific consciousness thrives on its capacity to create a system of thought through abstraction, but what it leaves behind in this process of abstraction, and deprives itself of ever attaining, is the complete answer which it set out to reach in the first place, namely, history, or, as Collingwood puts it, concrete facts.

Science, according to Collingwood, is at once the prisoner and the guard of the structures which it creates through abstraction. The predicament of science is that it cannot admit to itself that although it is thought, it is thought which has retained from religion its abstractness, and from art the immediacy of those abstractions and their arbitrary nature. Thus science, like the veil of Penelope, is forever in the process of completing and undoing itself at the same time; or as Collingwood explains,

But because the immediacy of science is the immediacy not of imagination – immediacy embraced and welcomed as such – but the immediacy of thought, an immediacy felt to be discreditable, an arbitrariness that cannot acquiesce in itself, it follows that science cannot, like art, accept this result with complacency. Science is trying to be thought, and thought is unity or system, and science cannot give up the attempt to co-ordinate itself without giving up the claim to be thought. Hence the

³²⁸ SM, 160.

³²⁹ SM, 160.

³³⁰ SM, 160.

production of schemes for the classification of sciences is bound to continue as long as science continues to resist its own absorption in history.³³¹

Scientific thought is intuitive because abstractions are arbitrary by definition. Though more explicit in their meaning than abstract religious symbols, they are no less arbitrary in their essence than the intuitions of art. These arbitrary abstractions are the stuff of the scientific consciousness, the world of abstract concepts, which will continue for as long as science continues and will change as the scientist demands that they should change. The tendency of science to separate the inseparable, and in doing so, to disfigure the reality of concrete or historical facts is not without moral cost. For a mind so set will soon find itself drawn towards 'the most abstract and dialectically primitive of all possible kinds of ethical theory',³³² namely, 'the calculus of conduct',³³³ or '[u]tilitarianism'.³³⁴

The ways in which the success of science, on the one hand, appears to underwrite the advances of Western civilisation whilst on the other hand undermining its moral achievements, are frequently reflected upon by Collingwood in his writings. About these reflections there will be much more to say in subsequent chapters, not least about the gathering sense, for Collingwood, that the repercussions of the dominance of science were akin to the spread of a fatal illness within the bone marrow of civilisation.³³⁵ For the present, our attention must remain with the relationship of science to other forms of consciousness.

Despite the superficial success of science in positioning itself as the finally authoritative custodian of facts and persuading itself and the world that this was so, for Collingwood the Cartesian recognition that 'natural' facts which the mind comes to know through observation pre-suppose the historical fact of a knowing mind demonstrates the

³³¹ SM, 192.

³³² SM, 172.

³³³ SM, 172.

³³⁴ SM, 172.

³³⁵ R.G. Collingwood 'Man Goes Mad'. In R. G. Collingwood (2005). *The Philosophy of Enchantment: Studies in Folktale, Cultural Criticism, and Anthropology*. David Boucher, Wendy James, and Philip Smallwood (Eds.). Oxford: Clarendon Press, 306.

presupposition of history in experimental science.³³⁶ As he puts it, science presupposes history and can never go beyond history: 'that is the discovery of which Descartes' formula is the deepest and most fruitful expression.'³³⁷ Thus the special claim of science to know reality as it really is, is something that Collingwood ultimately finds wanting. Collingwood held that 'concrete' reality is mediated as much by thought as natural facts are ascertained by observation and experiment.³³⁸ Yet, unlike the work of experimental scientists and that of the 'annalists and compilers of memoirs',³³⁹ the work of the historian proper is restricted neither temporally nor spatially. '[D]efying the empirical limitations of time and space',³⁴⁰ the only limitation to the historian's work is his own choice of the subject of his enquiry.³⁴¹

Historical consciousness, as Collingwood puts it, 'asserts concrete fact',³⁴² whilst the other forms of consciousness in the dialectical series he was surveying each asserted a claim to truth which, when challenged, was found to be wanting. Science's Achilles heel is of its own creation. An invention of science itself, 'the contingent' describes everything that does not compute or comport with its own abstract principles. But to the historical consciousness, the contingent is - at the same time - what reveals the incompleteness and one-sidedness of scientific consciousness and its tendency to deny the concreteness of fact by converting every fact into an abstract instance of an abstract principle. Aesthetic and religious consciousness are no less troublesome in their claims to monopolise truth than is science. Both deny and degrade historical fact by subordinating it to some higher principle, whether this is the will of God as manifested in His providence or some heightened aesthetic which has little use for most of the facts of the world (that is to say, the multitude of facts in which the artist happens not to be interested). The equivalents to the contingent in scientific history in religious history are the natural and the diabolical, both of which stand in

³³⁶ SM, 204.

³³⁷ SM, 202.

³³⁸ Collingwood denies that perception is the same as sensation. Rather perception is a rudimentary form of thought about an object, and as such is a historical or concrete fact. For Collingwood, 'perception and history are thus identical' and conflating sensation with perception is the same as mistaking an abstract form for the concrete individual. SM, 204.

³³⁹ SM, 204.

³⁴⁰ SM, 204.

³⁴¹ SM, 204.

³⁴² SM, 208.

unreconciled opposition to God's supernatural actions. Its equivalent in aesthetic history is the mundane, the 'unromantic light of common day, the workaday world',³⁴³ which is not in itself any less dramatic than the abstractions away from it that the artist delights in. These attempts to bring history into line with science, or religion, or art, got things exactly backwards.

Collingwood was not saying that everyone who made this attempt recognized that they were making it. He was saying that the fact that they were making it was an important feature of contemporary thought, an important source of intellectual and practical error, and an impediment to the achievement of a genuinely historical consciousness.

This emphasis on the primacy of historical consciousness in relation to art, religion, and science, may leave the impression that with Collingwood history is the form of consciousness in which completeness is experienced and the unity that is sought by the mind is found: he tells us himself that 'the success of history'³⁴⁴ is that it 'achieves the idea of an object beyond which there is nothing and within which every part truly represents the whole'.³⁴⁵ And yet, in the order of the forms of experience in *Speculum Mentis* (1924), history is subordinate to philosophy. In the dialectic laid out there, philosophy is distinguished as the assertion of truth or 'concrete reality' to which all the other forms of consciousness, art, religion, science, and even history aspire. Yet the transition from history to philosophy is the least abrupt in the series, such that the difference between history and philosophy proves much harder to maintain than an identity between the two forms of consciousness, so much so that the two merge at their boundaries.³⁴⁶ This idea was one that Collingwood was to refine further in *An Autobiography*, in what he described as a *rapprochement* between the two. As we shall see, metaphysics was the bridge between the role claimed for philosophy in *Speculum Mentis* and the positions adopted about it, and about history, in his later writings.

³⁴³ SM, 208-210.

³⁴⁴ SM, 220.

³⁴⁵ SM, 220.

³⁴⁶ SM, 246.

Metaphysics as a historical science

The bridge between history and philosophy that metaphysics supplied was built on the claim that metaphysics had 'always been a historical science'.³⁴⁷ This was not well understood for at least three reasons. The first reason was that few people understood properly what history was. The second was that few understood what science was. The third was that few understood what metaphysics was.

The unspoken insinuation, it may be unnecessary to add, was that the set of those who *actually* understood what history was, what science was, and what metaphysics was, was very small indeed, perhaps numbering only one. In calling for a reform of metaphysics, Collingwood was calling for the removal of these misunderstandings and their replacement by an understanding that metaphysics concerned itself with 'a certain class of historical facts, namely absolute presuppositions'.³⁴⁸ So understood, metaphysics was not what so many of his predecessors had fancied it to be, a set of propositions claiming to give knowledge of a reality which transcended the world of experience, but rather an historical inquiry into the changing presuppositions by and upon which human beings organised their thinking and action. For reasons that will be explained, it was by the same measure shown to be necessary to 'the well-being and advancement of knowledge'³⁴⁹ and to the health of European science and European civilization more generally.³⁵⁰ Let us see how Collingwood makes his case for this understanding of metaphysics and its indispensability, by looking in closer detail at the reform he was proposing.

Collingwood's reform of metaphysics, like his method in *Speculum Mentis* (1924), begins by setting out what is conventionally understood before proceeding to expose and resolve ambiguities, confusions, and the kind of loose language which gets in the way of clear-sighted philosophical analysis. Accordingly, Collingwood's starting point in *An Essay on Metaphysics* (1940) is Aristotle, whose writings introduced metaphysics into Western

³⁴⁷ Collingwood, R.G. (1940). *An Essay on Metaphysics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 58.

³⁴⁸ EM, 61-62.

³⁴⁹ EM, vii.

³⁵⁰ EM, vii.

philosophical thought. Collingwood reminds the reader that the earliest use of the term 'metaphysics' did not refer to a science of anything in particular,³⁵¹ but was a word used by editors to refer collectively to 'a certain group of treatises' by Aristotle 'which they placed' (literally) 'next after the *Physics*' in the Aristotelian corpus.³⁵² With this apparently simple ambiguity removed, Collingwood's essay goes on to ask questions about the nature of the scientific enquiry recommended and exemplified in the Aristotelian treatises that went by the name metaphysics.

For Collingwood, a science is 'a body of systematic or orderly thinking about a determinate subject-matter'.³⁵³ In keeping with this line of thinking, in his treatment of the topic of metaphysics in *An Essay on Metaphysics* (1940) Collingwood begins by dealing with 'what metaphysics is' as a science,³⁵⁴ rather than what it has been mistaken to be hitherto in the cloud of dust thrown up by age-old 'obscurities'.³⁵⁵ Collingwood posits as his starting point the three names given by Aristotle to metaphysics, namely, 'First Science', 'Wisdom', or 'Theology'.³⁵⁶ As a 'First Science' metaphysics is the study of that which is 'logically presupposed by every other science'.³⁵⁷ Yet it is also 'Last Science' or 'Wisdom' because although as a 'First Science' it is logically prior to other sciences, it can only be studied last after sufficient experience, knowledge and mastery of a subsidiary science in which the question of what a science presupposes logically forces itself on the mind unavoidably.³⁵⁸ And in the third and final sense, metaphysics is 'Theology' because since God is the 'ordinary name for that which is the logical ground for everything else',³⁵⁹ and the study and understanding of whose nature is the subject matter for theology.

³⁵¹ EM, 4.

³⁵² EM, 3-4.

³⁵³ EM, 4.

³⁵⁴ EM, 5.

³⁵⁵ EM, 5.

³⁵⁶ EM, 5-6.

³⁵⁷ EM, 9.

³⁵⁸ EM, 9.

³⁵⁹ EM, 6-10.

The principal source of obscurity in Aristotle's works, which Collingwood seeks to remove in the course of making his case for metaphysics as a science, is the idea that metaphysics is concerned with the study of 'pure being', 'the universal of being' that is at the 'peak' of a 'pyramid of universals'.³⁶⁰ The proposition that 'metaphysics is the science of pure being' can be found in Aristotle's works (in translation), but one which Collingwood is quick to rebut by explaining that such a definition of metaphysics is not that of a science, if science 'means [as he had already posited] a body of systematic or orderly thinking about a determinate subject-matter'.³⁶¹ For Collingwood, a science of 'pure being' could not exist, not because such a study could not be systematic, but because its subject matter, so defined, would make of it something with no particulars or attributes to study. A pure being is abstraction taken to its limits, and the question which a science of pure being seeks to answer is not 'what is pure being?', for the answer to that question is 'nothing'. Rather, the question which a science of pure being is in fact exploring is one about the limits of abstraction: how far can one get before nothing is left to know. As Collingwood puts it,

The universal of pure being represents the limiting case of the abstractive process. Now even if all science is abstractive, it does not follow that science will still be possible when abstraction has been pushed home to the limiting case. Abstraction means taking out. But science investigates not what is taken out but what is left in. To push abstraction to the limiting case is to take out everything; and when everything is taken out there is nothing to investigate. You may call this nothing by what name you like – pure being, or God, or anything else – but it remains nothing, and contains no peculiarities for science to examine.³⁶²

Collingwood is unequivocal in his rejection of the proposition that metaphysics is the science of 'pure being', for an investigation into pure being is not 'even a quasi-science or pseudoscience'.³⁶³ Rather, Collingwood advances the view that what goes by the name of a

³⁶⁰ EM, 9.

³⁶¹ EM, 4.

³⁶² EM, 14.

³⁶³ EM, 17.

science of pure being is the mistaking of ontology for the science of metaphysics, by Aristotle 'first and foremost',³⁶⁴ and the propounding of this error by posterity, notwithstanding the contingent fact that truths can be found in any enquiry which has mistaken itself for a science, and which mistook its subject-matter (nothing) for something definite.³⁶⁵ For Collingwood, this line of thinking led its followers down the garden path to a dead end.

Collingwood's denial that there could be a science of 'pure being' is intimately linked with his argument, made earlier in *Speculum Mentis*, that abstraction leads the mind not towards, but away from, concrete facts. To put it differently, abstraction stands opposed to the historical method by which concrete facts are understood and known not as separate from the context in which they exist, but as answers that are inseparable from questions that arise in that context. For Collingwood, a science which did not recognise the historical nature of knowledge was bound -by degrees- to distort knowledge through abstraction in one form or another.

With that in mind, it is not surprising that Collingwood's approach to his exposition of what metaphysics is leads him to support and explore the conclusion that metaphysics is a historical science; a science which does not shy away from studying and revealing the historical nature of being, as opposed to studying the limits of abstraction. Being, for Collingwood, is the life of theory (thought) and practice (action). And if there is anything to the idea of a science of being dedicated to the understanding of being, it would be a historical science whose end is to reveal the roots of structured and logical thought, and with that the practical implications of taking metaphysics seriously, or of failing to take it seriously.

In sum, metaphysics is a special kind of enquiry into human thought, and its method is historical. In this respect metaphysics is not very different from Collingwood's reformed

³⁶⁴ EM,

³⁶⁵ EM, 16-20.

philosophy as an enquiry into any subject matter. Hence, Collingwood's exposition of what Aristotle really meant by metaphysics turns on themes that are salient to, and make themselves felt, in most of his analyses one way or another. But where metaphysics distinguishes itself from other philosophical analyses is in its nature as a specific enquiry into the genesis of human thought on the one hand, and in its aim of following the enquiry to its conclusion on the other hand. The metaphysician's destination in his enquiry is thus a particular kind of thought, a thought which, when reached, is recognised for its logical priority in all thinking, after which there will no further questions that arise for the metaphysician to answer. A limit is reached, not in the abstract but *in concreto*. One hits metaphysical bedrock, so to speak.

To explain Collingwood's argument, which as stated cannot yet be said to be entirely transparent, it is necessary to revisit his definition of what a proposition is. A proposition, Collingwood asserts, is always an answer to a question. By a proposition Collingwood means any thought which is expressed whether in a statement, or silently in the mind of the person who thinks the thought.³⁶⁶ This definition may at first glance seem perplexing, since most of the time when a person makes a proposition (which is the same as expressing a thought), they need not be aware of the question to which the proposition is an answer. This is because to recognise this nature of propositions as answers to questions demands effort in thinking, to disentangle the thought process in order to reveal the question to which the proposition stands as an answer. As Collingwood explains,

In unscientific thinking our thoughts are coagulated into knots and tangles; we fish up a thought out of our minds like an anchor foul of its own cable, hanging upside-down and draped in seaweed with shellfish sticking to it, and dump the whole thing on deck quite pleased with ourselves for having got it up at all. Thinking scientifically means disentangling all this mess, and reducing a knot of thoughts in which

³⁶⁶ EM, 23-24.

everything sticks together anyhow to a system or series of thoughts in which thinking the thoughts is at the same time thinking the connexions between them.³⁶⁷

When a proposition (or statement) is made, it is an answer to a question which must arise if both question and answer are to be worthy of being described as sensical. For a question to arise, however, it must do so by force of the logic of *something* within the context in which the question comes into being. That *something* is what Collingwood describes as a presupposition, and the logical imperative which 'causes a certain question to arise' is the '*logical efficacy*' of what is supposed.³⁶⁸ Collingwood's systematic approach to understanding the nature of human thought can thus be described as an effort to address and explain '[t]he theory of presupposition'.³⁶⁹

Metaphysics as the analysis of presuppositions of thought is one piece of the jigsaw-puzzle that Collingwood was puzzling out. It was the matching piece to the 'logic of question and answer' he proposed as an alternative to realism's propositional logic.³⁷⁰ Truth, Collingwood contended, did not belong to propositions alone, but to the complex of question and answer in which a proposition stood as an answer to a question. Metaphysical analysis is therefore not different from philosophical analysis of thought in general, and where thoughts are expressed (as utterance or action) metaphysics is the same as all history, that is, the history of thought.

But metaphysics is a special kind of historical enquiry into thought, in that it proceeds to uncover the logical structure of thought moving along the sequence of questions and answers, revealing the presuppositions that give rise to the questions. Collingwood makes one further key proposition in his reform of metaphysics, which is that '*A presupposition is either relative or absolute*'.³⁷¹ Amongst presuppositions there are those which stand in a

³⁶⁷ EM, 22-23.

³⁶⁸ EM, 26-27.

³⁶⁹ EM, 23.

³⁷⁰ The logic of question and answer is addressed in more detail in chapter three of this thesis: Historiography and Collingwood's metaphysics.

³⁷¹ EM, 29.

particular relation to questions, as a presupposition to one question and an answer to another question in the logical structure of thought. In other words, such presuppositions are verifiable as either true or false, and hence are 'relative presuppositions'; or as Collingwood puts it,

To question a presupposition is to demand that it should be 'verified'; that is, to demand that a question should be asked to which the affirmative answer would be that presupposition itself, now in the form of a proposition. To verify the presupposition that my measuring tape is accurate is to ask a question admitting of the alternative answers 'the tape is accurate', 'the tape is not accurate'. Hence to speak of verifying a presupposition involves supposing that it is a relative presupposition.³⁷²

It is important to pause here to underline the fact that whilst the concept of *logical efficacy* of a presupposition explains the difference between a question which 'does not arise' and a question which does arise in a given context, it is a concept which does more than accord logical legitimacy to a question in Collingwood's metaphysics and his wider philosophy. For as Collingwood explains, '*the logical efficacy of a supposition does not depend upon the truth of what is supposed, or even on its being thought true, but only on its being supposed*'.³⁷³ Thus, whilst the question of whether a supposition is true or false can be asked (and may well arise), a supposition remains a historical fact without which the work of metaphysics could not proceed to its end. To put this point differently, and in a way which helps to reveal its significance and reach in Collingwood's philosophy, one could say that for Collingwood a historical fact is a proposition which is the answer to a question that arises; what makes a proposition a historical fact, therefore, is not whether it is true or false, but that it is right insofar as it is intelligibly the answer to the question that is its logical pendant.

³⁷² EM, 30.

³⁷³ EM, 28.

Collingwood's attempt to distinguish between 'fact' and 'truth' in the history of thought is arguably as original as the distinction which he exalted between 'right' and 'duty' in moral philosophy.³⁷⁴ In exposing the difference between fact and truth, and in emphasizing that fact belonged to the complex of question and answer, the question of the place of truth naturally arises. Where does truth fit in Collingwood's philosophical method? To put it differently, if *logical efficacy* does not depend on the truth of what is presupposed, how could Collingwood's metaphysics claim to be a science at all, if it did not concern itself with both fact and truth?

The answer is that such a question only arises if truth is understood as something that can be completely apprehended by the work of scientific consciousness alone. In other words, Collingwood's apparent relegation of the quest for the truth to a secondary place is not a demotion of truth but rather its elevation beyond the reach of any form of realism's pursuit of authority over knowledge. Seen within the wider context of Collingwood's philosophical reforms, and his passionate rejection of authority as an external brake on the work of the historian, Collingwood's logic of question and answer and the concept of *logical efficacy* liberates the past as well as the historian from authorities that purport to exercise control over both.

For Collingwood, we never start from a point of 'absolute ignorance',³⁷⁵ in the pursuit of knowledge. If metaphysics is to reveal the essence of being then its task is to make intelligible the foundations upon which all experience turns. This is what Collingwood takes the end of Aristotle's metaphysics to be and it is what he carries over from Aristotle into his own thinking. Metaphysics, if it is a science at all, is the enquiry whose end is the articulation of the premises which enables the mind to make sense of its being.

Collingwood thus completes his set of definitions that enables metaphysics to be understood and practiced as a historical science with his exposition of the idea of 'absolute

³⁷⁴ Boucher (1989). *The Social and Political Thought of R.G. Collingwood*, 103-109.

³⁷⁵ EM, 97.

presuppositions'. The absolute presuppositions of any society at any time or place are those fundamental beliefs without which there would be no meaningful human experience. Our capacity to make sense of the world around us, to pose questions, and to verify the truth and falsity of ideas is itself animated by 'absolute presuppositions' that in themselves are not answers to any question. They simply are what they are, and of which proof could not be asked or demanded. For Collingwood,

We do not acquire absolute presuppositions by arguing; on the contrary, unless we have them already arguing is impossible to us. Nor can we change them by arguing; unless they remained constant all our arguments would fall to pieces. We cannot confirm ourselves in them by 'proving' them; it is proof that depends on them, not they on proof. The only attitude towards them that can enable us to enjoy what they have to give us (and that means science and civilization, the life of rational animals) is an attitude of unquestioning acceptance. We must accept them and hold firmly to them; we must insist on presupposing them in all our thinking without asking why they should be thus accepted.³⁷⁶

And accordingly, the task of a metaphysician is not to question the truth or falsity of 'absolute presuppositions', but rather to discover and understand the absolute presuppositions of a society at a given time, and to 'follow the historical process by which one set of presuppositions has turned into another'.³⁷⁷ For Collingwood, 'absolute presuppositions' are the bedrock of all human thought and -in and of themselves- are beyond the judgement of the metaphysician, for they are 'logically prior to our thoughts about the world, about reality, our manipulation of experience'.³⁷⁸ They 'can neither be true or false' nor can they be 'empirically verified'.³⁷⁹ For Collingwood, metaphysics is 'a kind of history',³⁸⁰ and its methods are those of history, with the difference being that metaphysics

³⁷⁶ EM, 173.

³⁷⁷ Collingwood, R.G. (1939). *An Autobiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 66.

³⁷⁸ James Connelly (2003). *Metaphysics, Method and Politics: The Political Philosophy of R.G. Collingwood*. Exeter: Imprint Academics, 101.

³⁷⁹ Connelly (2003). *Metaphysics, Method and Politics*, 98.

³⁸⁰ EM, 67.

is concerned with one subject-matter from the past: 'absolute presuppositions'. In a crucial sequence of argument, Collingwood went on to assert that

It is because absolute presuppositions are not 'derived from experience', but are *catalytic agents which the mind must bring out of its own resources to the manipulation of what is called 'experience' and the conversion of it into science and civilisation, that there must be institutions for perpetuating them. If they were once lost, they could never be recovered except by repeating the same kind of process by which they were originally created' and about this process little was known except that it 'must have been extremely slow'.³⁸¹ (emphasis added)*

This led Collingwood to speculate that if all record of the scientific achievements of European civilisation were somehow lost, the whole of European science could be reinvented in a few thousand, or even a few hundred years, as long as 'what may be called "the scientific frame of mind" was preserved. But 'if "the scientific frame of mind" were lost it would be a question of perhaps tens or hundreds of thousands before any tolerable substitute for it could be invented'. The guardianship of this scientific frame of mind, he then argued, 'is vested in the religious institutions of European civilization'³⁸² because the institutions of religion have as their object 'to consolidate and perpetuate in posterity the absolute presuppositions which lie at the root of their thought'.³⁸³ 'In any civilization', Collingwood continued,

it is man's religious institutions that refresh in him from time to time the will (for it is a matter of will, though not a matter of choice) to retain the presuppositions by whose aid he reduces such experience as he enjoys to such science as he can compass; and it is by dint of these same religious institutions that he transmits the same presuppositions to his children. For if science is "experience" interpreted in the light of our general convictions as to the nature of the world, religion is what

³⁸¹ EM, 197-98.

³⁸² EM, 198.

³⁸³ EM, 197.

expresses these convictions in themselves and for their own sake and hands them on from generation to generation. And it does this *irrespective of whether we know by means of metaphysical analysis what these convictions are.*³⁸⁴ (Emphasis added)

We shall return to the question of religion in a later chapter, but for now, our concern is to explain what metaphysics is as Collingwood construes it. The explanation at which we have arrived is that metaphysics is the study of absolute presuppositions, and metaphysical analysis is the analysis of those presuppositions; or, what amounts to the same thing, historical exploration and criticism of the foundations of civilisation.

Collingwood's theory of 'absolute presuppositions' provides both historians and philosophers with a description of the intellectual framework that underpins human thought and action. Ignoring 'absolute presuppositions' or declaring them irrelevant to human thought and action because of their logical or temporal distance from the experience at hand, now and around here, is to effectively sever thought from that by which it is animated and nourished through the *logical efficacy* of what the mind absolutely presupposes about reality. To speak of Collingwood's theory of 'absolute presuppositions' as a framework for human thought is not to declare such presuppositions are unchanging, ascribed to all human beings everywhere and always, or to imply that they stand to each other in a perfect and strainless mathematical relationship of the kind natural science methodology might require or intimate. Rather, 'absolute presuppositions' exist as a 'constellation' of '*consupponible*' presuppositions in which none is logically prior to another, for otherwise an absolute presupposition becomes a relative presupposition.³⁸⁵

Collingwood goes to considerable pains to explain that 'absolute presuppositions' can, and do, change in reaction to the 'strains' to which they are subject in 'any given society, at any given phase of its history', but he insists that such change never occurs consciously (it is not, as we saw him say, a matter of choice). Such is the indispensable nature of 'absolute

³⁸⁴ EM, 198.

³⁸⁵ EM, 66-67.

presuppositions' in the genesis of human thought that Collingwood asserts that a real change in 'absolute presuppositions' is 'the most radical change a man can undergo, and entails the abandonment of all his most firmly established habits and standards for thought and action'.³⁸⁶

Collingwood's reform of metaphysics as a historical science whose subject matter could not be verified as true or false but only revealed by a metaphysician as something which is absolutely presupposed, has profound implications in the practice of history and philosophy. In insisting upon it, Collingwood was denying the realists' notion of 'eternal' problems in philosophy, arguing instead that problems in philosophy change with time, and with them change the solutions that philosophy offers to these problems. Coupled with the 'logic of question and answer', in which Collingwood denied that truth belonged to either question or answer, but was attached instead to the complex of both, the reform of metaphysics takes the question of truth to its logical destination in 'absolute presuppositions'. That all thought is ultimately grounded in what the mind absolutely presupposes – or believes - about the 'world's general nature',³⁸⁷ appears at first glance to be an attempt to evade the question of a universal truth, since 'absolute presuppositions' are beyond verification. But such a view of Collingwood's reform of metaphysics turns on a mistaken assumption that truth can be apprehended by philosophical analysis, that is reason, alone.

Authority over truth is well and truly put beyond the reach of reason alone by Collingwood, and perhaps more significantly (and speculatively) beyond political authority. This need not surprise us coming from Collingwood, bearing in mind his unequivocal rejection of the realists' doctrine of knowledge according to which truth can be 'apprehended' or 'intuited' directly.³⁸⁸ Not only does such a doctrine invite authority over knowledge once a claim to truth is made, but for Collingwood it is also the end of thought. Or as Connelly puts it,

³⁸⁶ EM, 48.

³⁸⁷ EM, 66.

³⁸⁸ EM, 34.

Collingwood argues that truth 'is an activity partly because every statement must have a contradictory' and that thought is developed only through opposition and hence that without contradiction there could be no thought.³⁸⁹

Collingwood's reform of metaphysics is a recognition of the infinity of knowledge and at the same time of the necessity of the special kind of assumptions that are the catalysts of all thought, assumptions that give meaning to reality and are part of reality itself. As Collingwood put it in his opening statement on philosophy as a form of consciousness in *Speculum Mentis* (1924),

Philosophy is self-consciousness, but this does not mean that there is a self standing in abstract isolation over against a world of objects and that philosophy ignores the latter and studies the former. The self and its world are correlative. I am the self that I am because of the nature of the world: by studying a certain kind of world and living in it as my environment, I develop my own mind in a determinate way. And conversely, my world is the world of my mind: I see in it what I am able to see, trace in it the kind of structure which my powers qualify me for tracing, and thus determine my world as it determines me.³⁹⁰

Collingwood's argument for the indispensability of 'absolute presuppositions' in knowledge and being is the outworking of his philosophy of consciousness, a philosophy which is never more than thinly veiled across his writings on any subject. For Collingwood '[i]ntelligence alone is absolutely intelligible',³⁹¹ and 'absolute presuppositions' are what makes intelligence possible, by providing the foundation for all structured thought. It followed that the attempt to get rid of absolute presuppositions was *eo ipso* an attempt to do away with structured thought, destroying science and civilisation along with it. Accordingly, Collingwood's positive doctrine was accompanied by an effort to expose and demolish

³⁸⁹ Connelly (2003). *Metaphysics, Method and Politics*, 123.

³⁹⁰ SM, 247-248.

³⁹¹ SM, 248-249.

positions which to his mind wittingly or unwittingly embodied this attempt. Realism, as Collingwood understood it, was one such position.

Metaphysics as a historical enquiry was placed in contrapuntal relation to realism by Collingwood. By realism he meant less any particular text of the school of philosophy to which Alexander, Whitehead, and Russell had contributed primarily by their writings and to which Cook Wilson had contributed primarily by his teaching than a catalogue of errors which included the separation between subject and object, abstractness, and correlative misconceptions about the meaning of knowledge which flowed out of the presupposition (for that was what it was) that nothing was affected by being known. Such errors invariably led to the demise of high-grade thinking, that is, systematic or scientific thought.

Collingwood's reform of metaphysics is arguably his refutation of realism as a theory that advocated a form of knowledge severed from its metaphysical anchor in presuppositions, whether absolute or relative presuppositions. In *realism* propositions are apprehended or 'intuited' as verifiable facts regardless of the context in which they arise. The apparent simplicity gained by accepting the 'immediacy' of thought provides fertile ground for propounding the case for 'thinking almost at zero-level of efficiency', which is why Collingwood has no hesitation in declaring that *realism* is 'based upon the grandest foundation a philosophy can have, namely human stupidity'.³⁹² Collingwood's reform is a restoration of the logical form of thought in which presuppositions are indispensable. In this enterprise, Collingwood exalts history as the science which reveals the logical priority of all thought. Realism appears by contrast as a form of anti-metaphysics that separates thought from the only ground in which meaning is to be found. It is for this reason that history is the antidote to realism, and metaphysics and history stand and fall together.

Collingwood dedicates a considerable proportion of *An Essay on Metaphysics* to dealing with what he calls anti-metaphysics, which he defines as 'a kind of thought that regards metaphysics as a delusion and an impediment to the progress of knowledge, and demands

³⁹² EM, 34-35.

its abolition'.³⁹³ Collingwood is careful to distinguish anti-metaphysics from the various species of errors in metaphysical analysis which are due to the ambiguities which his reforms had already addressed. For example, the error in what Collingwood describes as pseudo-metaphysics is that of not recognising 'absolute presuppositions' as absolute, and therefore as not being subject to verification. Pseudo-metaphysics is thus the result of mistaking the absolute for the relative in the analysis of presuppositions, rather than the beginning of a line of thought whose end is the negation of metaphysics or of the need for metaphysics.³⁹⁴ For Collingwood, a life without metaphysics is a threat to civilization itself, because it is a life without the high-grade thinking through which man is able to reap the fruits of natural science for the advancement of civilization.

In *An Essay on Metaphysics* (1940) Collingwood writes of the 'conditions' in which anti-metaphysics germinates and from which the movement towards the abolition of metaphysics can grow and gain ground. Collingwood distinguishes between three forms of anti-metaphysics, namely 'progressive', 'reactionary' and 'irrationalist'.³⁹⁵ Both progressive and reactionary anti-metaphysics grow out of dissatisfaction with a metaphysics that is perceived as out of step with 'ordinary' thought. A metaphysics whose relevance to the present has been weakened through neglect is seen as irrelevant and its invocation an obstacle to progress. Conversely, when 'ordinary' thought finds itself disempowered by the best that metaphysics can offer, conditions become conducive to what Collingwood describes as reactionary metaphysics. But perhaps the most threatening form of anti-metaphysics from Collingwood's perspective is 'irrationalist anti-metaphysics' whose end is not merely the opposition of metaphysics but its abolition and with that 'the ultimate abolition of systematic and orderly thinking in every shape'.³⁹⁶

Proceeding 'like an epidemic disease' from within civilization, and conscious of how civilization works, irrationalism exalts emotional life over the rational life of civilization. In a

³⁹³ EM, 81.

³⁹⁴ EM, 47-48.

³⁹⁵ EM, 82-83.

³⁹⁶ EM, 83.

way, irrationalism is the unravelling of the dialectic towards historical consciousness which Collingwood had depicted in *Speculum Mentis*; a retrograde movement back along the 'scale of forms' of consciousness through the scientific to the religious back to the aesthetic, the most infantile or primitive form of mind of all, which eschews reflection on a past of meaningful or structured thought in favour of 'the sleep of the soul'.³⁹⁷ Elsewhere in Collingwood's writings, too, we encounter his fear for the fate of civilization from irrationalism as it realises itself in the forces of primitivism that he terms barbarism. For Collingwood, metaphysics is not only a science but the epitome of systematic and orderly thought whose end is the pursuit of truth. Only a belief in the value of the pursuit of truth could sustain a civilization that is based on scientific and rational thought. And without this belief, metaphysics would become an irrelevance at best, and at worst, a thing to destroy to make way for a return to the emotional life and its corollary, the capricious life.

Collingwood provides examples of how, when metaphysics is understood as historical enquiry, the logical necessity of deeply held beliefs becomes intelligible. In one of the first examples of reformed metaphysics that he attends to in *Essay on Metaphysics*, Collingwood denied that the existence of God was verifiable proposition while insisting that it was an absolute presupposition of all thinking, including in natural science.

Collingwood's point is that the existence of 'a thing as 'nature'' in which processes take place in a manner independent of human action,³⁹⁸ is an absolute presupposition. But so deeply-held an absolute presupposition would appear as if it is demonstrable by 'experience'. But as Collingwood explains, as we discussed briefly in chapter 2 when discussing Donagan, '[a]n absolute presupposition cannot be undermined by the verdict of

³⁹⁷ SM, 59.

³⁹⁸ Human action here refers to 'art' which is the most primitive form of consciousness which does not admit of a single asserted reality which 'nature' as separate and independent reality is such an assertion. In the world of 'art' the mind does not recognise a dividing line between itself and a natural world: "a world of things which happen of themselves". The "creation of science" is thus the result of "thinking systematically according to any give set of presuppositions". Religion is a primitive science of a kind in which presuppositions (especially absolute presuppositions) are upheld through faith without necessarily exploring their meaning or implications systematically which is the work of metaphysics. SM, 196 – 197.

‘experience’, because it is ‘the yard-stick by which ‘experience’ is judged’.³⁹⁹ Collingwood recognises that the rise of natural science depended on the organisation of knowledge about nature through classification. But that although inherent in natural science, any ‘system of classification’ is not a system ‘discovered’ but a system ‘devised’ and implemented. As Collingwood put it,

The act of supposing the natural world to be divided into various natural realms is an act for which all human societies known to us has been habitual out of mind; but it must have had a beginning. I do not see how we can ever hope to find out when or where so distant an event in human history took place; and I think we can describe with reasonable probability the kind of way in which human institutions are likely to have been affected by it.⁴⁰⁰

For Collingwood, who lived during the first half of the twentieth century, scientific work absolutely presupposed that ‘nature is one and that science is one’.⁴⁰¹ And as an absolute presupposition, the unity of nature and the science which studies nature are ‘bound up’ with the development of ‘monotheistic religion’. God does not stand opposed to nature in all that it includes; rather nature in its ‘manyness’ is the expression of God’s ‘self-differentiating unity’.⁴⁰² Thus Collingwood’s exposition of the underpinnings of natural science is faithful to Aristotle’s declaration that metaphysics is just another name for theology.⁴⁰³ For Collingwood, ‘God exists’ is a historical fact about the development of Christian society, that is, a proposition that a given society proceeds on the basis of belief in God and so that in that sense ‘God exists’. Thus, the question which arises to the metaphysician is not whether God exists as a physical entity whose existence demands proof, but of the difference it makes to civilization and the forms of thought characteristic of it to ‘presuppose the existence of God’.⁴⁰⁴

³⁹⁹ EM, 193-195.

⁴⁰⁰ EM, 196.

⁴⁰¹ EM, 206.

⁴⁰² EM, 206-212.

⁴⁰³ EM, 211.

⁴⁰⁴ EM, 185-190.

Collingwood's conclusion is that, absent this presupposition being held in common, and the relations between the members of that civilization would be as 'chaotic as the relations between various communities whose frontiers had never been agreed upon, had never made any treaties, and whose respective positions had never been marked on any map'.⁴⁰⁵ The presence within a single civilization of rival sets of absolute presuppositions was, by these lights, a recipe for war. Diagnosis is one thing, treatment another. Before we can understand what Collingwood was proposing by way of solution, more needs to be said about the aetiology and symptoms of the problem he had diagnosed. To this end, more needs to be said first about Collingwood's philosophy of history, and his conception of religion, before we turn to his philosophy of civilisation. These are the subjects of the next three chapters.

⁴⁰⁵ EM, 200.

Chapter Four: Historiography and Collingwood's

Metaphysics

Introduction

Collingwood's philosophy of history is perhaps the one area of his many and diverse fields of interest which has received the most attention from commentators.⁴⁰⁶ The irony is that the majority of his writings that were dedicated to dealing specifically with history were published posthumously, and some of them remain contentious in terms of their accuracy and the faithfulness of their editors to the intentions of their author.⁴⁰⁷ What is clear is that the philosophy of history had a unique place in Collingwood's thought from a very early age. In *An Autobiography* (1939) Collingwood reveals how upon reading Descartes' *Principia* in his youth, he came to recognise his deep interest in what he later regarded as his 'own subject, the history of thought'. That interest never waned.⁴⁰⁸

Neglecting history, by contrast, was an error that suffused the doctrines propounded by the realist school of philosophy,⁴⁰⁹ the school into which Collingwood had been 'thoroughly indoctrinated' during his formative years in Oxford.⁴¹⁰ As I will argue in this chapter, when philosophising about history Collingwood returned to the heart of his battle with the doctrine of realism. Realism's distinction between mind and knowledge, depicting them as subject and object respectively, owes its genesis to abstractness. When a mind so guided by abstractness approaches the past it seeks not the truth of concrete individual facts, for concrete or historical facts are not apprehended in and by abstraction from their context.

⁴⁰⁶ Collingwood (1999). *The Principles of History*, editors' introduction, xiii.

⁴⁰⁷ So is the accuracy of *The Idea of Nature*. See editors' introduction to *The Principles of History*, p. xviii.

⁴⁰⁸ Collingwood, R.G. (1939). *An Autobiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1-2. In his recollection in *An Autobiography* of reading - when he 'was about nine' - 'what must have been a compendium of Descartes' *Principia*', Collingwood reveals what can be described as the kernel of his maxim 'all history is the history of thought' insofar that reading *Principia* 'let [him] into the secret [...] that the natural sciences [too] have a history of their own'. In other words, A 'scientific' view of history through abstraction was an internal contradiction, since natural sciences themselves have a history the study and knowledge of which could not logically proceed by natural science methods that were not yet established.

⁴⁰⁹ AA, 28.

⁴¹⁰ AA, 22, 28.

And a past so-apprehended is not history, but a kind of 'pseudo-history', or so Collingwood came to think.

Hence, the fundamental aspect of Collingwood's reform of history as a discipline dealt with the relationship between history and philosophy, or to put it differently, between the past and the mind. Although for Collingwood philosophy and history were distinguishable, they were not distinct or separate human sciences. As we saw in the previous chapter, what distinguishes history from philosophy is more a matter of nuance than categorical difference. At its heart, what Collingwood describes as a *rapprochement* between philosophy and history seeks to expunge from both the domination of natural science methodology under which they had both laboured, rendering philosophy an easy prey to an erroneous propositional logic, and leading history astray into believing itself to be merely the chronology of the past. In *An Autobiography* (1939) Collingwood highlights his commitment to this reconciliation between philosophy and history when he describes his 'life's work hitherto' as having been 'in the main an attempt to bring about a *rapprochement* between philosophy and history'.⁴¹¹

Collingwood summarised the essence of his approach to history in the maxim 'all history is the history of thought'.⁴¹² This summary, like most summaries, invites further elaboration. 'All history is the history of thought' because the past is the repository of human actions which are the expressions of human thought. Collingwood's account of history is inseparable from his wider reforms in philosophy and its method, for to know the past demands, in the first place, an understanding of how the mind can think about the past in a style capable of attaining historical knowledge, which for Collingwood is ultimately self-knowledge, or in his terms, the consciousness of the self as a knowing mind, and the raising up of man into God.

⁴¹¹ AA, 77.

⁴¹² AA, 110.

With the simplicity of expression that is characteristic of a philosopher who, as I have said, rejected the use of jargon in philosophy, Collingwood's maxim captured the idea of how history could be understood, once it is liberated from the grip of the classificatory methods of natural sciences. For Collingwood, historical knowledge is not a checklist of the events of the past presented in a neat sequence in the manner of a textbook. Rather, and ultimately, knowledge of the past was a form of consciousness which defied the confines of the material world.

The implications of Collingwood's philosophy of history are far reaching not only because of Collingwood's *rapprochement* between history and philosophy, but because of the more tantalizing prospect of a philosophy that equates history with mind, and therefore with being or with reality itself. For Collingwood, history properly understood is the essence of what it means to know, both in theory and in practice. Once rescued from subjugation to the authority of the profession and its paradigms, history is liberated to reveal its true nature as mind. But the very freedom which history achieves on Collingwood's terms would be found, I will argue in this chapter, to encompass a 'moral attitude';⁴¹³ an attitude which – as I argued in the Introduction and posited in chapter 2 - turns on a rationale which finds symbolic expression in the central article of the Christian faith, and one which informs the liberal culture Collingwood prized.

Collingwood's approach to history co-evolved⁴¹⁴ with his rejection of realism's propositional logic.⁴¹⁵ Neither Collingwood's rejection of realism, nor the impact of that rejection on his philosophy, can be overstated. Collingwood's criticism of *realism* runs throughout his *Autobiography*, culminating in his condemnation of *realists* as the 'minute philosophers of [his] youth' who 'for all their profession of a purely scientific detachment from practical affairs, were the propagandists of a coming Fascism'.⁴¹⁶ No less equivocal, but perhaps less cited, is his description of realism's doctrine of knowledge in his *Essay on Metaphysics* as

⁴¹³ PH, 218.

⁴¹⁴ W. J. van der Dussen (1981). *History as a Science: The Philosophy of R.G. Collingwood*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 20.

⁴¹⁵ AA, 44.

⁴¹⁶ AA, 167, and van der Dussen (1981). *History as a Science*, 20.

one which 'is based upon the grandest foundation a philosophy can have, namely human stupidity'.⁴¹⁷ It is against the backdrop of his rejection of the realists' doctrine of knowledge, a doctrine, as I have said, that was influenced by the methodology of natural sciences, that Collingwood offered his *rapprochement* between history and philosophy,⁴¹⁸ at the heart of which are his development and advocacy of the 'logic of question and answer' and the 're-enactment' of the past as the explanation of how historical knowledge is attained:⁴¹⁹

History did not mean knowing what events followed what. It meant getting inside other people's heads, looking at their situation through their eyes, and thinking for yourself whether the way in which they tackled it was the right way.⁴²⁰

In logic, Collingwood recognised 'the importance of the 'questioning activity' in knowledge',⁴²¹ a recognition which he credits to his extensive work as an archaeologist. Truth, as Collingwood saw it, did not belong to 'propositions' alone, and could not be ascertained by mere linguistic analysis, the approach that was characteristic of the *realists'* propositional logic. For Collingwood, propositional logic was at best the analysis of the content and linguistic characteristics of statements, judgements and utterances that are severed from both their historical context and their own history as ideas, that is, their metaphysical genesis as ideas. For Collingwood, the truth of a proposition lay not in the proposition alone, but in the complex of the proposition and the question to which it was intended as an answer. This Collingwood called the 'logic of question and answer' which, as we saw in previous chapters, was a central plank in his reform of metaphysics and is widely regarded as one of his fundamental methodological contributions to the history of philosophy.

⁴¹⁷ Collingwood, R.G. (1940). *An Essay on Metaphysics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 34.

⁴¹⁸ AA, 77.

⁴¹⁹ AA, 29-43 and 112.

⁴²⁰ AA, 58.

⁴²¹ AA, 30.

Question and answer in historiography

The logic of question and answer was Collingwood's remedy for what can be described as realism's denial of what history could be; a denial that turned on the separation between question and answer, leading to the relegation of history to merely an account of, rather than an enquiry into, the past, which in the final analysis reduced to little more than a list of one event after another, events from which thoughts and actions floated free. This allowed the thinkers of every age to reach the same plateau of intelligibility, which could be judged without reference to the circumstances in which they wrote by the thinkers and interpreters of the present age who had succeeded in reaching the same heights. As Collingwood explains, for the realists 'the problems with which philosophy is concerned were unchanging' and the questions to which philosophers gave answers were 'eternal' questions.⁴²²

Collingwood pays significant credit for the development of the logic of question and answer to his troubling experience of trying to understand why Gilbert Scott should have designed something 'so indefensibly bad' as The Albert Memorial.⁴²³ Predisposed by his earlier philosophical training in *realism*, Collingwood's bafflement at Scott's intentions turned on propositional logic which held that a correlation between language and the logic which it expresses was both valid and sufficient to establish the truth of a proposition.⁴²⁴ Yet, as a proposition, The Albert Memorial failed to explain its truth in isolation of exploring the thought of its creator. Or as Peter Johnson puts it in *R.G. Collingwood and the Albert Memorial*, '[s]omething so obviously bad does not simply explain itself'.⁴²⁵ If Scott had intended to produce something beautiful, then he had failed, and failed dismally, but if the question to which The Albert Memorial is an answer was different, then Scott might yet be understood to have succeeded. For Collingwood, there was a crucial lesson here: truth belonged not to propositions alone, but to the complex of question and answer.

⁴²² AA, 59.

⁴²³ AA, 29.

⁴²⁴ Here I use 'language' to indicate all forms of expression of thought. This is in keeping with Collingwood's overall methodology and his dictum that 'all history is the history of thought'.

⁴²⁵ Peter Johnson (2009). 'R.G. Collingwood and the Albert Memorial'. *British Idealism and Collingwood Studies*, 15(1), 11.

Collingwood does not conclude his account of his experience with The Albert Memorial by going as far as answering the question of why Scott had created the memorial. The answer, in and of itself, to the question seemed far less troubling to Collingwood than the effect of asking the question in the first place and the questions which asking that question forced him to confront about his own method of seeking answers; or as he put it,

If I found the monument merely loathsome, was that perhaps my fault? Was I looking in it for qualities it did not possess, and either ignoring or despising those it did?⁴²⁶

Collingwood's interest, in short, was not in the memorial itself and whether or not it was a triumph or a disaster (he already knew that it was not to his taste), but in what it had to say as a problem for historical understanding: how could one make sense of it? In his telling of the story, it provoked Collingwood to rethink the positions he had inherited from his teachers and provided the cue for his own reformation in historical thinking.

An Excursus on Skinner

In elaborating the logic of question and answer via his encounter with The Albert Memorial, Collingwood projects an image of himself as a historian who had come to recognise, almost as an epiphany, the dominance of established paradigms over his approach to understanding the thought of past agents. The logic of question and answer is an arresting formulation, and it has attracted the attention of posterity, not least as it was taken up by the founding members of the so-called 'Cambridge School' of intellectual history.⁴²⁷

Quentin Skinner, to name only one, exalts Collingwood's approach to historical knowledge in his most influential essay, *Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas* (hereafter

⁴²⁶ AA, 29-30.

⁴²⁷ For a recent review on The Cambridge School, which places it in a broader historical perspective, see James Alexander (2016). 'The Cambridge School, c.1875-c.1975'. *History of Political Thought*, 37(2), 360-386.

referred to as *Meaning and Understanding*).⁴²⁸ However, it is worth spending a little time exploring how much of Collingwood's approach survives in Skinner's, not least because comparison between the two helps to throw into sharp relief the role of metaphysics in underwriting Collingwood's logic of question and answer and the difficulties that arise when, as with Skinner, metaphysics is ignored or even repudiated. Those difficulties, as we shall see, affect not only the coherence of the claims made to historical knowledge but also the place and standing of those claims in a wider conception of mind and world.

In *Meaning and Understanding* Skinner recognised favourably the influence of Collingwood, and in particular a key aspect of Collingwood's philosophical method, that of the logic of question and answer. As Skinner put it, 'I am directly indebted [to Collingwood] for what remains my fundamental assumption as an intellectual historian: that the history of thought should be viewed not as a series of attempts to answer a canonical set of questions, but as a sequence of episodes in which the questions as well as the answers have frequently changed.'⁴²⁹ For both Collingwood and Skinner, understanding the past is inextricably bound with revealing the agent's thought in some form. Skinner's subject matter was the understanding of classic texts in political philosophy; Collingwood's logic of question and answer concerned all understanding of human action of which there was evidence. Yet Skinner's preoccupation with describing and applying a method of historical research to reveal the *meaning* of past utterances, though illuminating and fruitful in many ways, fights shy of Collingwood's concern with history as a form of human consciousness in which methodology is the servant and not the end. Skinner's critique of the dominance of inherited paradigms in historiography veers his main thesis away from the question of what history is (a question that is central in Collingwood's philosophy of history), in favour of the quest for a method to reveal and attribute intentions to past authors.

⁴²⁸ *Meaning and Understanding* was first published in 1969 but had undergone revision in subsequent editions which appeared in 1988 (in *Meaning & Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*) and in 2002 in Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1, *Regarding Method*.

⁴²⁹ James Tully (Ed.). (1988). *Meaning & Context: Quentin Skinner & his Critics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 234.

In *Meaning and Understanding* Quentin Skinner invites historians of ideas to reflect on their own past work to reveal how the commitment of historians to the paradigms they bring to the study of the history of ideas has led to what Skinner describes as 'mythologies'. At its heart, Skinner's historiography is animated by (i) the question of what constitutes evidence of intention of past authors when the historian attempts to exhume the meaning of their utterances, and to a no lesser extent by (ii) the question of the relationship between historical evidence and the mind of the historian. Skinner's main thesis is essentially this: predisposed by existing scholarly paradigms, historians have approached past texts searching for a content that is compatible with, or readily assimilable to, a pre-conceived frame of reference about the intentions of past authors who existed in alien contexts, and who are long dead.

Writing in 1969, Skinner's aim in *Meaning and Understanding* was to reveal the 'extent to which the current historical study of ethical, political, religious, and other such modes of thought is contaminated by the unconscious application of paradigms the familiarity of which, to the historian, disguises an essential inapplicability to the past.'⁴³⁰ The application of paradigms that have gained academic respectability and authority in studying the past has not been without some fruit in illuminating our view of the past. But Skinner's contention is that it has often led historians into historical absurdities and towards mythologies, not histories. Driven by preconceptions about intentions, historians approached canonical texts searching for answers to perennial questions which the author being studied is meant to have addressed. It is not difficult to see how such a determined quest would end up applauding philosophers from the past and bestowing upon them ownership of a preferred doctrine, whenever their text yielded to the historian's self-fulfilling method. On the other hand, a text which did not yield what the historian was searching for is criticised for its omissions, confusions, and inadequacies. This, the 'mythology of doctrines',⁴³¹ is not the only mythology which modern historical methods of the 19th and 20th centuries have perpetuated. The classificatory approach symptomatic of

⁴³⁰ Skinner (2002). *Regarding Method*, 59.

⁴³¹ Skinner (2002). *Regarding Method*, 64.

the paradigms which Skinner challenges in *Meaning and Understanding* is equally responsible for the 'mythology of coherence' which 'consists in effect of criticising the classic writers according to the *a priori* assumption that they must have intended whatever writings they produced to constitute the most systematic contribution they were capable of making to their discipline'.⁴³²

Skinner's primary contention, upon which his own method is based, is that the author's intention cannot be revealed by the exegetical effort of the text as words alone. Words are also deeds, and excavation of what the author was *doing* when he wrote the text is necessary before attributing intention to the author. Situated in the linguistic context of the discourse within which the text came into being, the meaning of an utterance is illuminated by the analysis of 'speech acts' where language is seen not only as words, but as action through illocutionary force.

Skinner's appeal to Collingwood's logic of question and answer appears understandable enough at first inspection, since the task which Skinner had set himself in *Meaning and Understanding* is fundamentally an instrumentalist one. As Skinner put it, the question which *Meaning and Understanding* aimed to answer was 'what are the appropriate procedures to adopt in the attempt to arrive at an understanding of the work?'.⁴³³ If such a methodological inquiry is to draw on any aspect of Collingwood's philosophy, it would surely draw on Collingwood's central logical instrument in philosophical analysis: the logic of question and answer.

History without metaphysics

This inextricable relationship between question and answer in understanding human action informed Skinner's historiography in a powerful fashion. But it is in the nature of a philosophy which wishes to avoid metaphysics to find itself recoiling towards a narrower empiricism, at the expense of the wider horizon which metaphysics (and especially

⁴³² Skinner (2002). *Regarding Method*, 66.

⁴³³ Tully (1988). *Meaning & Context*, 29.

Collingwood's metaphysics, the case that is relevant to our exploration of Skinner) makes possible, namely what history *is*. Or to use Skinner's turn of phrase, what history *could* be. And with the exception of a transient reference to deeper metaphysics in the final two sentences of *Meaning and Understanding*, Skinner's masterful exposition in the essay succeeds almost completely in presenting the treatment of the symptoms (the mythologies) as if his method were the cure of a much deeper metaphysical deficit in historiography. The cost to Skinner's project of eschewing metaphysics is thrown into sharp relief in his response to his critics. 'Reading my critics', Skinner pronounces, 'I am perplexed to learn that I am at once an idealist, a materialist, a positivist, a relativist, an antiquarian, an historicist, and a mere methodologist with nothing of substance to say at all.'⁴³⁴

Yet it can hardly be a Collingwoodian criticism of Skinner's methodology that he is difficult to assign to a particular philosophical school or to assimilate to an existing doctrine. Collingwood himself resisted classification on this model. But where Skinner appears to part company with Collingwood, with significant implications for history both methodologically and conceptually, is in his treatment of beliefs held by past agents, a question which Skinner explores in his essay *Interpretation, Rationality and Truth*.

Skinner's approach in *Interpretation, Rationality and Truth* draws on examples of beliefs held by agents from the distant past. Yet, a philosophy of history ought to be just as applicable to the recent past as it is to the distant past, including the present as it turns into the past. The purpose of raising this observation at this point in my argument is to alert the reader to the relevance of historical method not only to the understanding of the thought and beliefs of agents long dead, but to the understanding of all thought and beliefs, including those held in the transient present. Historical understanding is thus as relevant to the living present as it is to a dead past.

Skinner's treatment of the challenges that beliefs pose to the historian is predominantly procedural and appears to favour containment of the argument within a delimited

⁴³⁴ Tully (1988). *Meaning & Context*, 231.

interpretation of the social context in which such beliefs are said to be held. Clearly, the beliefs of past agents could hardly pose a problem of understanding for the historian unless such beliefs were at odds with the historian's own canons of intelligibility (that is, they only invite explanation if they do not seem self-explanatory, which is to say that the historian does not recognise them as rational), or when beliefs present themselves as clearly false. The difficulty for the historian, as Skinner appears to indicate, centres on the extent to which the accounting for beliefs can advance the historian's work, or not. Skinner recognises the difficulty in dealing with beliefs which the historian deems irrational, since denying or accepting the rationality of certain beliefs can have an impact on the historian's understanding of the past. To deal with this point, Skinner appeals to the social context as providing sufficient grounds for accepting the rationality of beliefs, or as he put it,

When I speak of agents as having rational beliefs, I mean only that beliefs (what they hold to be true) should be suitable beliefs for them to hold true in circumstances in which they find themselves.⁴³⁵

This, what Skinner refers to as the 'concept of rational acceptability' relieves the historian from an unnecessary burden of having to judge the rationality of belief by the yardstick of historian's own set of beliefs.⁴³⁶

On the question of the truth of beliefs, which is the other difficulty addressed in *Interpretation, Rationality and Truth*, Skinner's view is effectively that the issue of the truth of beliefs need not arise in the historian's work, for when it does, the historian's tools are found wanting in the face of one of two equally unpalatable alternatives: either an end to his enquiry or adopting 'conceptual relativism' by which the truth of beliefs are judged by the prevailing 'consensus over norms and standards'.⁴³⁷ Skinner concludes that whilst it is possible to relativize what 'holding true' means in the context in which the holding of a given belief could be reasoned (rational acceptability), without undermining the pursuit of

⁴³⁵ Skinner (2002). *Regarding Method*, 31.

⁴³⁶ Skinner (2002). *Regarding Method*, 53.

⁴³⁷ Skinner (2002). *Regarding Method*, 51-54.

intellectual history, 'conceptual relativism' *per se* is incompatible with the aims of intellectual history.⁴³⁸

Whilst serving well the intellectual historian's task when confronted with alien beliefs, 'rational acceptability' has nothing to offer a historian seeking to understand 'core beliefs'. By definition, core beliefs are described as such precisely because they are in some form indispensable to the integrity of the agent's whole set of beliefs. To attempt to describe 'core beliefs' as rationally held or acceptable is to deny the very nature of what they profess to be. And this is where the intellectual tool of 'acceptable rationality' within the historical context appears to leave the historian adrift within pre-set limits of reasoning, as laid bare in Skinner's response to Hollis,

this image of a rational bedrock strikes me as confused. What does it mean for a purportedly core belief to be rationally held? On the one hand, it can hardly mean that we are capable of giving good reasons for holding it. For in that case it would still be a derivative rather than a core belief. But on the other hand, I cannot see – as I have already conceded – what else it can mean to describe a belief as being held in a rational way.⁴³⁹

Skinner is right to reject the notion of a 'rational bedrock' of core beliefs as 'confused' since such beliefs could not be 'attained by some accredited process of reasoning', which is Skinner's definition of what he means by a 'rational belief'.⁴⁴⁰ Yet, Skinner's rejection of the notion of rational core beliefs appears to set core beliefs altogether outside the purview of the linguistic context to which his own methodology is committed, as if the intellectual integrity of the past agent is indifferent to their core beliefs. And it is perhaps at this point more than any other in Skinner's conjecture about beliefs that appealing to Collingwood's metaphysics to underwrite historical understanding is most urgently necessary, not merely because it can advance the work of the historian of ideas, but because with Collingwood's

⁴³⁸ Skinner (2002)., *Regarding Method*, 53-54.

⁴³⁹ Skinner (2002). *Regarding Method*, 43-44.

⁴⁴⁰ Skinner (2002). *Regarding Method*, 31.

reform of metaphysics the moral end of history comes within people's grasp. When metaphysics is ignored or even repudiated, the difficulties which arise, as I have argued already, affect not only the coherence of the claims made to historical knowledge but also the place and standing of those claims in a wider conception of mind and world, in the present as much as in relation to the past. They also, I suggest, demonstrate that the *rapprochement* between history and philosophy that Collingwood promises cannot be delivered without his metaphysics: for without it, the connection between thought and truth that unites history and philosophy is severed and one reintroduces the false dichotomy between the historian, concerned with facts, and the philosopher, concerned with truth. Collingwood, with his flair for *le mot juste*, once termed this position 'the doctrine of the historian as eunuch'.⁴⁴¹

Both Collingwood and Skinner are concerned with understanding the past. But in dissevering the logic of question and answer from Collingwood's metaphysics, as I have just argued, Skinner may well have disabled himself from saying very much if anything about what history is. His method, paradoxically, offers lessons about what constitutes historical facts, but tells us little about how they relate beyond the suggestion that they relate to nothing beyond themselves,⁴⁴² perhaps because there is nothing beyond the battle to establish what they are that each generation takes up in its turn.⁴⁴³

History and 'absolute presuppositions'

A historical fact, for Collingwood, is the answer to a question that arises. What accords its nature as a fact is not whether it is true or false, but that it is right insofar it is the answer to the question. Yet, Collingwood makes a critical distinction between an answer being 'right' and it being 'true'. The 'right' answer, as Collingwood put it, is that 'which enables us to get

⁴⁴¹ In a paper read to the Stubbs Historical Society on 27 January 1936, 'Can Historians be Impartial?', printed in *PH*, 209-18, at 211.

⁴⁴² More than one critic has noted that Skinner's histories tend to be 'episodic, composed of isolated events and conflicts (like the Engagement controversy) multiplied and strung along a chronological scale' See Cary J. Nederman (1985). Quentin Skinner's State: Historical Method and Traditions of Discourse. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 18: 339-52, at 343, and compare Joseph Femia (1981). An Historicist Critique of 'Revisionist' Methods for Studying the History of Ideas. *History and Theory* 20: 113-34.

⁴⁴³ Skinner (2002), *Regarding Method*, esp. ch. 1.

ahead with the process of questioning and answering'.⁴⁴⁴ And whilst an answer could be 'right' in terms of its logical place in the questioning activity, this need not mean that the answer is 'true'. To explain this point, Collingwood draws on the following example,

Thus, when Socrates asks (Plato, *Republic*, 333 B) whether as your partner in a game of draughts you would prefer a just man or a man who knows how to play drafts, the answer which Polemarchus gives – 'a man who knows how to play draughts' – is the right answer. It is 'false', because it presupposes that justice and ability to play draughts are comparable, each of them being a 'craft', or specialized form of skill. But it is 'right', because it constitutes a link, and a sound one, in the chain of questions and answers by which the falseness of that presupposition is made manifest.⁴⁴⁵

As I explained earlier, in his reform of metaphysics, Collingwood posited the idea of *logical efficacy* of a presupposition as the rational ground for thought. According to Collingwood, a question arises through the logical imperative, or logical force, of what is presupposed. He further adds that this *logical efficacy* of a presupposition does not depend on the truth of what is presupposed nor, and significantly, on it being thought true. Thus, the rationality and truth of a proposition (for example, an utterance) are not identical, a point which Skinner also asserts.

In dismantling realism's propositional logic which held that truth belonged to a proposition alone (proposition as an answer to a universal and unchanging question), Collingwood, albeit implicitly, appears to have distinguished the concepts of rationality and truth of a proposition. As the above example demonstrates, an answer could be rational insofar it is the right answer to the question, but false insofar the question to which it is the answer rests on a false presupposition. It is for this reason that the logic of question and answer could not be simply disentangled from the wider metaphysics without falling into a

⁴⁴⁴ AA, 37.

⁴⁴⁵ AA, 37-38.

premature relativism in which the historian of ideas tries in vain to ground both rationality and truth within the constraints of the narrowest of contexts, whilst keeping at arm's length Collingwood's metaphysics. To put this differently, the logic of question and answer confers rationality to the historical method but does not address the question of truth in history.

To achieve a more rounded understanding of the implications of Collingwood's reform of metaphysics for the philosophy of history, it is necessary to remind the reader at this point that Collingwood's philosophy is underwritten by a pursuit of the unity of mind and, with that, the unity of the whole of experience. The grounds of a philosophy of history, therefore, will be shown to be not merely a procedural account of how one attains historical knowledge, but rather the grounds upon which history proper may even become possible. In what follows I will draw on Collingwood's overriding concern with unity of the mind and experience to advance the conception of history as mind. I will also highlight the metaphysical impasse in 're-enactment' which resolves itself by appealing to history as a moral attitude.

Collingwood offered his *rapprochement* between history and philosophy,⁴⁴⁶ at the heart of which are his approaches of the 'logic of question and answer' and the 're-enactment' of past thoughts as the means through which historical knowledge can be attained.⁴⁴⁷

Collingwood's *rapprochement* between history and philosophy sits well with his rejection of the applicability of the methodology of natural sciences with its 'classificatory systems'.⁴⁴⁸

For Collingwood, rigid divisions between philosophical concepts in the study of human nature were not only illogical, but also contrary to the very nature of philosophical concepts where an overlap is 'normal' and 'may reach formidable dimensions'.⁴⁴⁹ In philosophising history, Collingwood concludes that the subject-matter of historical investigation is human thought, for 'all history is the history of thought'.⁴⁵⁰ And in approaching the history of

⁴⁴⁶ AA, 77.

⁴⁴⁷ AA, 29-43, 112.

⁴⁴⁸ Collingwood, R.G. (1933). *An Essay on Philosophical Method*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 31.

⁴⁴⁹ EPM, 26.

⁴⁵⁰ AA, 110.

philosophy, Collingwood contends that there are no perennial problems to which philosophers at all times have attempted to give answers to, and according to which rests the task of the historian of philosophy to pass judgement on whether a philosopher's answer was right or wrong. Rather, philosophers have addressed problems whose nature was changing, and with it the answers.⁴⁵¹ In approaching a past text, we ought to identify the question to which the text is an answer through the logic of question and answer.⁴⁵² According to Collingwood, we work back from answer to question, and it is only by re-thinking or re-enacting in our own minds past thoughts that we come to acquire historical knowledge.⁴⁵³ Collingwood goes even further in suggesting that the purpose of history as an inquiry is self-knowledge, for it is when we re-think past thoughts and know that we are doing so that we come to know our minds, that is, self-knowledge.⁴⁵⁴

Festin describes Collingwood's 'doctrine of re-enactment' as consisting of three elements. Our first encounter with past thoughts is that with the available evidence of such thought as purposeful human activity; evidence such as past text or any relic of past human activity. For the historian can only hope to know purposeful past thoughts, evidence of which had persisted into the present. Subjecting evidence to the logic of question and answer, the second element towards attainment of historical knowledge, the historian aims to 'get into the inside dimension of the event or the *thought* of the human agent'. The logic of question and answer is not, however, sufficient for the reconstitution of past thought without the historian's '*a priori* imagination' which serves to fill-in, logically, the missing links during the re-construction of past human actions, leading to uncovering and re-enacting the thought of past agents.⁴⁵⁵

For Collingwood, historical knowledge is the 're-enactment' of the thoughts of past agents. And although the common usage of the word 'past' implies a distant past of agents long

⁴⁵¹ AA, 62.

⁴⁵² AA A, 74.

⁴⁵³ AA, 70, 112.

⁴⁵⁴ AA, 107-119.

⁴⁵⁵ Raymun J. Festin (2005). "At the Crossroads of Historiography and Metaphysics of History: Gadamer's Critique of Collingwood". *Idealistic Studies*, 35(1), 35-47.

gone, Collingwood's philosophy of history applies to the most recent past -the present just turned into the past- as much as it does to ancient times. What Collingwood means by 're-enactment' is that 'the historian of a certain thought must think for himself that very same thought, not another one like it'.⁴⁵⁶ This presented Collingwood with the problem of how it was possible for the historian to think -in his present context- the 'very same thought' of someone else. In other words, the two thoughts were identical in one sense, yet had to be different in another. Collingwood made clear the extent of the difficulty posed by the question of explaining the difference between the thought as it existed in the past and the re-enacted thought in the present, and correlatively reconciling the past with the present in the mind of the historian. As Collingwood put it,

[n]o question in my study of historical method ever gave me so much trouble; and the answer was not complete until some years later. The difference is one of context.⁴⁵⁷

The answer, Collingwood explains, is that the re-enacted thought is 'incapsulated' in its own context in the mind of the historian, such that the historian is able at once to re-think it as if it were his thought, whilst recognising that it exists in a context of its own that remains distinguishable from the historian own present context. As Collingwood explains, an incapsulated thought is

a thought which, though perfectly alive, forms no part of the question-answer complex which constitute what people call the 'real' life, the superficial or obvious present, of the mind in question.⁴⁵⁸

Collingwood, therefore, deploys the logic of question and answer to solve the problem posed by the idea of a re-enacted and incapsulated thought. In this solution, the re-enacted thought could not be part -or at least not a logical part- of the historian's present context,

⁴⁵⁶ AA, 111.

⁴⁵⁷ AA, 112-113.

⁴⁵⁸ AA, 113.

because the question-answer complex of a re-enacted thought is rooted in a context of its own which provides the logical validity to sustain the thought, which is otherwise lost in the historian present, or 'real' context. Collingwood's account of incapsulated thoughts provides the answer to a methodological question. But the answer he provides raises a further question that is not only one of method, but when explored reveals itself to be fundamentally a moral question. This is because where Collingwood appears to declare the problem posed by re-enactment of past thought solved is where the question of 'absolute presuppositions' in his historical method arises.

Collingwood's description of re-enacted thoughts in a context of their own explains the nature of re-enactment, but appears, at first inspection, to leave almost untouched the nature of the thinking by the historian proper when re-enacting the thought of another mind. On Collingwood's own terms, a thought is intelligible only insofar it is an answer to a question which arises by the logical efficacy of what the question presupposes. In proximal logical priority to a question that arises are the relative presuppositions, but at the farthest end, the logical efficacy that gives all thinking its ultimate logical nourishment arises out of those unique and unverifiable assertions about reality, namely 'absolute presuppositions'. Re-enactment thus understood demands not merely a passive acceptance but the intellectual adoption of the 'absolute presuppositions' which animate the thought as it is re-enacted in a manner that brings it back to life in the historian's present. In positing the idea of incapsulated thoughts, Collingwood appears to answer only the question of how the past is distinguished from the present in the historian's mind. A re-enacted thought exists in a context which Collingwood describes as a 'secondary life' that is 'prevented from overflowing' into the historian's 'primary life'.⁴⁵⁹ Yet, this 'secondary life' is a life which the historian's own 'absolute presuppositions' must be able to grant.

A seasoned reader of Collingwood would be familiar with, and sympathetic to, the idea that unlike separating, distinguishing serves to challenge the tendency of the 'analytic turn of

⁴⁵⁹ AA, 113.

mind' towards 'the mutual exclusiveness of categories'.⁴⁶⁰ If re-enactment involves distinguishing between the historian's own present and the past, it does so by elevating the shaping of the historian's present by the past -into which he enquires- above the distinction and separation with that past. If the historian's own 'absolute presuppositions' underpin all meaning in his present reality, then the thought which he re-enacts must also shape his present reality through self-knowledge of the mind. The historian's mind and the past which he comes to know through re-enactment are not mutually exclusive but correlates in self-knowledge:

If what the historian knows is past thoughts, and if he knows them by re-thinking them himself, it follows that the knowledge he achieves by historical inquiry is not knowledge of his situation as opposed to knowledge of himself, it is a knowledge of his situation which is at the same time knowledge of himself. In re-thinking what somebody else thought, he thinks it himself. In knowing that somebody else thought it, he knows that he himself is able to think it. And finding out what he is able to do is finding out what kind of a man he is. If he is able to understand, by rethinking them, the thoughts of a great many different kinds of people, it follows that he must be a great many kinds of men. He must be, in fact, a microcosm of all the history he can know. Thus his own self-knowledge is at the same time his knowledge of the world of human affairs.⁴⁶¹

In exposing the nature of historical knowledge as self-knowledge of the mind re-enacting past thoughts, Collingwood reveals the depth of the fault lines in the realists' doctrine of knowledge. Mind is thought, and all thinking is historical thinking because to think is to think about something which has already come into existence, whether it is an event or a thought. The ultimate object of knowledge is the mind itself that is shaped by thinking. Knowledge thus makes a difference to the knower who is at the same time what is known, that is the mind, or the self. Historical thinking is not only how we come to know the past

⁴⁶⁰ R.G. Collingwood (1989). *Essays in Political Philosophy*. David Boucher (Ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press, editor's introduction, 1.

⁴⁶¹ AA, 114-115.

from its traces in the present, but it is also how we come to know our minds and attain self-knowledge, or as Collingwood puts it,

Historical knowledge is the knowledge of what mind has done in the past, and at the same time it is the redoing of this, the perpetuation of past acts in the present. Its object is therefore not a mere object, something outside the mind which knows it; it is an activity of thought, which can be known only in so far as the knowing mind re-enacts it and knows itself as so doing. To the historian, the activities whose history he is studying are not spectacles to be watched, but experiences to be lived through his own mind; they are objective, or known to him, only because they are also subjective, or activities of his own.⁴⁶²

For Collingwood, history is, therefore, not the past but the consciousness of the past as our thought in the present, in a mind 'made of thought'.⁴⁶³ In history, we stand in relation to other minds, a relation through which we come to know who we are. If abstractness undoes concrete historical facts, then *realism's* propositional logic disunites the mind and dissevers humanity's shared consciousness. Self-knowledge through historical thinking has as its corollary the recognition of others as agents capable of thought and action independently of us, or as Boucher puts it '[h]istorical thinking is the exploration of a world of unique agents other than oneself in situations uniquely their own'.⁴⁶⁴ To be historically-conscious is to be conscious of the individuality of human action.

Collingwood's account of history as self-knowledge of the mind is synonymous with his account of freedom, which he equates with liberalism and civilisation.⁴⁶⁵ It is the liberation of the mind through self-knowledge which reveals the moral end of history, once history is understood as an expression of our relationship with the self and others with whom we are in a community of thought. For Collingwood, historical consciousness is equal to freedom.

⁴⁶² R.G. Collingwood (1946). *The Idea of History*. T. M. Knox (Ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press, 218.

⁴⁶³ R.G. Collingwood (1942). *The New Leviathan, or, Man, Society, Civilization and Barbarism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1.61.

⁴⁶⁴ Collingwood (1989). EPP, editor's introduction, 41-42.

⁴⁶⁵ Collingwood (1989). EPP, editor's introduction, 15.

This, Collingwood talks about in several different ways but central to all of them is the concept of the individual as historian, as he posits in *The Philosophy of History*,⁴⁶⁶

When we think of history as merely a trade or profession, a craft or a calling, we find it hard to justify our existence as historians. What can the historian do for people except turn them into historians like himself? And what is the good of doing that? Is it not simply a vicious circle, whose tendency is to overcrowd the ranks of the profession and to produce an underpaid “intellectual proletariat” of sweated teachers? This maybe a valid argument against the multiplication of historians, if history is merely a profession, but it cannot be if history is a universal human interest; for in that case there are already as many historians as there are human beings, and the question is not “Shall I be a historian or not?” but, “How good a historian shall I be?”

But how might we understand, on Collingwood’s terms, the individuality of the historian and that of past agents -authors of thoughts- whose thoughts the historian re-enacts in the present?

Originality and authority in history

Collingwood’s *rapprochement* between philosophy and history was between two fields of inquiry whose concerns were different, in that ‘historical thought concerns itself with something individual’, whereas philosophical thought – like scientific thought- concerned itself with something universal.⁴⁶⁷ For philosophy and history to overlap, there needed to be a subject-matter that was appropriate for both disciplines. This, for Collingwood, was human thought, and in particular ‘reflective thought’, which can be re-thought by the inquirer, who would be both a historian and a philosopher in Collingwood’s terms, for what a past author had said and whether it was right or wrong were not two separate questions, one historical and one philosophical, but rather one question, which was historical.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁶ Collingwood (1989). *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, 123-124.

⁴⁶⁷ R.G. Collingwood (1933). *An Essay on Philosophical Method*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 26.

⁴⁶⁸ AA, 69-72.

Collingwood's historian is a historian insofar as his object of inquiry is past thought which he comes to know through re-enactment; he is also a philosopher insofar as his discerning of past thought requires him to think critically—that is, philosophically.⁴⁶⁹

In Collingwood's philosophy the concept of an 'author' applies as much to a philosopher as it does to an army general, for both undertake human activities the relics of which are the object of historical inquiry contemplated by the historian who aims to re-think the thoughts of both. But what does Collingwood's methodology tell us of the agencies of a past agent, and that of the historian in the present? If we turn to Collingwood's essay *The Authorship of Fairy Tales*, we find an especially illuminating insight into the matter.

Though the title of his essay suggests a different category of authorship, Collingwood's 'dictum' that 'all history is the history of thought' embodies his universal approach to the study of human history; or as Boucher puts it,

What Collingwood's means by this dictum is that all human artefacts, from Stone Age arrow-heads, or triangular terracotta loom weights to complex philosophical texts, are expressive of thought, and embody purposive activity.⁴⁷⁰

It is with this spirit that Collingwood approaches fairy tales and folklore in general as expressive of thought, and in which the lack of defined individual authorship takes nothing away from their value. In *The Authorship of Fairy Tales*, Collingwood sets out to challenge the underlying presuppositions of the prevailing conception of the term 'folklore' as something redolent and slighting of 'mere tradition, the property of unenlightened people who have no creative power' of their own.⁴⁷¹ According to this conception, which

⁴⁶⁹ Peter Johnson (1998). *R.G. Collingwood: An Introduction*. Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 20.

⁴⁷⁰ R.G. Collingwood (2005). *The Philosophy of Enchantment: Studies in Folktale, Cultural Criticism, and Anthropology*. David Boucher, Wendy James, and Philip Smallwood (Eds.). Oxford: Clarendon Press, editors' introduction, xciv-xcvi.

⁴⁷¹ PE, 263.

Collingwood traces back to both 'Illuminists' and 'Romantics',⁴⁷² the 'ideas' within folklore were handed down from the educated to the non-educated as a

diluted and degraded form of literature, in which motives and elements originally created by the educated have been picked up and used, without creative energy, by the uneducated.⁴⁷³

In setting out to criticize what he saw as an elitist and socially-divisive conception of folklore, which embodies a distinction between 'the creative culture of an educated and enlightened elite, and the merely traditional and uncreative culture of the lower classes',⁴⁷⁴ Collingwood identifies three presuppositions on which this conception of folklore rests. Amongst these presuppositions is, first, that folklore lacked the originality and inventiveness which we associate with philosophical, literary or musical works. According to this presupposition, the lower and uneducated classes amongst whom folklore is transmitted were 'incapable of original creation'.⁴⁷⁵ In other words, originality and individuality of authorship is presupposed both to be lacking in the lower classes whilst being a defining feature of great thinking and an intellectual elite. Collingwood's attack on this presupposition is unequivocal. For Collingwood,

'[t]he conception of an original work of science or art, created in its entirety by a single man, is a mere fiction', be it a Descartes, a Locke or a Voltaire⁴⁷⁶

And he went on to say,

the original creator who makes an absolutely new work of art, is no actual human being; he is an imaginary creature, like the purely economic man of the early

⁴⁷² PE, 261-262.

⁴⁷³ PE, 263.

⁴⁷⁴ PE, 263

⁴⁷⁵ PE, 262.

⁴⁷⁶ PE, 265.

economists. Every actual thinker, every actual artist, works by adding his quota to a tradition, a common stock of ideas already current⁴⁷⁷

This assertion by Collingwood resonates with the way he views the history of philosophy as a continuum of ideas, a 'process' of development to which each philosopher contributes. Or as he puts in *The Idea of History*:

An intelligent inquiry into the influence of Socrates on Plato, or Descartes on Newton, seeks to discover not the points of agreement, but the way in which the conclusions reached by one thinker give rise to problems for the next'.⁴⁷⁸

Not only does Collingwood refute the concept of a sole authorship of a work of science or art, but he finds nothing impossible in the concept of collective authorship of various forms of unwritten arts which constitute folklore.⁴⁷⁹ Nor does Collingwood view the passing down of folklore from one generation to another as a passive process, for such a notion to Collingwood is as fictitious in its way as the concept of an original and sole creator of a work. In his words, '[t]he human mind may be receptive, but receptivity is not passivity: it is an effort of active thought'.⁴⁸⁰ For Collingwood, both folktales (the unwritten) and literary stories (the written) are simply works of art where in each we can find both 'originality' and 'creativity'.⁴⁸¹

Collingwood's treatment of fairy tales brings to the centre of attention the 'special character' of folklore as a 'human product' that is passed down through generations, and at each act of transmission human creativity plays a part.⁴⁸² This, Collingwood exalts at the expense of an elitist view of a sole author of an original work of art; for an author is

⁴⁷⁷ PE, 265-266.

⁴⁷⁸ Collingwood (1946). *The Idea of History*. T. M. Knox (Ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press, 313.

⁴⁷⁹ PE, 267.

⁴⁸⁰ PE, 266.

⁴⁸¹ PE, 266-267.

⁴⁸² PE, 275.

consumed in a creative process of transmission of ideas of which he is an agent, or as Boucher, James and Smallwood put it,

The transactional link between creators and audience within a system of social relations here focuses the question of authors as original creators, critiques the hypothesis of their individuality and 'privileged' authority, and dissolves the individual creator within a process of cultural and literary transmission.⁴⁸³

A history, whose subject-matter is human thought itself, is an 'open' history of a continuous process where neither author nor reader have authority over knowledge, rather they are agents in a 'process' of development of knowledge. 'Individuality' for Collingwood is 'the vehicle of a thought' that once expressed becomes 'potentially everyone's'.⁴⁸⁴

Re-enactment, then, negates the idea of absolute individualism and authority over knowledge. In a sense, implied in re-enactment is a kind of communion between individuals, a recognition of interdependency of thought, a sense in which we are all part of the whole in which each is defined not only by their own history, but all of history. There is in Collingwood's philosophy of history, then, the essence of freedom for the historian, or what amounts to the same thing, the individual, insofar as historical knowledge means re-enactment in the mind of the historian. But this freedom is not separate from the freedom of others. Once liberated from the grip of dichotomies of one kind or another, history not only transcends the subject-object divide, but the divide between individuals. It is a communion of a kind, at work in history and brought to light by Collingwood's reforms in metaphysics and history. To speak, as I have done, of communion as a correlate of history is to recognize that in history we experience the meaning of the relationship between the author and the historian, the past and the present, the self and the not-self, the individual and the whole, and between the finite and the infinite. As these words intimate, Collingwood's theological writings are as necessary to understanding his conception of

⁴⁸³ PE, editors' introduction, xix.

⁴⁸⁴ IH, 303.

history as are his writings on history itself. In knowing ourselves, we know God. This is the framework within which Collingwood had been developing his views since the 1910s. If this framework has not always been visible to interpreters, it is because it is the picture, not the frame, which claims their attention. There is a sense in which this is only proper. There is another sense in which, without due attention to the frame, we cannot see how the picture is supported and curated by Collingwood. It is to these matters that I turn in the next chapter, which discusses in more detail the theological conceptions from which Collingwood constructed his framework and the ways in which that frame was reflected back into the discussions of religion and Christianity he provided.

Chapter Five: Religion

Introduction

Before embarking upon my analysis of Collingwood's ideas about religion, a restatement is necessary of some of the key features of his methodology. As we have seen in the two preceding chapters, Collingwood's historical method is fundamental to his exposition of the meaning of philosophical terms and concepts. It is helpful to think of Collingwood's historical method as one which can be distinguished into two forms, which he calls upon interchangeably in addressing a problem. In one form of the method, Collingwood's approach is etymological or philological: the approach here is to explore the history of a given term and its usage. A particularly illuminating example of this which we have come across already is his explanation of how the term 'metaphysics' came to be used in philosophy. In the other and chief form of the historical method, Collingwood's approach aims at bringing to light the presuppositions of a given concept or idea. As such, the history of an idea refers to its logical past, and the grounds upon which it rests. And since all forms of consciousness, even in the most rudimentary form, the artistic consciousness, are in possession of at least some intellectual content, it follows that no matter how primitive or implicit a thought might appear to be, it remains thought and therefore a historical fact. Therefore, when it comes to philosophising religion, Collingwood's starting point is to take seriously 'only one presupposition: namely that the form of consciousness called religion really does exist'.⁴⁸⁵ From this point onwards, the task of understanding religion as thought becomes both possible and fruitful.

It is also especially helpful for the purpose of this chapter to set forth, again, Collingwood's concept of *logical efficacy* from his account of metaphysics. What logical efficacy means is that the work of a presupposition in the structure and genesis of thought does not depend on the truth of what is presupposed, but only on its being presupposed. Thus, if a presupposition is unverifiable or even false, it neither follows that the thought which turns

⁴⁸⁵ R.G. Collingwood (1968). *Faith and Reason: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion by R.G. Collingwood*. Edited with an introduction and sectional introduction by Lionel Rubinoff. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 43.

on such presupposition does not exist, nor that it cannot manifest itself into a form of action. And as for the special group of presuppositions which Collingwood calls 'absolute presuppositions', these have an unquestionable necessity in all thought, for without them the whole of reality is incomprehensible. Hence the task of a philosophy of religion becomes like that of the philosophy of any other subject-matter, which is to make clearer the intellectual content of the subject-matter; and in the specific case of religion, it is to articulate the meaning of the religious beliefs in question, and how such beliefs shape consciousness, thought, and action.

Besides the reminders issued above, it is helpful in the context of this thesis, and in advance of the final chapter on the politics of civilization, to restate my hypothesis that to understand Collingwood as a philosopher, and in particular as a moral and political philosopher, we need to grasp the way in which Christianity, and the Incarnation in particular, shaped his thinking implicitly. This is not to say that it did not also feature explicitly. As Collingwood himself put it in a characteristically uncompromising assertion that '[n]o philosopher worthy of the name ignores religion or tries to construct a view of human life in which it has no part whatever'.⁴⁸⁶ As we will come to see in the next chapter, Collingwood's conception of freedom of the will turns on the idea of a healthy and rational consciousness, of which religion is an integral form. Religion is also the strongest expression of faith. And for Collingwood, as I will argue in this chapter, faith is a form of knowledge through which the mind asserts the indemonstrable certainty of the whole, that is, of the infinite. Without this assertion of the whole through faith, reason is adrift, for without reference to the whole it cannot orientate itself correctly. Faith and reason, therefore, are both necessary in knowledge, both in theory and in practice, in the life of a civilization. The necessity of exploring Collingwood's thought on religion as a prelude to the politics of civilization is mandated by Collingwood's specific concern with the fate of Western civilization, a civilization which he believed was ultimately informed by the central doctrine of the Christian faith.

⁴⁸⁶ R.G. Collingwood (1923). 'Can the New Idealism Dispense with Mysticism?', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, S3 (Relativity, Logic, and Mysticism), 161.

Collingwood's theological writings were almost entirely dedicated to an exposition of the intellectual content of the Christian faith, with only limited forays into other faiths (that were, nonetheless, illuminating despite their brevity, for Collingwood wrote little if anything that is not worth reading). As James Patrick explains in *The Magdalen Metaphysicals* (1985),

In fact the Christian religion was for Collingwood an indispensable intellectual hermeneutic and the *Essay on Metaphysics*, in which Christian dogma appears as the intellectual presupposition of Western civilization, is the culmination of a consistent development begun in *Religion and Philosophy*, not an anomaly. History was the method, and any of the forms—religion, art, philosophy, or science—will tend in Collingwood's writings to function from time to time as the single hermeneutic illuminating all the others. Collingwood wrote in his *Autobiography* that his life work had been the investigation of the relation between history and philosophy, but philosophy should probably be taken in this text as a synecdoche for all knowledge. Among the forms of knowledge, religion is not the one Collingwood handles most easily or self-confidently nor is it the most obviously pervasive, but religion—specifically the Christian religion—is the most fundamental.⁴⁸⁷

For Collingwood, as Patrick also notes, 'philosophical questions often provoked theological answers'.⁴⁸⁸ Collingwood paid a great deal of explicit attention to theology in his earlier publications. In his later work, the attention was implicit. Christianity never went away: it simply appeared in a different form.

The main elements in Collingwood's thoughts concerning Christianity, discussed in this chapter, form the logical bridge between previous two chapters of this thesis on knowledge and metaphysics and history and the account of Collingwood's political theory offered in the final chapter. The exposition given below is organised into four parts. The first part

⁴⁸⁷ Patrick (1985). *The Magdalen Metaphysicals*, 82. James Patrick also states that 'Collingwood never philosophized apart from Christian belief' (xviii).

⁴⁸⁸ Patrick (1985). *The Magdalen Metaphysicals*, xviii.

addresses how Collingwood understood the relationship between faith and reason, each being necessary to knowledge. Religion, as an expression of faith, has an intellectual content. In the second part, I provide an exposition and analysis of one unpublished Collingwood essay to argue for the necessity of going beyond a philosophy of religion, understood as an abstract concept, to a philosophy of Christian faith in order to reveal the relevance of religion as thought to life as it is lived. In the third part, Collingwood's treatment of the Atonement is discussed. On the interpretation of Collingwood's thinking that I am developing, far from it being mere forgiveness without punishment, the Atonement combines both forgiveness and punishment in the attitude of a good will towards a bad will. In the final part, which looks back to Collingwood's essays on the concepts of evil and the Devil, the chapter follows out Collingwood's account of the Atonement to reveal that God's will and the will of man do not stand in opposition to one another, but in communion in a feeling of repentance that is shared by both parties, and by all bearers of good wills: the communion of the faithful, as it were. This is the logical expression of the position Collingwood had come to quite early on, the outlines of which I set out at the end of chapter two. My concern in this chapter is to show how that position 'worked', by following out the currents in Collingwood's thinking that linked various of his claims together.

Faith and reason

At many points in this thesis I have underlined Collingwood's hostility to abstraction, but when endeavouring to speak about the significance of the intellectual content of religion *qua* religion, one seems to fall necessarily into the use of abstractions when trying to convey the sort of cosmology that Collingwood was trying to convey in his two essays *Reason is Faith Cultivating Itself* (1927) and *Faith and Reason* (1928). In these essays, Collingwood provides an account of knowledge according to which neither faith or reason are dispensable, and neither are the two in conflict. Both faith and reason, Collingwood maintains, are 'habits of the mind', and both are 'necessary to man'. And even though they

appear as if 'opposed', they are in truth dependent on one another for meaningful knowledge.⁴⁸⁹

The relationship between faith and reason, and between their most commanding outward expressions, religion and science, respectively, is explained by Collingwood in terms of the relationship between their objects: the infinite and the finite. As Collingwood puts it in *Faith and Reason*,

The main principle is this: the finite falls within the infinite, not outside it; therefore the sphere of faith and the sphere of reason are not two mutually exclusive spheres, but the sphere of reason falls within the sphere of faith. Faith is our attitude towards reality as a whole, reason our attitude towards its details as and separate from each other.⁴⁹⁰

And just as the mind cannot come to know the infinite by the accumulation of all the finites that there are, so the mind 'cannot produce faith by arguing. Faith is presupposed in the argument itself.'⁴⁹¹ Collingwood likens the certainties which faith provides in the truth of concepts like 'God, freedom, and immortality'⁴⁹² to that which Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* demonstrates: these are certainties that 'lie too close to us' to admit of any external justification. And just like our very existence, they are certainties that could not be denied without denying the whole of experience, or repudiating being itself,

⁴⁸⁹ EPR, 122.

⁴⁹⁰ EPR, 140.

⁴⁹¹ EPR, 118.

⁴⁹² Collingwood gives prominence to Kant's position in 'Reason Is Faith Cultivating Itself' (EPR, 117) because, as he explains, 'it lies at the root of all that is best in modern thought on this subject.' Lionel Rubinoff provides additional insight into Collingwood's account of faith and its relationship to experience as a whole by distinguishing faith into 'theoretical', 'practical', or 'emotional': 'Theoretical faith is knowledge that the universe as a whole is rational. This is a basic and universal presupposition of science. Indeed, Collingwood later describes it as an absolute presupposition. Practical faith consists in the certainty that life is worth living, in the belief that the world is open to possibilities and in the knowledge that we are free. These are the absolute presuppositions of moral existence. Finally, the emotional aspects of faith are present in art, conceived as a feeling toward the universe as a whole'. (pp. 100-101).

But in our universal and necessary experience of every day we are actually aware, if only we can detect and isolate this awareness, of our own responsibility and spontaneity, of our timeless and eternal reality, and of the existence of an infinite mind upon which our own finite nature somehow depends. These are certainties of precisely the same kind as Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*. They cannot be proved, because they lie too close us; you cannot demonstrate them anymore than you can button up your own skin; they are the presupposition of all proof whatever, not like the Aristotelian axioms, which enter into particular arguments as their premises, but rather as the conditions of there being any argument at all.⁴⁹³

Collingwood's argument for harmony between faith and reason provides a basis for his reforms of the sciences, since it addresses the foundations of knowledge as a whole. Here, as in many of Collingwood's reforms, an appeal is made to some concept of the eternal or infinite – to 'our timeless and eternal reality, and of the existence of an infinite mind upon which our own finite nature somehow depends' - though this is not noticed or emphasised very often. For example, in his reform of philosophical method, he posits the idea of a 'scale of forms' to explain conceptual overlap in philosophy, where the forms at either end of a scale are maximal expressions of the essence of the concept itself. Yet, neither end of a 'scale of forms' is pure (and therefore can be known in its finitude), since neither maximal form is entirely devoid of the 'other' by which it is defined (for example, on a scale of 'goodness', the maximal expression of 'goodness' is only comprehensible by comparison to what is not good). And in history, as we have already seen, the past being an infinite past and historical knowledge being self-knowledge of the mind, posits a view of historical knowledge as never compete or foreclosed, but infinite.

Thus, in *Reason is Faith Cultivating Itself*, Collingwood warns against the separation between faith and reason, or leaving either one behind in the pursuit of final knowledge. Reason without faith can take knowledge only so far into a 'cul-de-sac' of 'tideo intellectualism' and 'logic-chopping'. Faith without reason, on the other hand, was no less corrupting in the

⁴⁹³ EPR, 115.

pursuit of knowledge, as faith which kept reason at arm's length lent itself to superstition, 'pseudo-metaphysics', and 'fantastical theology'.⁴⁹⁴

Collingwood did not deny that the success of the natural sciences and its classificatory approach was a triumph of human reason as it tended to its proper object, the world of finites. Nor did Collingwood suggest that there were some facts which were off-limits for reason.⁴⁹⁵ What he was saying, rather, was that the success of natural science owed as much to faith as it did to reason itself; for our certainty of there being a natural world in which events take place according to what we know as the laws of nature, without human interference, is a certainty that rests not on empirical knowledge of the 'whole' through experience, but on the presupposition of an orderly natural world without which the inductive methods of natural science would be of precious little use. Such a presupposition is a matter of faith. That scientific enquiry thus far has not verified either the infinite or arguably the finitude of the universe is not a failure of reason, but a vindication of the necessity of faith not merely for reason to survive, but to thrive. In other words, faith provides reason with the infinite terrain of finites: reason's 'food for thought'. As Collingwood put it, '[u]nless there is a whole, a universe, an infinite, there is no science'.⁴⁹⁶ Collingwood would restate this position in the *New Leviathan*, when he asserted that the 'principle of limited objective' that governed modern science, which ignored the question of essence as unanswerable, were Christian sciences, which owed their form not so much to 'heretics' like Galileo as to the Church Fathers, who wished to safeguard the essence of God's mysterious nature against the hubris of a materialist paganism.⁴⁹⁷

For Collingwood, then, knowledge does not proceed from a *tabula rasa*, but from a reality made meaningful, and therefore cognoscible, through faith, the articulation of which is the proper task of reason. As Rubinoff puts it succinctly, for Collingwood, '[k]nowledge

⁴⁹⁴ EPR, 111-112.

⁴⁹⁵ EPR, 142.

⁴⁹⁶ EPR, 144.

⁴⁹⁷ R.G. Collingwood (1942). *The New Leviathan, or, Man, Society, Civilization and Barbarism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 31.61–31.84. For a restatement of this old line, see David Wootton (2010). *Galileo: Watcher of the Skies* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

presupposes knowledge'.⁴⁹⁸ Faith and reason meet in 'thought' at the leading edge of an ever-developing knowledge, or as Collingwood put it,

Faith, properly understood, is not irrational, for it is not so much dependent on reason as the ground and source of reason; reason is not the negation of faith, but its development into an articulated system. Every act is fundamentally an act of faith; but it is not a completed act of faith unless it develops into a rational and self-explanatory system of thought.⁴⁹⁹

And it is the task of faith, if it is to survive reason's advance, to concede the superstitious elements within it to the advance of reason with grace and humility. As Collingwood put it in *Faith and Reason*,

The defeat of superstition is a victory not only for reason but for faith too. Nothing could more thoroughly consolidate the position of religion than that science should systematically drive it from every position of detail that it holds, because nothing could more thoroughly enforce the lesson that if religion is to exist at all it must base its claims not on a reading of this fact or that but on its reading of human experience in its entirety.⁵⁰⁰

Collingwood's aim in his exposition of the relationship between faith and reason is ultimately to argue that all thought, and therefore, all action and all choices are animated and informed by our most deeply held beliefs about reality as a whole, that is, the kind of beliefs which we experience as religious beliefs insofar they embody and express our deepest convictions, our 'absolute presuppositions' as he describes them in his account of metaphysics. Action, Collingwood maintains, 'no less than knowledge, begins in faith and rests on faith'.⁵⁰¹ To put it differently, Collingwood's argument is that faith can neither be

⁴⁹⁸ EPP, 102.

⁴⁹⁹ EPP, 118.

⁵⁰⁰ EPP, 144.

⁵⁰¹ EPP, 119.

proven nor denied by reason, for the essence of faith is its 'intuitive immediacy' which makes possible the pursuit of the knowledge within it, not outside it. Hence his slogan that reason is 'nothing but faith cultivating itself'.⁵⁰²

Collingwood did not deny that the indispensable certainty which faith provides in knowledge can be implicit insofar it is not readily immediate or present to consciousness for what it is. As such it may appear as if such certainty -as well as its necessity in all thought – can be denied: one will not miss what one never knew one had. In response, Collingwood argues the need for reflection since 'being certain of a thing and recognizing that one is certain of it' are disguisable states of consciousness. Here we find Collingwood emphasizing that knowledge is a correlative of our historical nature, and that it is through reflective thought that we recognize that of which we are certain, be it our consciousness of God or consciousness of the self, and its correlative, the not-self. As Collingwood explains,

But the child comes to recognize that it has, or is, a self; and this recognition comes not through any special type of experience, but simply through learning to reflect on experience in general. And we become conscious of God in an analogous way; we come to recognize a certainty which we possessed in some obscure form long before we came to recognize it. If anybody says he does not believe in God, that may be simply because he has not successfully reflected on his own experience and detached from it the certainty which he cannot but have. But it is more likely to be because someone has confused his mind by putting before him a definition of the term "God" which does not connect itself with anything in his personal experience.⁵⁰³

For Collingwood, as we have seen, all personal experience, properly understood, begins with God and seeks to return to him at a higher level of understanding.

⁵⁰² EPP, 121.

⁵⁰³ EPP, 116.

Religion, then, in which faith ‘finds its proper expression’⁵⁰⁴ is understood by Collingwood not as lacking in intellectual content, but as a form of consciousness in which thought can be ascertained as the articulation of beliefs about the whole of reality. Collingwood’s central philosophical interest in religion is the exposition of the intellectual content of Christianity, because that content has saturated Western civilization. Thus, Collingwood’s defence of religion goes beyond a defence of an indispensable form of consciousness and knowledge to reveal the intellectual content of the Christian religious consciousness, and its necessity for the understanding of the Christian mind. As James Patrick puts it,

[Collingwood] writes as a philosopher determined to discover the philosophic truth of Christianity insofar as philosophy can know it. There is in his writings an implicit rationalism, a tendency to identify the content of faith with the content of reason and to assume that just as the redemption of men is a reasonable solution to a philosophical problem, the presuppositions of metaphysics are somehow revealed. Reason is then, to quote a title Collingwood had used in 1927, faith cultivating itself. Faith is the presupposition; reason presupposes and tests.⁵⁰⁵

Collingwood’s method of discovery was the same as the method he pursued in *Speculum Mentis*. He began with what ‘everybody knew’ about religion and set about exposing the flaws in the most common objections that were being lodged against the recognition of religion as a form of consciousness with an intellectual content that ‘does exist’.⁵⁰⁶ For example, Collingwood explains that the view of religion as mere ‘ritual’ is problematic in a number of ways. For one thing, such a view is based on an anthropological conception of primitive religions. But even then, relegating religion to mere ‘ritual’ fails to explain the necessity and compulsion in the anthropological ‘savage’ to perform the rituals being performed. Creed, Collingwood argues, does not grow out of rituals but is what underpins rituals. The difficulty in revealing or understanding the thought that animates what is referred to as religious behaviour in the ‘savage’ cannot be solved simply by denying that

⁵⁰⁴ EPP, 122.

⁵⁰⁵ Patrick (1985). *The Magdalen Metaphysicals*, 82-83.

⁵⁰⁶ EPP, 43.

creed exists, even in the savage religion.⁵⁰⁷ It has a meaning that needs to be elicited. The elicitation of meaning is the task of theology rather than religion; and the more so for Collingwood, for whom theology merges with metaphysics and metaphysics is the science of absolute presuppositions, that is, of what lies underneath and makes sense of the actions performed in all human conduct, including religion.

For much the same reason, Collingwood denies the 'anti-intellectual' view of religion which holds that religion is concerned with conduct in such a way that conduct is seen to be removed from knowledge and thought. In this mistaken sense, religion is more like an addendum to the intellect which can be adopted, rejected or modified in isolation of the intellect. Conduct, Collingwood explains, cannot be 'divorced from knowledge or knowledge divorced from conduct', since conduct is not possible without 'some knowledge of the situation in which we are dealing', and no less so without the certainty that our moral choices are grounded in beliefs which we take as being true. To merely ascribe to religion a role in morality that is unrelated to the intellect is to deny that 'conduct' and 'truth' are at all related.⁵⁰⁸

Similarly, Collingwood rejects the account of religion which relegates it to being no more than a matter of feelings or emotions, as if religion belongs to a 'totally separate function of the mind, independent of thinking and willing'. Feelings and emotions, Collingwood argues, are not devoid of an intellectual content. As he explains,

Religion is doubtless an emotion, or rather involves emotions; but it is not emotion in the abstract apart from other activities. It involves, for instance, the love of God. But the love of God implies knowing God on the one hand and doing his will on the other.⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁷ EPP, 44-45.

⁵⁰⁸ EPP, 47-48.

⁵⁰⁹ EPP, 49.

For Collingwood, arguments which – whether deliberately or inadvertently- deny the intellectual content of religion are typically the result of abstraction and separation of one kind or another, as guided by formal logic in search of ‘scientific’ or empirical evidence which in actual fact do not apply to the essence or creed of religion, since creed is a ‘statement of belief as to the nature of God’, and all the ‘relations’ which derive from the belief itself. The intellect, Collingwood asserts, is the ‘activity by which we think, know, hold convictions, or draw inferences; and a non-intellectual conviction would be a contradiction in terms.’⁵¹⁰

It follows that views which set religion to one side in opposition to other more readily recognized activities of the intellect, such as philosophy and science, turn on assumptions which, once interrogated critically, are found to be wanting. For example, the ‘materialism and atheism’ of philosophy and science, Collingwood argues, are ‘not necessarily irreligious’, for

[w]e may even be so bold as to assert that atheism and materialism are necessarily religions of a kind; for not only do they spring from the impulse to solve the intellectual problem of the universe, but they owe their form to an essentially religious dissatisfaction with existing solutions.⁵¹¹

Separating religion from science is also an example of ‘false abstraction’ in which religion is confined to its concern with the whole and, similarly, science to its concern with the parts. As Collingwood explains, there can be no knowledge of the whole without knowledge of the parts, nor knowledge of the parts without knowledge of the whole of which they are parts. In this sense, neither science nor religion can be described as wholly irreligious or wholly unscientific, respectively, in their characters. For just as science ‘does not take its facts in absolute isolation from one another and from a general scheme of the world’, so religion

⁵¹⁰ EPP, 50.

⁵¹¹ EPP, 56-57.

‘must take account of detail; for it is only in the details that the nature of the whole is manifested’.⁵¹²

Religion and Christianity

The previous sections of this chapter worked through some of Collingwood’s more abstract discussions of the concepts of faith and religion, which led to the recognition that faith and reason are mutually nutritive, that religion is in a sense ubiquitous, and that it has a determinate meaning that should be elicited. However, the idea of a philosophy of religion in the abstract was not one that Collingwood was disposed to entertain: it made as little sense to him as a science of pure being. Religion needed to be understood in its particularity. This attitude shaped the argument of his essay *The Philosophy of the Christian Religion* (which mounted a defence of the establishment at Oxford of a Chair of the philosophy of the Christian religion).⁵¹³

In this essay Collingwood deals with objections to the idea of a chair of the philosophy of the Christian religion by making good an assertion that he makes within the essay itself: ‘grasp the history of the problem, and then you will be in the best position to offer a solution’. For Collingwood, the history of an idea or a proposition -as I have argued in chapters 3 and 4- is revealed by making explicit its presuppositions, and ultimately its metaphysical grounds in ‘absolute presuppositions’. As such, much of Collingwood’s argument in *The Philosophy of the Christian Religion* turns on challenging misconceptions or false presuppositions about philosophy, its subject matter, and the nature of religion.

A Philosophy of the Christian religion, Collingwood argues, cannot be ‘apologetic to the exclusion of criticism’, for if this were the case, this would be no true philosophy at all. The

⁵¹² EPP, 57.

⁵¹³ Collingwood does not reject philosophy of an abstract concept altogether, but that it ought to be part of an overall philosophical analysis that goes beyond the abstract. In a way, philosophy of an abstract concept is always a preliminary analysis followed by analysis of a concrete idea with all its particulars, which is a concrete historical fact. Thus, Collingwood’s earlier chapters in *Religion and Philosophy* (1916) which deal with religion *qua* religion can be seen as preliminary investigations leading to dealing with concrete concepts in subsequent chapters.

concern expressed by those who objected to the idea of instituting a Chair in the philosophy of the Christian religion was that it would be 'a philosophy bent on proving that which it did not allow itself to criticise'. This was not only a matter of mistaking a philosophy of Christianity for theology (which, we have seen, was concerned with eliciting the meaning of religion and was in this respect the relevant critical activity) but also a misunderstanding of the nature of philosophical thought and analysis. For Collingwood, philosophy could only demonstrate that which it discovers in the act of thinking, not that which the mind pre-conceives dogmatically.

Having briskly dispensed with the notion of a philosophy tied to dogma as irrational and no more than a 'bogey' of confused thought, Collingwood turned in his essay to deal with the difficulties inherent in the idea of a philosophy of religion that was not determined to a particular content. He argues that a philosophy of religion *qua* religion was at best a philosophy which expressed itself in religious 'language' and 'terminology' to address philosophical, not religious, problems; and at worst, it was a philosophy of an abstract concept and the antithesis of historical thinking and knowledge. Religion as an abstract concept, Collingwood notes 'with all the characteristics of all the particular religions left out – is not worth philosophising about. Let it go, with the rest of the faculty – psychology to which it belongs'. In yoking together the philosophy of religion with psychology Collingwood was suggesting that both were hopelessly misconceived for the same reason: they attempted to put metaphysics out of business by depriving it of its subject matter and so evacuated themselves of any possible meaning or benefit to human understanding and conduct.

Collingwood's faith in the power of genuinely philosophical thought to disclose the workings of the world was one which he expressed eloquently in *An Autobiography* (1939) when he asserted that in working on any problem, he would not fully have it in his grasp until his thought has engaged to the extent that the problem 'has gone a long way towards being solved'. To contend that philosophy of the Christian religion would end up being nothing more than a defence of Christianity was inimical to the idea and purpose of philosophy

itself. Collingwood did not deny that in working on a problem one had to have an idea of what the solution might be, but this was a forecast of a kind that stood or fell upon philosophical analysis. Fallible as they are, anticipations, as Collingwood put it in the essay, 'are always made: they are the accompaniment of every conscious act and thought, and are absent, only in the case of reflex movements'.

Collingwood's rejection of abstract thought in philosophical method was a characteristic feature of much of his work, most prominently perhaps the *Essay on Philosophical Method* in which he sought to liberate philosophy from the grip of natural sciences. As Collingwood asserted in *Speculum Mentis* (1924), 'classification is the work not of imagination but of abstract thought', and its proper place is the natural not the human sciences. Collingwood's philosophical method denied that classification and specialisation were properly applicable in philosophy, for philosophical concepts naturally overlapped. A philosophy of religion, if it were to be accepted as philosophy, would find itself pulled remorselessly in two opposite directions, towards ontology through abstraction on the one hand, and a false independence from other forms of human consciousness through classification on the other. There was no middle course between the two it could chart, because it had no determinate content of its own.

For Collingwood, Christianity, by contrast, was a 'historical reality', a system of thought that evolved over time and one which has shaped European civilization as we know it. A philosophy of the Christian religion would therefore involve the study of 'historical facts and processes' that give 'meaning' and 'character' to the problems in European civilisation. And even if the philosophy of religion was to be the study of God, it is only through the particulars of a given religion that a 'concrete and determinate conception of God' and its implications can be understood. Collingwood's point, we have seen, was that '[t]he belief that Christ really lived, whether it is true or false colours the whole consciousness of the believer'.⁵¹⁴ In saying this Collingwood was not denying that a philosophy of other faiths and religions was possible or meritorious, or that they did not merit the attention or the

⁵¹⁴ EPP, 87.

investment of resources that was being lined up for the philosophy of Christianity. Nevertheless, the place of Christianity in European civilisation just was the more fundamental historically: more fundamental than Mohammedan or Buddhist thought, for example. *The Philosophy of the Christian Religion* brought together many aspects of Collingwood's thought and method in support of an argument which is at heart a defence of historical thinking against abstraction, and an assertion that all forms of human consciousness, religion included, have an intellectual content that makes his maxim that 'all history is the history of thought' all the more persuasive.

Collingwood's theological writings are striking demonstrations of his historical method by which he reveals, and challenges where appropriate, the presuppositions that underwrite the concepts of faith and religion. Two corollaries of the historical method have especial salience to the present exposition because of their relevance to the argument of the thesis, and more precisely, to Collingwood's moral and political theory. The first of these is the recognition that consciousness is thought, whether implicit or explicit. When explicit as thought, it is a higher order of consciousness than is achieved in more rudimentary states of feeling or emotion but the latter are likewise orders of consciousness. What this means for Collingwood is that an adequate understanding of religion and the different ways in which it can manifest itself in thought means giving due regard to consciousness as a whole. For Collingwood, consciousness is ultimately indivisible; or rather, one should say, if it is divided, partitioned, or otherwise broken up into different departments between which there is no mutual commerce and no mutual recognition – and Collingwood believes that this is what has happened - the moral and political costs to individuals and to society as a whole will be very great. The second of the corollaries to highlight is that, since human action is the expression of thought, a question arises in relation to religious consciousness as to how the Christian conception of God can find its meaning in the human will, and with that, the relation of the human will to God's will. This is the question to which we turn next when discussing the Atonement. In chapter 2, I discussed this question in general terms, showing how it provided an archetypal model for Collingwood's thinking. Here I discuss it in more

detail in order to lay out the logic of Collingwood's position and to preface the account of community that he built upon it, that will be my focus in the final chapter.

The Atonement

'Whatever else is involved in the doctrine of the Atonement [Collingwood begins his treatment of the topic in *Religion and Philosophy* (1916)] it includes at least this: that the sins of man are forgiven by God'.⁵¹⁵ This, for Collingwood, raises the question of the meaning of forgiveness generally, and specifically forgiveness by God. Turning his attention first of all to the issue of forgiveness, Collingwood addresses the dilemma of how forgiveness and punishment can both be morally justified and characteristics of a 'just' God. In other words, in any given situation if forgiveness is what duty demands, then how might wrong-doing be punished? Equally, if a duty of justice demands punishment, then forgiveness appears impossible. As Collingwood puts it,

If punishment is right, then the doctrine that God forgives our sins is illusory and immoral; it ascribes to God the weakness of a doting father who spares the rod and spoils the child. If punishment is wrong, then the conception of a punishing God is a mere barbarism of primitive theology, and atonement is no mystery, no divine grace, but simply the belated recognition by theology that its God is a moral being.⁵¹⁶

Collingwood's argument against this manner of treatment of forgiveness and punishment is that it depends upon a distinction that results from an abstraction which mistakenly sets up forgiveness and punishment as antitheses of each other. Collingwood's argument draws attention to the erroneous identification of revenge or physical pain as the essence of punishment on the one hand, and similarly highlights the erroneous identification of appeasement or weakness as the essence of forgiveness on the other hand. If punishment and forgiveness are both moral duties, Collingwood argues, then it is necessary to understand the moral *essence* which renders both of the actions equally necessary, and yet non-contradictory. For punishment without hope of forgiveness is mere retaliation, and

⁵¹⁵ R.G. Collingwood (1916). *Religion and Philosophy*. London: Macmillan, 169.

⁵¹⁶ RP, 170.

forgiveness without condemnation is tantamount to moral indifference at best, and at worst a form of complicity in the wrong doing through the dereliction of a moral duty.

Collingwood's resolution of the apparent paradox between punishment and forgiveness starts with his assertion that the moral crux of punishment is the same as that of forgiveness, namely 'a pronouncement of the moral consciousness'.⁵¹⁷ Therefore, in order for both punishment and forgiveness to be recognised as moral duties of an agent or agents in response to wrongdoing, it is necessary to make clear the intellectual content (the thought) of the 'moral pronouncement' towards sin Collingwood posits and in what it constitutes. For only then would it be possible to move towards an understanding of the meaning of the Atonement, that is to say, the meaning of the notion that 'the sins of man are forgiven by God.'⁵¹⁸ For Collingwood, there is no doubt that if the concept of punishment were to be morally compelling, it could not be rooted in the desire to inflict pain merely to avenge, or to punish on what would be found upon analysis to turn on purely utilitarian grounds; for example, on the ground of some sort of argument from deterrence. Rather, punishment as a moral duty must be grounded in the concept of 'desert'. A wrongdoer is punished because they deserve the punishment for their wrongdoing or sin.

Collingwood goes on to elucidate the idea that our inward moral 'attitude' towards our own sins is 'one of condemnation' by 'a good will declaring its hostility to a bad one'. When the essence of punishment is conceived as such, punishment is no longer a means to an end, but a moral end in itself, insofar it is the 'manifestation of the new good will'.⁵¹⁹

Collingwood's approach to understanding the moral essence of punishment also brings to light the necessity of there being 'social relations', since condemnation is not only an inward matter, but the duty 'of all good wills' towards evil, whether the evil or sin is committed by oneself or by others. Here Collingwood introduces the thought that there is a unity and a shared consciousness between the sinner's bad will and the good will. As Collingwood put it,

⁵¹⁷ RP, 171.

⁵¹⁸ RP, 169.

⁵¹⁹ RP, 176.

We conclude, therefore, that punishment – the only punishment we can attribute to God or to a good man – is the expression to a criminal of the punisher’s moral attitude towards him. Hence punishment is an absolute duty; since not to feel that attitude would be to share his crime, and not to express it would be a denial of social relations, an act of hypocrisy.”⁵²⁰

For Collingwood, the essence of punishment, then, is the ‘self-expression of a good will’, which, as he put it, is just as applicable in ‘the act of kindness as in the block and gallows’. Here we find Collingwood’s analysis leading him to the conclusion that punishment and forgiveness - insofar as each is a moral duty - are identical, rather than the antithesis of each other. Each is the attitude of a good will to a bad will, and both aim not to inflict pain but to awaken the ‘moral consciousness’ in others with and to whom we stand in a ‘social relation’, and feel a ‘duty toward’ with hope of ‘regeneration and recovery into the life of a good society’,⁵²¹

Punishment and forgiveness are thus not only compatible but identical; each is a name for the one and only right attitude of a good will towards a man of evil will. The details of the self-expression vary according to circumstances; and when we ask, “Shall we punish this man or forgive him?” we are really considering whether we shall use this or that method of expression of what is in either case equally punishment and forgiveness. The only important distinction we make between the two words is this: they refer to the same attitude of mind, but they serve to distinguish it from different ways of erring. When we describe an attitude as one of forgiveness, we mean to distinguish it, as right, from that brutality or unintelligent severity (punishment falsely so called) which inflicts pain either in mere wantonness or without considering the possibility of a milder expression. When we call it punishment, we distinguish it as right from that weakness or sentimentality

⁵²⁰ RP, 177.

⁵²¹ RP, 179.

(forgiveness falsely so called) which by shrinking from the infliction of pain amounts to condonation of the original offence.⁵²²

The essence of punishment, therefore, is not the 'incidental' physical pain that may as a matter of contingent fact be inflicted but the moral pain which is necessary and integral to the recognition of evil doing; it is the 'pain of self-condemnation or moral repentance; the renunciation of one aim and the turning of the will to another'. Collingwood goes further to assert not only that punishment is possible *without* the infliction of physical or material pain, but also that such punishment is 'more civilized' and indicative of 'a higher degree of intelligence and a more delicate social organisation' than is evidenced by corporal punishments. Forgiveness thus is also possible not as the foregoing of penalty, but penalty as the 'judgement' in and of itself with the aim not of retribution, but of 'regeneration and recovery' of the offender's good will 'into the life of a good society'.⁵²³

Punishment and forgiveness, in short, are identical, and what distinguishes one from the other is not the presence or absence of physical pain (falsely identified with the essence of punishment) or of sentimental weakness (falsely identified with the essence of forgiveness), but the 'attitude' which a good will adopts to avoid the error of either falsehood.

These are the terms in which Collingwood construes the doctrine of the Atonement. Having established that punishment and forgiveness are identical, Collingwood is now able to say that the doctrine of the Atonement consists in God's redemption of man through God's good will towards man, and the conversion of man's will through grace. The fact that forgiveness and punishment are in essence the same, as Collingwood argued, means that God's 'condemnation' is combined with his 'love and hope' for the 'sinful will' in a 'single necessary expression of his perfect nature towards nature less perfect, but regarded as capable of perfection'. God's attitude to man, Collingwood explains, is

⁵²² RP, 179-180.

⁵²³ RP, 178-79. Collingwood's argument is relevant to his conception of civilization as a process which aims to eliminate force from human relations in society, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

the means of man's redemption; for by understanding God's attitude towards sin man comes himself to share in that attitude, and is thus converted to a new life in harmony with God's will.⁵²⁴

The will of God and the will of man

Just as the false dichotomy between punishment and forgiveness is the result of an abstraction, so too is the idea (according to Collingwood) that either God or man must, and alone, will the conversion of a bad will to a good will. The false dichotomy in understanding the Atonement consists in viewing the act as either "objective" or "subjective". On what is called the "objective" view, the Atonement is 'an act of God' alone, for only He is the source of all goodness and without His spirit man has no source from within to redeem his fallen will. On the opposite site of this abstraction is the "subjective" view of the Atonement which holds that redemption of the will, any will, can only originate from within, otherwise the very idea of having a "will" no longer holds true.⁵²⁵

Theories of this kind, Collingwood contends, are based on certain fallacies about individualism. On the one hand, the "objective" theory of the Atonement – whilst laying most of the emphasis on action on the part of God in the work of redemption – views the individual human as a merely passive recipient of grace, leaving the theory open to the objection from authenticity with regard to the conversion of the human will. On the other hand, the "subjective" theory denies that redemption of the human will can be inspired from without. The danger of the "subjective" theory of the Atonement, in particular, resides in its implications for social and political thought, for it not only undermines a fundamental theological precept of communion between God and the human being, but also makes communion between one person and another impossible. The "subjective" view, as Collingwood explains,

⁵²⁴ RP, 180.

⁵²⁵ RP, 181-182.

insists on the reality and inviolability of the individual; and the least over-emphasis on this truth leads to the theory that no real help, no real stimulus, can pass over from one individual to another.⁵²⁶

It is not only the Atonement, it should be said, which could not be made meaningful against a backdrop of a theory which falsifies the concept of the individual human being as wholly independent and separate from God. Such theories deny what for Collingwood is a profound truth: that the individual is in fact an individual *only* because and in virtue of his or her relations with others, not in separation and complete isolation from them.

The perfect life for man is a life not of absolute isolation but of absolute communion. A man shows his greatness not in ignoring his surroundings but in understanding and assimilating them; and his debt to his environment is no loss to his individuality but a gain.⁵²⁷

God's redemption of man is, then, understood as involving the will of God and the will of man. On this view of the Atonement, which rejects as abstractions a picture of God's will and man's will as separate and wholly independent of each other, there remained the question of how it could be that God and man can share in the forgiveness and redemption which the Atonement delivers. Whilst forgiveness, as already argued, can be an attitude in which both God and man share, it is not obvious that the same is true of redemption. It thus becomes necessary to explain how it is that God shares in the redemption of man, and whether and how God feels redemption as man does.

Collingwood addresses the idea of the possibility of God's repentance - an idea which appears at first as strikingly counter-intuitive in the light of God's purported possession of the attributes of omniscience, omnipotence and perfect goodness - by exploring the nature of repentance as a feeling or a state of mind. He begins by noting the tendency, when

⁵²⁶ RP, 183.

⁵²⁷ RP, 184.

contemplating feelings, to describe them by or in terms of the circumstances in which they arise.⁵²⁸ Thus the difficulty in attributing repentance to God, Collingwood argues, arises from the mistaken belief that repentance is a feeling that is experienced only by a sinful will as it converts to a good will. According to this view of repentance, God, who is sinless, could not share in the repentance of man. But as Collingwood explains, '[w]e do not cease to repent when our will becomes good', for otherwise repentance becomes merely a transient experience and nothing more. Repentance, Collingwood explains, 'is necessarily the attitude of a good will. It does not precede conversion; it is the spirit of conversion'.⁵²⁹ Collingwood's argument is that repentance is a feeling that is not restricted to a sinful will, but can be experienced by any good will whatever, even the will of a sinless God. As Collingwood puts it,

A good man's feelings towards the sins of others is exactly the same kind of emotion as that which he feels towards his own. The fact that we call this feeling one of penitence when it regards himself and one of forgiveness (or punishment) when it regards others must not mislead us; for this is merely an example of the distinction according to circumstances of two emotions which when considered in themselves are seen to be one and the same.⁵³⁰

And it is through the repentance of others, the attitude of a good will communicated to a bad will, that a conversion of the bad will of the sinner to the good is stimulated. God's penitence for the sins of men is complete insofar it is completed through the sorrow and pain of the sinless Christ; it is 'sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world'. It is 'permanent' because it is the penitence of a 'permanently sinless mind'. And it is not only the communion between God's will and man's will, but the communion among human beings by the 'spectacle of God's suffering' *reproducing itself infinitely* in the 'consciousness of all mankind',

⁵²⁸ RP, 188.

⁵²⁹ RP, 189.

⁵³⁰ RP, 190.

There is only one way of destroying sin; namely to convert the sinner. And there is only one way of converting the sinner; namely to express, to express to him, in such a way that he cannot but realise it, the attitude towards himself of a good will; the attitude which unites condemnation and forgiveness in the concrete reality of vicarious repentance.⁵³¹

And hence, human repentance, Collingwood asserts, is

the peculiar feeling of a converted person towards his own evil past. A person only repents in so far as he is now good; repentance is necessarily the attitude of a good will. It does not precede conversion; it is the spirit of conversion.⁵³²

Further insight into the question of the human will and its relation to God's can also be gleaned from Collingwood's essays which deal conceptually with 'evil' and the 'Devil'. Collingwood's treatment of 'the problem of evil' is another informative example of how his methodology removes conceptual ambiguities that stand in the way of a reasoned solution to a theological problem, and in doing so reveals the relationship of problems addressed in one idiom, in this instance theology, to wider questions in moral and political philosophy (though, of course, there is no reason to think that Collingwood would have accepted the disciplinary boundaries by which the world of thought is carved up today).

The problem of evil, as Collingwood sees it, is the apparent irreconcilability of the 'conceptions of omnipotence, goodness, and evil', or as he puts it,

If God wills the evil which exists, He is not good; If He does not will it, He is not omnipotent. But, since it certainly exists, He either wills it or does not will it; therefore He is either not good or not omnipotent.⁵³³

⁵³¹ RP, 192.

⁵³² RP, 189. For an analytical treatment of Collingwood's view of atonement, see Dale Jacquette (2014). 'Collingwood on religious atonement'. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 76(2), 151-170.

⁵³³ Collingwood, 'What is the problem of evil?', in EPR, 148.

Collingwood's treatment of this dilemmatic problem of evil turns on explaining the philosophical error through which evil is understood not as an attribute of the will, but as the consequence of actions in which the will is merely the means to an end (the end being itself an evil in the form of either pain or sin). This mistaken attribution of evil (and similarly the attribution of good) to events or actions is, for Collingwood, symptomatic of the pervasiveness of utilitarian reasoning in philosophy and of its success in insinuating itself into the wider public consciousness.⁵³⁴ The problem is this: on the utilitarian view the will becomes merely the means to an end. Whether a will is a good will, or an evil will becomes no more than a corollary of whether or not the end in view or achieved can be described as good or evil. As Collingwood explains,

This point of view makes the will a means, and never anything but a means; the will so conceived does not by being good confer goodness on the things it does, but it derives goodness -a reflected glory- from these things, when they are good.⁵³⁵

Rejecting such utilitarian reasoning out of hand, Collingwood adduces Kant's famous declaration that "[t]here is nothing in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good without qualification, except a good will".⁵³⁶ Collingwood then proceeds to deny that 'pain' is necessarily a manifestation of an evil will, since at times the only thing a good will can do is inflict what can be described as a moral pain.

In both 'What is the problem of evil?' and 'The Devil', Collingwood's central aim is to give primacy to the human will and its inescapable significance, whether it is by refuting the

⁵³⁴ EPR, 151.

⁵³⁵ EPR, 152. Collingwood has very little sympathy with utilitarianism except in the narrowest sense of being one form of valid reasoning in economic questions. Otherwise, the plausibility of utilitarianism as a moral theory is not seriously entertained by him; indeed, and on the contrary, it is a dangerous notion to which he attributes -as we will see in the next chapter- an important role in the accelerating demise of civilization.

⁵³⁶ EPR, 150. Compare Immanuel Kant (1996). *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy* trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor, with a general introduction by Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 49: 'It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will'.

utilitarian conception of the will as means to evil, or by contesting the obsession with the idea of causation that leads us to seek a cause for wrong-doing outside the self,

But if the Law of Causation is a good servant, it is a bad master. It cannot be applied to the activity of the will without explicitly falsifying the whole nature of that activity. An act of free will is its own cause and its own explanation; to seek its explanation in something else is to treat it not as an act but as a mechanical event. It is hardly surprising that such a quest should end in a confusion greater than that in which it began. Evil, like every other activity of free beings, has its source and its explanation within itself alone. It neither needs nor can be explained by the invocation of a fictitious entity such as the Devil.⁵³⁷

Collingwood's key aim in these conceptually paired essays is to exalt human will as free: 'action is precisely that which is not caused; the will of a person acting determines itself and is not determined by anything outside it',⁵³⁸ since negation of the concept of free will is also a negation of the possibility of redemption, as already argued. Another way of making this point is to say that if evil is a predicate of the consequences of actions, and not of the will which acts, or if evil is caused from without the will, then redemption becomes at best meaningless, and at worst impossible. The Devil, as Collingwood asserts, is 'simply the person who is sinning: the wickedness into which he has made himself'.⁵³⁹ Collingwood ultimately situates the meaning of 'evil' in 'self-worship', the turning-away from communion with God and our fellow human beings,

Worship of the self pure and simple must always be devil-worship, for it is only the bad self that can be called self pure and simple. The good self is always something more than self; it is self informed and directed by the spirit of God. Man is only alone in the world when he has expelled the spirit of God from his heart and lives a life of evil; for there is no great central power of evil upon which he can then depend as in

⁵³⁷ Collingwood, 'The Devil', in EPR, 217-219.

⁵³⁸ EPR, 218-219.

⁵³⁹ EPR, 231.

the alternative case [goodness] he depends on God. The vacant sanctuary can only be filled with an idol created by man for his own worship; and this idol is the Broken-specter on the fog, the gigantic shadow of man himself when he turns away from the sunlight.⁵⁴⁰

To summarise, Collingwood's discussion of the philosophy of religion aims to remove ambiguities that obscure a clear-sighted understanding of the relationship between God and man. This relationship is presented as being one of communion. The Atonement showed what this meant in terms that human beings could grasp. The concepts of evil and the Devil were discussed by Collingwood in concordant terms. Collingwood's assertion of the Christian grounds for liberalism and civilization depended on this relationship, the relationship between the God of Christianity and man, because it established the terms of the relationship between man and himself, man and man, man and the world. That relationship was broken when man turned away from 'the sunlight' and disavowed the spirit of God within him. By contrast, it was renewed every time he chose to act on that spirit, or in that spirit. What this meant, to put it in philosophical terms, was to exercise free will. Without the freedom of the will, civilization as a process is neither meaningful nor indeed possible on Collingwood's own terms.

Collingwood assumed a God of goodness not of evil. Likewise, he assumed the human being's capacity for self-realisation as "will" in communion with, not in separation from, God. This was to assume the freedom on man's part to embrace and act upon the spirit of God within him. It was in communion not only with God but with other men that this spirit found its fullest expression. The final chapter discusses Collingwood's last words on these matters, which culminated in the arguments about civilisation set forth in *The New Leviathan*.

⁵⁴⁰ EPR, 231.

Chapter Six: Civilization as Incarnation

Introduction

The New Leviathan (1942) was the last of his books that Collingwood lived to see printed.⁵⁴¹ It is at once the most comprehensive account that he ever gave of the social and political implications of his wider thought and a fiercely polemical work in defence of civilization against the ideas and forces that, to his mind, were attacking it and threatened to destroy it.⁵⁴² In this account, which announced its four-part structure in its subtitle 'Man, Society, Civilization and Barbarism', Collingwood brings together familiar themes from across his earlier works to elucidate the meaning of civilization and the qualities which, above all others, he takes to be characteristic of it. Civilization as he understands it rests on a conception of freedom of the will that is the correlate and the pendant of a higher order consciousness. If *Speculum Mentis* is Collingwood's exposition of the various forms of consciousness, *The New Leviathan* is his exposition of the civilization made possible by the achievement of the kind of consciousness that sets a political society on its proper course away from the use of force and towards peace. Peace is a feeling of permanence in transience. It is never fixed in permanence. It is never guaranteed. No civilization is ever, or ever can be, wholly immune from the destructive elements in its own nature (what Collingwood called barbarism) that crave a return to irrational life and work to undermine the association of free men in a social community in which civilization consists. A political community, or state, is an incarnation of political action, because it represents *in concreto* the ongoing effort to overcome division within and between men, driven by a 'spirit of agreement' that is another name for the spirit of God.⁵⁴³ Civility is thus the choice of the 'dialectic' over the 'eristic' in dealing with others.⁵⁴⁴ It is a dutiful choice in so far as it is the 'assertion of man as will'⁵⁴⁵ and in that it serves no utility as a means to an end. Rather, civility is an ideal in itself, and *the* essence of the process of civilization towards the ideal

⁵⁴¹ For the composition of the text, see James Connelly and Peter Johnson (2019). The Composition of R. G. Collingwood's *The New Leviathan*. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 27: 114-133.

⁵⁴² David Boucher (1989) *The Social and Political Thought of R.G. Collingwood* is a dedicated interpretive exposition of *The New Leviathan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, 36.46.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.82.

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.88.

itself, which is the Christian ideal of reunion with God. This is why, for Collingwood, and as explained at the end of the previous chapter, it is only with the ‘appearance of free will in human life’ that a community embarks on a ‘process of civilization’,⁵⁴⁶ or as Collingwood puts it, the ‘awakening to free will is an awakening to a process of civilization’.⁵⁴⁷ And since the consciousness of free will is self-respect, the obverse of which is respect for others, being civilized is ‘inseparably bound up with self-respect’ and with respect for others as similarly-situated selves.⁵⁴⁸ This is the ground and expression of ‘the real community of life’ Collingwood had said was possible between men who shared ‘each other’s outward presence and inward thoughts’, for they expressed those thoughts in public actions that gave life to their shared (divine) spirit.

Thus, with Collingwood, Western civilization, or liberalism, is an achievement from within, just as the preservation of civilization is always menaced by the possibility of barbarism from within. In his political theory we find Collingwood positing an *ideal of civility* as that which sustains civilization as a process towards the ideal itself, an ideal which is reaffirmed continuously in conduct that eschews coercion in favour of freedom, reason, and deliberation. This ideal of civility which a political society can recognise but can never realise completely, upon which it converges asymptotically, is not merely a ‘liberal virtue’.⁵⁴⁹ It is the embodiment of a particular kind of freedom or consciousness; a consciousness that in the final analysis is made possible, so Collingwood argues, by the central doctrine of Christianity. The purpose of this chapter, in which all the different currents of thought I have been following out separately in the past three chapters flow together, is thus to vindicate the central hypothesis of this thesis, that Collingwood was offering a Christian solution to problem of civilisation.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.84.

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.87.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.16.

⁵⁴⁹ For this notion, compare e.g. William Galston (1988). ‘Liberal Virtues’. *American Political Science Review*, 82(4), 1277-1290; Stephen Macedo (1990). *Liberal Virtues: citizenship, virtue, and community in liberal constitutionalism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; Bican Şahin (2010). *Toleration: The Liberal Virtue*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.

The first part of the chapter develops an account of what civilization means for Collingwood, and of the underpinnings of civilization in his moral philosophy. In the second part, I address the danger to civilization that comes about when utilitarianism is taken for what it is not, that is, a moral theory, and rises to a hegemonic position in the public mind. In the third part, I highlight the impasse that is reached when Western political theory seeks to devise moral grounding for derivative liberal virtues, such as justice,⁵⁵⁰ whilst at the same time remaining determined to avoid any invocation of the religious consciousness and the metaphysical grounding which Christian faith provides to liberalism and civilization. And in the final part of the chapter, I draw on and expand Rudolf Bultmann's reading of Collingwood to argue that the absolute presuppositions of Christianity (represented metonymically in the Atonement) animate history, or the atoned mind. For when Collingwood's conception of historical consciousness (or complete freedom), is rightly understood with its metaphysical underpinning acknowledged and fully fleshed out, history becomes not only self-knowledge of the mind, but a mind atoned. Or so I hope to demonstrate.

A 'thing of the mind'

For Collingwood, a civilisation is 'a thing of the mind',⁵⁵¹ and 'mind is made of *thought*'.⁵⁵² *The New Leviathan* (1942) is, among other things,⁵⁵³ an attempt to demonstrate how the ideal of civilisation emerges as thought reflects upon itself and manifests its developing consciousness of itself in the concrete institutions of a mature political community.

⁵⁵⁰ In *An Essay on Metaphysics*, Collingwood makes an interesting observation when attributing monotheism to Plato in showing that the 'four 'virtues' of temperance, courage, wisdom, and justice were differentiations of one single 'virtue' which includes them all, so that a man is properly called 'good' not because he is either temperate or brave or wise or just but because he is alike temperate and brave and wise and just'. One may speculate that part of Rawls's difficulty was that he was trying to deal with a derivative virtue as if it were a higher-order virtue, and so that it was unable to play the load-bearing role he had assigned to it. Many of the structural difficulties with which Rawls wrestled in trying to make his idea of justice as fairness stable might be supposed to originate with this first false-step. Collingwood's remarks about Plato may be found in *An Essay on Metaphysics*, pp. 213-214.

⁵⁵¹ NL, 1.21.

⁵⁵² NL, 1.61.

⁵⁵³ See James Alexander (2016). The Philosophy of Political History in Oakeshott and Collingwood. *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 10: 279-303, which points out that Collingwood 'was doing several things in *The New Leviathan*. One was to attempt to cover the same territory Hobbes had covered in *Leviathan*. A second was to put forward his own novel theory of utility, rules and duty. A third was to indicate why the Germans were barbarians. [A] fourth was to propose [his own] three laws of politics'.

Collingwood's explanatory effort in his account of 'Man' in the first part of the book is directed at giving meaning to consciousness, because in its simplest form consciousness is 'the root of knowledge',⁵⁵⁴ and in its reflective or '*second-order form*', consciousness becomes knowledge itself.⁵⁵⁵ In other words, a knowing mind is a mind that is conscious of itself and is its own master. Here we see Collingwood laying out before the reader the most fundamental premise in all his philosophy, namely the historical nature of mind and, with that, the historical nature of all knowledge.

Early in his exposition, Collingwood helps his readers by offering a summary account of some of the principal ideas which run through his philosophy and need to be remembered to avoid unnecessary confusion. Collingwood asserts, for instance, that the sciences of mind and sciences of nature have different methods and different objects of study. Thus, civilization as 'a thing of the mind' is not to be approached or understood in the same way as natural facts are, but as a historical fact and the manifestation of human consciousness, one which is ascertained not by observation and experiment, but by reflection.⁵⁵⁶

Understanding civilization is not merely an enterprise in the field of politics *qua* politics, as if politics was somehow a field of activity that existed apart from other fields of activity and operated in complete independence of them.⁵⁵⁷ It is a philosophical endeavour as much as a practical one, that leaves none of the divisions between professionalised disciplines in place or intact. A 'body politic' is not reducible to the mechanical interactions of its parts and so it is not well understood by analogy with natural bodies; it is the embodiment of thought in practice, and chief amongst the thoughts which determine the nature and longevity of a

⁵⁵⁴ R.G. Collingwood (1942). *The New Leviathan, or, Man, Society, Civilization and Barbarism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 4.3.

⁵⁵⁵ NL, 4.31.

⁵⁵⁶ NL, 34.14-34.17

⁵⁵⁷ This is not to say that there are not, so to speak, laws of politics which apply peculiarly to politics: Collingwood offers three of his own. It is to say, instead, that there are laws (politics is not a lawless matter of power, or the continuation of war by other means or some such) and that such laws as there are not applied from without to delimit or circumscribe a sub-field of a wider activity, such as economic activity or purely moral activity: politics is constituted by people determining their own actions freely and according to criteria internal to their own thinking. For further discussion, see Browning (2004). *Rethinking R. G. Collingwood*, 130-40.

civilization are those which determine its worthiness, and which a civilization deems to be of an unequivocal value. And in Western civilization, Collingwood has no doubt that Christian faith and doctrine sit at the root and the centre of all that has been achieved in its name. As he puts it in *Fascism and Nazism*,

The real ground for the 'liberal' or 'democratic' devotion to freedom was religious love of a God who set an absolute value on every individual human being. Free speech and free inquiry concerning political and scientific questions; free consent in issues arising out of economic activity; free enjoyment of the produce won by a man's own labour – the opposite of all tyranny and oppression, exploitation and robbery – these were ideals based on the infinite dignity or worth of the human individual; and this again was based on the fact that God loved the human individual and Christ had died for him. The doctrines concerning human nature on which liberal or democratic practice was based were not empirically derived from research into anthropological data; they were a matter of faith; and these Christian doctrines were the source from which they were derived.⁵⁵⁸

There can be no doubt of the scale or the scope of Collingwood's claim. Virtually no aspect of life in society is untouched at its core by faith, or to be more exact, by the presuppositions of Christianity. It is not surprising, then, that Collingwood refers to religion as the 'vital warmth at the heart of a civilization' and the 'passion which inspires a society to preserve in a certain way of life and to obey the rules which define it'.⁵⁵⁹ What Collingwood was saying was that civilization rested on 'absolute presuppositions' that were Christian presuppositions.

These presuppositions had been acquired before they were debated or analysed and, historically speaking, they had been being acquired at least since the time that Christianity had imposed itself on Greek and Roman thought. The *New Leviathan* showed

⁵⁵⁸ R.G. Collingwood, 'Fascism and Nazism', in Collingwood, R.G. (1989). *Essays in Political Philosophy*. David Boucher (Ed.). Oxford, Clarendon Press, 190.

⁵⁵⁹ EPP, 187.

philosophically, besides much else, that these presuppositions were present in the movement he was describing from the untrained and untutored state of the human body and individual human feeling, to the particulars of human choice and language, to those aspects of our moral reasoning that shape decision-making—desire, happiness, right, and duty—towards, finally, the ongoing social exchange of civility that Collingwood understood by the term liberalism.

In showing this Collingwood was showing that a *rapprochement* between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ was as necessary as that between history and philosophy. It was necessary in order to defend Western Civilization from the ‘moral corruption propagated by the ‘realists’ dogma’ which rendered moral philosophy no more than a theoretical study with no consequences in or for what (in ordinary speech) we would call ‘real’ life.⁵⁶⁰ It was clear to Collingwood, however, that this was a false dichotomy: human beings lived in a world of ‘thoughts’, not in a world of unchanging ‘hard facts’; change the ‘thoughts’, and you change the way humans act and the reality which they inhabit.⁵⁶¹

Human action, Collingwood was saying, did not fall neatly into an array of classes and categories that were mutually exclusive and impermeable. Neither was action separate or separable from theories which provided structures of reasoning or from the thought that becomes action, any more than thoughts or ideas were separate from actions or alive and at work independently of the thoughts and actions of agents in the civilization in which they were found. Thought was incarnated in action. And if action was based on knowledge of the situation in which one acts, then knowledge -which can only be historical knowledge to merit the description of it as knowledge at all – is fundamental in all human action.⁵⁶² Hence when Collingwood describes civilization as ‘a thing of the mind’ he is not saying that it is separate from action. He is asserting that civilization stands or falls with the ‘thoughts’ which underpin it, sustain it, express it. There is no graver danger to civilization, Collingwood

⁵⁶⁰ Collingwood, R.G. (1939). *An Autobiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 147.

⁵⁶¹ AA, 147.

⁵⁶² AA, 148-149.

believed, than the danger from within that comes about when 'the people to whom it belonged have lost faith in it' and 'no longer feel it as a thing of absolute value'.⁵⁶³

To speak of value, as I have done just now, is to arrive at the heart of the matter. For Collingwood, liberalism is at its heart a moral achievement whose aim – as he would put it in his *Translator's Preface to The History of European Liberalism* by his friend Guido de Ruggiero - is 'to assist the individual to discipline himself and achieve his own moral progress', which for Collingwood is to say progress towards God.⁵⁶⁴ It is this aim, implicit in the ideal of civilization, which necessitates a prefatory exposition of Collingwood's moral philosophy, and in particular the meaning of complete freedom and individuality as he construed them. Inculcating and sustaining a conception of the individual as a moral agent, whose actions can embody a higher order consciousness, is the key to Collingwood's liberalism. It is a key which unlocks his belief that civilization is a process that requires continuous nourishment and assiduous cultivation to afford it the strength from within that it needs to withstand the attacks from within and without to which it will always be subject.

Collingwood believed that this process was being choked off, and that civilization was being throttled at its own hand. Responsibility for this act of self-suffocation was placed at the door of the realists because realism implied the opposite of everything Collingwood associated with civilization. It implied that thought was separate from action. It implied that actions could be assigned to different classes and categories after appropriately rigorous analysis. It implied that value was extrinsic not intrinsic and assigned value to what was valued rather than to what was valuable. Collingwood discovered all these implications in the predominance of the utilitarian ways of thinking that signalled realism's triumph and civilization's metaphysical demise.

What is wrong with utilitarianism?

What is wrong with utilitarianism? Collingwood's answer is that it is a cheat and a liar. It is a cheat because it offers an 'account of economicity' while 'professing to offer one of

⁵⁶³ EPP, 187.

⁵⁶⁴ EPP, *Translator's Preface*, 175.

morality'.⁵⁶⁵ It is a liar because it tells the world that the highest order of rationality is one that is organised around the idea of utility—what today would be called economic rationality. For Collingwood, Western civilization has essentially deceived itself into believing what utilitarianism wishes it to believe and, as a result, it is dying. (The terrible irony that a philosophy formally committed to bringing about the greatest happiness for the greatest number was assisting at their destruction was not lost on Collingwood, and helps to explain why he inveighed against it so passionately). The antidote is the historical method which Collingwood staunchly advocated and the rival philosophy he propounded.⁵⁶⁶

Collingwood's argument is that the dominant view of human thought and action, that is to say the view that is disclosed through the prism of utilitarianism, derives its appeal from a model of rationality that suppresses the emotions in favour of what he describes as a 'hard-headed, or thick-skinned, or rationalistic attitude towards life', an attitude that has its roots in the seventeenth century.⁵⁶⁷ The dogma that utility is 'the only kind of value that a thing can have' narrows our moral view of the world because it discredits all that cannot be explained in terms of its utility, which included for Collingwood such things as art and religion.⁵⁶⁸ Utilitarianism, Collingwood asserts, involves doing a certain violence to one's emotional nature by disregarding forms of consciousness which do justice to the emotions by making sense of them, as is the case with its treatment of art and religion, but also its treatment of magic.

In an especially vivid example of how an 'obsession' with utilitarian analysis can undermine understanding of other peoples and communities, Collingwood cites the ritual of villagers pulling up the grass from the earth when the earth quakes to alert it to their presence, in the belief that this would stop the earthquake. The response of a certain cast of mind to such rituals as this would be to scorn it as superstitious or irrational nonsense, and to observe that its efficacy in the matter of halting earthquakes was unlikely to be prodigious.

⁵⁶⁵ AA, 149.

⁵⁶⁶ Collingwood, 'The Utilitarian Civilization', in EPP, 197-200.

⁵⁶⁷ EPP, 197.

⁵⁶⁸ EPP, 198.

Indeed, such backward beliefs, it might be further supposed, would only tend towards the destruction of those possessing them, who would do better to flee than to pull at grass. Whilst such a response would conform in general terms to a utilitarian analysis and would satisfy one kind of scientific mind, it neglects to acknowledge and to explore the truth of the ritual as understood in terms of the emotional angst which it resolves. Not to enquire into the emotional needs which magic addresses is to impose on the 'savage' the error of 'pseudo-science' from a vantage point of an 'advanced' scientific civilization that tends to ridicule rather than trying to understand the consequences of the continuum that necessarily exists between emotions and thought in consciousness.

The example of how the 'savage' is misunderstood is a striking reminder of Collingwood's commitment to the historical method in philosophy. For one thing, interpreting the ritual of the 'savage' merely with reference to its utility is an imposition from without which seeks to mould rather than to understand the ritual for what it truly is: the manifestation of the consciousness of the 'savage' situated in its own unique historical and cultural context. Collingwood further argues that viewing the 'savage' under an abstract concept of a separate (and indeed lower or earlier) stage of being is mistaken, and one which is no less misleading about our consciousness in the present than it is about the life of the 'savage'. Or as he puts it,

The savage is not outside us; he is inside us. Conceiving ourselves as rational and civilized people, which is what we want to be, we are aware within ourselves of savage and irrational elements, parts of ourselves which we would willingly disown.⁵⁶⁹

Our fear of that which we deem irrational within, namely our emotions, does harm to our consciousness in the present, and sets the historian (by which Collingwood means each one of us) on a course that undermines the achievement of 'complete freedom of the will'

⁵⁶⁹ R.G. Collingwood (2005). *The Philosophy of Enchantment: Studies in Folktale, Cultural Criticism, and Anthropology*. David Boucher, Wendy James, and Philip Smallwood (Eds.). Oxford: Clarendon Press, 182.

without which the process of civilization would run into the sands. And it is for this reason that a moral philosophy which proceeds by the methods of abstraction, classification and generalization that utilitarianism had brought to high art presents a danger to a civilization that turns on history as self-knowledge of the mind.

Collingwood's response to such methods is his own historical method which, when applied to the question of action, reveals the roots of human actions to lie in our primitive or *capricious* nature. From these roots the exercise of historical thinking achieves the higher moral planes of *utility* and *right* and from there the possibility of further growth towards the ultimate destination of embodying a fully developed historical consciousness in the idea of *duty*. The relevance of Collingwood's exposition of theoretical and practical reason to political theory is that it gives meaning to individuality not as separateness from others, not driven by what is useful (utility) or even by obedience (right), but by a higher order consciousness of a 'self' made of all the details of the concrete reality in which the self and not-self exist. In other words, historical consciousness is the consciousness of the unity of the whole in which the mind exists.

The idea of duty should not be confused with the idea of obligation. Imagine that there exists a range of more or less agreeable alternatives. Either one plumps for one rather than the others for no reason – caprice – or one feels obliged to choose one alternative over the others because x or y – obligation – or there is a choice which is at the same time no choice: one must do one thing and only that thing. This last is duty. Duty, in other words, is a choice that stands at one end of a 'scale of forms' of the 'grounds' for 'goodness' in the choice of action, with caprice occupying the opposite end of the scale. And these grounds of moral choice and action are 'facts of consciousness'.⁵⁷⁰ As Collingwood explains in *Goodness, Caprice, and Utility*

My own consciousness being the first consciousness to which I have access (not of course the only one, because I share with others the use of certain languages

⁵⁷⁰ Collingwood, 'Goodness, Caprice, and Utility', in EPP, 79.

whereby our consciousnesses become to some extent common property), I ask myself: 'Is it true that I am never conscious of any reason why I choose one thing and refuse another?' I answer 'No, it is not true. It is true that I am sometimes not conscious of any such reason; but I am sometimes conscious of reasons; and these reasons are sometimes of one kind, sometimes of another.'⁵⁷¹

Though a capricious action in which the agent is not conscious of his or her reasons for choosing is indicative of 'psychical forces' rooted in emotions, other rational choices exist, and these are 'based on reasons' which are the object of moral philosophy.⁵⁷² And it is to the extent that a person is conscious of the individuality and uniqueness of the situation in which they make a choice that their choice embodies a higher order of goodness. Thus, Collingwood distinguishes 'three types' of reasoning in which the consciousness of making a rational choice is grounded: Utilitarian (choosing something because it is useful), regularian (choosing something because it is right), and historical (choosing something because it is the agent's duty). Choice, therefore, becomes more rational (which is to say less capricious) as it adheres to an obligation of one kind or another. In the case of utility, a choice commits the person to an end (a good) along with the implicit means to that end. In regularian reasoning, the choice is more rational insofar it involves obeying a rule such that an end is chosen because it is right, leaving the way in which the rule is to be obeyed undefined and open to arbitrariness, and therefore, caprice. But it is only in the case of duty that '[n]othing is left to caprice'.⁵⁷³ And it is perhaps appropriate to assert that no single concept captures as neatly or as fully the essence of Collingwood's philosophy as the concept of duty did.

Understanding the complexity of the concept of duty is necessary in order to buttress the ideal of civility from which liberalism derives nourishment and conviction, and to fully recognize the meaning of historical consciousness through the lens of Collingwood's metaphysics as the science of 'absolute presuppositions'. The next section of this chapter explores the idea of duty more fully.

⁵⁷¹ EPP, 80.

⁵⁷² EPP, 82-83.

⁵⁷³ EPP, 150-151.

Both utility and right are conceptions of 'particular' historical facts within which remain elements of caprice, but the concept of duty as posited by Collingwood is that of the 'individual' historical fact in all its concreteness, in the situation which a moral agent finds him- or herself. The counterpart of duty as practical reason, therefore, is historical consciousness as theoretical reason. Duty is Collingwood's exposition of complete freedom of the will in action. The recognition of a moral agent not of the utility of a given choice, nor of the need to obey a rule, but of the inescapable necessity of a choice that, paradoxically, only a will which is completely free can make. Unlike the utilitarian view of freedom, Collingwood argues that in its positive sense freedom of the will is '*freedom to choose*', while in its negative sense it is freedom '*from desire*'.⁵⁷⁴ In positing this definition of freedom of the will, Collingwood laid the groundwork for a conception of freedom that symbolizes a higher order consciousness, insofar freedom turns on the naming of, and reflection upon desires, in an 'involuntary' act of '*self-liberation*' that involves neither caprice nor the denial or suppression of desires:

The freedom of the will is, positively, *freedom to choose*; freedom to exercise a will; and negatively, freedom *from desire*; not the condition of having no desires, but the condition of not being at their mercy.⁵⁷⁵

It may be helpful to develop this idea by means of a contrast with the utilitarian conception of freedom that Collingwood was criticising. According to that conception, freedom is best understood as the freedom from coercion by society. It is a negative conception which sets the individual and society against one another in a contrapuntal relationship. Collingwood rejected that way of thinking about individuals and their social relations and developed an alternative conception of civilization that was grounded in relations between moral agents each in position of free will. Hence, civilization on Collingwood's terms becomes an exercise

⁵⁷⁴ NL, 13.25.

⁵⁷⁵ NL, 13.21-13.25.

in 'government and education' that engenders and 'arouses' self-respect in the individual.⁵⁷⁶ Self-respect is the consciousness of the self of freedom from the dictates of desire.⁵⁷⁷

Because freedom is an 'involuntary act of self-liberation', Collingwood argues that it 'cannot be done to a man by anything other than himself.'⁵⁷⁸ To ask why a man would seek to attain such freedom through '*self-denial*' is to ask a utilitarian question which, in terms of Collingwood's conception of free will, is a question that simply does not arise and so does not merit an answer.⁵⁷⁹ For Collingwood, that humans are capable of a higher order consciousness is a moral, not an empirical or an economic fact. As he explains,

In defiance of psychological probability, men do sometimes neglect or defy what is called their 'duty to themselves', and in consequence make the strange discovery of freedom.⁵⁸⁰

And it is with the 'appearance of free will in human life' - an 'awakening' of a kind - that the process of civilization begins, the kernel of which is 'the control of each man's emotions by his intellect: that is, the self-assertion of the man as will'.⁵⁸¹ By this route, we arrive at part of the answer to the question of what Collingwood means when he speaks of civilization as 'thing of the mind' which is not driven by mere utility, but by a higher order consciousness of the self and others with whom a person is in a community. For Collingwood, the realisation of oneself as being in possession of free will is correlative to the idea of others, like oneself, being likewise in possession of free will, as the following three passages from *The New Leviathan* make plain:

⁵⁷⁶ NL, 13.64.

⁵⁷⁷ NL, 13.3-13.31, and chapter XIII ('Choice').

⁵⁷⁸ NL, 13.21.

⁵⁷⁹ NL, 13.4.

⁵⁸⁰ NL, 13.39.

⁵⁸¹ NL, 36.84-36.88.

The idea of oneself is always correlative to the idea of something not oneself. The idea of oneself as a self of a particular kind is correlative to the idea of a not-self of the same kind.

The idea of oneself as having a will is correlative, therefore, to the idea of something other than oneself as having a will.

No man has any idea of himself as a free agent, without an idea of free agents other than himself and of social relations between them. No man has an accurate idea of himself as a free agent without an accurate idea of free agents other than himself and of social relations between them.⁵⁸²

Grounded in self-knowledge – which, in and of itself, is shaped by recognition of a not-self of the same kind - civilization is therefore *'something which happens to a community'*.⁵⁸³ Civilization, that is to say, turns on members of a community achieving the level of 'intellectual maturity'⁵⁸⁴ that enables the community to move away from the dictates of emotional (capricious) life towards a rational life of cooperation. Civilization is the choice to lead a 'dialectical' not an 'eristical' life,⁵⁸⁵ by which Collingwood meant the choice to live a life in which we engage in argument in order to understand ourselves and each other, not in order to win. It is a choice which is nourished by a recognition of the ideal of civility, that is, the ideal of *'refraining from the use of force'* in social relations between members of the community.⁵⁸⁶ The deficit in utilitarianism's account of freedom becomes all the more evident when one recognizes that its aim is to deliver freedom *from* society, in contrast to Collingwood's account of self-knowledge delivering freedom *to* join society.

The ideal of civility is the acme of Collingwood's moral and political philosophy, containing within its folds the essence of numerous assertions and conclusions that he had

⁵⁸² NL, 21.13, 21.14, 21.19.

⁵⁸³ NL, 34.4.

⁵⁸⁴ NL, 36.86.

⁵⁸⁵ NL, 36.82.

⁵⁸⁶ NL, 35.44-35.45.

propounded and reached over many years of reflection. As an ideal, complete civility cannot be attained; but a belief in the ideal is necessary for the process of civilization to continue. An articulation or intimation of the infinite in the language of moral and political philosophy, the ideal of civility turns not on weighing up finite alternatives but on the recognition of the absolute value of every human being as will, and that of the collective will of society. Civility presupposes self-knowledge, and with this, knowledge of others with whom the self is in relation in a community. If utilitarianism depicts reality as reducible in the final analysis always into means and ends, then civility negates this separateness at the inception of reality itself: the consciousness of who we are, that is, of our own *being*: the presupposition of reality itself. It follows that a freedom that is attained through self-knowledge is one which is readily unravelled by all that undermines the mind's consciousness of itself and its capacity to understand the emotions and desires, which, left unchecked, become breeding grounds for the capricious life and, soon enough, for the re-emergence of the forces of barbarism.

Collingwood's conception of the moral agency of the individual is bound-up with a conception of others as moral agents of the same kind. Complete individuality in moral agency for Collingwood, however, turns neither on utility nor on right but on a higher order conception of moral agency, namely duty. Collingwood's elevation of duty over right and utility is remarkable precisely because it is not an abstraction from utilitarianism. To act according to duty is to act according to an 'obligation' but not in the ordinary sense of the term. Duty is the consciousness of the concrete situation in which an individual finds themselves, and it is at the same time the consciousness of others as individuals in their own concrete situation. Duty is the consciousness of complete individuality and therefore the uniqueness of the concrete reality in which an action is both individual and unique. Duty is a consciousness that questions neither the ends nor the means, because it is a consciousness of the action in its own context as a 'historical fact', an action which happened as it did, or it could not have happened at all otherwise. As Collingwood puts it, '[t]he consciousness of duty is thus identical with the historical consciousness'.⁵⁸⁷

⁵⁸⁷ EPP, 157.

Collingwood did not deny that questions concerning the means and ends of actions were valid historical questions, but these are not questions that the historical consciousness is either interested or concerned with 'unless 'why' merely means 'how''.⁵⁸⁸ Or as Collingwood puts it,

The consciousness of duty precludes the consciousness of any possible alternatives. In being conscious that we ought to do a certain individual action we are conscious of our ability to do it, and also conscious of our inability to do anything else. In being conscious of our duty we are conscious that this and nothing else is what we can do.⁵⁸⁹

A Christian Civilization

The fundamental question to which these reflections point is, how are we to best understand the morally compelling choice towards others with whom we are in community on Collingwood's terms? Collingwood did not deny that human beings had a propensity to 'gain power over men by monopolizing knowledge', but that they also had a propensity to 'impart knowledge' and to follow a path of 'agreement and cooperation and sharing' was not less important.⁵⁹⁰ And this leaning, desire, or tendency is for Collingwood the 'origin and essence of civilization',

But although there is certainly an eristic of knowledge, a tendency to make it a matter of contention and competition and monopoly, there is also a dialectic of knowledge, a tendency to make it a matter of agreement and co-operation and sharing. This is the origin and essence of civilization. Civilization, even in its crudest and most barbarous form, in part consists in civility and in part depends on civility: consists in it so far as it consists in relations of man to man; depends on it so far as it consists in relations of man to nature.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁸ EPP, 157.

⁵⁸⁹ EPP, 159.

⁵⁹⁰ NL, 36.64-36.66.

⁵⁹¹ NL, 36.66-36.7.

Unlike Hobbes, Collingwood denied the utilitarian argument that human co-operation turns on the fear of the 'consequences of mutual enmity', asserting instead that co-operation between humans 'does not rest, as Hobbes thought, on so feeble a foundation as human reason'. Reason, Collingwood continues, 'supports [human co-operation], and powerfully; but it does not originate it'.⁵⁹²

In *The Essence of Civilization (The New Leviathan XXXVI)* Collingwood returns his readers to his starting point in the treatise, namely his account of 'Man' as a sentient being with 'feelings and appetites and passions and desires' that are 'inextricably confused and hopelessly contradictory'.⁵⁹³ Our feelings towards others, the 'pleasure' and the 'pain' we experience in 'human propinquity' are only ever resolved by the will and more precisely the decision to lead a 'dialectical' life or an 'eristical' life. If we choose to view the 'self' as separate from the 'not-self', then we *will* ourselves '*to do nothing*'. But awakened to free will, man is conscious of the 'self' as 'correlative with the not-self', and this marks the beginning of social cooperation and with it the sharing of knowledge which a man alone can never hope to command, nor gain from others without cooperation in a social community with others who, like him, are in possession of free will. Civility (or sociality) is thus the enactment of the historical consciousness of our complete individuality and that of others, which is identical with duty.

A process which is a 'thing of the mind', as civilization or liberalism is, thus thrives or withers away to the extent that a social community promotes the realisation of free will in its members, or lets its guard down, leaving the way open to the forces of barbarism and the capricious life of a non-social community, at the whim of emotions and desires: men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind. 'Then came the *Daily Mail*', Collingwood writes in *An Autobiography* (1939),

⁵⁹² NL, 36.71-36.74.

⁵⁹³ NL, 36.81.

the first English newspaper for which the word 'news' lost its old meaning of facts which a reader ought to know if he was to vote intelligently, and acquired the new meaning of facts, or fictions, which it might amuse him to read. By reading such a paper, he was no longer teaching himself to vote. He was teaching himself not to vote; for he was teaching himself to think of 'the news' not as the situation in which he was to act, but as a mere spectacle for idle moments.⁵⁹⁴

Similar opinions have been voiced since.

In order to fully appreciate the meaning and significance of Collingwood's assertion of the Christian roots of Western liberal civilization, it is necessary to repeat again his crucial statement on metaphysics, that our very ability to exercise reason, if it is to be possessed at all, is dependent on the special kind of presuppositions named 'absolute presuppositions'. 'Absolute presuppositions' are necessary assumptions about reality as a whole; necessary because without them, no argument is possible and assumptions because in their very nature they are not answers to any questions. Once articulated by the metaphysician, 'absolute presuppositions' are revealed as the intellectual anchor which moor all thought.

Collingwood's argument is that the central doctrine of Christianity, the atonement, is 'an integral part of the ordinary moral consciousness' in Christian society.⁵⁹⁵ In and of itself, the atonement is an act of duty in which God assumes responsibility for a debt incurred by man,⁵⁹⁶ and Christ's action is one of duty insofar it is an action that 'he is in no sense bound to do'. The atonement is an individual act by an agent 'having free will'.⁵⁹⁷ What the atonement as a conception imparts to the moral consciousness is the 'possibility' of a higher order moral act that is completely rational and freed from caprice, an act of free will that 'admits of no alternatives'.⁵⁹⁸ As Collingwood puts it,

⁵⁹⁴ AA, 155

⁵⁹⁵ NL, 17.35.

⁵⁹⁶ NL, 17.32-17.35.

⁵⁹⁷ NL, 17.52

⁵⁹⁸ NL, 17.5-17.51.

*A man's duty on a given occasion is the act which for him is both possible and necessary: the act which at that moment character and circumstance combine to make it inevitable, if he has a free will, that he should freely will to do.*⁵⁹⁹

If historical consciousness is the consciousness of the self and others -like the self- in possession of free will in 'unique' situations in which the agent 'can do no other' action except what they did,⁶⁰⁰ then it is a consciousness that rests on the moral certainty rather than the moral dilemma of the *inevitability of choice*:

Now man, by his misguided thirst for knowledge, partakes of that knowledge which is forbidden, namely error, or the human wisdom which negates God's wisdom. This error deforms his own true, that is divine, nature, and the deformation takes the shape of banishment from the presence of God into the wilderness of the visible world.⁶⁰¹

But historical consciousness or duty, arguably, involves far more than imparting an attitude of forgiveness and forbearance in the social relations that characterise liberalism. Forgiveness, as Collingwood explains in *Religion and Philosophy* - and as I have argued in the preceding chapter - is a peculiar form of kind punishment, which punishes without the exacting of physical or material pain, since forgiveness – the attitude of the good will towards sin – presupposes the committing of a sin which the good will rebukes. God's forgiveness through the atonement is not the forgiveness of an infinite succession of sinful human actions; rather it is the forgiveness of the original sin, the sin which made choice *inevitable*. Being infinite through the death of a sinless Christ, God's forgiveness of the original sin is his recognition of the human predicament, the *inevitability of choice*, and with

⁵⁹⁹ NL, 17.8.

⁶⁰⁰ NL, 18.52.

⁶⁰¹ R.G. Collingwood (1924). *Speculum Mentis, or, The Map of Knowledge*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 303. It is worth reflecting at this point on how Collingwood describes true human nature as being simply yet comprehensively divine. For Collingwood, there is no such thing as human nature in isolation or separation from divine. Rather, such a notion of human nature is a failure to attain its truth.

it, the possibility of freedom of the will. If liberal political theory is in search of the *a priori* moral certainty which eluded Kant,⁶⁰² then it is the certainty that choice in itself is not a sin *per se* but the consequence of a sin that is forgiven. Thus every human action becomes a moral action according to the agent's intellectual maturity, the highest order of which is that which seeks communion with man through God's *forgiveness* of the original sin, as well as through God's *acceptance* of the necessity of this human predicament. Thus, when such moral certainty is conceived in political terms, it becomes apparent how

[t]he outward characteristic of all liberalism is the fact that it permits the free expression of opinion, no matter what the opinion may be, on all political questions. This attitude is not toleration; it is not the acquiescence in an evil whose suppression would be a greater evil; it is not a mere permission but an active fostering of free speech, as the basis of all healthy political life.⁶⁰³

In political life, then, '*to civilize is to socialize*',⁶⁰⁴ through a life of moral and political education and practice whose aim is to bring into society those who have not yet achieved mental maturity and its pendant, free will. Collingwood provides a generalised and somewhat abstract account of the structure of a 'body politic' to facilitate the understanding of the politics of civilization. This account receives its clearest expression in *The Three Laws of Politics*.

The three laws of politics, as Collingwood sets them down, are 'meant to hold good of every body politic without exception, irrespective of all difference between one kind and another'.⁶⁰⁵ The first of the three laws is that '*a body politic is divided into a ruling class and a ruled class*' (emphasis original). The second law is that '*the barrier between the two classes is permeable in an upward sense*', and the third is that '*there is a correspondence between*

⁶⁰² NL, 17.62-17.7.

⁶⁰³ R.G. Collingwood (2005). *The Philosophy of Enchantment: Studies in Folktale, Cultural Criticism, and Anthropology*. David Boucher, Wendy James, and Philip Smallwood (Eds.). Oxford: Clarendon Press, 319.

⁶⁰⁴ NL, 37.22.

⁶⁰⁵ NL, 25.61.

the ruler and the ruled’ (emphasis original).⁶⁰⁶ The most important distinction between the *ruling* and the *ruled* which Collingwood posits is the degree of free will achieved by members of each class, which correlates with membership of society or the non-social community, respectively. Whereas in a community, human beings live together ‘whether of their own free will or not’, in society ‘they are members of their own free will’.⁶⁰⁷ In other words, a society is a ‘social community’. Accordingly, a body politic will always contain a mixture of a ‘social community’ and the ‘non-social community’, that is, those who in matters of politics act out of their own free will, and those who in the same matters act under a ‘constraint’ of some kind, and therefore not out of free will.⁶⁰⁸ This helps to explain why Collingwood chose Hobbes as his foil in the *New Leviathan*. It was Hobbes who had first recognised that the body politic was neither a purely social community nor a purely non-social community, but both and something more than either one. Hobbes was a dialectician, who had aimed to reconcile these two views but had not quite succeeded. Hence a *New Leviathan*, which retained the ambition but improved upon the argument.

The threat to civilization

Hobbes had recognised that no society is ever free from non-social elements within it,⁶⁰⁹ and so that civility was an ideal that can never be fully realised. Collingwood concurred. As he put it, ‘any society is actually found to be in a mixture of civility and barbarity’.⁶¹⁰ Societies that are undergoing the process of civilization would find themselves, therefore, in a process of ‘*asymptotic approximation to the ideal condition of civility*’.⁶¹¹ Barbarism, the enemy within, is - like civilization- a process and a thing of the mind. As Collingwood puts it,

⁶⁰⁶ NL, 25.1-25.98.

⁶⁰⁷ Collingwood, ‘The Three Laws of Politics’ in EPP, 207.

⁶⁰⁸ EPP, 208.

⁶⁰⁹ In its simplest form, the family is a mixed community since the children are necessarily non-social members of the community since they are not in possession of free will. NL, 160-176.

⁶¹⁰ NL, 34.52

⁶¹¹ NL, 34.56. Collingwood makes a comment in passing about his use of the phrase ‘asymptotic approximation’ which is note-worthy since it is typical of his strong aversion to the use of technical terms or jargon. ‘Rather disgustingly’ is how Collingwood describes his own usage of the phrase ‘asymptotic approximation’. NL, 35.11.

By barbarism I mean hostility towards civilization; the effort, conscious or unconscious, to become less civilized than you are, either in general or in some special way, and, so far as in you lies, to promote a similar change in others.⁶¹²

It is necessary to highlight that barbarism is not the same as savagery, though both are 'ways of being uncivilized'.⁶¹³ This distinction is important since, as we have seen earlier, Collingwood recognizes the 'savage' within as a residue of our primitive nature. But to speak of a primitive nature which, relative to others, is less civilized, is not the same as being hostile to civilization and willing its destruction:

Savagery is a negative idea. It means not being civilized, and that is all. In practice, I need hardly say, there is no such thing as absolute savagery; there is only relative savagery, that is, being civilized up to a certain point and no more.⁶¹⁴

And if civilization turns on the 'dialectical' life in social relations, then barbarism turns on the 'eristical' life, fed and animated by overpowering emotions and desires in social relations that, left unresolved, would make those relations in the end impossible. As Collingwood explains,

Barbarism is a process too. It is a process in which the non-social community, instead of drifting as before on the winds of emotion, accentuates the non-social, non-voluntary, character of its life; hands itself over to the control of emotions which it has contemplated controlling but has decided not to control.⁶¹⁵

Collingwood's concern for the fate of European civilization infused his writings, and received dedicated attention in his later books, including *The Principles of Art* (1938), *An Essay on*

⁶¹² NL, 41.12

⁶¹³ NL, 41.1

⁶¹⁴ NL, 41.11

⁶¹⁵ NL, 36.9

Metaphysics (1940), and *The New Leviathan* (1942).⁶¹⁶ Yet Collingwood believed that the defeat of barbarism was self-assured. Being '*a will to do nothing*', barbarism is the 'negation of sociality' and the indulgence in the 'chaotic rule of emotion' to its own self-detriment. All that barbarism does, as Collingwood puts it, 'is to assert itself as will and then deny itself as will'.⁶¹⁷ Civilization, on the other hand, is more likely to prevail '*in the long run*'.⁶¹⁸ Because civilization manifests itself in the infinity of '*asymptotic approximations*' to the ideal of civility, the ideal itself is never realised, and therefore could not be destroyed. And the continuity and re-emergence of civilization as a process is unavoidable as long as people remained who could recognise the ideal of civility, and who are prepared to 'go on defending it, whatever happens, until its cause is victorious'.⁶¹⁹

But the process of civilization, as we have noted, is always at risk from the forces of barbarism, especially in a society which has achieved an advanced level of civilization. This is because, Collingwood argues, in such a society acting civilly becomes second nature. In that setting the rationalisation of emotions and desires demands less of an intellectual effort in a 'self' that is well-trained and practiced in the civil norms of the social community; a self for whom high grade thinking is the *zeitgeist*. It is at such an advanced point in the process of civilization, at the dizzy heights of its achievement, that civilization becomes arguably most vulnerable to its enemies, and the vitality of its metaphysical roots becomes most needed for its aid and defence. Not so with barbarism, in which thought remains closely bound up with *sentiment*, attuned to the emotions which it has no desire to understand or to rise from, but merely to acquiesce in their chaotic nature that can never be satisfied, as Collingwood explains,

⁶¹⁶ Boucher and Vincent (2000). *British Idealism and Political Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 186.

⁶¹⁷ NL, 36.91-36.94.

⁶¹⁸ NL, 41.67.

⁶¹⁹ NL, 41.68-41.74.

A civilized man or relatively civilized man can work unconsciously at promoting civilization; that is, he can promote civilization without any clear idea of what he is promoting or why.⁶²⁰

In the fight between civilization and barbarism, Collingwood went on, only civilization could fight in this unconscious way:

Barbarism can never be in this sense unconscious. The barbarist, as I will call the man who imitates the conditions of an uncivilized world...cannot afford to forget what it is that he is trying to bring about; he is trying to bring about not anything positive, but something negative, the destruction of civilization; and he must remember, if not what civilization is, at least what the destruction of civilization is.⁶²¹

The wellbeing of civilization, Collingwood believed, was intertwined with the congruence of the self, and the ability of the mind to name and make sense of emotions and desires, rather than repress them or conversely unleash them in a capricious way of life. Thus, an inharmonious consciousness is a corrupted consciousness, and unaware of itself as free will. As Boucher and Vincent put it with reference to Collingwood's *The Principles of Art*,

To suppress or deny one's emotions, that is, preventing them from being expressed, results in a corruption of consciousness, a form of delusion which undermines social relations.⁶²²

Once restrained, distracted or subdued, whether by the mechanisation of life, fragmentation of the human experience into minutiae and specialization, or utilitarianism, the emotional energy at the heart of civilization becomes vulnerable to those who can arouse the passions at the expense of rationality. Writing in 1940, Collingwood explains this in relation to the rise of Fascism and Nazism in Europe,

⁶²⁰ NL, 41.5.

⁶²¹ NL, 41.53.

⁶²² Boucher and Vincent (2000). *British Idealism and Political Theory*, 198.

The point to which I want to draw attention is this. Alike in Italy, in Germany, and in Spain, the vast majority of the population is sympathetic to the liberal-democratic ideals and hostile to the Fascist and Nazi minority that has seized power. And persons belonging to that majority know very well why power has been snatched from their hands. It is because their Fascist or Nazi opponents have somehow contrived to tap a source of energy which is closed to themselves. Fascist and Nazi activity exhibits a driving power, a psychological dynamism, which seems to be lacking from the activity of those who try to resist it. The anti-Fascists and anti-Nazis feel as if they were opposed, not to men; but to demons; and those of them who have analysed this feeling say with one accord that Fascism and Nazism have succeeded in evoking for their own service stores of emotional energy in their devotees which in their opponents are either latent or non-existent.

And Collingwood goes on to conclude, with great poignancy, that

Liberalism and democracy may be wise, but the people who care for it do not care for it passionately enough to make it survive.⁶²³

In defence of faith

Collingwood always tended to chart his own course, in apparent disregard of, or in opposition to, the theoretical concerns that principally occupied his contemporaries. He was out of step with the intellectual fashions of his day. His tone is not one that we are still accustomed to hearing in political theory. In *British Idealism and Political Theory*, Boucher and Vincent capture something of this combination of elements when they describe Collingwood as a 'political philosopher in the grand theory tradition', whose concerns are not of 'narrow analytical philosopher'. Somewhat anachronistically, Collingwood's political philosophy is placed alongside Charles Taylor's *Politics of Recognition* in which the 'self' is

⁶²³ EPP, 191.

not atomised, but a correlative of the culture in which it arises, and to which it belongs.⁶²⁴ On the ‘importance of Christianity to civilization’, Boucher and Vincent draw parallels between Collingwood and Alasdair MacIntyre insofar that both recognise the indispensability of beliefs in human conduct, and the adversity to civilization of the ‘fragmentation of experience’ when religion is seen not as integral part of a complete life, but a confined and severed activity from other aspects of life that are seen as secular.⁶²⁵

Yet, when Collingwood’s methodological reforms are explored, specifically in history and metaphysics, for the additional light they might shed on his assertion of the Christian roots of Western civilization, they suggest an argument that goes even beyond the indispensability of Christian doctrine to liberalism as an attitude, or to the unity of the human experience in which all parts are integral to its wellbeing. For Collingwood, history is not the past but the highest form of consciousness of the past, in the present. History is the knowing mind, conscious of its being as free will, and that of others in possession of free will. And if Western civilization turns on the absolute presuppositions of Christian faith, then history – as understood by Collingwood – is only made meaningful, and even possible, by the Atonement. In order to expand this idea, we need to take a closer look at the presuppositions of ideal of civility with the aid of Collingwood’s metaphysics, and a critique by Peter Johnson of Collingwood’s emphasis on civility, rather than justice, as the liberal ideal.

If Collingwood’s unequivocal assertion that liberalism and freedom are not the fruits of scientific discovery, but of the central doctrine of Christianity, of the love of God, and the infinite value he placed on every individual human being, then civility – the correlative of the awakening to free will – needs to be understood as being underpinned by the ‘absolute

⁶²⁴ Boucher and Vincent (2000). *British Idealism and Political Theory*, 206.

⁶²⁵ Boucher and Vincent (2000). *British Idealism and Political Theory*, 202-203. Readers who wish to pursue further some of the parallels between MacIntyre and Collingwood, and to consider the ways in which Collingwood’s writing may have influenced some of MacIntyre’s formulations, would do well to compare the ‘Prologue’ to *Speculum Mentis* with the ‘Disquieting Suggestion’ that opens MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*. MacIntyre explicitly acknowledged a debt to what he called Collingwood’s ‘conception of historical enquiry’ in the ‘Prologue’ (and it may be that the choice of that term is itself a quiet nod to Collingwood, and to *Speculum Mentis* in particular) to the Third Edition of *After Virtue*, written in 2007. See p. xii.

presuppositions' of Christian faith. To view civility not as Collingwood saw it, but in isolation from its metaphysical grounds in Christian faith, is to sever the concept from what gives it a unique meaning that goes beyond mere politeness, or mere restraint in the use of force. Such an abstracted view of civility also jars with Collingwood's historical method. An example of this is Peter Johnson's critique of Collingwood's elevation of civility as the liberal ideal in his comparative reading of Collingwood's views with Rawls's justice as fairness. Although Johnson recognizes the advocacy of fairness in Collingwood's writings on economics, and that refraining from the use of force, that is, civility in practice, supports a conception of the common good, the analysis he provides of the ideal of civility in Collingwood's philosophy is presented without its underpinnings in the Christian doctrine. Whilst Johnson's analysis is fluent and illuminating, it inevitably turns into comparison between civility and justice as separable concepts, and the metaphysical depth of the ideal of civility, which I have argued here, is not explored.

Johnson's argument is essentially that civility *qua* 'abstaining from the use of force' [...] 'distributes nothing',⁶²⁶ and that in the contemporary world 'liberals will argue that civility is a poor substitute for justice' to address 'economic intemperance'.⁶²⁷ However, the ideal of civility, or the elimination of force from all human relations, is bound up with Collingwood's conceptions of historical consciousness, freedom of the will, intellectual maturity, self-knowledge, and ultimately self-respect and respect for others as agents in possession of free will. Civility is not so much a political state of affairs that can be achieved through legislation, nor is it a good that can be distributed equally or equitably to members of a social community. That Collingwood's emphasis in *The New Leviathan* is on civility and not on justice as the overriding liberal ideal is interpreted by Johnson as an oversight of a kind, since civility need not deliver justice, and in a society that is not just, civility may well become mere politeness and of little worth. Johnson rightly asserts that civility if it is understood to be no more than the elimination of force from human dealings leaves much

⁶²⁶ Peter Johnson (2008). 'Talking with Yahoos: Collingwood's Case for Civility'. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 16(3), 618.

⁶²⁷ Peter Johnson (2010). 'R.G. Collingwood and economic licentiousness'. *International Journal of Social Economics*, 37(11), 839-851.

to be discussed. But if it is understood not simply as a liberal virtue, but as the embodiment in human dealings within society of the infinite value of the individual human being, then it provides the grounds for, not an alternative to, derivative liberal virtues, of which justice is only one. Johnson is right to assert that civility distributes nothing, but then again neither does faith.⁶²⁸

It is not only the overtly secular approach exemplified by Johnson that appears to miss the cogency of the idea of history (or mind) as something deeply religious in character. Although somewhat sympathetic to Collingwood's attempt at a 'civilizing mission' through a historical philosophy of a kind,⁶²⁹ Maurice Cowling's critique of Collingwood is not as sympathetic in its estimation of Collingwood's overall achievement. Having made an 'improper identification between religion and civilization',⁶³⁰ and having sought to account for liberalism as a manifestation of the individual consciousness in which theory and philosophical method were paramount, Collingwood – according to Cowling- ended up subordinating religion to philosophy, and allowing 'philosophy and history a quasi-religious authority which no sensible man will allow, except inadvertently, to any academic subject'.⁶³¹ *The New Leviathan*, Cowling maintained, was symptomatic of Collingwood's 'later political ravings',⁶³² the rantings of someone who was depressed by the death of liberalism and, incapable of seeing it for what it was, wished to bring it back from the dead.

⁶²⁸ In *Talking with Yahoos: Collingwood's Case for Civility*, Peter Johnson effectively dismisses the link between faith, civility and politics in Collingwood's political philosophy: 'When Collingwood attempts to link politics and civility it is noteworthy that he turns to religion for support. The difficulty here is how Collingwood's understanding of faith as expressing an 'inward flame' can fit with his view of civility as a shared practice. How can civility be a matter of personal feeling when its language is necessarily public and inter-subjective? Additionally, Collingwood's attempt to return liberalism to what he takes to be its Christian origins raises doubts about the status of civility as an ideal embodying the principles of the Sermon on the Mount. More specifically, Collingwood's picture of civility as an ideal does little in the way of smoothing a path for his wish to subsume justice under it. Clearly, the economic injunctions of the Sermon on the Mount might be satisfied either by requiring the rich to give away all they have or by allowing them to keep what they have but only if this makes the poor better off. Given the equivocal nature of such interpretations, it is hard to think of them as absolute presuppositions of civility. Are they, therefore, merely the relative presuppositions of a particular society at a particular stage of its development?' (p. 621).

⁶²⁹ Maurice Cowling (1980). "Collingwood". In *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England* (Cambridge Studies in the History and Theory of Politics, pp. 159-190). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 160-161.

⁶³⁰ Cowling (1980), 161.

⁶³¹ Cowling (1980), 189.

⁶³² Cowling (1980), 188.

This ambitious, but obviously forlorn, enterprise was not really proceeded with, unless *The New Leviathan* is regarded as its completion. There was no doubt that Collingwood connected the death of civilization with the death of liberalism and explained both in part in terms of the predominance of realism. The problem, for Cowling, was that he lacked good reasons for doing so.⁶³³

Indeed Cowling was dismissive of Collingwood's central thesis, of the profound impact of realism and psychology as a pseudo-science on civilization. As Cowling puts it,

Even if realism was mistaken or psychology was a misconception, it was absurd to imagine that thought-fashions could destroy civilization so simply, or, assuming that they could, that the way in which Collingwood put the matter showed any better sense than Popper of the relationship between thought and practice.⁶³⁴

Cowling's approach to Collingwood was to consider chronologically the full range of his writing in the belief that approaching a thinker in this way will disclose structures of thought which are concealed by reading a single work in isolation, or even a number of works.⁶³⁵ He was interested, as in a sense I am interested, in the logic of Collingwood's position, its 'deep structures', more than in surface changes to his explicit doctrine. With Collingwood, these structures were found to be liberal structures and, because Cowling disliked liberalism almost as much as he disliked liberals, deplored accordingly.

This 'structuralism', for want of a better term, enables him to discount the *New Leviathan* as an irrelevance (as well as an embarrassment) because Collingwood had already revealed himself across the range of his writings. My own approach, as I have just said, is not unlike

⁶³³ Cowling (1980), 186. Cowling is dismissive of *The New Leviathan* which he thought 'would be easy to take [...] apart. But since Collingwood was dying when he wrote it, it may be best to ignore it'.

⁶³⁴ Cowling (1980), 188.

⁶³⁵ Cowling (1980), p. xxiv gives a summary statement of his method. Michael Bentley reports a conversation in which the method was explained more bluntly: "You have to bash them over the head until they tell you what you want to know". See Michael Bentley (2010). 'Herbert Butterfield and Maurice Cowling', in Robert Crowcroft, S. J. D. Green and Richard Whiting (Eds.), *The Philosophy, Politics, and Religion of British Democracy: Maurice Cowling and Modern Conservatism*. London: I. B. Tauris, pp. 85-107, on p. 103.

Cowling's in assuming that there are structures of thought which run through and are put to work across the range of Collingwood's writings, but like Skinner I do not suppose that any single text is best read as a systematic exposition of an unchanging doctrine that is never subject to strains or that everything in Collingwood's thought was teleologically ordered towards an end, the end of defending liberalism, and so towards *The New Leviathan*. That *The New Leviathan* was Collingwood's final publication before his death need not be construed as his culminating statement and conclusion in his attempt to resuscitate what he saw a dying Civilization. Instead, and as Collingwood himself made clear, it was his philosophy of history -which he never concluded and parts of which were posthumously published in *The Idea of History*, and later superseded by the incomplete *The Principles of History* – which he hoped would be the culmination of his life's work.

We cannot grasp Collingwood as a political philosopher without taking seriously his philosophy of history, not only because of its methodological implications for philosophy as a whole, but because of its potential to deliver for Cowling that which he is probably seeking in Collingwood: a meaningful account of the roles of Christian faith in Western civilization. Once those roles are identified, the relevance of Collingwood's identification of the threat to civilization with realism is revealed as anything but an absurdity.

Cowling would be right in his dismissal of the threat of realism as conceived by Collingwood, if realism were to be conceived as Cowling conceives it, as an academic position whose influence need not be presumed to reach any further into the fabric of civilization than any other so-called theory of knowledge talked about in philosophy departments at modern universities – that is to say, not very far at all. But when Collingwood's philosophy of history is taken seriously then realism is revealed as something altogether more pernicious. It is a congeries of positions which work together to lull the mind into a narcotic and indifferent state in which a consciousness which prefers idleness to thinking and cleverness to knowledge can find itself a home. Extending a view of an inanimate and mechanical nature to a philosophy of mind and a theory of knowledge was not the invention of realism, but what it propounded as its solution to the predicament of the separation between the mind

and reality, the individual and the whole, the finite and the infinite, and between man and God, was a solution the essence of which is to do nothing. And this was what, for Collingwood, realism meant, and it is why, for him, realism meant the decay of civilization.

What is perhaps Collingwood's most captivating and most chilling account of this dreadful eventuality is given in another of his later works, *The Principles of Art*, in a long and admiring discussion of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.⁶³⁶ As construed by Collingwood this was the abiding theme in Eliot's poetry, the decay of civilization, defined not by 'violence or wrongdoing', nor 'the persecution of the virtuous and...the flourishing of the wicked' - though there is no doubt that Collingwood saw this happening all across the continent - nor even 'a triumph of the meaner sins, avarice and lust'. This was a time in which the great deeds and great crimes of the past were nothing but remembrance; the present was only 'stony rubbish, dead tree, dry rock, revealed in their nakedness by an April that breeds lilacs out of the dead land, but no new life in the dead heart of man'. The picture painted, Collingwood went on,

is not the picture of any individual, or of any individual shadow, however lengthened into spurious history by morning or evening sun; it is the picture of a whole world of men, shadows themselves, flowing over London Bridge in the winter fog of that Limbo which involves those who, because they never lived, are equally hateful to God and to his enemies.

The poem, as Collingwood expounds it, depicts a world in which 'the wholesome flowing water of emotion, which alone fertilizes all human activity, has dried up. Passions that once ran so strongly...are shrunk to nothing. No one gives; no one will risk himself by sympathizing; no one has anything to control. We are imprisoned in ourselves, becalmed in a windless selfishness. The only emotion left in us is fear: fear of emotion itself, fear of death by drowning in it, fear in a handful of dust'. Collingwood adds, perhaps unnecessarily, that the poem 'is not in the least amusing'. It describes an evil where no one person and no

⁶³⁶ R. G. Collingwood (1938). *The Principles of Art*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 333-35.

one thing is to blame, a disease which 'has so eaten into civilization that political remedies are about as useful as poulticing a cancer'.⁶³⁷

Realism was that cancer; and once Collingwood had rejected that, and the enervation, drift and decay he associated with it, his pursuit of an alternative led him to the thing that stood in opposition to the separation of mind and reality that embodied it and metastasised it. And since the whole of reality, in its unity, is everything that has happened (or, if you prefer, the past), he was led to an idea of history that restored to consciousness not only its self-knowledge, but the belief in the value of ideals in shaping civilization. The fragility of ideals, such as the ideal of civility, is what for Collingwood grounds the concern for the fate of Western civilization, since civility has no logical imperative except itself; its possibility arises in what the mind, and in Collingwood's political philosophy the Christian mind, absolutely presupposes about the nature of God and God's expression of Himself in and through the relationship between human beings and His relationship with them.

Cowling does praise Collingwood's theory of 'absolute presuppositions' though astonishingly he sees no more in it than advancing the case for contextualization of the past, or as he put it,

[t]he doctrines of absolute presuppositions and total contextualization were brilliant conceptions which deserved better than to be reduced to a memory which is little more than a caricature as a classic statement of the importance of understanding the context in understanding any artefact from the past.⁶³⁸

Whilst Cowling recognizes Collingwood's identification of the intellectual content of religion with the metaphysics of thought, it is less clear that Cowling grasped the implications of Collingwood's reform of metaphysics in the full light of his reforms of what history is, or what history could be. History as self-knowledge of the mind was the logical antidote to

⁶³⁷ *PA*, 334-35.

⁶³⁸ Cowling (1980), 188.

realism because once reality (or the past) was recognized as part of the present, knowledge of the past was ultimately knowledge of the mind itself as thought.

But history on Collingwood's account, as I have argued already, demands of the historian a *civility*, or a *sociality*, towards past agents seen as being in possession of, and acting out of, free will or duty. How might the historian (by which Collingwood means each one of us) be able to re-enact the past without the kind of 'absolute presuppositions' which recognize the freedom of the will of past agents, the freedom of choice, and the *inevitability of choice*, is the question which arises for Collingwood, and to which the answer is provided by the central doctrine of Christian faith, namely the Atonement.

It is not so much that Collingwood, as Cowling wishes to suggest, 'allowed philosophy and history a quasi-religious authority' to an academic subject to which religion -integral to life as it is – was subordinated. Rather, neither philosophy nor history, nor even religion, were merely academic subjects in Collingwood's hands. These were activities of the mind that were neither separate from one another, nor stood in opposition to one another, except in the idle moments of a consciousness content with its disunity and indifferent to the consequences of its fragmentation. Cowling is right to describe Collingwood's ascription of the demise of civilization to *realism* as 'absurd', if *realism* was merely no more than a 'thought-fashion'. But *realism* is far more than that. It is a consciousness of the self as separate and irreconcilable with the not-self with which it sees no scope or hope for unity, just as it sees the physical world in its separateness from the perceiving mind.

For Collingwood, complete life was not only a religious life, but specifically the life made possible by Christian faith; the life of freedom, liberalism and civility as the embodiment of the historical consciousness of the mind. Collingwood's defence of Christianity is a defence of what its 'absolute presuppositions' about the nature of God and the love of God make possible through faith, and through history as the knowing and atoned mind.

If this claim is to amount to more than portentous sounding phrase-making, it is necessary to be clear about how the Atonement translates into history, or into mind. And for this, no effort in analytic philosophy will suffice. Rather, a historical approach is needed to unveil the meaning of the Atonement as it perpetuates itself in each and every mind whose being is underpinned by the 'absolute presuppositions' of Christian faith. All of which brings me, by way of conclusion, to the account of Collingwood offered by the theologian Rudolf Bultmann, which gives a sense of the kind of reading of Collingwood that is possible if one were to take seriously his assertions of the inextricability of Christian beliefs from liberalism, and its implications for moral and political philosophy.

In *History and Eschatology* (1957) Bultmann expresses deep admiration for Collingwood's philosophy of history, describing *The Idea of History* as containing 'the best that is said about the problems of history'.⁶³⁹ History is objective not because it separates the present from the past, or the historian from the evidence, in the manner we are accustomed to thinking from the sciences of nature. Rather, the 'objectivity' of Collingwood's history as a science is 'precisely in its subjectivity, because the subject and object of historical science do not exist independently of one another'.⁶⁴⁰ What Bultmann is saying is that once history is recognized as a science of a different kind to natural sciences, its meaningfulness and truth are manifest not through separation between historian and past thoughts, but through the re-enactment of the past in, and as part of, the historian's own mind. If we are to know the past, to understand it, and criticize it, we do not, as Bultmann observes, do so 'from a standpoint outside of history, but within it'. The historian is 'interwoven' in the process of historical knowledge, and he himself, or his mind, is the 'object which he endeavours to know'.⁶⁴¹

Bultmann's reading of Collingwood's ideas about history exalts the 'existential' nature of history, as understood by Collingwood who recognized the 'unity of will and thinking' in

⁶³⁹ Rudolf Bultmann (1957). *History and Eschatology*. Edinburgh: The University Press, 130.

⁶⁴⁰ Bultmann (1957), 133.

⁶⁴¹ Bultmann (1957), 131-133.

purposeful thought: 'The historian's thought must spring from the organic unity of his total experience'.⁶⁴² As Bultmann puts it,

Collingwood conceives thought not as a mere act of thinking, but as an act of man in his entire existence, as an act of decision.⁶⁴³

Bultmann goes further in his reading of Collingwood than Collingwood's incomplete works on history explicitly affirm. Bultmann is careful to assert, and in agreement with Collingwood's methodology, that history and historical knowledge ought not to be seen as activities that have a 'goal' in the common – or utilitarian- sense of the word. Thus, when Bultmann asks 'Why self-knowledge', he is seeking an explanation of the place of history as activity in human reality. To this, Bultmann's answer is that history as self-knowledge is 'consciousness of responsibility over against the future and therefore in decision'. The historicity of the mind, Bultmann argues, is not a 'relativism' or a 'nihilism', but a recognition of the individuality, and with it, the responsibility of human beings to 'grasp and realise' a possibility of a higher order consciousness,

For since, according to [Collingwood], thought includes purpose or intention, then it follows that self-knowledge cannot be a mere theoretical act, but is also an act of decision. If that is true, then the historicity of the human being is completely understood when the human being is understood as living in responsibility over against the future and therefore in decision. And, furthermore, it must be said that historicity in its full sense is not a self-evident natural quality of the human individual, but a possibility which must be grasped and realised. The man who lives without self-knowledge and without consciousness of his responsibility is a historical being in a much lower degree, one who is at the mercy of historical conditions, handing himself over to relativity. Genuine historicity means to live in responsibility and history is a call to historicity.⁶⁴⁴

⁶⁴² IH, 305. Cited by Bultmann (1957), 135.

⁶⁴³ Bultmann (1957), 131-135.

⁶⁴⁴ Bultmann (1957), 136.

Bultmann's argument is that man's life is a becoming of a kind. And insofar as man's life always lies 'before him' to realise as a genuine life of action, a life of choice that is both inevitable and not without risks, its pursuit is an obligation by virtue of his consciousness of responsibility. Bultmann follows Collingwood in arguing beyond the methods of natural sciences from the idea of historicity. If the past determines the future, it only does so to an extent. But human action at any given point in time demands human will, and choice. Historicity is about the present being 'a moment of decision' whose apparent relativity is merely the consequence of methodological yearning for causality in history, from which rules -which in actual fact do not apply- can be derived.⁶⁴⁵ As Bultmann goes on to explain,

Historicity is the nature of man who can never possess his genuine life in any present moment, but is always on the way and yet is not at the mercy of a course of history independent of himself. Every moment is the *now* of responsibility, of decision. From this the unity of history is to be understood.⁶⁴⁶

Critics have suggested that Bultmann 'tendentious' interpretation of Collingwood foists onto Collingwood his own existentialist conception of the self.⁶⁴⁷ The argument advanced in this thesis suggests, rather, that Bultmann's insight served him well. His own Christian preconceptions helped him to see what others have missed in Collingwood's argument about what history is, and how historicity can be understood not as something that evades the universal in favour of relativism, but which makes sense of relativism within a unified whole; a whole which itself could not be anything but infinite.

To put it differently, once the "infinite and whole" is admitted – rather than forcibly kept at arm's length in the argument – the charge of historical relativism in general, and specifically in the case of Collingwood's philosophy of history, reveals itself to be founded on a

⁶⁴⁵ Bultmann (1957), 141.

⁶⁴⁶ Bultmann (1957), 143.

⁶⁴⁷ See Jasper Hopkins (1965). Bultmann on Collingwood's Philosophy of History. *The Harvard Theological Review* 58: 227-233, at 233.

misguided conception of a finite truth that lays claim to universality, a misconception that turns on the mistaken presupposition that philosophical truth is measurable; that it can be apprehended by reason alone if only philosophy would simply persist in its search for that which will forever elude reason. That the truth which makes historicism intelligible happens to always be a step ahead seems never to dampen the enthusiasm of its pursuit by a philosophy that only needs to reflect on its own methodological presuppositions to recognize that it no longer needs to exert itself. If everyone is equally far from God in this life, it is an inescapable fact that all positions are relative.

Bultmann's quest, if it can be called that, is to ask whether 'there is a core of history from which history ultimately gains its essence and its meaning and becomes relevant', rather than the multiplicity of one-sided (though each 'legitimate' in and of itself) views of history.⁶⁴⁸ The core of history is the same for Bultmann and for Collingwood, namely the human being as will in pursuit of realisation of divinity through the human agency that is called upon by historicity. In a history that 'means the discovery of absolute truth and the development of God's purposes', Collingwood explains, 'the divine man will stand at the centre of it and know it, past and future, from within, not as a process but as a whole'.⁶⁴⁹ This is why he is able to say, in another place, that becoming and being a historian is about 'the right kind of man'⁶⁵⁰ and that in being such a 'man' one is *eo ipso* an historian. This is the argument I have endeavoured to make about Collingwood in this thesis.

Truth, Collingwood asserts, is 'not historically circumscribed', for truth is the infinite, the eternal, God as the whole of reality. Truth is not contingent, but its 'attainment' is – as Collingwood explains 'is an event, doubtless, in time, and capable of being catalogued in the chronologies of abstract history. But God, Collingwood goes on to say, 'is the same now and forever', and

⁶⁴⁸ Bultmann (1957), 138.

⁶⁴⁹ RP, 156-157.

⁶⁵⁰ Collingwood (1937). Review of 'Philosophy and History', 144.

since knowledge of God is union with God, [man] does not merely see an extra-temporal reality; he does not merely glance through breaking mists at the battlement of eternity, as Moses saw the promised land from the hill of renunciation. By his knowledge of eternity he is one with eternity; he has set himself in the centre of all time and all existence, *free from the changes and flux of things*. He has entered into the life of God, and in becoming one with God he is already beyond the shadow of changing and the bitterness of death.⁶⁵¹ (emphasis added)

The freedom to act historically, which for Collingwood is embodied in the idea of *duty*, is what Bultmann refers to as 'radical freedom', or freedom from oneself, for 'only a radically free man can really take over responsibility, and that he is not allowed to look around for guarantees, nor even the guarantees of moral law'.⁶⁵² It is the freedom of the mind which knows itself to be at-one with the whole.

What the mind presupposes about reality as a whole, or in Collingwood's terms, the 'absolute presuppositions' of the mind, are the grounds for the degree of self-knowledge that can be attained, and with it the degree to which the human person can achieve the kind of self-knowledge that enables the will to act out of duty, in defiance of its obligation (in the utilitarian sense of the word) to itself. And as Collingwood reminds us in *The New Leviathan*, the 'European conception of duty' is imbued with the Atonement,

17.33. A still further complication is possible. B finds himself under an obligation; he ascribes its origin to an act on the part of A; he regards it as discharged by a third person C who by taking the responsibility for it releases both A, who incurred it, and B, who found himself saddled with it.

17.34. The importance of this case in the history of the European conception of duty will appear if we call A Adam, B the believer, and C Christ. The believer thinks of

⁶⁵¹ RP, 167.

⁶⁵² Bultmann (1957), 150.

himself as saddled with responsibility for Adam's sin, and as freed from it through assumption of it by God Himself in the person of Christ.

17.35. This is the idea of the Atonement, which has sometimes been denounced as a legal quibble forced upon an alien and inappropriate context. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The idea is an integral part of the ordinary moral consciousness, at least in Christendom; it is perplexing only to a man who is too weak in the head to follow the logic of a case where an obligation is distributed over three agents.⁶⁵³

For Collingwood, acting out of duty is what historicity means in moments of decision and choice where the will is completely free, acting at the limits of history, limits which are achievable not by reason alone, but through the grace of God made possible and eternal through The Atonement, that is, *the* eschatological event. And as Bultmann puts it 'for Collingwood, every moment is an eschatological moment, and that history and eschatology are identified'.⁶⁵⁴ This is why I have argued in this thesis that history is non-other than a mind atoned.

⁶⁵³ NL, 121.

⁶⁵⁴ Bultmann (1957), 135-136.

Conclusion

My aim in this thesis was to advance my own reading and interpretation of the philosophy of R. G. Collingwood. I explored Collingwood's conception of Western civilization—which he sometimes identified with liberalism—as a civilization ultimately rooted in the Christian faith and animated by a conception of freedom of the will as the achievement of historical consciousness. The organizing hypothesis was that Collingwood made Christian faith central to Western civilization and that it was central to his understanding of that civilization. The well-being and vitality of Western civilization, and its preservation in the face of the forces of barbarism, to his mind depended upon its continuous nourishment from its Christian absolute presuppositions, and, more broadly, from what Collingwood described as 'the central doctrine of Christianity', the idea of the Incarnation and Atonement.

In his hands, I argued, this idea was translated into terms of universal significance: mind, history, and community were explicated in those terms and fell into one pattern of explanation, in which false oppositions were exposed and transcended through the reconciliation of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, thought and mind, mind and man, man and man, man and God. In chapters 1 and 2 of the thesis, I sought to show how various interpretative debates in Collingwood studies, especially those debates which centre upon his ideas of absolute presuppositions and re-enactment, have come apart from the setting in which they were originally developed. This setting was provided by the idea of the Incarnation and Atonement, which embodied and exemplified both the idea that understanding rested on presuppositions that were accepted on faith and that in developing understanding faith cultivated itself as reason and man moved towards self-understanding and towards God by choosing to follow the impetus of the divine spirit within him. In a like way, civilization progressed by following the impetus of the divine spark within it, which religion provided.

Having sketched this setting in, in the process emphasizing the degree to which it is overlooked in much mainstream scholarship. I turned to a detailed analysis of the texts in

which Collingwood worked out the logic of the position which was captured in the image of the Incarnation.

In chapter 3, I presented an exposition of what knowledge as consciousness meant for Collingwood. Here, I drew on *Speculum Mentis* where Collingwood describes art, religion, science, history and philosophy as forms of consciousness, and charts the development of thought from its rudimentary form as feelings and emotions in art, through the assertions of religion and reasoning in science, to its most developed form as reflective thought -thought about thought- in history and philosophy. The forms of consciousness are not separate faculties of the mind, but an intertwined dialectical series the undermining of any of which would undermine the potential of the whole of consciousness to achieve that which it is capable of, that is, self-knowledge. Like the other forms of consciousness, religion is shown here not to be an enigma to be explained away, but as a necessary form of consciousness by which the mind's most fundamental assertions about reality are domiciled.

Amongst the forms of consciousness, philosophy and history find their *rapprochement* in Collingwood's reforms of metaphysics which begin to reveal the depth and reach of an analysis that can be described as Collingwood's pursuit of an account of the grounds of knowledge. To put it differently, if the conscious mind is made of thought, on what does the whole of thinking turn? Collingwood thought that it was the task of metaphysics proper to provide the answer to this question, which is a historical question in two aspects. The first, because it is a question about 'absolute presuppositions', the name given by Collingwood to the special kind of assumptions about reality which individuals or societies have held at any given point in the past. In the second aspect, metaphysics is historical because the analysis of presuppositions and the articulation of the 'absolute presuppositions' by the metaphysician is an analysis of the logical past of thought, and of its genesis.

The theory of absolute presuppositions, I argued in chapter 4, has a significant bearing on the understanding of what history is, or could be from a Collingwoodian perspective. Collingwood's reform of metaphysics into a historical science whose end is the uncovering

of the absolute presuppositions of human reason commits him to a philosophy of history whose end is unavoidably metaphysical: the consciousness of mind of itself as thought. Collingwood's account of philosophy of history in this sense is his response-in-progress to the metaphysics of abstraction. It goes beyond the remit of historiography towards an account of history as neither a narrative of the past, nor the past itself, but the activity of mind *becoming* mind. History is the consciousness of *being*.

To further elaborate the point, I turned to the critique of historiography by Quentin Skinner who exalted Collingwood's key instrument in history and philosophy, the logic of question and answer, as a method to understand the actions of past agents in the context in which they acted. As a method, the logic of question and answer addressed many of the concerns that Skinner has about the imposition of thoughts and actions on past agents by paradigm-driven historiography, a historiography that seems – to Skinner – to begin by foretelling the answers it seeks from the past, rather than identifying or asking the right questions. In this regard, Skinner and Collingwood agree, and the logic of question and answer serves Skinner's purposes. Yet, Skinner, I argued, appears to extricate the logic of question and answer from its natural home in Collingwood's methodology, that is, in metaphysics. This, I argued, was best demonstrated when Skinner's approach to the question of how to deal with alien beliefs and beliefs which the historian deems irrational.

Skinner's methodology runs into more difficulty when the historian is faced with the issue of core beliefs of past agents, and how might these be located and discussed in historical interpretation. This, I argued, was the cost for Skinner of eschewing metaphysics, and that when the logic of question and answer is used in its natural habitat in Collingwood's metaphysics, the question of rationality as well as the question of truth can be appropriately addressed. The rationality of a thought turns on the logical efficacy of what is presupposed in the thought, and insofar a thought (a proposition) arises from its presuppositions, it is rational. Truth and falsity, on the other hand, were ascertained in Collingwood's metaphysics as a predicate of all presuppositions except for one group, the 'absolute

presuppositions' upon which all thought depends and of which to ask for the truth is a logical impossibility.

This led me to problematize Collingwood's idea of knowledge of the past as the re-enactment, or re-thinking of past thoughts. I argued that for the historian -which is each and every one of us on Collingwood's own terms- to re-think the thought of a past agent, the historian also had to presuppose what the past agent had presupposed in that thought, including what was absolutely presupposed. This line of argument brought into view a question of moral and political philosophy insofar the attitude of the historian is none other than the attitude of one human being towards another, and ultimately the attitude of human beings to the infinite whole, or God.

In chapter 5, on religion, I provided an exposition of Collingwood's philosophy of religion beginning with his more abstract analysis to show that far from being an aberration to consciousness and rational thought, religious consciousness is rational insofar it is a necessary form of thought in which creed is expressed. Religion has an intellectual content, and one which is fundamental in moral and social conduct. To ask what the intellectual content of religion is was, therefore, a valid metaphysical question. And where European civilization is concerned, this question – for Collingwood – was only relevant when asked of Christian faith. The question is essentially about the meaning of the central doctrine of the Atonement, and how a core belief that Christ was born and that he died for the sins of man manifests itself – or can manifest itself – in the moral and political life of civilization.

In providing an exposition of Collingwood's account of the intellectual content of religion, and Christianity in particular, I argued that the habitation of religion in the pursuit of and attainment of knowledge was not a mystery once the relationship between faith and reason was understood. As Collingwood had argued, both faith and reason are 'organs' of knowledge, and neither was dispensable. Faith (religion) presupposes and reason (science) tests in the pursuit of knowledge of the infinite whole which can never be apprehended by reason alone.

When explored for its meaning in the reasoned terms of philosophy by Collingwood, Christianity's central moral doctrine, the Atonement, is found to embody a meaningful forgiveness that is identical with moral punishment. The essence of the Atonement, the forgiveness of sin and the liberation of man, is not an act on part of God alone or as separate from man. It is an act in which the infinite good will of God stimulates the conversion of the will of man. It is an act in which both God and man share not only in the consciousness of forgiveness but also in the consciousness of repentance. For though sinless, God shares in the feeling of man's repentance, a feeling which Collingwood explains is that of a good will towards a bad will.

The path of the argument in the chapter on religion was chosen to lead to an understanding of Collingwood as saying that it is within man's grasp to come into possession of complete freedom of the will through the love of God, His grace and His forgiveness. This self-liberation of man was a correlative of his relationship not only with God, but with others in society like him, capable of attaining the same and complete freedom of the will. The idea of man as will was further supported in this chapter with exposition of Collingwood's account of evil and of The Devil to demonstrate that it is only the 'will' to which good or evil can be attributed, and not the consequences of choices which a 'will' makes in a utilitarian conception of the 'will' as means to an end. In arguing thus, Collingwood further reveals that to speak of humans being in possession of free will is meaningful. The recognition of free will is the necessary presupposition of civilisation, which was the focus of my discussion in chapter 6.

There I argued that it is the will to enter into dialectical social relations rather than eristical non-social relations which marks the discovery of freedom of the will by members of a community and sets the process of civilization on its tracks towards the ideal of civility. If the Atonement as a fundamental and deeply held belief in Christendom is to manifest itself in the politics of civilization, then it is the freedom to choose whether to lead a peaceful life which recognizes the infinite value of every individual and their right to be free for which

Christ died, or to lead a life of conflict, war and coercion by denying the communion with God and fellow human beings. The ideal of civility, which is the ideal of elimination of force from society turns on our historical consciousness of ourselves and others as being in possession of free will, and acting out of duty, as we recognize that every human action is an expression of the infinite whole, immanent and eternal, in a context unique to the agent.

My reading of Collingwood focused on his texts, as framed and informed by my organising hypothesis that Collingwood used the Incarnation as a crucial figure of thought and explored its implications in his writing about philosophy, history and politics. My aim in doing so was to take up Collingwood's challenge to write about the problems that troubled him, as far as my talents permit, for myself. I cannot pretend to think that my own talents approach Collingwood's, but I have tried to re-think his thoughts after him to the best of my capacity. Gauging my analysis against the background of what is a large body of pertinent interpretative literature, I have come to think that the focus in Collingwood studies on analysis of his methodology, in particular his philosophy of history and his metaphysics, has produced more in the way of bravura technical performances by interpreters than it has illuminated Collingwood's mind.

In the end I found myself more comfortable in the company of David Boucher, Bruce Haddock, and others who had expressed a degree of scepticism about the analytical approach to Collingwood's texts, and most comfortable aligning my position with that of the theologian Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann's reading of Collingwood, which I have attempted to develop and revise via the idea of the Incarnation, explains, rather than explaining away, Collingwood's thinking as embracing the historicity of the human being, leading to its conclusion which reveals how the oneness of God and man in Christ has turned every moment, ever since, into an eschatological moment of moral choice and decision.

Collingwood's concern for the fate of civilization in the face of the forces of barbarism, which are forever present, is no less urgent today than it was when he was alive. Once again, we witness a rising tide of populism in Europe and violent religious fundamentalism.

The marginalisation of religion, the mechanisation of life, and the excesses of utilitarianism would be seen, from a Collingwoodian perspective, as undermining the vitality of a civilization which as he descried is 'a thing of the mind'. For Collingwood what we thought mattered, not in a purely academic sense, but in a real practical sense, and it mattered to how people act in every sphere of human activity, including the moral, the economic and the political, which to his mind were not, in the final analysis, separate spheres of activity at all. To argue otherwise is to risk falling into a kind of indifference and a fragmented consciousness, which leaves civilization exposed to the forces of barbarism. Collingwood was aware of these dangers at the time and offered a Christian solution to them. I am merely adding my voice to his:

This is my reason for offering to the public what might seem essentially an academic essay, suitable only for readers who are already, like myself, committed to an interest in metaphysics. The fate of European science and European civilization is at stake. The gravity of the peril lies especially in the fact that so few recognize any peril to exist. When Rome was in danger, it was the cackling of the sacred geese that saved the Capitol. I am only a professorial goose, consecrated with a cap and gown and fed at a college table; but cackling is my job, and cackle I will.⁶⁵⁵

⁶⁵⁵ EM, 343.

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