

Technium.

41/2023

2023
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Robin George Collingwood on metaphysics as understanding the world

Adrian Hagiu¹, Constantin C. Lupașcu², Sergiu Bortos³

^{1,2} Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy and Socio-Political Sciences, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, Romania,

³ Department of Social Sciences and Humanities Research (DSU), Institute for Interdisciplinary Research (ICI), “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, Romania

adrianhagiui@yahoo.com¹, c.c.lupascu@gmail.com², bortos.sergiu@uaic.ro³

Abstract. The aim of our study is to provide an overview of the concept of metaphysics as conceived by the British philosopher Robin George Collingwood and argue that his method still holds practical implications for contemporary philosophers. According to Collingwood, metaphysics is the science – that is, the knowledge – of the absolute presuppositions of an historical period. In other words, for him metaphysics is a historical science, albeit one which is not confounded with history. Thus, following the discussion concerning the constitution of Collingwood’s metaphysics, and a brief framing of his thought within the history of metaphysics, we will make the case in favor of the thesis that understanding or knowing the absolute presuppositions or principles of a historical period provides the individual with a vision of that period. As such, we will also advocate that the duty of those philosophers who wish to explain our contemporary world is to identify these principles. In order to achieve the objectives outlined in our study, we have employed both the hermeneutic analysis and the phenomenological description as our methods of choice. The results of our investigation serve a practical purpose in contemporary philosophy, as the individual who succeeds in shaping the metaphysics of our current time period is in fact shaping his own vision – *Weltanschauung* – of the contemporary world, his own ideas, principles or beliefs. Therefore, our study can be of great benefit to the reader who is interested in the metaphysics of the present, and the social changes it entails, precisely because it provides the necessary tools for this particular process of knowledge.

Keywords. Collingwood, metaphysics, understanding, contemporary world

1. Introduction

Giuseppina D’Oro [1] notes that, for Robin George Collingwood, philosophy is the reflection on the presuppositions or principles underlying human knowledge. According to Collingwood himself, metaphysics appears in close connection with the understanding of the historical past. With some of his exegetes agreeing that this type of understanding is entirely hermeneutic [2]. The British thinker devoted a treatise [3] to this particular type of understanding, focusing on the philosophical method. We can, however, extend the application of this method to the understanding of certain phenomena of our modern world [4].

What we aim to demonstrate is that the idea of metaphysics outlined by Robin George Collingwood helps us to understand the contemporary world by reflecting on the principles, or absolute presuppositions of our time. It is therefore the task of philosophers concerned with explaining the contemporary world to identify these principles.

In order to justify this thesis it is necessary for us to cover the following objectives: (1) a brief discussion of Collingwood's metaphysics in order to see in which tradition we can situate his theory; (2) to show how metaphysics is constituted as a science of the absolute presuppositions of a period; and, finally, (3) to point out some characteristics of metaphysics as historical thought. Our aim, as such, is to illustrate that, starting from the ideas of the British philosopher, even those who are less philosophically trained can form a certain picture of the present, as long as they successfully identify some of its absolute presuppositions.

The approach we have adopted in order to achieve these objectives and to justify the thesis formulated consists in a hermeneutic analysis of the texts of the British philosopher, as well as in a phenomenological description of some of his most important concepts.

2. The novelty of Robin George Collingwood's metaphysics

Metaphysics has undergone various transformations throughout the ages, nevertheless what has been written was mostly nothing more than a response to, or an interpretation of Aristotle's metaphysics. Philosophers who have concerned themselves with metaphysics saw Aristotle's concepts as the starting point for all philosophical work. Indeed, at the same time that Collingwood set out his views on metaphysics in *An Essay on Metaphysics* [5], Martin Heidegger [6] argued that the question regarding the being needed to be asked once more. The two philosophers, Heidegger and Collingwood, did not seem to have communicated with each other. Therefore, we see that at the beginning of the 20th century, there was a prevailing need for a change in metaphysics. Of all the things that had become classic, none of them were of any interest any more. Collingwood points out that although metaphysics has been much discussed, there has never before been any question of rethinking it. Or, rather, the question "What is metaphysics?". Florin Lobont, a commentator of the British philosopher, wonders whether "it might be justified, after the 'transcendental turn' (Kant), the 'historical turn' (Dilthey) and the 'linguistic turn' (Wittgenstein), to talk about the project of a 'scientific' metaphysics" [7]. As we have already stated above, for Collingwood metaphysics is the science of absolute presuppositions. Therein lies the novelty proposed by the British philosopher.

Immanuel Kant writes in his *Critique of Pure Reason* [8] that legitimate metaphysics is a systematisation of the pure concepts of thought, to which criticism offers only a few points of reference. Moreover, the German philosopher sees metaphysics as the systematically ordered inventory of all that we possess through pure reason. This aspect of Kantian thought is, according to Lobont, "the understanding that most profoundly influenced Collingwood's project of a 'reformed metaphysics', seen as the science of *a priori* principles or absolute presuppositions underlying knowledge, 'as the science of parts', such as those that implicitly presuppose the unity of the world [and thus that of the spirit]" [7, p. 52].

Referring back to Collingwood, for him metaphysics "arises out of the mere pursuit of knowledge. That pursuit, which we call science, is an attempt to think in a systematic and orderly manner. What this involves is disentangling the presuppositions of our thinking. This again involves discovering that some of them are relative presuppositions which have to be justified, and that others are absolute presuppositions which neither stand in need of justification nor can in fact be justified" [5, p. 233] and a person who has made this

discovery is already a metaphysician. In addition to the extensive treatment of these issues in *An Essay on Metaphysics*, we also find further clarification in the chapter “Method and Metaphysics” [5]. In other words, Collingwood aims to present his ideas to an audience less familiar with philosophical discourse, and the purpose of the lecture is to apply his own method of philosophising to metaphysics. The British philosopher begins by noting that “the enterprise which goes by the name of metaphysics may be described as an attempt to find out what we can about the general nature of reality: or, if you prefer any of these phrases, the general nature of the real, or of things, or of the world, or of what there is” [3, p. 328].

Moreover, he insists that “metaphysics does not consist in any number of investigations concerning the nature of *particular* kinds of things, unless these are pursued in connection with an investigation concerning the *general* nature of things” [3, p. 328]. This comes as a continuation of his polemic with George Edward Moore, who argued that there is no such thing as the general nature of reality. Collingwood understands Moore's words as referring to the fact that there is no such thing as reality, which in turn would imply that nothing is real. His thesis, therefore, would be that reality, whatever it is, is not a class-concept: the real or the world (or that which is) is not a classification system. He says that he does not deny that there are classification systems, but we must admit that something else is also possible [5].

Collingwood describes reality as a *hierarchy of forms*. In this case, however, two questions arise: (1) whether there is only one hierarchy or several, and (2) whether metaphysics can reveal reality as such a hierarchy of forms. Collingwood insists on these two questions [5]. His answer to the first is that there are many hierarchies of forms. People's knowledge of reality is far too fragmentary and one-sided to make any claim such as that *there is only one hierarchy of forms*. However, metaphysics risks falling into such a situation, since, Collingwood points out, even if we are always running away from the anthropocentric viewpoint, we still can't get rid of it entirely, which makes our whole knowledge incomplete [5].

In this system, metaphysics is at the summit of the pyramid of knowledge. Metaphysics is the first science, the logical basis of all other sciences – their foundation. For these reasons, the relationship between the sciences and metaphysics must be one of subordination. If, for instance, the object of metaphysics is A, and A is specified by B and C, and the latter are the objects of different sciences, then these sciences will have A in common [5, p. 8]. This must be understood solely from the perspective of the hierarchy of forms. Hence, in *An Essay on Metaphysics*, the British philosopher shows that a science like geometry must fulfil three criteria. First, it must be co-ordinated with one or more other sciences that have a universal object of study, in the same way that geometry is co-ordinated with arithmetic. Secondly, this science must be subordinate to another science whose object is universal. Moreover, the object of the science that frames the former must be superordinate to the object of the former, serving as a kind of logical background for it. For example, geometry is subordinate to general mathematics. The third criterion is that this science must itself be subordinate to other sciences, whose objects of study are subordinate to its object. Just as geometry stands above the special geometries of the triangle [5, p. 8].

Apart from all this, it is necessary to study Collingwood's metaphysics separately from ontology. Ontology, the science of being, is referred to as such by the philosopher only when he wishes to use a single word for this discipline. However, in his *Essay [on Metaphysics]* [5], Collingwood shows that one cannot speak of a science of being not even as a quasi-science or pseudo-science. For the British philosopher, ontology is the name given to a mistake made by philosophers from the time of Aristotle [5, p. 17]. Such an ontology

cannot exist because its object would be being, and this object of study, he argues, cannot be discerned. For this object has no particularity by which it can be distinguished [5, p. 14]. Needless to say, ontology cannot satisfy the above three criteria. Therefore, neither can the question of such a science arise.

This is the framework within which Collingwood posits the thesis that metaphysics is the science of presuppositions underlying the thought of every epoch, that is, the science of absolute presuppositions. We will outline below how this is possible, while trying to show its practical importance in contemporary philosophy.

3. Metaphysics – the knowledge of absolute presuppositions

For Collingwood, philosophy is reflexive and serves to bring to light those areas of knowledge that would otherwise be less perceptible. Philosophy renders explicit what has always been implicitly known. Therefore, the philosopher, that is, the metaphysician, will never deal with art in the way an artist does, or with mathematics in the way a mathematician does, but the metaphysician will seek to understand the nature of those activities in which artists, scientists, or historians are engaged. It is clear, then, that these activities involving the manifestation of the spirit have some fundamental principles that need to be studied. These principles, taken together, are the object of study that philosophy is concerned with [9, p. 9].

Philosophy, as we can see, is understood here as metaphysics. In this sense, metaphysics is the investigation of the presuppositions that govern certain areas of knowledge or experience [9, 10]. Hence, in Collingwood's view, the metaphysician ought not to investigate whether something exists or not, but to draw those presuppositions into the light, to make them explicit [9, p. 16]. He does not discover new or ultimate areas of knowledge, but seeks to explain the principles that govern existence. In other words, the task of the metaphysician is to discover the absolute presuppositions of knowledge.

Inevitably a question arises here: how does the metaphysician bring these absolute presuppositions out of the shadows of the mind? By what process, if any, does he accomplish this task? Collingwood answers these questions by writing that absolute presuppositions are discerned through what is called metaphysical analysis [5, p. 40]. The latter consists, in fact, in the hermeneutics of absolute presuppositions. Where a new science is born, or, as Collingwood puts it, where thought is ordered, metaphysics is implicitly born. Should that science die at some point, the metaphysics behind it dies as well. In this framework, metaphysics is understood as a shadow of thought and knowledge within which absolute presuppositions are hidden. This is why the British philosopher writes that metaphysics is the science of these presuppositions, for it is only in metaphysics that they find their place [5, p. 41]. Collingwood assumes this because he has found it in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and claims that what the Stagirite does is nothing more than a metaphysical analysis of the absolute presuppositions that underlay the thought of his time.

Metaphysical analysis is directly related to the hermeneutics of absolute presuppositions and, implicitly, to the logic of questions and answers. The latter is concerned with the questions posed by a text in a given period, or the questions answered by such a text. In this case, the logic of questions and answers is concerned with detecting absolute presuppositions. These cannot provide answers to questions, but only presuppositions that lead to questions. For example, if we ask whether the world has a beginning, the absolute presupposition behind this question is that, as long as the world *exists*, it must have had a beginning at some point. The task of the metaphysician is, as far as we can tell, to search for the important questions of a given period, for behind them will inevitably lie the absolute

presuppositions of that period. Metaphysics is therefore, to a large extent, a hermeneutics of these presuppositions identified by the metaphysician.

In *An Essay on Metaphysics* [5] Collingwood writes that metaphysics is the attempt to bring to light the presuppositions that have been *made* by one person or another when referring to a text, or by a group of persons when referring to the presuppositions that underlie the thinking of a certain period of time, or of a cultural space in that given period. It is important to note that absolute presuppositions can be neither true nor false. Nor can absolute presuppositions be propositions, because they are never answers to questions. We may therefore ask: how can cognitive metaphysical “propositions” be, if we cannot even speak of truth in their case? [7, p. 75]. Lobonç [7] points out that this problem concerning the truth of absolute presuppositions was a rebuttal given by Collingwood to Alfred Jules Ayer, who had claimed that metaphysical propositions are neither empirically verifiable nor analytic. Thus, Collingwood justifies metaphysics as merely a description of the absolute presuppositions underlying thought. It follows that absolute presuppositions are not answers to questions. If the notion of truth is reduced to what Ayer meant by it, namely empirical verifiability or logical analysis of ideas, then metaphysical statements will be devoid of truth [7, p. 76]. Lobonç [7], who has had at his disposal a number of unpublished texts by Collingwood, succeeds in showing that, as far as metaphysical propositions are concerned, as they appear in Collingwood’s works, one can indeed speak of truth. He departs from the fact that for Collingwood, as we shall see in the next section, metaphysics is not only the science of absolute presuppositions, but also the analysis and interpretation of historical foundations. Although the British philosopher had a harder time deciding whether the problems of philosophy are perennial or not, he came to the conclusion that they do change with the passage of time. Thus the problem of truth becomes, in fact, the problem of establishing truth, for truth depends on the sequence of questions determining it, and it is only the *right* answer to a question that counts.

Following on from the above, it must be said that when Collingwood uses the word “science” he does not have in mind a science of nature, but rather an ordered body of knowledge that has a definite object and a specific method [5]. In this sense, the object of this science consists of absolute presuppositions, and preferred working or research method here is a metaphysical analysis based on the logic of questions and answers. This analysis has two stages: (1) the analysis of the questions and thus their distinction, and (2) their ordering. In other words, one examines whether the answer to a question is a relative presupposition or not. For Collingwood, to think historically is to know how to ask the right questions, that is, to ask only those questions whose answers prompt another question, and so on. It follows that “any question, though it may have the grammatical form of a single question, logically contains several questions which must be distinguished” [11, p. 159] - thereby satisfying the first stage of the analysis. And the order in which these questions are rendered represents the second stage of the metaphysical analysis. This stage shows us how behind every question lies a relative presupposition, which is the answer to a previous question. The last presuppositions, behind which there lie no more questions, are the absolute presuppositions.

This work done by the metaphysician makes metaphysics a hermeneutic discipline [11, p. 160], because it aims at making the above explicit. Since metaphysics distinguishes between the presuppositions underlying the science of a given time - which is a historical endeavour - we are justified in saying that metaphysics is also a historical discipline. Indeed, “the problems of metaphysics are historical problems; its methods are historical methods” [5,

p. 62]. Furthermore, “all metaphysical questions are historical questions, and all metaphysical propositions are historical propositions” [5, p. 49].

Let us focus more closely on these absolute presuppositions and their role in configuring metaphysics. For Collingwood, absolute presuppositions are the foundation of science, culture and civilisation, that is, of what justifies thought. In addition, although absolute presuppositions justify something, they cannot themselves be justified. There is no experience by which they can be attested. For these reasons, some interpreters have argued that “absolute presuppositions are belief systems that underlie the thought and practices of a given society at a given historical moment” [11, p. 125]. These beliefs are *a priori*. Logically speaking, they are prior to the ideas one might have about reality at any given moment. Moreover, these beliefs or absolute presuppositions do not stem from a direct experience of reality. For example, the presuppositions of a Christian in our time cannot be explained, nor can those of a Muslim. If we were to ask a believer, regardless of denomination, on what he bases his statements, he would most likely tell us that it is based on such a thing, namely an absolute presupposition, but this presupposition cannot be explained under any circumstances.

In one of his articles [12], the British philosopher discusses some of the central principles that guide human life. Principles that have no need of explanation. These principles, Collingwood claims, are fundamental and unshakable. They are assumed by everyone in everything they think and do. And they form the intimate core of every human being. For this reason, he observes that, since this core is present in every individual, it can be said that everyone possesses a philosophy. The mere attempt to discover what this philosophy is makes one a philosopher [12, p. 7]. This justifies what he would later claim about presuppositions – that their analysis is the foundation of metaphysics. It follows that everyone shares certain ideas of a philosophical nature, but this does not mean that everyone is a philosopher. In order to become a philosopher, one needs to examine, analyse and research these principles. It should also be noted that absolute presuppositions do not belong to any particular individuals, but to the periods in which those individuals live in.

4. Metaphysics as an analysis of historical thought

It is thus clear that we are facing an evolution of absolute presuppositions. Furthermore, it must also be said that we are often faced with not just one, but several absolute presuppositions of a historical period, which led the British thinker to state that absolute presuppositions can be organised in the form of constellations. It would be impossible for the transition from one constellation of absolute presuppositions to another to be arbitrary and entirely beyond rational understanding. Collingwood shows that from a rational incompatibility which arises between different constellations, a tension develops which triggers the process of change and replacement. This is what happened, for example, with the shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric worldview. Various rational tensions arose within the geocentric constellation, leading to a new constellation of presuppositions, the heliocentric one. Of course, this process of transition from one constellation to another was not immediate, but took place over time. It is difficult for human beings to change their absolute presuppositions, and therefore it is not the task of the metaphysician to develop reflections on new systems that, to a large extent, conceptualize how humans should view reality in the future. The metaphysician must return through a critical and reflective process to rational conclusions that can be historically determined [7, p. 85].

Collingwood’s reform of metaphysics consisted in the underlying assumption that metaphysics has always been a historical science, even if the metaphysicians themselves

disagreed with this [5, p. 58]. Metaphysics, viewed from such a perspective, largely takes over the problems of history. With one small caveat, however, Collingwood proposed that “historical metaphysics” is relativistic [13]. In this case, metaphysics is not a deductive science like history. The development of such a science can be understood historically in three stages: (1) identifying constellations of absolute presuppositions; (2) comparing them, finding similarities and differences between the specific presuppositions of two successive periods; (3) discovering the conditions and processes by which these constellations change [11, p. 157].

The metaphysician is charged with explaining the reality he implicitly experiences [7, p. 84], that is, with explaining what he experiments. However, some of the things to be explained happened in the distant past and therefore can no longer be directly experienced by the metaphysician. He is then obliged to look into other fields of investigation, such as religion, art, philosophy and science, in order to understand the thinking of that period within these particular universes of discourse [11, p. 156]. In this logical-historical analysis, “the metaphysician discovers the tensions between the various absolute presuppositions of these domains of experience. And it is precisely these tensions that function as a catalyst to change when replacing the dominant absolute presuppositions” [7, p. 84].

In an unpublished manuscript of Collingwood’s [14, p. 31], Lobonç points us to the fact that the philosopher noted one element which distinguishes metaphysics from history – that metaphysics is not implicative. “Implicative relations do not concern the essence of a system; they concern only the essence of a deductive system, and metaphysics is not and cannot be a deductive system. The essence of a deductive system consists in the fact that each of its elements places itself, directly or indirectly, in the position of being either implied or implying one another. The essence of a metaphysical system consists in the fact that each of its elements represents a presupposition among other presuppositions, all presupposed by the thought which is being analysed by the metaphysician. The presence of a particular element in a metaphysical system is a factual, not a logical, matter” [7, pp. 86-86]. After all this we must understand that the British philosopher did not try to identify metaphysics with history, he only pointed out the important links between these two “sciences”. Or, as Alan Donagan wrote, “although Collingwood, in propounding this conception, obviously connected philosophy far more closely with history than most of his contemporaries were willing to do, it is plain that he did not identify them” [15, p. 9].

Consequently, metaphysics is a historical science, yet it does not identify itself entirely with history. We should not see the relationship between metaphysics and history as one of identity. The connection between them, as far as we can tell, seems to be established by the means of absolute presuppositions, which are historical “propositions” in that they describe what we normally do with our ordinary thinking. Therefore, the method by which they can be verified is historical [15, p. 9].

5. Implications and conclusions

Thus, according to Robin George Collingwood, metaphysics is concerned with the identification and investigation of absolute presuppositions. Since absolute presuppositions are specific to a particular epoch, we can say that metaphysics is knowledge of a historical kind, without it being completely identified with history. However, metaphysics as the science of absolute presuppositions is useful in the development of a world view. First, through reflection on the absolute presuppositions of the present epoch, one can find one’s own place in the world of ideas, beliefs, principles, and so on. Secondly, it is clear that this metaphysics of presuppositions proposed by Collingwood helps us to understand the past. It

is very easy to imagine a world from various historical sources, as long as we have recognised what the absolute presuppositions of that world were.

Of course, the thesis proposed in this essay is justified, and moreover, we can assert, in agreement with the British philosopher, that every individual who reflects on the principles or the absolute presuppositions of the world in which he lives finds himself in the posture of a philosopher. And this reflection is carried out using the logic of questions and answers, which is the method through which these principles are brought to light. Furthermore, we have shown that Collingwood's metaphysics distinguishes itself from other forms of metaphysical thought both in its analysis of these absolute presuppositions and in the fact that it is to some extent historical. Having stated and emphasised this, it remains for the reader to ponder what the metaphysics of our age consists of, what are the absolute presuppositions that underlie the thinking of this century, and, of course, what are the challenges associated with this metaphysics.

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