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Collingwood's Critique of Oxbridge Realism

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Abstract

In chapters 3 to 6 of his *Autobiography*, R. G. Collingwood attacks the views of those he calls 'realists', seen as led in Oxford by John Cook Wilson and in Cambridge by G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell. Central to realism, as Collingwood characterizes it, are the doctrines that knowing is a simple 'intuiting' of reality and that knowing makes no difference to what is known, doctrines understood as grounded in the logic of propositions, and in particular, the assumption that the proposition is the unit of thought. Collingwood criticizes realism for ignoring history, and argues that the logic of propositions should be replaced by a logic of question and answer. In this chapter I elucidate and evaluate Collingwood's critique.

1 Introduction

R. G. Collingwood's *Autobiography* is an intellectual autobiography. As he states in the preface, "The autobiography of a man whose business is thinking should be the story of his thought." In chapter 1 we are already introduced to key themes in Collingwood's philosophy. He reports that he received his first lesson in what he came to regard as his own subject, the history of thought, when he found a copy of Descartes' *Principia*, which taught him that "the natural sciences have a history of their own, and that the doctrines they teach on any given subject, at any given time, have been reached not by some discoverer penetrating to the truth after ages of error, but by the gradual modification of doctrines previously held; and will at some future date, unless thinking stops, be themselves no less modified" (*A*, 2). The idea expressed here was fundamental to Collingwood's philosophy. Let us refer to it as his historicist principle. As we will see, it underlies his critique of realism.

The principle is also reflected in Collingwood's account, still in chapter 1, of his growing realization that his calling in life was to think. All he felt at first was a general

intellectual unease, but as he learnt later, it was only when solutions to problems had developed sufficiently that he was able to recognize what the problems were (cf. *A*, 4-5). This also goes to the heart of his conception of philosophy, a conception he so elegantly articulated in his *Essay on Philosophical Method* of 1933. Here what Collingwood takes as his starting-point is what has come to be known as Meno's paradox – the dilemma that Plato poses in the *Meno* concerning the supposed futility of seeking knowledge. Either we know what we are searching for, or we do not. If we do, then there is no point searching; if we do not, then we will not know what to search for (cf. *Meno*, 80e). Socrates' response is to argue that there is indeed a sense in which we already know what we are searching for – and hence can recognize it when we find it. What we have implicitly are 'true opinions', and what learning does is bring these to consciousness by connecting them and 'tying' them down, turning them into knowledge proper, a process that Socrates calls 'recollection' (cf. *Meno*, 97e-98a).

In chapter 1 of the *Essay* Collingwood essentially endorses Socrates' response:

in a philosophical inquiry what we are trying to do is not to discover something of which until now we have been ignorant, but to know better something which in some sense we knew already; not to know it better in the sense of coming to know more about it, but to know it better in the sense of coming to know it in a different and better way – actually instead of potentially, or explicitly instead of implicitly, or in whatever terms the theory of knowledge chooses to express the difference: the difference itself has been a familiar fact ever since Socrates pointed it out. (1933a, 11)

Following Collingwood himself (1933a, 105, 161), let us call the principle involved here 'the Socratic principle'. In the *Essay* Collingwood teaches us to 'recollect' this principle by connecting it with his doctrines of the overlap of classes and the scale of forms. But we can also see it implicit in his remark in chapter 1 of his *Autobiography* that it is only when he has worked on a problem for a while that he begins to know exactly what it is. It is also illustrated at the narrative level in his account of how "the problems of my life's work were taking, deep down inside me, their first embryonic shape" (*A*, 5).

2 Minute philosophers

Like the historicist principle, the Socratic principle lies at the heart of Collingwood's critique of realism. Indeed, the two principles are related: the Socratic principle might be seen as the epistemological correlate of the metaphysical, historicist principle. For if scientific (and philosophical) doctrines have a history, then it is natural to suppose that understanding them, too, has a temporal dimension. Chapter 3 of Collingwood's *Autobiography* is entitled 'Minute Philosophers', a term he employs to satirize the views of the realists who were active in Oxford during the 1910s. As it becomes clear in chapter 4, Collingwood attacked realism on the grounds that it "erred through neglecting history" (A, 28).

The term 'minute philosophers' (*minuti philosophi*) was used by Cicero at the end of his essay 'On Old Age' to refer to those philosophers who denied the immortality of the soul. The term was taken up, most famously, by George Berkeley in his book, *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher*, published in 1732. In section 10 of the first dialogue, minute philosophers are described as free-thinkers who diminish "all the most valuable things, the thoughts, views, and hopes of men: all the knowledge, notions, and theories of the mind, they reduce to sense; human nature they contract and degrade to the narrow low standard of animal life, and assign us only a small pittance of time, instead of immortality". Alciphron himself, on the other hand, as the free-thinker Berkeley was depicting (and criticizing), is happy to count himself as a minute philosopher. Since "the best eyes are necessary to discern the minutest objects", Alciphron remarks, a minute philosopher is someone with "distinguished perspicacity".

Although Collingwood makes no reference to Berkeley's *Alciphron*, the Oxford realists would surely have recognized the allusion to the work of one of their greatest idealist foes. No doubt they would have regarded themselves as having "distinguished perspicacity", while Collingwood saw them as diminishing "all the most valuable things". The ambiguity of 'minute' may also have been deliberately exploited. We might capture this by saying that, on Collingwood's view, the realists behaved as if philosophy could be pursued by simple acts of critical judgement and immediate intuitions of truths – acts and

intuitions that could be completed in just a minute, as it were – without having to understand the history of what it was they were criticizing or apprehending.

Collingwood begins chapter 3, however, by mentioning the work of what he calls the school of Green – led by T. H. Green (1836-82) and including F. H. Bradley (1846-1924), Bernard Bosanquet (1848-1923), William Wallace (1843-97) and R. L. Nettleship (1846-92). He denies that this school can be described as Hegelian (A, 15), and notes that Bradley repudiated the title of 'idealist' as well (A, 19). It has sometimes been called 'neo-Hegelian' to distinguish it from (true) Hegelianism, but despite Bradley's repudiation, I think 'British idealism' is the best term to use. At any rate, it is preferable to 'the school of Green', which suggests that the dominant influence was Green rather than Bradley, who is now generally agreed to be the central figure. Collingwood himself calls Bradley "the greatest philosopher of the school" (A, 19) – "a man whose mind was the most deeply critical that European philosophy has produced since Hume" (A, 16). Bradley was certainly the main target of the realists – both in Oxford and Cambridge – who reacted to British idealism.

Collingwood says virtually nothing about the specific doctrines of the British idealists, merely mentioning instead their influence on those students of 'Greats' who subsequently entered public life. At the time he went to Oxford, the influence of British idealism was waning, a demise that was only hastened by the relative dearth of books offering any accessible account of the central ideas of the movement. The only such book that Collingwood notes as having come out of the school was Harold Joachim's essay, *The Nature of Truth*, which was published in 1906. In its preface, Joachim admits to having been greatly inspired (though not uncritically) by both Bradley and Bosanquet as well as by Hegel. It is perhaps surprising that Collingwood does not mention Bradley's work. Both *The Principles of Logic* (1883) and *Appearance and Reality* (1893) may have been published in the previous century, but Bradley was still writing well into the twentieth century, publishing a series of papers in the journal *Mind*, for example, which were collected in *Essays on Truth and Reality* (1914). But perhaps Collingwood did not

count this as accessible enough.¹ Although Collingwood's concern in chapter 3 is merely with Oxford philosophy, it should also be noted that idealism was still flourishing outside Oxford.

The dearth of books by the British idealists, according to Collingwood, left the field open for the realists. Among the Oxford realists, Collingwood identifies the leader as John Cook Wilson (1849-1915) and mentions two of his followers, H. W. B. Joseph (1867-1943) and H. A. Prichard (1871-1947). In his lifetime Cook Wilson published only on mathematics and ancient Greek philosophy.² But as the Wykeham Professor of Logic from 1889, he lectured regularly on logic and epistemology, and after his death in 1915, these lectures were edited by A. S. L. Farquharson and, together with various letters and occasional philosophical pieces, published as *Statement and Inference*, in two volumes, in 1926. Collingwood writes of Cook Wilson's resistance to publishing, on the grounds that he kept changing his mind (cf. *A*, 19), and it is true that Cook Wilson continually rewrote his lectures. But he does seem to have wanted to make his views on logic available to a wider audience than his Oxford colleagues.³ Although *Statement and Inference* had not been published in the period about which Collingwood is speaking in chapter 3, it had certainly appeared by the time he wrote the *Autobiography* itself; yet he makes no mention of this. With over 1000 pages, *Statement and Inference* is a major work. Collingwood may not have read it all, but its publication was a significant event in the Oxford of his academic life.

Collingwood's criticism of Cook Wilson's attitude towards publication reflects a deeper disagreement between the two about the nature of thought, which brings out what lies at the root of Collingwood's critique of realism. In accord with the Socratic principle, Collingwood saw his philosophical writing as a matter of gradually working out his ideas, getting clearer and clearer about the problems that occupied him. There was no assumption of a final state of perfect understanding to be captured in a definitive statement or theory; what was important was the process of thinking itself, pursued and expressed *through* writing. Presumably, he felt that writing for publication was the best

¹ Collingwood had earlier written an essay on Bradley (Collingwood 1933a), which was published for the first time in Collingwood 2005; but this, too, is not mentioned in the *Autobiography*.

² See the list of published works in Wilson 1926, I, lxvi-lxxii.

³ Cf. e.g. Wilson 1926, II, 870.

way to focus the mind, and that the resultant publication could help and stimulate others to develop their own thoughts. Cook Wilson, on the other hand, in accord with his realist principles, held that truth is independent of human knowledge, in the sense that what is true is not affected by being known to be true. Furthermore, according to Cook Wilson, we come to know what is true – where knowledge is possible – through acts of immediate intuition. Presumably, then, until he had intuited a truth clearly and distinctly, and had found the definitive statement that captured this intuition, Cook Wilson was reluctant to go public with his views. As he once remarked, “the (printed) letter killeth and it is extraordinary how it will prevent the acutest from exercising their wonted clearness of vision” (1926, II, 871).

In Collingwood's (published) writing, there is a clear sense of *development* in the thoughts that are expressed, and Collingwood seems not to have suffered (unduly) from the feeling that later elaborations of an idea required going back and ‘correcting’ its initial formulation. To have done so, on Collingwood's view, would have risked undermining those later elaborations – obscuring their nature and motivation. Initial formulations could be left as vague or potentially misleading, in the knowledge that they would be clarified later, or could be clarified as occasion demanded. This is the Socratic principle at work in his own methodology.

While there is clearly development in Collingwood's philosophy, however, he never admits to anything as drastic as a *change of mind*. Even when he confesses, at the beginning of chapter 4, to having gone through a realist phase, he notes that he had reservations about realism even then. His aim is to show how growing awareness of the internal contradictions in realism helped shape his own views. Indeed, his whole *Autobiography* is an attempt to demonstrate the natural development of his philosophy, in accord with principles – and in particular, the historicist and Socratic principles – that gradually became clearer and clearer to him.

In this respect, it is instructive to compare Collingwood's autobiography with that of Bertrand Russell (1872-1970). Russell revels in his rebellion against British idealism at the turn of the twentieth century, and in his later abandonment of the extravagant realism

that this rebellion initially fostered.⁴ As in the case of Cook Wilson, Collingwood is scornful of Russell's changes of mind. He speaks of the records that Russell left of "his successive attempts at a philosophy", and writes of the realists in general as stumbling "from one temporary and patchwork philosophy to another in a kind of intellectual nightmare" (*A*, 51). Of course, unlike Cook Wilson, Russell had little anxiety at all about publishing,⁵ so there is no necessary connection between realism and reluctance to publish. Perhaps Collingwood felt that Russell *should* have been more reluctant. At any rate, he attacks both Cook Wilson and Russell for their intellectual stumblings, for which he holds their realism as ultimately responsible.

Cook Wilson is not the only realist that Collingwood criticizes in the chapter on 'Minute Philosophers'. He also mentions Prichard and Joseph. Prichard was White's Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford from 1928 until he retired in 1937, but Collingwood does not discuss Prichard's views on ethics in this chapter (he attacks them later, in chapter 6, 47-8). Instead, he notes Prichard's realist critique of Kant in *Kant's Theory of Knowledge* (1909) and Prichard's supposed progression towards complete scepticism (cf. *A*, 20-1). This latter charge is unfair: Prichard did indeed move to a more subjectivist position in ethics, but it was not a form of complete scepticism. Although there were changes of mind, no doubt provoking Collingwood's scorn, Prichard remained an 'intuitionist' in both ethics and epistemology, believing that basic principles were to be intuited as self-evident. The problem was that he was a pluralist about these basic principles, opening the door to his later subjectivism.⁶ Nevertheless, just because of this, Prichard would undoubtedly count as a 'minute philosopher'; certainly, he lacked that historical self-consciousness upon which Collingwood placed such emphasis (cf. *A*, 57-9).

As far as Joseph is concerned, Collingwood mentions his *Introduction to Logic* and his work on Plato. His book on logic was first published in 1906 and a revised edition (of some 600 pages) appeared in 1916. It is essentially a textbook of traditional logic. There is an account of terms, judgements and inferences (syllogisms), in accord with the

⁴ See especially Russell 1959, chs. 1, 5; 1975, ch. 6.

⁵ Perhaps the only notable exception is Russell's *Theory of Knowledge* manuscript, which he abandoned in 1913 due to Wittgenstein's criticisms.

⁶ For an account of Prichard's ethics, see Dancy 2010.

standard Aristotelian division, followed by discussion of induction and scientific methodology, along Millian lines. Joseph makes no attempt to consider the mathematical logic that was then emerging, in Britain, in the work of Russell and others, which was to revolutionize logic. By the time of the second edition, he recognizes its existence, but curtly dismisses it for making “the error of representing either all thinking as a kind of mathematics, or all thinking as class-thinking, and mathematics as merely a special sort of class-thinking” (1916, 228; cf. viii). The book was influenced by Cook Wilson (acknowledged especially in the preface to the second edition), but from the early 1910s Joseph began to criticize Cook Wilson’s brand of realism, and as Collingwood rightly says, came to regard himself as primarily a follower of Plato. In granting a fundamental role to our supposed powers of immediate apprehension, however, he shared at least some of the epistemological views of the other ‘minute philosophers’, views which take centre-stage in the next chapter of Collingwood’s *Autobiography*.

3 Inclination and intuition

Chapter 4 of Collingwood’s *Autobiography* is entitled ‘Inclination of a Sapling’, a reference to his initial – though qualified – acceptance of realism. He reports that his tutor, E. F. Carritt (1876-1964), himself a realist (and a student of Prichard’s), had sent him to the lectures by Cook Wilson and the other realists. Collingwood writes that he was thus “thoroughly indoctrinated” with the principles and methods of realism (*A*, 22). His only reservation concerned the realists’ lack of regard for historical fact. Collingwood mentions Moore’s critique of Berkeley’s idealism and Cook Wilson’s critique of Bradley’s idealism: in both cases, he remarks, the views criticized are not the views that Berkeley and Bradley, respectively, actually held. At the time, though, he accepted that the realists were concerned with philosophy, not history, and that the important point was whether the doctrines they criticized were indeed false or not, regardless of who held them.

After his degree, however, Collingwood reports that he became aware of a conflict between the realists’ positive principles and their critical methods, and this left him with three options: to reject realism because of the conflict, to endorse the principles

but not the methods, or to endorse the methods but not the principles – assuming, in these latter two cases, that the principles and methods could be legitimately separated. Collingwood does not spell out the conflict; he simply remarks that “Cook Wilson’s positive teaching was incapable of resisting attack by his own critical methods’ (A, 23). What Collingwood had in mind here is made clear in the chapter that follows. As he characterizes it, the essence of the realist’s critical method is “to analyse the position criticized into various propositions, and detect contradictions between these” (A, 42). Applied to realism itself, Collingwood then seems to think, such a method soon detects contradictions between its own constituent propositions – and he presumably saw Cook Wilson’s (and Russell’s) own frequent changes of mind as evidence of the instability of realist views.

In chapter 4, however, Collingwood does not say which of the three options he ended up taking. He reports instead on his “flank attack” on the problem (A, 23, 28), introducing what he calls in the next chapter his ‘logic of question and answer’ (A, 37). His main idea is that “knowledge comes only by answering questions”, an idea he says he learnt from his archaeological research on the history of Roman Britain: “what one learnt depended not merely on what turned up in one’s trenches but also on what questions one was asking” (A, 24-5). It is this idea that he claims the realists fail to recognize in talking “as if knowing were a simple ‘intuiting’ or a simple ‘apprehending’ of some ‘reality’” (A, 25). Such talk can indeed be found in the work of the Oxford realists, and in particular, Cook Wilson⁷ and Prichard.⁸ But as Collingwood remarks, similar views are expressed by the Cambridge realist G. E. Moore (1873-1958)⁹ and the Manchester realist Samuel Alexander (1859-1938).¹⁰ In the light of what Collingwood goes on to say, though, perhaps the best illustration would be Russell’s much-quoted remark in his preface to *The Principles of Mathematics*:

⁷ See e.g. Wilson 1926, II, chs. 1, 14. As the editor of his work notes, Cook Wilson nowhere defines ‘apprehension’, but seems to use the term for what he earlier called ‘recognition’: “the immediate cognizance of the object and conviction of its being” (*ibid.*, 78). For discussion of Cook Wilson’s conception, see Marion 2000, §2.

⁸ See e.g. Prichard 1906.

⁹ See e.g. Moore 1903, 453, where Moore claims that “I am as directly aware of the existence of material things in space as of my own sensations”.

¹⁰ See e.g. Alexander 1914, 283, where Alexander writes that “mind and its object are two separate existences connected together by the relation of togetherness or compresence”.

The discussion of indefinables—which forms the chief part of philosophical logic—is the endeavour to see clearly, and to make others see clearly, the entities concerned, in order that the mind may have that kind of acquaintance with them which it has with redness or the taste of a pineapple. (1903, v)

Russell did indeed conceive ‘acquaintance’ as an immediate ‘intuiting’ or ‘apprehending’ of some ‘reality’. In his 1911 paper ‘Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description’, for example, he defines it as follows:

I am *acquainted* with an object when I have a direct cognitive relation to that object, i.e. when I am directly aware of the object itself. When I speak of a cognitive relation here, I do not mean the sort of relation which constitutes judgment, but the sort which constitutes presentation. In fact, I think the relation of subject and object which I call acquaintance is simply the converse of the relation of object and subject which constitutes presentation. That is, to say that S has acquaintance with O is essentially the same thing as to say O is presented to S. (1911, 152)¹¹

The view that Russell expresses here can be seen as encapsulating the realist conception that Collingwood criticizes: “The questioning activity, as I called it, was not an activity of achieving compresence with, or apprehension of, something; it was not preliminary to the act of knowing; it was one half (the other half being answering the question) of an act which in its totality was knowing” (A, 26). He goes on to say that he knows how a realist would respond to this, but refrains from telling us. A clue to the answer, though, is contained in the very title of Russell’s 1911 paper. For Russell would say that ‘knowledge by acquaintance’ is only one form of knowledge, the other form being ‘knowledge by description’. An object is known by description, he says, “when we know that it is *the so-and-so*, i.e. when we know that there is one object, and no more, having a certain property” (1911, 156). We need not be acquainted with the object in order to have such knowledge, according to Russell; indeed, non-acquaintance is the rule in cases of knowledge by description.

¹¹ Cf. Russell 1912, 25, where Russell writes that “we have *acquaintance* with anything of which we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths”.

It is not hard to see how such a conception leaves space for the questioning activity. A statement of the form 'The F is a G ' might well be given as an answer to the question 'What is a G ?'. There need be no apprehension of the F here, and the knowledge expressed by the statement clearly has complexity. What Russell would nevertheless insist is that, at the ultimate epistemological level, there must be acquaintance with the relevant objects (universals or particulars). In accord with his theory of descriptions, 'The F is a G ' is analysed as 'There is one and only one F and whatever is an F is a G '. If this is the fully analysed form of the statement, according to Russell, then we must have acquaintance with the logical constants (which fill out the logical structure of the statement) and the concepts F and G (not the object denoted by 'the F ', as there may be none: this is one of the points of the theory of descriptions).¹²

Collingwood fails to address the issue of whether, at some ultimate level, we have acquaintance with objects. We might agree with him that at higher levels, there are questioning activities essentially involved, but Russell would argue that questioning itself must presuppose acquaintance with objects at the ultimate level. The point is general. The questions asked must themselves make sense, and at some point we must reach a level of understanding or cognitive access to reality that cannot be seen as itself an answer to a question. This brings us to the logic of question and answer.

4 The logic of question and answer

Collingwood's 'logic of question and answer' is one of the most well-known but also controversial elements of his philosophy. In chapter 5 of his *Autobiography*, which is simply entitled 'Question and Answer', Collingwood claims to have developed the main ideas during the war, when he was working for the Admiralty. Walking past the Albert Memorial every day led him to ask what George Gilbert Scott, the architect, had been trying to do. What were the questions to which Scott's design was the answer? Collingwood also mentions his work in archaeology, which had impressed on him "the importance of the 'questioning activity' in knowledge" (*A*, 30). This led him to reject what he calls the 'propositional logic' of his contemporaries. Truth and falsehood, he

¹² The theory of descriptions was first presented in Russell 1905; the best account is in Russell 1919, ch. 16.

claims, belong not to propositions but to question-and-answer complexes. A proposition is always an answer to a question, and both its meaning and truth-value are relative to the question it answers (cf. *A*, 33-5).

Collingwood says that he first wrote all these ideas out in 1917, in a book entitled 'Truth and Contradiction'. It was offered to a publisher but rejected (*A*, 42-3, 74), and Collingwood reports that the manuscript was subsequently destroyed (*A*, 99). It turns out, though, that one chapter has survived, and we also have a reader's report on the book.¹³ Neither suggests that Collingwood had developed anything at the time that might be called a 'logic of question and answer', however; and this is confirmed when we look at *Speculum Mentis*, published in 1924. In chapter 3, there is a section entitled 'Knowledge as Question and Answer'. Here there is criticism of the 'crude empiricist' view that "knowledge is composed wholly of assertion", as Collingwood puts it. Against this, he writes: "People who are acquainted with knowledge at first hand have always known that assertions are only answers to questions" (*SM*, 77). Question and answer, he goes on to say, are inseparable 'moments' in the process of knowledge (*SM*, 80). But there is no mention here of propositions, propositional logic, issues of meaning and truth-value, or of any new 'logic'.

If we look at the two other main books published between 1917 and 1939, namely, the *Essay on Philosophical Method* (1933a) and *The Principles of Art* (1938a), then we find no reference at all to the idea of question and answer. So it hardly seems as important as Collingwood makes out. In fact, the first talk of a 'logic of question and answer' occurs in the *Autobiography* itself, which is certainly surprising if the *Autobiography* is meant to be read as a record of his thought, with chapter 5 reporting his thinking around 1917. So is Collingwood being disingenuous in claiming that he had written all this out in 1917 (*A*, 42)?¹⁴

In defence of Collingwood, we might appeal to his own Socratic principle and suggest that it was only much later that he appreciated exactly what the problem was that

¹³ Collingwood 1917; Jones 1918. Cf. Martin 1998, 127-9; Connelly 2003, 116.

¹⁴ Martin (1998, 126-9) considers whether the "all this" refers to the ideas of the whole of chapter 5 or just to those of the two preceding pages. I am in no doubt that Collingwood meant the former. I agree with Martin that "we have no firm basis whatsoever for concluding that Collingwood had developed a *logic* of question and answer in 1917" (1998, 129).

he had been thinking about while communing with the Albert Memorial and that the ideas he is talking about were only in embryonic form at the time.¹⁵ As the previous two chapters make clear, Collingwood had been thinking his way out of Oxbridge realism, and the idea of the interdependence of question and answer came to crystallise for him his fundamental objection to realism. This still leaves Collingwood open to the charge of being misleading, at the very least, in suggesting that the ideas were more fully worked out than they actually were; but he was writing in good faith in seeking to explain his objection.

If this is so, however, then there is an irony of which there is no indication at all in Collingwood's account. For the logic of question and answer has roots in the very philosophy that it was supposedly directed against – in Oxbridge realism itself. Even today this is scarcely appreciated, although that is due far more to the obscurity into which Oxbridge realism, especially of the Oxford variety, has now fallen than to any suppression of influences on Collingwood's part.¹⁶ The key figure here is John Cook Wilson, whose *Statement and Inference* can be regarded as the Oxford realist's textbook on logic. Part II of this work is entitled 'Statement and its Relation to Thinking and Apprehension', and Cook Wilson begins by discussing the notions of apprehension, judgement, knowledge and belief. Chapter 4 is called 'The Distinction of Subject and Predicate in Logic and Grammar', and it is here that Cook Wilson appeals to what becomes the central idea of Collingwood's logic of question and answer.

Cook Wilson's main concern is to establish that what counts *logically* as the subject and predicate of a statement depends on the question which the statement is intended to answer. Take Cook Wilson's own example, the sentence 'That building is the Bodleian'. If the question is 'What is that building?', then 'that building' counts as the

¹⁵ It might be noted here that there is no talk of the Albert Memorial in any of the surviving letters that Collingwood wrote at the time, so one even wonders how much of this story was a later reconstruction. I am grateful to David Boucher for this information.

¹⁶ This is not to suggest that Oxbridge realism was the only influence on Collingwood's idea of question and answer. As Collingwood himself notes (1924, 77; cf. *A*, 30), the basic idea goes back to Socrates and was implicit in Bacon's conception of the scientist's interrogation of nature, for example. There may also have been important contemporary influences, such as from Evans-Pritchard's work on the Azande, operating from the mid-1930s (as Wendy James has pointed out to me in discussion). My focus here is only on Collingwood's relationship to Oxbridge realism, which I nevertheless do think was central in the development of his idea of a *logic* of question and answer.

subject (as indeed we might take it grammatically to be). On the other hand, if 'Which building is the Bodleian?' is the question, then 'the Bodleian' is the subject, logically speaking. Cook Wilson's point is therefore very simple: statements (sentences as used on a given occasion) are answers to questions, and we need to know the question before we can determine the logical analysis. (Cf. 1926, I, 117-20)

In fact, this basic idea is by no means original to Cook Wilson. It can be found earlier in the work of G. F. Stout (1860-1944), for example. Educated at Cambridge, Stout taught there until 1896, when he moved to Aberdeen and then Oxford, before becoming Professor of Logic and Metaphysics at St. Andrews, where he stayed until he retired in 1936. In his *Analytic Psychology* of 1896, in a section on 'The Subject-Predicate Relation', Stout writes:

All answers to questions are, as such, predicates, and all predicates may be regarded as answers to possible questions. If the statement "I am hungry" be a reply to the question, "Who is hungry?" then "I" is the predicate. If it be an answer to the question, "Is there anything amiss with you?" then "hungry" is the predicate. If the question is, "Are you really hungry?" then "am" is the predicate. Every fresh step in a train of thought may be regarded as an answer to a question. (1896, II, 214)¹⁷

Collingwood would surely have come across the idea from at least Cook Wilson, and while he may have forgotten this by 1939, one might also suggest that he was deliberately taking this idea from Oxbridge realism to turn against them – whether in an act of Hegelian synthesis or just as a mischievous dig. Whatever his motivation, however, we must recognise that, in doing so, he generalized it to such an extent that it threatened to undermine the rest of his philosophy. For according to Collingwood, it is not just the identification of subject and predicate that depends on the question which the statement answers, but the very meaning and truth-value of the statement. Yet even when one and the same sentence, such as 'That building is the Bodleian', is used to answer more than one question, there may still be something that the corresponding statements have in

¹⁷ The idea is developed further in his later work. In his Gifford lectures from 1919 and 1921, for example, posthumously published as *God and Nature* (1952), Stout characterises a proposition as one of a group of alternatives that share a certain presupposition (1952, 102-4). The act of judging, Stout writes, "is always preconditioned by an interrogative attitude of mind" (1952, 276). For discussion of Stout's views, see van der Schaar 1991; forthcoming. I am grateful to Maria van der Schaar for these references to Stout's work.

common. This is what the traditional logician calls its 'content' or the 'proposition' it expresses.

Collingwood, of course, wants to reject 'propositional logic'. He formulates its central doctrine, which he calls 'the principle of propositional logic', as follows: "there is, or ought to be, or in a well-constructed and well-used language would be, a one-one correspondence between propositions and indicative sentences, every indicative sentence expressing a proposition, and a proposition being defined as the unit of thought, or that which is true or false" (A, 35-6). Now this was certainly a view that Russell held,¹⁸ but it is not obligatory. Gottlob Frege (1848-1925), the founder of modern (propositional and predicate) logic, for example, did not hold it.¹⁹ We need to distinguish this principle from a more basic principle, which I shall simply call the principle of logic: every sentence, as used on a given occasion to express a thought, has a content that can be expressed by a different sentence on a different occasion.

This principle can be regarded, rightly, as an absolute presupposition of logic. For it is essential to logic that we be able to transform one sentence into another in order to better express its 'content' – whether we are attempting to say what is 'really meant' or just to exhibit or clarify the logical relations it has with other sentences (as used on given occasions). Frege was clear about this. In one of his most famous papers, he wrote: "we must not fail to recognize that the same sense, the same thought, may be variously expressed ... If all transformation of the expression were forbidden on the plea that this would alter the content as well, logic would simply be crippled; for the task of logic can hardly be performed without trying to recognize the thought in its manifold guises" (1892, 184, fn. G). Cook Wilson, too, endorsed the principle. Although he regarded the identification of subject and predicate as depending on our *apprehension* of content (and hence as relative to the question asked), the content itself he saw as an 'objective fact' that could be described by different statements (cf. e.g. 1926, I, ch. 7).

¹⁸ See e.g. Russell 1918, Lecture 2, 197-8; and for discussion, see Hylton 2007; forthcoming.

¹⁹ This is controversial, and at least needs qualification. But all I will note here is that Frege undoubtedly held that one and the same 'content' or 'thought' can be analysed in different ways. Cf. the quote in the next paragraph. For fuller discussion of this, see Beaney 1996, esp. ch. 8.

The principle of logic is presupposed by Collingwood himself in his use of the Socratic principle. For in coming to know better something we already know, there must be some content in common. Indeed, this content is individuated in the process of coming to know it better.²⁰ There need be no definitive articulation of this content, so we can agree that the principle of propositional logic is false. But the falsity of this principle does not imply the falsity of the principle of logic, despite the impression that Collingwood sometimes gives in advocating his new logic of question and answer. Even if an assertion of a proposition *P* and an assertion of its apparent negation *not-P* are answers to different questions (cf. *A*, 42), they may still contradict one another at the level of content, so that there is value in the realist's method of analysis.

Shortly after completing the *Autobiography*, Collingwood wrote some notes for his new logic (1939b). These are brief, and were never developed further, but what Collingwood is gesturing towards is a theory of speech acts rather than a new logic. Not only is this not incompatible with propositional (and predicate) logic, but its successful development requires such a logic (presupposing the distinction between semantics and pragmatics that we now take for granted). Collingwood's own ideas about a logic of question and answer were suggestive, but there remained tensions and confusions that were never resolved.²¹

5 Realism and knowledge

The principle of logic might be taken to presuppose an even more basic principle, the epistemological/metaphysical principle that knowing makes no difference to what is known.²² For if we come to know a content better in improving the sentences that express

²⁰ The principle of logic is also presupposed in Collingwood's doctrine of re-enactment and his conception of 'eternal objects' as what can be "apprehended by historical thought at any time" (1993, 218). On the importance of this for Collingwood, see Haddock's contribution to this volume.

²¹ For a more detailed diagnosis of what goes wrong in Collingwood's appeal to a logic of question and answer, see Beaney 2005, esp. §§ 2.7 – 2.9, where I distinguish two notions of 'proposition', one the traditional logician's notion and the other a speech act notion.

²² In *The Nature of Truth* Joachim calls the assumption that "experiencing makes no difference to the facts", which he finds in Russell's and Moore's work, "the fundamental postulate of all Logic" (1906, 33, 36). Collingwood was editing the second edition of the book at the time he was writing the *Autobiography*. It was published in 1939, a year after Joachim's death (cf. *A*, 18, fn. 2). Collingwood acknowledges his debt to Joachim's work in two places (*A*, 18, 36).

it, then we must presuppose that this content remains constant. For if it were changed when we come to know it better, then how could we claim that we know *that content* better? Yet this is the principle that Collingwood attacks in chapter 6 of the *Autobiography*, entitled 'The Decay of Realism'. He describes it as Cook Wilson's central positive doctrine, and the only positive doctrine that realism could count as its own.

Collingwood reports that he read a paper after the war in which he argued that this doctrine was meaningless.²³

I argued that any one who claimed, as Cook Wilson did, to be sure of this, was in effect claiming to know what he was simultaneously defining as unknown. For if you know that no difference is made to a thing θ by the presence or absence of a certain condition c , you know what θ is like with c , and also what θ is like without c , and on comparing the two find no difference. This involves knowing what θ is like without c ; in the present case, knowing what you defined as the unknown. (*A*, 44)

The immediate point to make about this is that it only establishes, at best, that no one could claim to *know* that knowing makes no difference to what is known. This might suggest that the doctrine should simply be taken as an absolute presupposition of realism, for which no arguments can be given. One might have expected Collingwood to be sympathetic towards this suggestion, but he is not the relativist that his conception of absolute presuppositions is often taken to imply.²⁴ One can indeed criticise someone else's absolute presuppositions, and Collingwood certainly felt no inhibition in doing so in the present case. The fact that he does criticise it also shows that we cannot take seriously his claim that the doctrine is meaningless; if it were meaningless, then it could not function in the kind of argument that Collingwood offers (which attempts to derive a contradiction from the supposition that it is true). The claim that a doctrine cannot be known to be true does not imply that it is meaningless.²⁵

²³ For details of the event itself (which took place in November 1920), see Patrick's contribution to this volume.

²⁴ See e.g. Collingwood 1938b, 394-5. For defence of this view of Collingwood, see Beaney 2005.

²⁵ A verificationist would beg to differ, and although Collingwood may have flirted with verificationism in writing the *Essay on Metaphysics* just a year later, I do not think that that was his considered view. Again, for further discussion of this, see Beaney 2005.

What, then, of the argument itself? The condition *c* that Collingwood has in mind is the condition of being unknown. Clearly, one cannot know something that is unknown at the time one knows it. That is indeed a logical contradiction. But assume, for the sake of argument, that in coming to know something, one knows that no change was made to it in the process. (Think of cracking open a nut and discovering the kernel inside, where one knows that cracking open a nut does not alter the nature of the kernel itself.) Of course, such an assumption is unproblematic if the realist doctrine were true, so the critic of realism might object that this simply begs the question. But all we need is a single plausible case to establish the *possibility* that in coming to know something, we know that it did not alter in the process. That is enough to show that there is no logical contradiction in the idea that we can know that knowing makes no difference to what is known. Collingwood's argument is not the knockdown argument he seems to suppose.

We might agree with Collingwood, though, that the Oxford realists never provided a knockdown argument *for* their doctrine. In fairness to the realists themselves, however, it is not clear that they ever claimed to have done so. Following Collingwood's own advice to look carefully at the texts when a charge of contradiction is being levelled, consider the following remarks by Cook Wilson:

Now we must know something about knowledge, and we know when we reflect that the very idea of it is incompatible with any such *action* upon, or *suffering* in, the object known. You can no more act upon the object by knowing it than you can 'please the Dean and Chapter by stroking the dome of St. Paul's'. ... Obviously if we 'do anything to' anything in knowing, it is not done to the object known, to what we know, for that simply contradicts the presuppositions of the act of knowledge itself. (1926, II, 802)

These remarks occur in a letter to Prichard, in whose work we find an even more explicit statement of the doctrine:

Knowledge unconditionally presupposes that the reality known exists independently of the knowledge of it, and that we know it as it exists in this independence. It is simply *impossible* to think that any reality depends upon our knowledge of it, or upon any knowledge of it. If there is to be knowledge, there must first *be* something to be known. (1909, 117)

Given the role that the idea of presuppositions comes to play in Collingwood's philosophy, the use that both Cook Wilson and Prichard make of it is significant. On their view, knowledge *presupposes* that knowing makes no difference to what is known. To deny this is to deny the very nature of knowledge itself. There can be no argument for this, since any argument would rest on premises that would need to be known, begging the question as to the nature of knowledge. Knowledge and apprehension are *sui generis* and indefinable. All one can do is get someone into a position whereby they can apprehend or intuit this presupposition.²⁶ Cook Wilson thought that if you genuinely know something, then you know what this involves: "The consciousness that the knowing process is a knowing process must be contained within the knowing process itself" (1926, I, 107). The idea is problematic, but not meaningless or straightforwardly self-contradictory.²⁷

The basic idea here also informed Prichard's ethics. In his paper 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?', published in 1912, to which Collingwood alludes (A, 47), Prichard argued that it was a mistake to seek a single overarching principle of morality from which to derive particular obligations; rather, the grounds for each of our obligations can be discerned in our very apprehension of it.²⁸ The idea is as problematic in ethics as it is in epistemology, not least because of its appeal to the conception of apprehension Collingwood criticizes in chapter 4 of the *Autobiography*; but these problems do not, I think, have their source in the central realist doctrine itself.

Is there not an obvious sense in which knowing does make a difference to what is known? In coming to know something, whether it is an object, fact, proposition, or whatever, that something acquires a property that it did not have before, namely, that it is now known by me. The standard response to this is to distinguish between essential and non-essential properties, or between internal and external relations. The property of being known by me is not an essential property of that which I know; so the realist doctrine should at least be qualified: knowing makes no essential difference to what is known. Another way to put this is to say that, in general, the relation between knower and known

²⁶ Cf. e.g. Wilson 1926, I, 38-9, 98ff.; II, 803-4; Prichard 1909, 124.

²⁷ For critique of Cook Wilson's views, see Marion 2000, 307-16.

²⁸ Cf. Cook Wilson, referring to Aristotle: "the principle lives only in the particulars" (1926, I, 43).

is external rather than internal. Now at the time Collingwood is talking about in criticizing the realists, there was a vigorous debate about the nature of relations, in which the leading figure on the idealist side was Bradley and the leading figure on the realist side was Russell.²⁹ Collingwood does not mention this debate at all; what it shows is that idealism was by no means as dead and that realism was by no means as unchallenged at the time as Collingwood suggests.

How, then, might the debate between the realist and the idealist be resolved? An answer can only be gestured at here, but the starting-point, once again, is the Socratic principle. For (to state the obvious) in coming to know something, something must be taken as the same, in one sense, and something must be seen as changing, in another sense. It seems right to talk of the process of knowing as *presupposing* that something is identified as constant: this is what we come to know, even though our knowledge grows. Sometimes this is expressed by distinguishing between the object and content of knowledge: the object remains the same while the content is refined in coming to know something better. Some such distinction is clearly needed; there are various ways in which this can be developed. I think Collingwood himself provided one such way in his *Essay on Philosophical Method*, and it is both surprising and disappointing that he does not discuss this in the *Autobiography*, especially since, in the only mention he does make, he describes it as his “best book in matter” (*A*, 118). Perhaps his animus against realism clouded his judgement in the *Autobiography*; it certainly prevented him from giving the more nuanced critique that I think could be mounted on his behalf, which accommodated elements of realism that Collingwood himself had absorbed.³⁰

6 Conclusion

In the penultimate paragraph of chapter 6 of his *Autobiography*, Collingwood remarks that the end of the realist movement “is one of those things whose history will never be

²⁹ The problem of relations was central in Russell's rebellion against British idealism, and there were idealist responses to Russell. See e.g. some of the papers in Bradley 1914; Bradley 1924; Joachim 1906, ch. 2. For an account of this debate, see Candlish 2007, esp. ch. 6.

³⁰ I have identified a source of the idea of a logic of question and answer in Oxbridge realism, but it might also be noted here that the Socratic principle, too, can be found in Cook Wilson's work; see e.g. 1926, I, 44-5.

written" (*A*, 51). Collingwood had in mind its disintegration into "a kind of intellectual nightmare" (*ibid.*). More than seventy years later, it is clear that this prophecy has turned out false. Within the analytic tradition itself, whose early founders Collingwood criticized, there has been an historical turn, as at least some of those trained in that tradition have been led to investigate its historical and philosophical foundations.³¹ Cambridge realism has received far more attention than Oxford realism, or indeed, non-Oxbridge realism, but even here there have been historical accounts.³²

Collingwood's sense that there was something wrong in the realism of his Oxbridge contemporaries, however, has proved right. While his attack on the doctrine that knowing makes no difference to what is known leaves something to be desired, he correctly identified their appeal to 'apprehension' and 'intuition' as problematic. I have argued that Collingwood was wrong to reject the new logic that Russell did so much to establish, although he was right to criticize what he called 'the principle of propositional logic'. The 'logic of question and answer' that he hoped would replace existing logic was too poorly conceived to take seriously, although the basic idea of question-and-answer complexes has certainly been influential.

In the *Autobiography*, Collingwood exaggerates his opposition to realism, for reasons that are political rather than philosophical, as the final chapter, in particular, makes clear. As I have tried to show here, there is continuity as well as opposition, in accord with Collingwood's own historicist and Socratic principles, which provide unity in the development of his philosophy. In the hastily written works of his last few years, when he knew that he may not live much longer, there are caricatures and exaggerations, loose formulations and weak arguments. But as Cook Wilson had once said to him, he had the gift of seeing the obvious (cf. *A*, 26), and he had a good nose for what was wrong in a philosophical doctrine or theory. When the story of realism does indeed emerge from

³¹ The historical turn can be dated as having properly got going around 1990, with works on Moore by Baldwin (1990) and on Russell by Hylton (1990) and Griffin (1991). On the historical turn generally, see Beaney forthcoming and Reck forthcoming.

³² On Oxford realism, see esp. Marion 2000 and Travis and Kalderon forthcoming; and on other forms of realism, see e.g. Nasim 2008.

the accounts that are now being written, Collingwood will have his own rightful place in it.³³

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³³ Talks based on drafts of this paper have been given at the Collingwood conference in Montreal in October 2007, at the conference organized by the Centre for the Study of British Idealism at Hull in December 2009, and at the workshop on the *Autobiography* held in Oxford in July 2010. I am grateful to the participants for discussion, and especially to David Boucher, James Connelly, Wendy James, Sharon Macdonald, Rex Martin and Teresa Smith for detailed comments.

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