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METHOD AND METAPHYSICS

(R.G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, revised edition, with *The Metaphysics of F. H. Bradley: 'An Essay on Appearance and Reality'*, *The Correspondence with Gilbert Ryle* and *Method and Metaphysics*, edited with an introduction by James Connely and Giuseppina d'Oro, Oxford University Press 2005 hardback, 2008 paperback)

Abstract

The volume under review here is an exceptional publishing event as it reedit Collingwood's *An Essay on Philosophical Method* first published in 1933 with additional material, i.e. an introduction, an essay on Bradley, a lecture on method and metaphysics and the correspondence with Ryle. The fundamental themes of *An Essay on Philosophical Method* are: *conceptual overlap* and the *scale of forms* within the context of discussion of the philosophical method. *The Metaphysics of F. H. Bradley* Collingwood reveals himself as an interpreter as he reads Bradley by his own views. *The Correspondence with Gilbert Ryle* is a philosophical polemics on the nature and value of the ontological proof. *Method and Metaphysics* is an application of the analytical method of the scale of forms in the *Essay on hilosophical Method* to the metaphysical problem of the the general nature of reality.

Key words: Conceptual overlap, Metaphysics, Ontological proof, Philosophical method, Scale of forms

The volume under review here is marking an exceptional publishing event that cannot possibly be overlooked. I am referring to the revised edition of Collingwood's *An Essay on Philosophical Method* edited by James Connely and Giuseppina d'Oro. The volume is structured into the 110 page introduction written by the editors, followed by *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, first published in 1933 (pp. 1- 226), and finally including *The Metaphysics of F. H. Bradley: 'An Essay on Appearance and Reality'* written on Christmas 1933, (pp. 227 -252), *The*

Correspondence with Gilbert Ryle, (pp 252-326), and *Method and Metaphysics* a Jowett Society lecture delivered in June 1935 at Oxford (pp 327 – 355).

As Collingwood himself confessed in his *Autobiography*, the *Essay on Philosophical Method*, that he wrote during a long illness in 1932, and that he published in 1933, is by far his best book in matter and his only one in style, as it is the only one that he had time to finish, instead of leaving it in a more or less rough state, as it is the case with his other books¹.

The fundamental themes of *An Essay on Philosophical Method* are: *conceptual overlap* and the *scale of forms*. In philosophy the specific instances of concepts tend to overlap so that two or more concepts may be exemplified in the same instance. The scale of forms supplements and develops this by suggesting that there is overlap not only in extension but also in intension. Philosophical concepts cannot be classified into mutually exclusive species of a common genus of the sort to be found in the natural sciences. Philosophical concepts are generic; the species of a philosophical genus differ from each other both in degree and in kind; and in a philosophical scale of forms 'the variable is identical with the generic essence itself. The terms on a scale of forms are related both by opposition and by distinction. Taking the two theories together, the overlap consists in this: the lower is contained in the higher, the higher transcending the lower and adding to it something new, whereas the lower partially coincides with the higher, but differs from it in rejecting this increment². By a scale of forms Collingwood understands a system that is not an orthodox logical classification, as the opposition of its terms is accompanied by difference and differences are both in kind and degree.

The main purpose of *An Essay on Philosophical Method* is to point out how philosophy has a determinate subject matter and method, different from those of both mathematical and empirical sciences. Apart from being a deductive science, philosophy consists of propositions that cannot be inferred from first principles. Then philosophy is different from an inductive science as well as philosophers don't work with hypotheses and their propositions are not founded on empirical observations. Marking its distance from mathematical sciences in the first place and from empirical sciences in the second place, philosophy has as its proper the regressive or transcendental method, that is unveiling the fundamental principles that underpin the practical and theoretical sciences. As for the distinct subject matter of philosophy, it differs from that of the exact and empirical sciences alike for, like the former, it makes genuinely universal claims but, like the latter, is not indifferent to the existence of its object insofar as philosophical concepts are necessarily instantiated in our practical and theoretical judgments. Collingwood explains why philosophy has a distinctive subject matter in the context of his

¹ R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982, pp. 117-118.

² R.G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933, p. 91.

discussion of the ontological proof. He believes the importance of this proof to be that of establishing that philosophical concepts exist necessarily in the sense that they are necessarily instantiated in judgements of a certain logical form. Taking for example the concept of mind is instanced in the explaining of our actions, as we cannot explain something that has rationally happened but by using this concept. Collingwood's attempt to make clear the subject matter of philosophy in terms of the ontological proof has generated much controversy.

I will refer in turns to three texts that represent the publishing novelty of the volume under review.

The first of all is *The Metaphysics of F. H. Bradley: An Essay on Appearance and Reality*, written on Christmas, 1933, where Bradley's fundamental metaphysical theses are discussed. The essay on Bradley contains six parts: 1., „The current view of Bradley's metaphysical doctrine” – how Bradley was wrongly interpreted by common view opinionists, 2. „The metaphysics which Bradley set out to criticize”- an exposition of nineteenth century phenomenalist metaphysics that Bradley sets out to criticize; 3. „The principles used in his criticism” – an exposition of the method that Bradley makes use of; 4. „His own metaphysical position” – an analysis of Bradley' metaphysical doctrine; the last two - „His relation to his sucesors”and „His relation to modern physics” concerning Bradley's relation to his successors, and to modern physics.

Collingwood observed that Bradley adopted two major principles within his metaphysics: 1. reality must be consistent with itself, and that what is inconsistent with itself cannot be real, but only appearance; 2. nothing can be mere appearance, but that somehow all appearance must qualify or belong to reality. As for Bradley's metaphysical doctrine, it can be synthesized up to 4 theses that later on he will reduce to just two: 1. that there is such a thing as reality; or, as he calls it, the absolute; 2. appearances somehow all belong to or qualify reality; 3. no appearance exhausts reality, which therefore in the end is inscrutable; 4. reality is present among its appearances in different degrees and with diverse values. The four theses thus reduced to only two are as follows: 1. There is no such thing as a mere appearance. The real appears; appearances are appearances of reality; 2. Appearances differ in the degree to which they represent or exhibit or possess reality.

In this essay, Collingwood considers the doctrine of the degrees of truth and reality by his own interpretation as in the scale of forms doctrine. Historically speaking, Collingwood's presentation is an excellent one as he manages to place diferrent philosophical conceptions in their own place as he discusses them. Also he succeeds in getting at the central core of Bradley' metaphysical doctrine: „Reality is not something hidden behind appearances, it is that which appears; appearances are not something other than reality; they are reality itself appearing”³.

³ Collingwood, “Nature of Metaphysical Study” (1934), II (25).

The second additional text present in the volume is *The Correspondence with Gilbert Ryle*, and it consists of three long letters that Collingwood and Ryle sent each other during late May – June 1935, a philosophical polemic on the nature and value of the ontological proof. The two philosophers also argue about a series of other issues: for instance, Ryle denies Collingwood's overlap of philosophical classes.

In an article published in *Mind*, Ryle vehemently fights Collingwood's attempt to reconsider the ontological proof, therefore Collingwood addresses the first of the three letters of the correspondence in response to Ryle. But the discussion goes beyond its original purpose, the nature of philosophy, what could and could not be proved by philosophical inquiry, the nature of philosophical concepts, the nature of universals and the distinction between an intensional and an extensional understanding of concepts are brought into the open. Freshly appointed to the Waynflete Chair of Metaphysical Philosophy in May 1935, Collingwood adopts reveals his own views regarding the nature and role of metaphysics.

In Ryle's opinion the way Collingwood understands philosophical propositions as both universal and categorical is totally wrong. Their being categorical means that philosophical propositions refer to something which exists, or contain or rest on propositions which do so and Ryle cannot accept this. Next he accuses Collingwood of reopening the ontological proof issue as a valid one. The ontological proof can be dismissed if we admit that existence is not a predicate, but this objection seems not to bother Collingwood and at this point Ryle is again outraged. Moreover, Ryle cannot accept its main pretence, how a state of fact can possibly be inferred from a priori non empirical premises.

Method and Metaphysics, also present in the volume, is a lecture that Collingwood delivered on the 19th of June 1935 to the Jowett Society in Oxford. Its importance is that it can be read as an application of the analytical method of the scale of forms in the *Essay on Philosophical Method* to the metaphysical problem of the general nature of reality. Collingwood shows that reality is not a class concept but a philosophical concept to which the rules of classification appropriate to the empirical or the exact sciences do not apply. The possibility of metaphysics was thereby defended on the grounds that (because reality is not a class concept) metaphysics as the search for the general nature of reality is not an empty search for a bare abstraction. Collingwood points out that when we speak of the general nature of reality we are using the word general nature in a different sense from that in which we speak of the general nature of men or triangles. Whereas concepts like man and triangle consist of characteristics common to all men and all triangles and are for that reason amenable to the ordinary logical rules of definition, classification and division, philosophical concepts, of which reality is one, do not consist of common characteristics and are not amenable to these rules. The concept of reality is different as it reveals a scale of forms where the different real things are different in kind as well as in degree. Such a scale of forms isn't going down to

zero, so that there is no such thing as the completely unreal, but one in which every term is relatively unreal by contrast with higher terms, except the highest of all. At this point, for Collingwood, there is no distinction in philosophy between the concept of reality and reality itself. Collingwood's idealism is more obvious here than in the *Essay on Philosophical Method*. In this lecture Collingwood gives an example of how his method can be applied.

Collingwood's intention is to explicitly show how his method can be used in metaphysical thinking. For this he first distinguishes three kinds of things, which he calls minds, bodies and abstract entities. By the abstract entities he understands philosophical categories such as being, negation, relation, necessity, possibility. All the three kinds of things are real but each of them in a different way. The reality of a mind is identical with its activity, a complex activity of feeling, thinking and willing; the reality of a body consists in its occupying a given place at a given time; and the reality of an abstract entity, far harder to describe, means that there is something such as relation, or quantity or necessity and that we believe that there is. The three different kinds of things cannot be treated as classes in ordinary logic, as no genus – species relation can be settled among them. They are not three species of a genus, nor two species of which one is divided into two sub-species, nor anything else of the same sort. Therefore these three kinds of things, minds, bodies, and abstract entities, cannot be arranged in any classificatory system. We cannot possibly separate mind from body when we think that we go someplace or do something. So to us mind is an embodied mind and the body an “enminded” body. If we wanted to classify them into a system we would have to abandon this ordinary way of thinking and to face dilemmas. To Collingwood the problem of the relation between mind and body is not eloquent, and is interested in how they can be one thing. With this purpose he examines whether these three kinds of things (minds, bodies, and abstract entities) constitute a scale of forms. Such a scale of forms is characterised by: the combination in it of differences of degree with differences of kind; the combination of distinction and opposition and finally each term in the scale sums up in itself the whole scale to that point. As for the third and most important characteristic, in this example one term contains in itself nothing but itself, the second contains the first, and the third would contain the first and second. The first term stands here for abstract entities, the second for bodies and the third for minds. The world of abstract entities doesn't need to be instanced in order to be apprehended, so they neither contain nor imply either bodies or minds. The world of bodies presupposes the world of abstract entities in order that it should exist, and the bodies composing it are actually instances of the absolute entities. The world of minds presupposes the world of bodies as each mind has a body. Also the world of minds presupposes the world of the abstract entities

because each mind is an instance of the abstract entities and these entities are in themselves necessary objects of mind's thought⁴.

In this lecture Collingwood finally accepts Bradley's doctrine of the degrees of truth and reality, that he interpreted in *The Metaphysics of F. H. Bradley* by his own doctrine of the scale of forms.

Besides the monographical importance of the long introduction that the editors James Connelly and Giuseppina d'Oro wrote to the volume, the 2005-2008 edition of Collingwood's *An Essay on Philosophical Method* is remarkable for the publishing of the three manuscripts that help us better understand him. Grace on the now published manuscript on Bradley's metaphysics we can read Collingwood as a real interpreter that reads Bradley by his own views Collingwood's general conception regarding Bradley's metaphysics is it has been wrongly understood when it was considered an idealism, whereas it is a different kind of a realism. Actually, Collingwood denied all kind of labels in philosophy, and he didn't consider himself neither an idealist nor a realist, but mainly protesting against Ryle's abusive way of naming him an idealist. Of great importance is the conference on *Method and Metaphysics* as it illustrates some of the ideas in the *Essay on Philosophical Method*.

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⁴ *Method and Metaphysics*, par. 14-20 in manuscript.