*The Armchair and the Pickaxe*

After a long period during which metaphilosophy was shunned as philosophers chose to focus instead on first order philosophical problems, reflections on the method of philosophy are once again occupying centre stage (Williamson 2007; Chalmers et al. 2009; Overgaard et al. 2013; D’Oro and Overgaard 2017). Collingwood was the author of two explicitly metaphilosophical treatises, *An Essay on Philosophical Method* (1933) and *An Essay on Metaphysics* (1940) and regarded the question ‘what is philosophy?’ to be part of philosophy: “Reflection on it is part of itself” (EPM: 1). There has therefore never been a better time to revisit Collingwood’s conception of the role and character of philosophical analysis and assess where he stands on a spectrum of views that range, as in the title of a recent collection, from the armchair to the laboratory (Haug 2013). Clearly Collingwood rejected both these extremes: he was neither the kind of metaphysician who conceived of philosophy as a form of armchair science seeking after ontological truths through reflection alone, nor did he think that philosophers could abandon the reflective method in favour of the experimental one.

But where exactly did he stand? Would he have been sympathetic to the Quinean view that philosophy is continuous with natural science? *Or* would he have taken the more moderate Lockean view, recently revived by Jackson (1998) that philosophy is an underlabourer to science whose task is to establish what aspects of the manifest image are compatible with the scientific image? While the editors of this collection are united in thinking that Collingwood had a much more robust sense of the role of philosophical analysis (and it may be better to declare one’s views from the outset, rather than smuggle them in as a fact of the matter) the literature is quite divided on this issue and it is not always easy for the reader to navigate their way round it. Some think that Collingwood was indeed in the business of liquidating philosophy, even if the preferred special science in which he thought it should be dissolved was not physics but history. On this view Collingwood conceived of philosophy not as a normative but as a purely descriptive undertaking, whose task is to describe the belief systems of different people at different times and places. Metaphysics, on this view, is superseded not by physics but by cultural anthropology. This is still an influential view of Collingwood’s philosophy with a long pedigree (Donagan 1962; Rotenstreich 1972; Toulmin 1972), and one that is shared by Williams (2006) (reprinted in this volume). Others have thought that Collingwood had a more robust sense of the distinction between philosophy and the special sciences and that he saw philosophy as distinct from them: rather than being continuous with any of the special sciences philosophy is in charge of excavating the presuppositions on which they rest. On this view there are two levels of investigation. The first-order level is that of the special sciences, which are the laboratories of knowledge; the second-order level is that of metaphysics, whose task is to make explicit the presuppositions that are entailed by the questions that are characteristically asked (and answered) in the sciences. While the metaphysician does not dictate to the historian or the physicist, what their method should be, metaphysical analysis does make explicit to them what their method is, what is their distinctive *explanandum*, and how the subject matter of a special science differs from that of other forms of inquiry. The task of excavating these presuppositions does not therefore consist in describing what people believe (as if it were a form of cultural anthropology) but what presuppositions are entailed by the characteristic questions asked in a given form of inquiry. In other words, on this reading, the task of metaphysical analysis is to uncover the presuppositions that are constitutive of a given form of knowledge and are mandatory for its practitioners. The consequence of this reading is that, far from being science’s underlabourer (the Lockean view) or being continuous with science (the Quinean view), metaphysics is an autonomous form of inquiry whose subject matter are the presuppositions which are constitutive of the knowledge claims arrived at in the special sciences. To be clear, this reading of Collingwood’s metaphysics of absolute presuppositions does not mean that he was in the business of defending the Cartesian view of metaphysics as an ontologically first science, lying at the roots of the tree of knowledge whose trunk is physics, and from whose branches (the special sciences) hang the fruits of knowledge which humanity enjoys (health and technological advances). Metaphysics, on this view, is a first science only in the order of logical priority because it uncovers those presuppositions which the practitioners of the special sciences must make, as a matter of logical necessity, in order to engage in the production of knowledge. To read Collingwood in this way is to acknowledge a distinction between the modus operandi of the special sciences and that of philosophy: the former are involved in the production of knowledge; the latter enables one to understand the conditions on which knowledge rests, rather than produce a different kind of (metaphysical) knowledge.

The divide between these interpretative lines is often traceable to whether or not one thinks that *An Essay on Metaphysics*, which is normally read as advocating the dissolution of philosophy into history, is continuous with the earlier *An Essay on Philosophical Method* or whether it marks an historicist departure from it. A discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this introduction but for the discontinuity thesis, which often goes hand in hand with the claim that Collingwood sought to liquidate metaphysics into history, the reader might consider Donagan (1962), Rotenstreich (1972) and Toulmin (1972). For the continuity thesis, which tends to go hand in hand with the claim that Collingwood did not relinquish a commitment to philosophy as an autonomous discipline with its own method and domain of inquiry the reader might look at Connelly (1990) and D’Oro (2002). What is at stake between those who see discontinuity between *An Essay on Philosophical Method* and *An Essay on Metaphysics*, and those who do not, is the status of the a priori in Collingwood’s later philosophy, and whether the notion of the a priori that is captured by the claim that knowledge rests on presuppositions of a certain kind (absolute presuppositions) is sufficiently robust to uphold the autonomy of philosophy or whether on the other hand, it is weak enough to support the claim that philosophy is either a form of cultural anthropology or perhaps continuous with it.

*An Essay on Metaphysics* defends the view that all knowledge rests on some presupposition or other and that certain presuppositions, which Collingwood calls “absolute”, are constitutive of a particular kind of knowledge in the sense that the form of knowledge which they support would not be possible without them. The principle of the uniformity of nature, for example, is implicit in any attempt to extrapolate general laws from particular observations and is thus presupposed by any attempt to advance empirical knowledge. The principle of the uniformity of nature is therefore absolutely presupposed by the making of inductive generalizations and constitutive of the kind of knowledge that natural science yields.

The view that the presuppositions on which knowledge rests are constitutive of the form of knowledge which they enable already marks an important departure from a strong (Kantian) notion of the a priori, where ‘a priori’ means valid at all times and places. But how weak or robust is Collingwood’s constitutive notion of the a priori? On the one hand one could argue that since metaphysics, as Collingwood conceives it, begins from knowledge as ‘we’ have it, and since the ‘we’ changes with the location of the subject in space and time, then the presuppositions that metaphysics uncovers are historically parochial rather than universal and valid at all times and places. On the other hand, one could argue that although the notion of the a priori captured by the view that absolute presuppositions are constitutive of forms of inquiry is weaker than the Kantian notion of the a priori, it is not reducible to a mere (time-relative) historical a priori since it makes a claim that is stronger than ‘this is what ‘we’ in a given spatio-temporal slice, believe to be the case’: the principle of the uniformity of nature, for example, is not merely something that we (here and now) believe to be true. It is rather, a principle that anyone engaged in empirical enquiry is committed to, whether they are aware of it or not. Since the principle of the uniformity of nature is entailed by the advancing of inductive generalizations, anyone, at any time, who extrapolates an empirical law from particular observations can do so only by presupposing the principle. Be that as it may, as Williams (in the essay reprinted here) says, there is often an ambiguity in the way in which philosophers who abandon foundationalism use the word ‘we’ and it is this ambiguity that interpreters trying to make sense of the notion of the a priori at work in *An Essay on Metaphysics* must grapple with and try to resolve.

This interpretative divide has substantive consequences for how one understands the sense in which Collingwood belongs to the historicist tradition. For the term ‘historicist’ has been used in very different ways. It has often been used as a term of abuse to indicate the willingness of a philosopher to espouse a form of epistemic relativism according to which what is true (or false) is relative to what a person or group of people believe to be true (or false). The view that Collingwood is a historicist in this sense (in the sense of being an epistemic relativist) is distinct from, and much stronger than, the claim that Collingwood is a historicist in so far as he held the view that in order to understand people who do not share our own assumptions we need to understand what they say and their actions on their own terms rather than our own. Stating that Collingwood was a philosopher sensitive to the historical context of action (something for which he is often praised) does not entail ascribing to him a commitment to the stronger claim that ‘x is true’ means, or is synonymous with, ‘S believes x to be true’. In the first sense, the attribute ‘historicist’ is often used to describe Collingwood’s philosophy in a pejorative way, to indicate a commitment to epistemic relativism, the view that the predicate ‘is true’ means ‘S believes x to be true’. In the second sense, the attribute ‘historicist’ has been used mostly as a term of praise, to mean something quite different, namely that Collingwood warned against historical anachronism.

Collingwood was clearly an historicist in the second sense. He claimed that understanding past agents requires understanding the thought-context of their action and was adamant that the historian should be sensitive to the differences between her own thought context and that of the agent. Historical inquiry, and the possibility of historical understanding, he claimed, rests on presuppositions that are very different from those informing the investigation of nature. The empirical investigation of nature, as we have seen, rests on the presupposition of its uniformity; the historical investigation of the past, on the other hand, rests on a very different presupposition, namely that the belief systems of historical agents may not be constant. Investigating the historical past as the natural scientist investigates nature (by assuming its uniformity) leads straight to committing the kind of historical anachronism Collingwood warns against. But the claim that in order to avoid anachronism in the study of past cultures the historian must make presuppositions which are very different from those at work in the natural sciences, does not entail the stronger claim that all sciences are historical i.e. that they share the same presuppositions as the study of history. Natural science, as we have seen, is not a historical science precisely because the key presupposition natural scientists make when investigating the natural world is that it does not change.[[1]](#endnote-1) Historicism, in the first and stronger sense, requires that the presupposition of natural science, the principle of the uniformity of nature, is a time-relative assumption, rather than a logical condition that is entailed by the making of empirical generalizations (whenever or whoever makes them). And so it appears we have come full circle back to the question that has dogged Collingwood’s scholarship: what is the status of absolute presuppositions? Are they logical conditions? Or are they historical ones? In what sense, if any, can they be both? While it would be overly optimistic to hope that the contributions to this edited collection will settle that question once and for all, they will hopefully enable the reader to understand what is at stake in answering that question one way or the other.[[2]](#endnote-2)

*Bernard Williams: An Essay on Collingwood*

*[republished from ‘The Sense of the Past’ (2006)]*

There is general agreement that Collingwood’s mature philosophy can be dated from *An Essay on Philosophical Method* (1933). In his *Autobiography* (1939) he deemed this to be “my best book in matter; in style, I may call it my only book” (A: 118). Most of those who are interested in Collingwood’s philosophy share Collingwood’s own high opinion of *An Essay on Philosophical Method*. Bernard Williams is exceptional in that although he has much admiration for Collingwood’s work, in his posthumously published ‘Essay on Collingwood’ he dismisses *An Essay on Philosophical Method* as “in fact mostly a dull and dated book, full of what are likely to seem unhelpful distinctions and assimilations.” What really attracted Williams in Collingwood’s work is Collingwood’s writings in the philosophy of history and his discussion of the relationship between philosophy and history. One perennial misunderstanding that has dogged the reception of Collingwood’s philosophy of history is the idea that Collingwood wishes to provide a prescriptive methodology for historians. Williams is fully aware that this is not the case and he argues against this misunderstanding both in this article and in his article on Collingwood in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, co-authored with Stefan Collini (Collini and Williams 2004). It is the discussion of absolute presuppositions in *An Essay on Metaphysics* that captivates Williams. Collingwood, Williams argues, tended towards a “radical historicism”; like many other philosophers, including Wittgenstein, who eschewed foundationalism, Collingwood used the word ‘we’ in an evasive way, both in an inclusive sense “as implying universalistic preconditions on interpretation and intelligibility” and in a contrastive sense ‘under which “we” here and now are distinct from others elsewhere and elsewhen, who lived in others and different intelligible human formations”. The nuances of the relationship between philosophy and history, and the tensions between the local and the universal ‘we’ are explored by many of the writers in this volume. Since Williams penned this essay much has been written on the relation between *An Essay on Philosophical Method* and *An Essay on Metaphysics*. As Collingwood’s conversion to radical historicism in *An Essay on Metaphysics* has been put under some pressure, Collingwood’s account of the nature of absolute presuppositions and of the role of conceptual analysis in metaphysics has been shown to be no straightforward form of historical relativism. It is to Williams’ credit to have recognized Collingwood as a great, worthy of inclusion as a major figure in the history of western philosophy, his philosophical reservations notwithstanding.

*James Connelly: The Development of Collingwood’s Metaphilosophical Views*

This chapter is an introduction to Collingwood’s metaphilosophical views concentrating on the development of Collingwood’s conception of philosophical methodology. It tracks his statements on metaphilosophy and method and goes on to ask whether it is appropriate to speak of an early and late Collingwood. In so doing it examines Collingwood’s engagement with Oxford realism, logical positivism and his attempt to rehabilitate metaphysics. It locates Collingwood at the crossroads between the declining tradition of British idealism and the rising school of analytical philosophy.

It asks what was the nature of Collingwood’s reconceptualization of the metaphysical task? Is there a danger that it leads to a dissolution of philosophy into history or is his later work part of a sustained effort to vindicate the autonomy of philosophical enquiry as distinct from the natural sciences? Its goal is to provide readers who are not acquainted with Collingwood’s work with an account of the evolution of his metaphilosophical views thereby enabling them to navigate their way round the various disputes which surround it.

*Jan van der Dussen: Collingwood on the Relationship between Metaphysics and History*

In this chapter Van der Dussen reads *An Essay on Metaphysics* in the light of an essay Collingwood wrote ten months earlier, ‘Function of Metaphysics in Civilization’. Van der Dussen claims that in *An Essay on Metaphysics* Collingwood does not so much argue for as assume that metaphysics is an historical discipline. Van der Dussen has sympathy for this position. He argues that the metaphysician uncovers presuppositions, but it is the task of the special sciences to change them.

He argues that it is only in relation to other metaphysicians that the Collingwoodian metaphysician can assume a critical role as opposed to a purely descriptive role. When not engaged in disputes with other metaphysicians, the Collingwoodian metaphysician works essentially as a historian.

By way of his own disputes with other metaphysicians (Krausz, Beaney and Martin) Van der Dussen puts forward the thesis that Collingwood’s central argument in *An Essay on Metaphysics* is that metaphysics is a historical science. However, it is only the first four chapters of *An Essay on Metaphysics*, in which Collingwood develops his theory of presuppositions, that is philosophical. The rest of the book in which he makes use of this theory is historical. As such the book itself exemplifies what Collingwood advocated in his *Autobiography*, the rapprochement of philosophy and history.

*Vasso Kindi: Presuppositions and the Logic of Question and Answer*

Kindi explains that in Collingwood’s view the logician should study not just propositions but questions and answers. Logic, of the sort favoured by Russell and Whitehead, makes the mistake of studying propositions in isolation, whereas they should be studied in relation to questions. It is only when two propositions can be seen to answer the same questions that they can be said to contradict one another. This is apparent when we turn our attention to the special sciences. Collingwood tells us that he was led to these conclusions by his experience of archaeology.

Meaning, agreement and contradiction, truth and falsehood, none of these belonged to propositions in their own right, propositions by themselves; they belonged only to propositions as the answers to questions: each proposition answering a question strictly correlative to itself. (A: 33)

We grasp the meaning of a proposition when we understand the meaning of the question which it attempts to answer. In that way we come to know more clearly that which we already know, but dimly. The metaphysician’s task is to ‘excavate’ different complexes of questions and answers until the absolute presuppositions which govern them are reached. It is this methodology that gives Collingwood’s metaphysics its distinctive character. It is not reduced or assimilated to natural science or any other discipline but nor does it lose sight of the particular and the concrete. Kindi, points out that here there is a similarity to the later Wittgenstein.

*Elena Popa: Collingwood, Pragmatism and Philosophy of Science*

Popa investigates the relationship between Collingwood’s metaphysics of absolute presuppositions and pragmatism. She notes that pragmatism is a broad church and that while there are family resemblances between Collingwood’s project and that of philosophers of a pragmatist orientation, there are also some important differences. Collingwood tends to have in common with all pragmatists a rejection of the correspondence theory of truth, but unlike of the classical pragmatists, he does not develop a positive theory truth: his metaphilosophical strategy is to reject the view that absolute presuppositions are truth-evaluable rather than articulate an alternative conception of truth. Collingwood has therefore less in common with the classical pragmatists and (subject to a number of important qualifications) he is closer to later incarnations of pragmatism, in particular Putnam’s internal realism and Price’s discussion of causation as a form of explanation that is context sensitive. Since Collingwood’s rejection of traditional metaphysical problems tends, like Price’s, to be motivated by a pragmatics of explanation, Collingwood’s rejection of the correspondence theory of truth does not lead to a full blown deflationary strategy: rather than seeing philosophical problems as fake problems, and advocating the end of philosophy he sees the role of philosophical analysis to be that of making explicit the absolute presuppositions which inform different causal explanations in different explanatory contexts.

*Giuseppina D’Oro: Why Epistemic Pluralism Does Not Entail Relativism: Collingwood’s Hinge Epistemology*

In her contribution D’Oro asks whether Collingwood’s metaphysics of absolute presuppositions leads to the kind of belief-system relativism which is the target of Boghossian’s sustained criticism in his *Fear of Knowledge* (2006). D’Oro argues that Collingwood’s metaphysics of absolute presuppositions aims to defend a form of epistemic pluralism which is not reducible to the kind of belief-system relativism Boghossian critiques. Epistemic relativism claims that “x is true” means “S believes x to be true”. But presuppositions, for Collingwood do not do their logical work in virtue of being believed to be true (or false). Rather, they have “logical efficacy” in virtue of being entailed by the questions to which they give rise. Since Collingwood does not defend a form of epistemic relativism (not even belief-system relativism) he is not vulnerable to the self-undermining objection that is often raised against it. The decoupling of epistemic pluralism from epistemic relativism rests on a reading of absolute presuppositions as epistemic “hinges” which give rise to the characteristic complexes of questions and answers operative in different contexts of inquiry. The task of the metaphysician is to show that the questions asked in different contexts of inquiry are entailed by different absolute presuppositions that are constitutive of those forms of knowing. Epistemic pluralism rests on a form of hinge epistemology which denies that the predicate “is true” applies to the conditions of knowledge. But since epistemic pluralism is not a form of relativism, it is not vulnerable to the stock objections raised against relativism.

*Karim Dharamsi: Oscillation and Emancipation: Collingwood on History and Human Nature*

Dharamsi considers Collingwood’s defence of the autonomy of the mental and contrasts it with the one articulated by liberal naturalists such as McDowell. Both Collingwood and McDowell, Dharamsi argues, acknowledge the irreducibly normative (in Collingwood’s words: criteriological) nature of the study of mind and both reject the widespread naturalist assumption that philosophy is continuous with natural science. The liberal naturalist’s and Collingwood’s strategy are however fundamentally different. McDowell’s liberal naturalism seeks to ease the tension between nature and mind through an Aristotelian account of how human beings acquire a second (rational) nature via the process of habituation into a culture. McDowell’s strategy is therefore to soften naturalism so as to accommodate within its womb the normative character of the mental which a harder or more traditional form of naturalism struggles to provide a home for. From McDowell’s perspective the problem of locating the mind in nature is a problem for traditional, harder forms of naturalism. Once naturalism is understood in a different way the problem that traditional philosophy of mind struggles with is eased. Collingwood’s agrees with McDowell’s diagnosis of the problem, but not with his proposed solution. The problem of how the normative or criteriological aspect of the mind can fit in nature is indeed a problem for the hard naturalist, and solving the problem does indeed require, as McDowell advocates, moving beyond the underlying metaphilosophical picture of philosophy as continuous with the natural sciences. But the solution, for Collingwood, lies not in liberalizing nature, but in rejecting a conception of metaphysics as a science of pure being and understanding it instead as an historical enquiry into the presuppositions of science, including natural science.

*Jonas Ahlskog: R.G. Collingwood and the Philosophy of History: The Metaphilosophical Dimension*

Collingwood believed that our understanding of the philosophy of history matters for our understanding of philosophy as a whole. He did not completely spell out his philosophy but it is possible to extend the trajectory of his thought.

In his unfinished *Principles of History* (1999) Collingwood is concerned with elucidating the a priori concepts (absolute presuppositions) that guide history but he is also concerned with elucidating the relation between historical and philosophical thinking.

History, for Collingwood, designates a distinctive way of understanding reality, which involves ‘re-enacting’ the motivational premise underlying an action. It is the philosophy of history that makes clear the distinctive character of history; and the philosophy of history is itself part of Collingwood’s ‘metaphysics without ontology’ which attempts to discover and make explicit the underlying presuppositions of different disciplines.

Collingwood’s understanding of history as an autonomous discipline is contrasted to Hempel’s view, but its interest is also pointed out in relation to more recent work in the philosophy of history that focusses on narrative and retrospective description.

In Collingwood’s concern to distinguish the human sciences from the natural sciences there is common ground with Dilthey, Gadamer and von Wright. However, Collingwood also worked on the relationship between history and philosophy. He wished to liquidate a particular conception of history, one that searches for timeless essences or confines itself to the analysis of pure logical form. This conception ignores philosophy’s purpose of providing us with self-understanding.

History also gives us self-understanding, but our knowledge of how we acquire that knowledge is given to us by philosophy (itself in turn nurtured by an awareness of history).

*Chinatsu Kobayashi and Mathieu Marion:*

In this paper Kobayashi and Marion first provide reasons to reject the many readings of Collingwood that sought to draft him as a participant in the Hempel-Dray debate about the status of covering laws in history. After all, this debate was not part of Collingwood’s context and, although one can pry from his writings a contribution to it, one may simply, by doing so, misunderstand what he was up to. In the second part, they present the Gabbay-Woods Schema for abductive reasoning, as it occurs in the context of inquiry, as triggered by an ignorance problem, and as being ‘ignorance preserving’. They then argue that this allows us better to see the point of Collingwood’s ‘logic of questions and answers’, as derived from his own practice in archeology, and his use of the ‘detective model of the historian’, as opposed to merely focussing on understanding what ‘re-enactment’ could mean as a contribution to the Hempel-Dray debate.

*Stephen Leach: Collingwood and Archaeological Theory*

Leach asks what would Collingwood have thought of archaeological theory, a sub-discipline of archaeology that has developed since the 1970s. He argues that Collingwood would have welcomed it for it has developed out of respect for the principle that in any investigation, in examining the evidence, in order for it to yield any answer one must always have some question in mind. Archaeological theory discusses what questions are worth asking.

Furthermore, Collingwood would have urged metaphysicians to take notice of such developments for not only did he leave his analysis of the presuppositions of history and archaeology unfinished but also, as he acknowledged, disciplines change and develop. One example of an area in which there is still work to be done is the exploration of possible differences between history and archaeology. These differences might be highlighted by the use of Collingwood’s theory of presuppositions.

Nonetheless, although Collingwood would have welcomed the development of archaeological theory, and although he would urge philosophers to follow his example and to stay abreast of developments outside of their own discipline, he is still himself primarily a metaphysician rather than an archaeological theorist.

As such, in pursuing his own distinctive form of metaphysics, Collingwood does not shun the philosopher’s study, or the philosopher’s armchair, but in his case the armchair is always placed next to the window.

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1. *But please note that denying that (natural science) is a historical science is not the same as asserting that natural science is presuppositionless!* That is a completely different claim, one that Collingwood would have adamantly rejected on the grounds that there is no such thing as presuppositionless knowledge. Every form of knowledge has its own *explanandum*, which is the correlative of its method and presuppositions. The *explanandum* of natural science is events, which are known through the experimental method. The *explanandum* of history is actions, which are known through the historical method. There is no *explanandum* and no knowledge from nowhere. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Those interested in Collingwood’s philosophical methodology might also be interested in this volume’s elder sister ‘Collingwood and Philosophical Methodology’, a special issue of *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies* edited by Giuseppina D’Oro and James Connelly [↑](#endnote-ref-2)