**Between ontological hubris and epistemic humility:**

**Collingwood, Kant and the role of transcendental arguments[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Abstract**. This paper explores and defends a form of transcendental argument that is neither bold in its attempt to answer the sceptic, as ambitious transcendental strategies, nor epistemically humble, as modest transcendental strategies. While ambitious transcendental strategies seek (but fail) to meet the sceptical challenge, and modest transcendental strategies accept the validity of the challenge but retreat to a position of epistemic humility, this form of transcendental argument denies the assumption that undergirds the challenge, namely that truth and falsity may be legitimately predicated of the conditions of knowledge. As a result, although this form of transcendental argument is not truth-directed, it is not vulnerable to a charge that is often levelled against modest transcendental arguments, namely that they amount to the adoption of a strategy of sophisticated capitulation. This form of transcendental argument, which is implicit in Collingwood’s conception of philosophy as the search for absolute presuppositions, takes transcendental arguments in a pragmatic direction that does not leave the framework of transcendental idealism intact. It nonetheless remains true to Kant’s conception of philosophy as a second order activity and to his goal of defending our entitlement to hold on both to the standpoint of theoretical and that of practical reason.

**Key words:** transcendental arguments, ambitious transcendental arguments, modest transcendental arguments, pragmatism, Collingwood, scepticism

**Introduction**

Transcendental arguments are often construed as ambitious anti-sceptical arguments only to be castigated soon afterwards for failing to deliver those goals.[[2]](#footnote-2) Stroud (1968) persuasively argued that Kant cannot succeed in showing (contra Hume) that it is possible to establish any ontological conclusions on the basis of purely epistemic premises and thus that so-called “world-directed” or “truth-directed” transcendental arguments (Peacocke 1989) are bound to fail because nothing ontological can be inferred from experiential premises.[[3]](#footnote-3) In answer to this criticism transcendental arguments have been modified to advance less ambitious modal claims concerning the structures of our beliefs rather than the structures of reality. Since modest transcendental arguments advance modal claims concerning the structure of our beliefs rather than metaphysical claims concerning the structures of reality they evade Stroud’s criticism.[[4]](#footnote-4) But in doing so they become vulnerable to a different objection: while ambitious transcendental arguments are criticized for failing to establish robust ontological conclusions, modest transcendental arguments are criticized for leaving unanswered the sceptical challenge that ambitious transcendental arguments tried (but failed) to answer. This paper argues that this predicament is the result of a commitment to a view, shared by ambitious and modest transcendental arguments alike, that “is true” is a predicate that can be legitimately asserted of the conditions of knowledge and explores a form of transcendental argument that responds to the criticism that ambitious transcendental arguments fail to establish robust ontological claims in a different way. Rather than lowering the threshold for success in the manner of modest transcendental strategies this form of transcendental argument rejects the assumption that the conditions of knowledge have truth-makers. This form of transcendental argument is to be found in R.G. Collingwood’s conception of metaphysics as the study of the absolute presuppositions which govern different forms of inquiry. The (absolute) presuppositions that philosophical analysis uncovers ground forms of inquiries not in so far as they are true of an inquiry-independent reality, or believed to be true, but in so far as they are logically entailed by the characteristic questions to which they give rise. The main objective of the paper is to show that there is a form of transcendental argument which unlike ambitious transcendental arguments is not truth or world-directed and yet is not vulnerable to the charge of subjective idealism that is often levelled against modest or belief-directed transcendental arguments.

Section I contrasts Collingwood’s use of transcendental arguments with so-called “modest” transcendental strategies. Modest transcendental strategies are belief-directed rather than world or truth-directed; they concede that transcendental arguments fail to establish ambitious anti-sceptical conclusions about the structures of reality but claim that they can nonetheless successfully establish modest epistemic claims concerning the structures of our beliefs about reality. They aim to show what transcendental arguments can realistically succeed in doing if such arguments curtail their (ontological) ambitions and refrain from advancing knowledge claims. I argue that although Collingwood’s transcendental arguments are not truth-directed, they are inappropriately described as *epistemically modest* if by an epistemically modest transcendental strategy one means an argument that limits the scope of transcendental arguments to the realm of beliefs/appearances for fear of transgressing the boundaries of what can legitimately be established by transcendental argumentation. Rather than limiting the scope of transcendental arguments to appearancesCollingwood argues that questions of truth and falsity are not properly applicable to the conditions of knowledge which transcendental arguments lay bare. As he puts it “…any question involving the presupposition that an absolute presupposition is a proposition, such as the questions ‘Is it true?’ What evidence is there for it?’ How can it be demonstrated?’ ‘What right do we have to presuppose it if it can’t?’, is a nonsense question.” (1940:33) Instead of limiting the scope of transcendental strategies to what we believe, or what we are justified to believe, as modest transcendental strategies do, Collingwood’s transcendental arguments show that the appearance/reality distinction that modest transcendental strategies decline to cross, is the result of the mistaken assumption that questions of truth and falsity can appropriately be asked about the conditions of knowledge. Given that questions concerning the truth-value of the presuppositions governing forms of inquiry are inappropriately posed, the premise on which *both* modest or belief-directed *and* ambitious or truth-directed transcendental arguments are based is rejected. For both modest transcendental strategies aimed at uncovering the structure of beliefs, and ambitious transcendental strategies aimed at uncovering the structure of things, presuppose that truth is a legitimate predicate in the case of the presuppositions governing forms of inquiry, the only difference between them being whether they assert or deny that the truth of such presuppositions can be known by means of transcendental argumentation. If, as Collingwood argues, truth is not a predicate that can be properly ascribed to presuppositions, then the question “are the presuppositions governing forms of inquiry that transcendental arguments uncover true of an inquiry-independent reality?” cannot arise. And if the question cannot arise, then it would make no sense to answer it either by asserting that the conditions of knowledge are true of a mind-independent reality (as ambitious transcendental strategies aim to show) or that they might, but we cannot know whether they are, since all we can know by means of transcendental arguments is the structures of our beliefs, or what we might be justified to believe about reality (as modest transcendental strategies claim). Whether the question is answered affirmatively (as in the case of ontologically ambitious transcendental arguments) or left unanswered (as in the case of epistemically humble transcendental arguments) the question presupposes that “is true” can, at least in principle, be legitimately asserted or denied of the conditions of knowledge.

But if transcendental arguments should not seek to answer the question of truth what question should they address and what is their goal? In section II I argue that the kind of non-truth directed transcendental argument that Collingwood develops addresses the problem of the relation between different methodological practices and that the goal of this kind of transcendental argument is not to provide an answer to scepticism but to defend the autonomy of the human sciences against the encroachment of the natural sciences by showing that different forms of inquiry rest on different absolute presuppositions which give rise to distinctive kinds of questions. In section III the paper proceeds to unpack the implications of this conception of the nature and goal of transcendental arguments for Collingwood’s conception of the a priori.It argues that although the notion of a prioricity at work in Collingwood’s transcendental arguments involves a significant revision of the Kantian a priori, it is nonetheless sufficiently robust to support a distinction in kind, rather than mere degree, between the subject matter of the special sciences and that of philosophy. The paper concludes that Collingwood’s version of transcendental arguments takes idealism in a pragmatic direction that does not leave the framework of transcendental idealism completely intact, but which nonetheless remains true to Kant’s conception of philosophy as a second order activity and to his goal of defending our entitlement to hold on both to the standpoint of theoretical and that of practical reason. Taking transcendental arguments in this pragmatic direction enables Collingwood to evade the charge levelled against modest transcendental arguments, namely that they can succeed only at the price of making a strategic retreat to a position of epistemic humility thereby endorsing a form of subjective idealism.

**I Collingwood and modest transcendental arguments**

It may seem odd to ascribe the use of transcendental arguments to Collingwood as he never describes his philosophical project in these terms. Yet if by a transcendental argument one means an argument which uncovers conditions which must be presupposed for certain activities to be possible, then such arguments are without doubt operative in Collingwood’s work. Whenever we ask a question, Collingwood claimed, we make some presupposition or other, even if we are not explicitly aware of this. In fact, without the presupposition, the question would not arise. Philosophy studies not the propositions we assert in answer to the questions we ask, but the presuppositions we make when asking the questions to which we offer propositional answers. Uncovering presuppositions involves a quasi-transcendental argument in that a question and its presupposition stand in a very special relation. The presuppositions we make (wittingly or unwittingly) leave a logical trace in the questions we ask. The role of transcendental arguments is to uncover presuppositions by following the logical trace they leave in the questions we ask. To illustrate: the question “has he stopped beating his wife?” (Collingwood 1940:38) presupposes that he was beating his wife. Only *this* presupposition gives rise to *that* question. The presupposition: “he was very gentle to his wife” would not give rise to that question, but to a different one. The regress from a question to the presupposition which gives rise to it is thus a regress to a necessary condition of the possibility for the question being asked. What determines whether a statement is a proposition or a presupposition is the role that it plays in what Collingwood calls “the logic of question and answer”. If the statement’s role is to answer a question, then it is a proposition. If its role is to give rise to a question, then it is a presupposition. The logic of question and answer thus captures the uncovering of the necessary conditions for the asking of questions, namely presuppositions.

Philosophy, Collingwood claims, is concerned with a special kind of presupposition, namely presuppositions that can only play one role in the logic of question and answer, that of presuppositions. To explain: “he has been beating his wife” could have two roles. It could be a presupposition which, as we have seen, gives rise to the question “has he stopped beating his wife?” or it could be a propositional answer to the question “why was he in prison?” Statements which can only have the role of giving rise to questions are presuppositions of a special kind, which are said to be “absolute”. These tend to be heuristic principles which govern forms of inquiry and which must be presupposed for those forms of inquiry to be possible. Such heuristic principles are *never* answers to questions in the sense that questioning them would undermine the line of inquiry which relies on them as a condition of its possibility. Some presuppositions (Collingwood refers to these as “relative” presuppositions) can be questioned without undermining the form of inquiry of which they are part. Thus, for example, questioning an inductive claim such as “smoking increases the chances of developing lung cancer” does not undermine the practice of making inductive generalizations; but questioning the principle of the uniformity of nature does. The principle of the uniformity of nature thus has a different status from the inductive generalizations that it makes possible because it cannot be questioned without undermining the practice which it undergirds. Understood as an absolute presupposition, the principle of the uniformity of nature is not an empirical proposition that differs merely in degree of generality from the working hypotheses adopted within a form of inquiry. Empirical hypotheses such as “smoking causes lung cancer” may conceivably be discarded by future observations. Absolute presuppositions, on the other hand, cannot be questioned without undermining the form of inquiry which relies on them. Absolute presuppositions are therefore not empirical propositions of a more general kind since, unlike empirical propositions, they cannot be undermined by future empirical evidence. Nor, however, are they metaphysical propositions about the nature of reality. The reason why the principle of the uniformity of nature cannot be denied, is not that it is impossible to conceive of its opposite, “nature is not uniform”, without contradiction. We can easily conceive of nature as lacking uniformity; but what we cannot do is presuppose that it lacks uniformity when formulating our inductive inferences. The principle of the uniformity of nature is therefore neither a contingent empirical proposition nor a necessary metaphysical proposition about an inquiry-independent reality. It does not assert that nature is uniform (as if it were a proposition); it is an absolute presupposition that is operative in the experimental sciences. Philosophy’s goal, as conceived by Collingwood, is to uncover not metaphysical propositions about an inquiry-transcendent reality, but the presuppositions that govern inquiry-dependent chains of questions and answers.

Implicit in the logic of question and answer is a transcendental argument that works regressively rather than deductively from a particular activity to the conditions of its possibility. The argument is regressive (rather than deductive) because it takes as its starting point a certain activity whose actuality is taken for granted at the outset and works backwards from a conclusion to the premises which make the conclusion possible. Since the point of the argument is not to establish the truth of a certain premise, the argument is not question-begging or guilty of vicious circularity. Were one to claim that since our inductive generalizations rest on the principle of the uniformity of nature, it follows from this that the principle of the uniformity of nature is true, then one would be assuming precisely what a sceptically minded philosopher (such as Hume) requires independent proof for, namely that the premise “the future resembles the past” is true. But this kind of (independent) justification for the truth of absolute presuppositions is precisely what Collingwood denies not only to be possible, but to be something that can be legitimately demanded precisely because absolute presuppositions are not propositions which can be asserted as true or false. The justification of absolute presuppositions can therefore only be back-handed (Allen 2016) because it must take as its starting point the fact *that* there are certain practices and then show what the conditions of their possibility is. Such back-handed justification is not viciously circular or question begging because it is not an argument for the truth of absolute presuppositions, but a denial that the notion of truth applies to them. Now since Collingwood denies that absolute presuppositions can be said to be true of an inquiry-independent reality, it would be tempting to infer from this that he advocates a modest transcendental strategy that establishes *mere epistemic conclusions* about what people believe to be the case (such as, for example, that the future resembles the past). This, however, is not entirely accurate. In the following I will argue, first, that Collingwood’s denial that presuppositions have a truth-value should not be confused with the sort of dismissal of the sceptical challenge one finds in the later Strawson’s naturalistically inspired ‘reply’ to the sceptic (Strawson 1985).[[5]](#footnote-5) Second, having distanced Collingwood from this naturalistic reply, I explain why his denial that absolute presuppositions can be said to be true of an inquiry-independent reality does not entail that Collingwood’s non-truth directed transcendental arguments establish merely epistemic conclusions and why his transcendental strategy should not be described as modest.

Strawson (1985), like Hume before him, claims there are certain beliefs which are very deeply embedded in human nature, which scepticism is unable to dent, even if the kind of justification required by the normative epistemologist could never be produced. As Hume famously put it: “Philosophy woul’d render us entirely Pyrrhonian, were not nature too strong for it” (Abstract:657). Truth and falsity here are irrelevant because they are not the sort of things that motivate us to believe one way or the other: since we do not hold the belief in, say, the existence of the external world because we know it to be true, so we would not abandon our belief in the external world on discovering it to be false. Although Collingwood does at times claim that we become ticklish (1940: 31) when our absolute presuppositions are being questioned, much of what he says suggests that he is not making *descriptive* claims about human psychology.[[6]](#footnote-6) Presuppositions have what he calls “logical efficacy” and it is in virtue of this that they have the power to give rise to questions. Collingwood’s claim is not that we are psychologically unable to contemplate the possibility that they might be false, but that they are necessarily presupposed by the asking of certain questions. Thus, while Collingwood denies that presuppositions may be either true or false he clearly advances a modal claim about what presuppositions one is necessarily committed to in order to engage in certain activities, and to this extent he sees himself as engaging in philosophical argumentation about which assumptions we should acknowledge to be operative in our thinking, rather than as pointing out that philosophical arguments are useless in either dislodging or motivating epistemic attitudes. Unlike the later Strawson Collingwood develops a genuine transcendental argument with modal force rather than pointing to scepticism’s inability to change what we are by nature inclined to believe.

In so far as the kind of transcendental strategy at work in the uncovering of absolute presuppositions makes necessary claims about the presuppositions which govern our thinking, it appears to converge with the later Stroud’s claim that transcendental arguments succeed in establishing modest (non-ontological or merely epistemic) *modal* claims about which propositions one *must believe to be true*. While Stroud (1968) argued that transcendental arguments fail because they cannot derive ontological conclusions from epistemic premises, the later Stroud (1994 and 1999) argues that transcendental arguments successfully establish claims about what propositions one *necessarily* *believes* to be true. This claim might seem close to the kind of non-truth directed modal claim that Collingwood makes. But it is in fact rather different. For Collingwood presuppositions are not beliefs. Beliefs have cognitive content. Those who hold a belief hold a proposition to be true. But for Collingwood to believe a statement to be true and to presuppose it are not the same thing. He illustrates the distinction between a presupposition and a belief as follows:

A man (or at any rate an intelligent man) need not regard himself as insulted if someone who has paid him a sum of money asks him for a receipt, or if the family of a lady whom he is about to marry proposes that a marriage settlement should be drawn up. He knows that the request or proposal is based on the assumption that he is capable, or will one day become capable, of acting dishonourably; but though he knows people assume this he does not necessarily think they believe it. He finds no difficulty in distinguishing their supposing him a rascal and their believing him one, and he does not regard the former as evidence of the latter. (1940:28-29)

The bride to be who asks for a prenuptial agreement presupposes the relationship may turn sour; but her presupposing that the relationship may sour does not require her believing it will any more than presupposing that the tooth fairy exists for the sake of one’s child entails believing it does. The 6-year-old who leaves money under the pillow believes the *proposition* “the tooth fairy exists” to be true; the parent who leaves coins under the pillow, on the other hand, presupposes “the tooth fairy exists” when asking “how much money did it leave for your tooth?” but does not believe the proposition “the tooth fairy exists” to be true. “Propositions” and “presuppositions” are terms of art and refer to sentences which have a very different role in the logic of question and answer (D’Oro 2015). Crucially, while the propositional answers we give to questions have a determinate truth-value, the notion of truth (and falsity) does not apply to the presuppositions which give rise to those questions. To treat presuppositions as having a truth-value is to understand them as propositions, that is, to mistake them for answers to questions which arise because of certain presuppositions being made. If (as Collingwood argues) the notion of truth and falsity does not properly apply to absolute presuppositions, then it would *not* seem quite right to say that absolute presuppositions are propositions which are (necessarily) believed to be true (even if they may be false). For once the idea that the notion of truth and falsity legitimately applies to absolute presuppositions is genuinely left behind, so is the need to characterise transcendental arguments as establishing modest doxastic or *merely* *epistemic* conclusions about what is believed (or even necessarily believed) to be true. After all, the qualification “even if they may be false” makes sense only from the point of view of the assumption that the concept of truth can legitimately be predicated of absolute presuppositions.

Collingwood’s position in relation to the later Strawson’s naturalistically inspired ‘reply’ to the sceptic and the modest or weak transcendental strategy defended by the later Stroud may be elucidated by referring to a debate, which commonly takes place in metaethics, between cognitivists and non-cognitivists. In metaethics cognitivism is defined as the position that moral statements such as “murder is wrong” and “helping others is right” express propositions which can be true or false. Non-cognitivism, by contrast, is the view that such statements express attitudes of approval and disapproval rather than propositions, and that these attitudes of approval or disapproval are neither true nor false. Collingwood’s claim that absolute presuppositions lack truth value, because they are not propositions, might appear to align his transcendental arguments with the position of the anti-cognitivist and thus with the Humean/Strawsonian naturalistic reply to the sceptic. But, as we have seen, Collingwood is making modal claims: our unwillingness to give up on absolute presuppositions is not a matter of recoiling emotionally at the suggestion that we abandon them in the way in which for the moral expressivist we recoil at the sight of an evil deed. One might then be tempted to think that since Collingwood rejects the Strawsonian/Humean anti-cognitivist response to the sceptic he must therefore be some sort of cognitivist who argues, along the lines of the later Stroud, that transcendental arguments uncover propositions which are necessarily (modal claim) believed to be true. But while Collingwood’s transcendental strategy may look a little like Stroud’s, it is not the same. For, as we have seen, Collingwood rejects the claim that absolute presuppositions are propositions which have a truth value. What is presupposed, in Collingwood’s sense, is neither what we are inclined to believe by nature (Hume/later Strawson), nor what we necessarily (modal claim) believe to be true (later Stroud) in order to carry out certain enquiries. For if we believe a proposition, the proposition has a truth-value, even if we may never know what its truth-value is. For Collingwood what sets presuppositions apart from propositions is precisely that they have no truth value. They are not beliefs which we hold (or necessarily hold) to be true (even if they may not be). As a result, although Collingwood’s transcendental arguments are not truth-directed, it makes no sense to say of the conclusions which they establish that they are *merely* *epistemic*. For the claim that the conclusions which transcendental arguments establish are doxastic rather than ontological betrays an attitude of epistemic defeatism which makes sense only from the point of view of the claim that the notion of truth and falsity is applicable to the presuppositions which they uncover. The kind of transcendental argument that is at work in the logic of question and answer is therefore not “modest” in the sense that it establishes modal conclusions of a *mere* doxastic nature about what must necessarily be believed to be true (as opposed to what might be the case), as the later Stroud claims. The assertion that transcendental arguments succeed if they steer clear of establishing truth or world-directed conclusions, is ***not the same as*** the claim that the notion of truth value has no applicability to absolute presuppositions.[[7]](#footnote-7)

It would be difficult in the context of this paper to do justice to the range of modest transcendental arguments that have been developed in the wake of Stroud’s work, but I would like to consider another, slightly different attempt, to defend transcendental arguments by limiting their scope. Stern (1999b and 2000) has argued that although modest transcendental arguments do not establish truth-directed conclusions because (as Stroud argues) they do not close the gap between what is believed to be the case and what is known (or truly believed) to be the case, they still have important anti-sceptical implications. To appreciate their anti-sceptical import one must take care to distinguish between the “justificatory sceptic” who claims that our beliefs lack justification, and the epistemic sceptic who claims it is not possible to know whether our beliefs are true rather than merely justified. Belief-directed transcendental arguments, Stern suggests, provide an effective antidote against justificatory scepticism in so far as they demonstrate that certain cognitive achievements (such as the possibility of ordered experience) can be accounted for only by referring back to certain structural beliefs which are therefore justified internally by showing that we can coherently and non-hypocritically hold on to the beliefs which they make possible in so far as we hold certain more foundational beliefs to be true. Stern claims that no meta-level justification to the effect that “coherence yields correspondence” is needed to defeat the justificatory sceptic because justification, unlike knowledge, is a matter of internal rather than external fit. Since such meta-level justification is not required to answer the justificatory sceptic, one need not conclude that because transcendental arguments cannot establish truth-directed conclusions they have no anti-sceptical clout. (Stern 1999b:59) Stern’s distinction between the justificatory and the epistemic sceptic offers an interesting variation on the modest transcendental strategy defended by Stroud but it ultimately remains vulnerable to the objection that if success in transcendental argumentation requires curtailing the ontological ambitions of truth-directed transcendental arguments, then it comes at a very heavy price. In Sacks’ words, Stern’s transcendental arguments would leave us “with no more than coherence in the confinement of our empirical belief set, without any appeal to an impinging external world” (Sacks 1999). The distinction between justificatory and epistemic scepticism, therefore, does not alter the predicament in which, according to many, transcendental arguments find themselves: if they seek to deliver truth rather than belief (or even justified belief) then they can be accused of arguing in a circular manner by building the conclusions which they seek to achieve into the experiential premises from which they start. If on the other hand they curtail their ontological ambitions they avoid the charge of circularity only at the price of renouncing any attempt to cross the appearances/reality gap.

Like Stroud’s, Stern’s modest transcendental strategy has something in common with the one that Collingwood adopts. But while Collingwood would have a great deal of sympathy with the claim that the justification of absolute presuppositions is coherentist he would have little sympathy with the internal/external distinction that is presupposed by Stern’s distinction between justificatory and epistemic scepticism. First, external questions concerning whether absolute presuppositions correspond to an inquiry-independent reality are, for Collingwood, nonsense questions. They are nonsense questions not because they are grammatically ill-formed, but because since absolute presuppositions are the yardsticks of knowledge they supply the criteria for truth and falsity. (1940: 38)[[8]](#footnote-8) Second, Collingwood would take exception to the view that there is a meaningful internal/external distinction that maps on the distinction between justificatory and epistemic scepticism. For once it is denied that “is true” can legitimately be predicated of the yardsticks of knowledge then it would seem to make no sense to say that the (coherentist) justification of presuppositions is internal in a sense that can be meaningfully contrasted with the kind of external validation that would be required to meet the epistemic sceptic and which truth-directed transcendental arguments are said to be aiming for (whilst failing to deliver). For the claim that justification - unlike knowledge - is internal, and that modest transcendental arguments are aimed at the justificatory rather than the epistemic sceptic, appears to rely on a contrast that can no longer be made once we deny that the predicate “is true” legitimately applies to presuppositions. If the notion of truth and falsity really has no applicability to absolute presuppositions, then the question: “do transcendental arguments establish world-directed conclusions?” is not the question that should be addressed by a second-order discussion of the goal of transcendental arguments. For whether that question is answered affirmatively, as in the case of ambitious transcendental arguments, or whether it is claimed that transcendental arguments uncover only the structure of our beliefs, the question assumes precisely what Collingwood denies, namely that “is true” can rightfully be predicated of presuppositions. Were such an assumption not operative the metaphilosophical debate between those who assert that transcendental arguments succeed in establishing world-directed conclusions and those who claim that they establish only doxastic, psychological or merely epistemic claims, could not get going. But if the contemporary metaphilosophical debate concerning the nature and scope of transcendental arguments relies on a premise that Collingwood rejects, then what ought to be the focus of a reflection on the nature and goal of transcendental strategies? This is what we shall consider next.

**II A different role for transcendental arguments**

Although transcendental arguments are often presented as anti-sceptical strategies, they have not been exclusively mobilized in the service of an anti-sceptical agenda.[[9]](#footnote-9) In the work of Michael Friedman (2001; 2010), for example, they have been invoked in order to account for changes in scientific orthodoxy. On Friedman’s account transcendental arguments do not uncover presuppositions which are absolutely necessary and universal but rather the presuppositions which underpin the most advanced scientific theories of one’s time. Scientific revolutions occur when certain changes occur at the level of fundamental presuppositions. As the presuppositions of natural science are subject to change it is necessary to prize apart two elements that are often conjoined in the Kantian notion of a prioricity: “constitutive of the object of scientific knowledge” on the one hand and “necessary and unrevisable” on the other (Friedman 2001:30). This is not to say that the presuppositions of natural science are themselves empirical hypotheses: they are not for, Friedman argues, there is a clear distinction between the first-order level claims of the special sciences and the second-order level claims of philosophy. This understanding of the task of transcendental arguments is closer to Collingwood’s conception of the character and goals of philosophical analysis than the modest transcendental strategies developed by the later Strawson and the later Stroud. But it also differs from it in some important respects. Collingwood’s primary goal is not to account for the possibility of scientific revolutions, but rather to defend the autonomy of the human sciences from the threat of scientism. His argument is that the explanations at work in any given form of inquiry must be fit for purpose, that is, they must be such as to deliver answers to the questions that are being asked. What counts as an explanation in one context will not count as an explanation in another if the questions which they seek to answer are not the same. The kind of explanation for Litvinenko’s death that the political historian seeks, for example, will not be found in his medical file, even if there is a perfectly legitimate medical explanation for his death. Different explanations can be mutually supportive without answering the same questions: a detective can put the results of the forensic investigator to good use even if the murder mystery will not be solved in the lab by determining the chemical composition of the grit under the victim’s fingernails. The explanations of the forensic scientist and those of the detective, like the political historians’ explanation for Litvinenko’s death and the one contained in his medical file, do not conflict as long as one bears in mind that they are *not just different explanations, but explanations of a different kind*,[[10]](#footnote-10) explanations which answer different questions, questions which arise from different presuppositions. Sensitivity to the questions asked requires an understanding of the presuppositions on which the questions are based, for, as we have seen, all questions rest on presuppositions. And this is precisely what scientism is guilty of: failing to acknowledge the presuppositions which govern the questions posed within natural science.

History, which Collingwood took to be a human science, makes use of folk-psychological explanations which differ in kind from those of the natural sciences because historians (like detectives) are concerned with uncovering motives and goals. Since the answers of the detective and those of the forensic scientist do not compete, there is no conflict between the claims of the natural scientist who explains reality in causal/deterministic fashion and those of the hermeneutic investigator who appeals to humanistic explanations. At a meta-level there is indeed a clash between the presuppositions which are made by the natural and the human sciences because such presuppositions give rise to conflicting conceptions of reality which cannot be simultaneously endorsed: we cannot say, at one and the same time, that reality is nomologically connected and that it is not: we must operate within one paradigm or the other. As Kant might say, we must conceive of ourselves *either* as theoretical observers subject to the causality of nature *or* as agents subject to the causality of reason. But since there are no presuppositionless questions, and since the propositional answers to questions arise only within one paradigm or the other, the conflict is not ontologically deep and the choice between paradigms is determined by what questions one is seeking an answer to. Taking transcendental arguments in this pragmatic direction does not leave intact the apparatus of transcendental idealism within which Kant originally developed them; it nonetheless preserves Kant’s goal of defending our entitlement to different standpoints without becoming vulnerable to the objection that the autonomy of the human sciences is achieved at a high price: that of endorsing scepticism at a higher level by limiting theoretical knowledge to appearances only. While Kant defends the autonomy of practical from theoretical reason by limiting the claims of theoretical knowledge to appearances, Collingwood defends the autonomy of the human sciences by arguing that the methodologies at work in different forms of inquiry have their own distinctive set of presuppositions which serve different explanatory goals, and which cannot be meaningfully said to be true or false. The autonomy of a form of inquiry is upheld by showing that it has a distinctive set of presuppositions, that the questions it asks (and the answers that it seeks) are different in kind from those operative in other forms of inquiry, and that its distinctive questions are better served by employing different methods. In denying that “is true/false” is a predicate that applies to absolute presuppositions Collingwood pulls the rug out from under an objection that is often levelled against two-tier philosophies which acknowledge a distinction between the first order level of the special sciences and the second order level of philosophical inquiry into the presuppositions operating at first order level. The standard objection raised against Kant’s transcendental idealism in the tradition of post-Kantian German idealism is that Kant’s critical philosophy simply encourages or endorses scepticism at a higher level, that of the forms of experience, and that it remains, despite its best efforts, a form of “subjective idealism”[[11]](#footnote-11), an objection that is a very close relative of the contemporary claim that modest transcendental arguments amount to nothing but the adoption of a strategy of sophisticated capitulation (Sacks:67). Such an objection does not apply to the presuppositions governing forms of inquiry as Collingwood conceives them because he does not claim that absolute presuppositions are propositions which are believed (or necessarily believed) to be true but which may *not* be true of an inquiry-independent reality in the way in which, say, Kant claimed that space and time are subjective features of the mind which may or may not be objective features of reality as it is in itself (Kant 1781/87 A42-3/B59-60). The kind of transcendental argument Collingwood develops does not entail a strategic retreat to a position of epistemic humility and is therefore not vulnerable to the charge of subjective idealism because rather than limiting the scope of transcendental arguments (as modest transcendental strategies do) it denies the meaningfulness of the question “are the presuppositions of knowledge true of an inquiry-independent reality?”

Collingwood’s defence of the autonomy of the human sciences differs from most contemporary defences of the autonomy of the mental which tend to grant ontological priority to the explanatory practices of the natural sciences (or the standpoint of theoretical knowledge) whilst simultaneously arguing for the methodological autonomy of the human sciences. As a result, the most dominant forms of non-reductivism marry explanatory pluralism with the very un-Kantian view that the method of natural science fixes our ontological commitments. From this naturalistic platform the human sciences have a distinctive methodology but lack an ontology; they are therefore like citizens without a country because their explanations, however useful they might be for pragmatic purposes, have no ontological clout. Like Kant, Collingwood rejects the view that the methodological autonomy of the human sciences can be defended from a naturalistic standpoint. But rather than confining the naturalistic/theoretical standpoint to the realm of appearances Collingwood argues that the claims of natural science are made possible by a set of presuppositions which differ from those of other forms of inquiry and which we are justified in adopting in so far as we seek answers to a specific kind of ‘why question’ that requires a certain kind of (nomological) explanation, and that the choice between one kind of explanation and another ultimately depends on the questions we want answered. While taking Kant in this pragmatic direction[[12]](#footnote-12) entails a substantive revision of Kant’s transcendental idealism, Collingwood does nonetheless remain true to Kant’s goal of defending our entitlement to view ourselves from two different standpoints, that of theoretical and of practical reason. But whereas Kant sought to show how we may hold on to two different and incompatible standpoints by limiting the claims of knowledge to appearances, Collingwood defends our entitlement to hold on to these different standpoints more pragmatically, by arguing that different absolute presuppositions serve different explanatory goals.

**III Philosophy, the a priori and the special sciences**

What is to become of the notion of the Kantian a priori in this version of transcendental arguments? Are absolute presuppositions a priori in some sense of the word? In the following I will argue that absolute presuppositions are a priori in the sense that they structure the practices by which they are presupposed. As such they make the practice possible in a very specific sense of “making possible”. Absolute presuppositions make a practice possible *not* in the sense that the practices would not be or exist had the presuppositions not been made. The principle of the uniformity of nature, for example, does not make the practice of extrapolating generalizations from experiential data possible in the same sense in which, say, water is a necessary condition for life so that, if there were no water, there would be no life. Presuppositions make the practices possible in the sense that the practice would not be justified if certain presuppositions were not made.[[13]](#footnote-13)

How weak or how robust is this notion of a prioricity? On the one hand this notion of a prioricity may be deemed to be rather weak because if absolute presuppositions are necessary in this sense, then they are not necessary in any absolute sense, and this implies a significant revision of the Kantian notion of the a priori. On the other hand, this notion of a prioricity is fairly robust because it retains a distinction in kind, and not only in degree, between the domain of inquiry of philosophy and that of the special sciences. An important feature of the kind of transcendental argument that is at work in the logic of Q&A is the commitment to different levels of investigation, the first order level of the special sciences and the second order level of philosophy. The domain of inquiry of the special sciences is a set of propositions asserted in answer to the questions posed by that special science. These propositional answers have truth values. There is a fact of the matter as to whether Caesar won the battle at Pharsalus or whether silver dissolves in nitric acid. The domain of inquiry of philosophy, on the other hand, concerns the presuppositions which give rise to the questions which are answered by the special sciences. Whilst the propositional answers given by the first order sciences have truth values, the notions of truth and falsity do not apply to presuppositions. There is therefore a clear division of labour between philosophy and the special sciences. And the dividing line between the job of the philosopher and that of first order investigators cannot be characterized merely by saying that the claims with which philosophers concern themselves are of a more general nature than those of the lower levels. As we have seen, the principle of the uniformity of nature does not have the same logical status as the working empirical hypotheses which it makes possible. Of course, many have conceived of philosophical claims as being different only in degree of generality rather than in kind from the assertions made within the special sciences. Philosophy is often described as answering the most general questions about the nature of reality. On this view when philosophers respond to the question “is reality material or immaterial?” by saying “reality is material”, or “reality is immaterial”, they are effectively making a claim that differs only in degree of generality from the assertion of the chemist who states “water is H2O”. On Collingwood’s account, by contrast, philosophy studies the fundamental presuppositions of the first order sciences, and such presuppositions differ from the propositional answers given within those sciences because they provide the criteria by which those propositions can be verified and falsified. There is therefore a distinction in kind between the domain of inquiry of philosophy and that of the first order sciences.

This commitment to a two-tier level of inquiry means that although Collingwood’s conception of the a priori is significantly weaker than Kant’s own, it is also incompatible with any attempt to reduce the distance between philosophy and any of the special sciences whose presuppositions it uncovers by naturalizing it, or by historicizing it, as he is often believed to be doing. The later work of R.G Collingwood is often associated with a historicist turn which dilutes the notion of the a priori by relativizing it to time and place, by turning philosophy into the study of predominant cultural *beliefs*. This alleged transformation of the a priori has engendered two kinds of reactions. On the one hand Collingwood has been praised for relocating the objects of philosophical knowledge from a realm of transcendent metaphysical entities beyond the reach of empirical knowledge to the accessible realm of historical beliefs. On the other he has been chastised because the weakening of the a priori required by such a relocation exacts too high a price, for it requires essentially the dissolution of philosophy into history. Collingwood is thus either praised for historicising philosophy or condemned for so doing.[[14]](#footnote-14) If the reconstruction of the kind of transcendental argument at work in the logic of question and answer provided here is correct, then both these reactions are based on a misrepresentation of Collingwood’s avowed goal of bringing about a *rapprochement* between philosophy and history. For the kind of transcendental arguments Collingwood develops make modal claims about the presuppositions of knowledge rather than descriptive claims about what people believe (to be true) at a particular time and place (D’Oro 2010). The heuristic principles which are at work in different forms of inquiry are not beliefs of a more general nature than those one finds in the special sciences, beliefs which, as Quine (1951) would say, are more central to the doxastic web.[[15]](#footnote-15) They are claims of a different kind which frame forms of inquiry in the sense of determining the kind of questions that arise within them. Although the presuppositions which transcendental arguments uncover do not have the apodictic necessity of the Kantian categories, philosophy retains a very different *modus operandi* from that of the special sciences. Therefore, while the absolute presuppositions which philosophical analysis uncovers lack the absolute necessity of the categories in Kant’s system of transcendental idealism, they are not comparable to widespread historical beliefs any more than the principle of the uniformity of nature can be compared or reduced to a working empirical hypothesis.

**Conclusion**

In sum: transcendental arguments in Collingwood are not epistemically humble because they do not advance modest or merely epistemic claims concerning the structure of our beliefs. Modest transcendental strategies tend to accept the validity of the sceptical challenge, concede that they cannot meet it, and find a less ambitious role for transcendental arguments. In some cases, as we have seen, modest transcendental strategies distinguish between the epistemic and the justificatory sceptic and, by retargeting the conclusions of transcendental arguments to the justificatory rather than the epistemic sceptic, they claim a degree of success against scepticism. But since modest transcendental arguments stop short of questioning the validity of the challenge posed by the epistemic sceptic, they remain vulnerable to a contemporary version of the charge of subjective idealism that was raised against Kant’s transcendental philosophy in the tradition of German idealism. Such an objection does not apply to the kind of transcendental strategy that is at work in Collingwood’s logic of question and answer because rather than retreating to a position of epistemic humility, Collingwood denies the legitimacy of the question concerning the truth-value of the conditions of knowledge, a question which can be answered only by locating oneself on either side of the appearances/reality distinction. As we have seen, rather than leaving the question of truth unanswered, in the manner of modest transcendental strategies which focus on the structure of our beliefs, or our justification for holding them, Collingwood argues that such a question arises when we fail to take note of the distinction between propositions and presuppositions. It is the failure to acknowledge this distinction that promotes the mistaken belief that “is true” can be predicated of the conditions of knowledge. Nor can Collingwood’s use of transcendental strategies be described as ambitious because he does not put them at the service of an anti-sceptical agenda; his goal is to defend the autonomy of the human sciences against the encroachment of natural science by showing that the explanatory practices at work in these different forms of inquiry answer investigative questions that rest on different presuppositions. This does not imply, however, that because his transcendental strategies do not address the sceptical challenge directly, and focus instead on the question of the relation between different explanatory practices, that he simply changes the subject and leaves the sceptical challenge completely unanswered. Since Collingwood denies the validity of the sceptical challenge he does, in some sense, have something to say to the sceptic; but his answer is not an attempt to refute scepticism (as in the case of truth-directed, ambitious transcendental strategies) but to undermine it, by challenging the view that “is true” can be properly predicated of the conditions of knowledge.

Two important conclusions can be drawn from what has been argued here, one for the contemporary debate on the nature and scope of transcendental arguments, the other for Collingwood scholarship. First, if the notion of truth and falsity does not apply to absolute presuppositions (because, as we have seen, they provide the criteria of verification internal to forms of inquiry), then renouncing the ontological ambitions of world or truth-directed transcendental arguments does not necessitate a strategic retreat to the realm of appearances: there is no need to choose between ontological hubris and epistemic humility, as the current division between modest and ambitious transcendental strategies would seem to suggest. Second, if the argument of this paper is correct then renouncing the notion of universality that goes hand in hand with the Kantian notion of the a priori does not entail that philosophy collapses into a form of cultural anthropology which is concerned with what beliefs are held to be true at a certain time and place.[[16]](#footnote-16) As we have seen, presuppositions are not beliefs of a very general nature; they differ in kind, not in degree from the propositional answers to the questions to which they give rise. Philosophy, therefore, does not lose its autonomy to history or to any of the special sciences.

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1. This project publication was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation. I am grateful to the anonymous referees of this paper for their close readings and constructive engagement with this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The text most commonly associated with the anti-sceptical reading of transcendental arguments is Strawson (1968). Strawson (1985) on the other hand develops a modest transcendental strategy that is not world or truth-directed. See below. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Early criticisms of the view that transcendental arguments are deductive arguments with anti-sceptical intent can be found in [Ameriks (1978) and](http://philpapers.org/rec/AMEKTD) [Malpas (1997).](http://philpapers.org/rec/MALTTC) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For an overview of ambitious and modest transcendental strategies see Robert Stern, “Transcendental Arguments”, *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/transcendental-arguments/>. See also the introductions to Stern (2000 and 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Strictly speaking the naturalistic response is not a reply to the sceptic in the sense in which robust transcendental arguments are. Therefore, I have placed ‘reply’ within quotation marks. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For Collingwood what determines whether a statement is a presupposition, or a proposition is the role it plays in the logic of question and answer. If the role of a statement is to give rise to a question, then it is a presupposition. If its role is to answer a question, then it is a proposition. Some statements may have two roles, depending on whether they give rise to, or answer a question. For example, “the salt is on the table” may be a proposition answering the question “where is the salt?” or a presupposition giving rise to the question “could you fetch the salt from the table?” Collingwood referred to presuppositions governing domains of inquiry as “absolute” because these presuppositions have only one role in the logic of question and answer; they are never offered as propositional answers (with a determinate truth-value) to questions in the context of the inquiry they make possible. Thus, for example, “nature is uniform” for Collingwood, is not a propositional answer to the question “What is the structure of reality?” because it is always presupposed (and never asserted) as a true propositional answer to a question by the inductive scientist. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The claim that the notions of truth and falsity do not apply to absolute presuppositions should not be conflated with the logical positivist view that they are empirically unverifiable propositions. Collingwood has sometimes been construed in this way and subsequently challenged on the grounds that he concedes too much to logical positivism (Beaney 2001:118 and 2005:45ff). Properly understood, Collingwood’s claim is not that absolute presuppositions cannot be empirically verified (in the way in which traditional metaphysical claims concerning the existence of God or the soul cannot be empirically verified), but that the notion of verification does not apply to them because they provide the criteria for determining what is true or false within a mode of inquiry. Absolute presuppositions are ***un***verifi***able*** not in the sense in which an overpriced property in a bad location is ***un***sell***able***, but more in the sense in which a mammal is ***unable*** to lay eggs. Unlike “suckling its young” “laying eggs” is not a predicate that applies to mammals, so

   when we say that mammals can’t lay eggs we mean that they are not oviparous. Equally when one says that absolute presuppositions cannot be true (or false), one means that they are not propositions. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. There are points of contacts, as well as important differences, between Collingwood’s claim that absolute presuppositions are the yardsticks of knowledge and, as such, they are neither true nor false, and Wittgenstein’s (1969) account of hinge propositions in *On Certainty*. On this see D’Oro (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For recent interpretation which do not see scepticism as central to transcendental arguments see Massimi (2010); Chang (2010) and Gava (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For the claim that explanations in the human sciences differ in kind from explanations in the natural sciences see Dray’s classic defence in Dray (1963, 1967, 1980) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hegel, G.W. F. (1830) in Findlay’s (ed.) 1975. *Hegel’s Logic: Being part I of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, New York: Oxford University Press § 45, p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For an account of the relation between transcendental arguments and pragmatism see Gava and Stern (eds.) (2016), Introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Though, as we have seen, presuppositions and practices are mutually supportive. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Influential historicist readings include Donagan, (1962); Rotenstreich (1972); Toulmin (1972) and Harrison (1989). The historicist reading has been questioned by Modood (1989); Connelly (1990); Oldfield (1995); Martin (1995); D’Oro (2002; 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For a view which reads Collingwood as being closer to Quine see Kindi (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Collingwood does occasionally say this. But this claim is inconsistent with the view that presuppositions are not propositions. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)