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**THE RELATION BETWEEN PRACTICE AND THEORY. ROBIN
GEORGE COLLINGWOOD VS. MICHAEL OAKESHOTT**

Abstract¹

In my paper I discuss the relation between theory and practice as it is differently conceived by Robin George Collingwood and Michael Oakeshott. It is a relationship of interdependence in Collingwood and, conversely, one of independence in Oakeshott. I agree with Collingwood's critics that his argument may not always be right. Still I cannot accept that there can be an authentic philosopher that who does not put into practices the theories that he embraces.

Keywords: Robin George Collingwood, Michael Oakeshott, practice, theory, relationship between practice and theory

Practice and theory as interdependent

Whoever aims at acting the right way, at improving one's actions and correcting errors in what concerns his or her actions, should ask questions about one's fundamental beliefs that guide him or her in the particular world that one inhabits, about one's right place within this world, about the motifs of one's actions, about one's possibilities, abilities, and desires within this world. Without clarifying our fundamental presuppositions, we risk finding ourselves impersonating a fighter in a war that does not belong to him, as one has no knowledge of the reasons that sent him to fight, or one blames without asking why, or one hates with no transparent motivation. Such phenomena lead to the decay of a particular civilization, and to the impossibility of self knowledge among its individuals. Whenever our fundamental principles are misunderstood or wrongly understood, our actions are compromised, and, on the other hand,

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we can save the compromised practices by clarifying our fundamental beliefs.

The role of our practices is to make our principles concrete, and the purpose of our principles is to guide our practices, therefore we cannot conceive the two realms (the theoretical and the practical) but in a tight relation of interdependence. This is exactly what Robin George Collingwood thinks of the relation between practice and theory. At the beginning of his *Speculum Mentis*, Collingwood synthetically expressed the relation between practice and theory as it follows: „All thought exists for the sake of action. We try to understand ourselves and our world only in order that we may learn how to live”².

In his book *An Autobiography*, Collingwood named three attitudes towards the relation between practice and theory, that he adopted: firstly, there is one R. G. Collingwood who considers that theory and practice are interdependent, secondly, there is the professional thinker R. G. Collingwood, who separates university from life, and philosophy from conduct, and thirdly, there is the social and political R. G. Collingwood, who is a man of action, and who believes in a *gloves-off philosophy* as a social weapon³.

By analyzing the main themes of Collingwood’s philosophy, I identified several ways that he conceives the relation between practice and theory. For instance, in his practice of archeology Collingwood applies the central principle of the logic of question and answer: the archaeologist is digging with a certain question in mind that he is searching an answer to. Also, if we consider the opposite direction (from practice to theory this time) we can conclude that Collingwood reaches the principle of the logic of question and answer as a result of his reflections on the practice of archaeology⁴. Next the theory of absolute presuppositions covers the presuppositions that constitute the foundation of our theories as well as of our practices. Also, the philosophy of history should use the most efficient historical method when it comes to its practical applicability. When it comes to our moral in general, including both politics and economy, the theories of moral conduct are very much related to our way of acting. History does not

² R. G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis or The Map of Knowledge* (1924), Oxford University Press, U. K., 1970, p. 15.

³ R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, Oxford University Press, 1982, for the Romanian translation *O autobiografie filosofică*, Editura Trei, București, 1998, pp. 160-162.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 137.

provide us with ready-made rules of acting, similar in any way to natural laws, but helps us to develop our discernment by which we can judge what rules should be applied to the particular situations that we come across⁵.

Such a *rapprochement* between theory and practice, conceived from theory towards practice, means on the one hand that thinking depends on what the subject learns from the experience of action, and on the other hand that action depends on the way that the subject thinks of itself and the world that it inhabits⁶. But in Collingwood's opinion this kind of a *rapprochement* between theory and practice should be doubled by a practical one that goes from practice to theory meaning that the two attitudes that I described above should not be thought of as separate.

Collingwood's argument against the realists

When trying to defend the relation of interdependence between practice and theory, Collingwood comes against the realists. The realist philosophers consider as fundamental the following principle: nothing, including human action is affected by being known. To them moral philosophy is but the theory of moral action without changing practical moral action⁷. In his philosophical autobiography, Collingwood intends to oppose the realists that deny moral philosophy any practical value. His argument starts with opposing Cook Wilson's thesis – "knowing makes no difference to what is known": "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"⁸.

Collingwood comes with the argument above in order to show that from an epistemological point of view it is wrong to consider the thesis "knowing makes no difference to what is known" to be true, since it is meaningless. However, the way Collingwood passes from denying an epistemological thesis to its practical consequences cannot be accepted.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 117.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 159.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 72.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 44 for the English version, p. 69 in the Romanian translation.

Critics such as A. Donagan and J. Connelly insisted upon this issue: the practical value of moral philosophy cannot be an epistemological consequence.

The reason why Collingwood opposed the realist philosophers in their epistemological thesis is in Donagan's opinion that he was afraid of having to accept their ethical doctrine along with their epistemology. Or, he could not accept that moral philosophy as a theory of moral action does not influence at all its practice. But Collingwood's way of thinking is not correct: epistemology and ethics should be considered separately⁹.

In his turn, James Connelly reveals how Collingwood's argument is epistemologically inconclusive for at least two reasons¹⁰. The first reason is that the argument cannot prove either that knowing makes a difference to what is known or its opposite that knowing makes no difference to what is known. The second reason is that Collingwood's conclusion, which says that the realists do not admit that there is a relationship between practice and theory, is not a result of his argument against the realists' thesis. Only for self knowledge when the subject and the object of knowledge are identical, knowing makes a difference to what is known, this meaning that theory changes practice. For this case only the thesis that "knowing makes no difference to what is known" can be related to moral philosophy.

Practice and theory as independent

Critics often consider Oakeshott as a follower of Collingwood in many respects. Without contradicting this idea, Efraim Podoksik insists that, in spite of their similitudes, Oakeshott in fact opposes Collingwood on fundamental aspects of his thinking¹¹.

In his Introduction to *Experience and its Modes*, Oakeshott rejects Collingwood's claim that theory is fulfilled only by being applied and put

⁹ Alan Donagan, *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*, Oxford University Press, 1962, pp. 288-289.

¹⁰ James Connelly, „Theory and Practice in the Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood”, Political Studies Association Conference, University of Swansea, April 2008, electronic document, p. 4.

¹¹ Efraim Podoksik, *In Defence of Modernity. Vision and Philosophy in Michael Oakeshott*, Imprint Academic, U.K., 2003, p. 13.

into practice, which is similar to saying that *all thought exists for the sake of action*. On the contrary, for Oakeshott philosophy is not a gospel that would help us through our lives: “And it is some time, perhaps, before we discern that philosophy is without any direct bearing upon the practical conduct of life, and that it has certainly never offered its true followers anything which could be mistaken for a gospel”¹².

Podoksik shows the main point where Collingwood’s ideas in *Speculum Mentis* and Oakeshott’s ideas in *Experience and its Modes* meet: they both focus on the analysis of various forms of experience. However, Collingwood’s argument is the precise opposite of Collingwood’s: Collingwood rejects the idea of the exclusivity of each form of experience, whereas Oakeshott affirms it. To Oakeshott each mode of experience is irrelevant to all others, and it forms a homogeneous world of ideas.

In Oakeshott’s opinion, practical experience or the practical activity or the practical mode and the theoretical modes such as history and science are separated from one another. Practical experience “is without any direct relationship with other abstract worlds of experience, such as those of science and of history”¹³.

Michael Oakeshott’s reinterpretation of Plato’s myth of the cave

Generally speaking, I consider the way that Michael Oakeshott conceives the relationship between practice and theory as opposed to Collingwood’s. In order to illustrate the gap between practice and theory, Oakeshott comes with a reinterpretation to Plato’s myth of the cave.

In Oakeshott’s view the stages that the philosopher passes through on his way up to the light are but moments of conditional understanding. Conditional theorizing means in oakeshottean terminology discussing the implications of a system of ideas within the system, without questioning its fundamental principles, whereas unconditional understanding means discussing the very principles that constitute the foundation of the system. For this case, theory means knowing in terms of postulates, presuppositions, fundamental beliefs. Every system of ideas (religion, science or philosophy) function by means of presuppositions such as: “there is life after death”, “light has a dual nature” etc.

¹² Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 1.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 249.

But Oakeshott is not aware of the fact that unconditional understanding may have a second meaning, closed to what the Greeks named by *theorein*: direct, intuitive, immediate, contemplative understanding.

The man in the cave has but a conditional understanding of the world that he inhabits, although he believes that he possesses unconditional understanding. He is not aware of the fact that his way of understanding is a conditional one: he does not doubt the shadows that he sees on the wall in front of him, or the truthfulness of his knowledge consisting of identifying identities as ideal characters composed of characteristics, and recognizing these ideal characters by their characteristics.

The released, on the contrary, is not content with recognizing fakes. Aware of his limited understanding he turns towards what has generated the shadows. By means of knowing the objects that actors carried along the parapet behind him, the released acquires the postulates of the world that he inhabits. And even this stage of theorizing can be left behind for the one of the unconditional understanding: once the liberated comes out of the cave into the light, he discovers the very source of the light in the cave. Now he can see the sun. In Oakeshott's interpretation, it is now the stage of the philosopher who knows the causes: the conditions of all conditions and postulates of all postulates.

By not considering the idea of the immediate knowledge, Oakeshott is not aware of the difficulties that his ideas are exposed to. Why shouldn't we believe that there might be another stage of the postulates of the postulates of all postulates and so on ad infinitum? I believe that the meaning of Plato's myth is that there are ultimate postulates, in spite of Aristotle's critic of the idea, and it is perhaps Oakeshott's view as well.

Actually, in Oakeshott we may identify three levels of understanding: the first level is that of understanding facts as compositions of characteristics, and it is the level of common life, that may have a practical aim, the second means theorizing ideal characters in terms of their postulates or conditions, and it is the level of history and science, where principles are exposed without being questioned. The third and the most important level is that of the philosopher who is constantly questioning the postulates of any understanding.

When speaking of the relation between theory and practice, what interests me is what happens after the philosopher returns to the cave. Is he able to apply what he theoretically possesses? How can he prove his superiority over the other men in the cave? How (if so) can he convince the

others that it is worth the effort coming up to the light? In other words, how does the fact that I detain a superior understanding of the causes affects my life?

In Oakeshott's reinterpretation, Plato's myth of the cave is a sad story with a sad ending. The philosopher cannot apply his knowledge; therefore he is publicly ridiculed and finally even killed. I believe that Oakeshott's thesis is that theory and practice are totally opposed, and that they cannot be reconciled.

When the philosopher returns to the cave, although he detains knowledge in terms of postulates, he does not prove skilled at all when it comes to knowing in terms of identifying and recognizing the shadows. Therefore the men in the cave take him for a stupid and a fraud. When he is asked what a horse is, his answer is that a horse is not what we usually take for a horse, but a modification of an attribute of God. No doubt, his answer will look original, unconventional and witty. But if he tells them that because of his superior understanding of the nature of horses he is more of an expert in horses than they are, but in fact he proves he cannot tell the front from the back of a horse, he will stir their suspicion¹⁴.

By the example above, Oakeshott does not reject the authentic philosopher, but the fake theoretician who believes that the postulates of unconditional understanding could be applied. The philosopher knows right from the beginning that the postulates that constitute the foundation of our theories are different from the fundamental convictions that guide our practical lives.

But this can be true only for speculative philosophy. When it comes to considering moral or political philosophy, it is hard to imagine that such a philosophy can be theorized apart from its theories being applied in practical life. Because it is useless to give or discuss moral principles, or to amend political systems, without being able to apply all these theories to the world out there, theory and practice should be seen as interdependent.

However, we can still prove Oakeshott right by distinguishing axiology from ethics, and from moral. We can say that the theories of axiology are distinct from the principles that ethics discusses or from their applying by moral. Still, it is risky to state that theory and practice are independent, as there is no scope for ethics if its principles are not applied in moral.

¹⁴ Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1990, p. 30.

As a personal extrapolation, and contradicting Oakeshott, I say that one who does not have the courage of putting the theories that one theoretically embraces into practice, cannot be thought of as an authentic philosopher.

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