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THE IDEA OF PRESUPPOSITION IN ROMANIAN PHILOSOPHY

Abstract

The idea of presuppositions that made career in Collingwood’s philosophy, especially as the idea of absolute presuppositions, influenced in a considerable manner Romanian philosophy and this is what I intend to explore in my present study. Generally, Romanian authors analyzed the role and function of presuppositions within epistemology (Mircea Flonta, Ilie Pârnu), some of them were mainly interested in how philosophy converts into a historical discipline without overlooking that Collingwood anticipated the hermeneutic turn in philosophy (Florin Lobonț) and some others offered interesting perspectives on how presuppositions can be characterized from the point of view of a philosophy of language (Adrian Paul Iliescu, Valentin Mureșan). I was myself interested in the issue of presuppositions opening new paths of (re)interpreting them and insisting upon the hermeneutical role of Collingwood’s metaphysics.

Key words: Romanian philosophy, metaphysics, philosophy of language, epistemology, hermeneutics, presupposition

The idea of presupposition influenced in a considerable manner many Romanian philosophers such as Mircea Flonta, Ilie Pârnu, Adrian Paul Iliescu, Valentin Mureșan, Florin Lobonț. They were interested mainly in the function of presuppositions within epistemology; some of them even accepted a more comprehensive view on the issue of presuppositions.

In the volume *Philosophical perspective and scientific reasoning*, Mircea Flonta, for instance, identifies two distinct paradigms in the history of scientific thinking. Firstly, there is the traditional one whose distinct paths can be traced along the end of the 19th as well as the beginning of the 20th centuries. The traditional perspective is completely unhistorical when it comes to consider the criteria of scientific thinking and it underlines the objectivity of scientific knowledge, by this interring the empiricist and positivist conceiving of scientific thinking. Secondly, there is the paradigm created in the 4th decay of the 20th century by thinkers such as Alexander Koyré, L. Brunschvicg, Thomas Kuhn, and St. Toulmin. It brings on as total novelty the idea that there are implicit presuppositions that underlie scientific knowledge and that understanding the main lines of thought that emerged within the development of science depends on their

revealing. Depending on which of the two paradigms we posit ourselves, natural sciences and philosophy can be considered as a whole or apart. According to the first perspective there can be no objective knowledge of nature but independently of philosophy, whereas the second perspective insists upon the role that certain general frameworks of thought have in establishing the goals of research or when it comes to guiding the way researchers think.

Mircea Flonta identifies such fundamental presuppositions that orientate scientific research to philosophical ideas and by this he manages to differentiate them from scientific hypotheses by taking into consideration a series of distinct features such as: 1. they are a priori conditions of possibility for scientific hypotheses; 2. they cannot be expressly, clearly, precisely or thoroughly formulated as scientific hypotheses demand to be formulated, but despite this, they function as directing presuppositions of research. 3. They cannot be proved by confronting with facts the way scientific hypotheses can¹. As an application to his theories regarding the presuppositions of scientific knowledge, Mircea Flonta takes into consideration one distinct domain, namely mechanistic physics. He identifies the presence of such philosophical suppositions as well as the way they function within the mechanistic paradigm: for instance, essentialism that states that there are certain unalterable physical entities, whose reducing to other entities is impossible, and that there are universal explicative principles.

Another essay to systematise and characterise the presuppositions of thinking is brought forward by Adrian Paul Iliescu in *The Philosophy of Language and the Language of Philosophy*. The Romanian philosopher quotes Collingwood in an explicit manner by critically considering the idea that presuppositions exclusively underlie scientific knowledge². On the contrary, according to the Romanian philosopher, they can be considered as founding most different kinds of rational acts, both intellectual and practical, and even technical ones (such as farming, writing a book, voting, striking, playing chess or listening to music). Science as well as everyday life, morals, politics, technique, and aesthetics are underlied by presuppositions. Here comes the distinguishable character of philosophy, meaning the enquiry onto the presuppositions of all rational acts. In support of this idea we have extensional as well as intentional proofs: material as well as intellectual acts are based on presuppositions (the extensional proof) and by its specific nature the idea of reason (rationality) implies the idea of presupposition³.

¹ Mircea Flonta, *Philosophical perspective and scientific reason (Perspectivă filosofică și rațiune științifică)*, București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1985, p. 68.

² Adrian Paul Iliescu, *The Philosophy of Language and the Language of Philosophy (Filosofia limbajului și limbajul filosofiei)*, București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1989, p. 160.

³ Ibidem, p. 155.

The most common meaning that we can confer to presuppositions is that they are self understood ideas that we cannot question. Any matter (question, problem, assertion, explanation) has an implicit assumption that is named a presupposition. For instance, the question “Why such an event takes place?” presupposes that the event really takes place⁴.

By analysing the concept of presupposition, Adrian Paul Iliescu establishes several distinguishing features. The characterising that he brings forward has a functional purpose as it follows the functions and the role of such presuppositions because a structural characterization that would follow what the nature of presuppositions is would be more difficult to accomplish.

First, presuppositions are implicit, tacit, shaping the context, the background ideas which, without being explicitly stated within discourse underlie it as such. The Romanian author insists upon the idea that presuppositions should be separated from axioms, postulates, or premises for the following reasons: 1. unlike axioms, presuppositions aren't explicitly present in discourse; 2. while axioms are present at the beginning of any discourse, presuppositions can intervene anytime, as they underlie arguments and statements.

But if we want to be precise, we should say that presuppositions are behind and not underneath any inquiry because “they are not effectively part of any linguistic construction, as it is improper to compare them to its ground but rather to the invisible physical forces that sustain the construction from behind”⁵. Then when it comes to considering the matter of the reality of presuppositions we can say that they are not real in a material way but only in a virtual way. However, not everything that is present within discourse as such and that is implicitly understood can be considered to be a presupposition. Scientific research assumes a series of different elements (empirical findings, referential indexes, and comparative standards) that cannot possibly be for presuppositions. What differentiates presuppositions from all these is their defining as “cognitive elements having a leading role and major value of generality and also major theoretical significance”⁶. Such elements have a technical, strictly local character while presuppositions are not local (regional). When metaphysics considers such presuppositions of thinking, it is in order to render them explicit.

Second, presuppositions can be distinguished by their unspecificity, by this meaning that they belong to a certain field, inquiry or act. They do not sustain only certain types of rational acts, but a diversity of such acts; thereby their functionality is extended over any type of inquiry or rational act. Therefore, we must distinguish presuppositions that have a local and specific character and which make not the subject matter of metaphysics in general, but which make the subject matter of the

⁴ Ibidem, p. 157.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 159.

philosophy of science, art etc., and of certain particular fields of research such as mathematics for instance (e.g. the presupposition “Numbers are ideal objects” from those unspecific presuppositions that have an universal applicability⁷).

Third, in relation to the attribute of unspecificity, presuppositions can be characterised by their ineffectiveness. Ineffectiveness means that they are not active within local, technical, particular contexts of a certain field. This feature can be proved by the fact that scientists share certain objectives or procedures although the philosophical presuppositions that lead their researches are totally different. Presuppositions become functional when the level of research leaves behind local, technical, specific reasons⁸.

Fourth, presuppositions sustain rational acts under the perspective of some general purposes, of existential and moral goals, for instance when the meaning of life is considered, they necessarily imply an existential suggestion and a moral connotation⁹.

Fifth, presuppositions are characterised by integrative force, meaning that they mediate the insertion of the singular act within a complex conduct as well as the integration of the conduct in the entire rational existence¹⁰.

Sixth, presuppositions are cannot be deduced from something more general than them, therefore they are primary philosophical suppositions. But this feature should not be mistaken by wrongly saying that presuppositions cannot be demonstrated. Usually though they cannot be sustained within the same system of reference that they belong to.

Seventh, presuppositions manifest epistemic unreliability as often they enter a discourse a posteriori and not a priori and so they seem invented rather than discovered¹¹.

In an article belonging to the volume *From Wittgenstein to Heidegger*, Valentin Mureşan reconsiders the issue of philosophy as a critic of tacit presuppositions¹². The subject matter of philosophy is language, meaning that by language one makes ones thoughts clear and one makes explicit the suppositions implicitly present in the language that art, science, moral etc. use, while its method consists of conceptual analysis and the rational critic of presuppositions. Any type of human experience (common, scientific, moral, and artistic) fits such ontological, gnoseological – methodological and anthropological tacit presuppositions. Major changes in science, art or politics correspond to changes of the fundamental presuppositions. Influenced by Adrian Paul Iliescu’s complete characterisation of

⁷ Ibidem, pp. 160-161.

⁸ Ibidem pp. 161-162.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 163.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 167.

¹² What is Philosophy? („Ce este filozofia?”), in Valentin Mureşan (ed.), *From Wittgenstein to Heidegger (Între Wittgenstein și Heidegger)*, Bucureşti: Ed. Alternative, 1998.

presuppositions, Valentin Mureșan synthesises among their fundamental features the fact that they are: 1. external (they imply problems that cannot be solved within the theories that they belong to), 2. tacit (they are inactive, hidden, implicit, and they function as habits of thoughts or beliefs), 3. fundamental (prime, underived), they have, 4. they have the resonance of a global pattern of rationality, 5. rational, they can be elucidated and criticised¹³. As a result, philosophy can be defined as “the critical activity whose object are the deepest suppositions and the most general categories of thought that underlie the whole of human experiences¹⁴”.

Florin Lobonț wrote a book that represents the editing of his doctoral thesis, *The New English Metaphysics. A regrettable enigma*, where he followed the relation between metaphysics and history and between science and religion within the context of British idealism, whose main representant is R.G. Collingwood who anticipated the so called hermeneutic turn in philosophy. The documentation for the volume includes Collingwood’s manuscripts that Lobonț found at Bodleian library in UK. Among British idealists apart from Collingwood we can also consider F.H. Bradley, B. Bosanque, G. Mure, T.H. Green, Bradley being without question of doubt his main antecessor. With this idea in mind Lobonț discusses Bradley’s theories: the identification of reality with experience and with thought, his essay to conceptually reconstruct the subject matter of historical thinking. Collingwood’s own contribution is seen as a protest against neopositivism (Russell, Carnap, Ayer), by the same side with thinkers such as M. Foster, A.N. Whitehead, J.A. Smith that tried to deconstruct metaphysics.

Mainly, Lobonț intends to show how Collingwood’s ideas tend toward the project of some new metaphysics or toward a reformation of metaphysics. By this we understand along with the Romanian thinker that metaphysics has a descriptive role as it is oriented upon the absolute presuppositions that change from one historical period to another. The author considers history along with its transcendental and epistemological justification (the question that matters is how knowing historical past can be possible?) as well as metaphysics and its transcendental and epistemological justification (the question that matters is how can metaphysics be possible?) and he stresses upon Collingwood’s being an idealist: the subject matter of metaphysics is not reality but our thoughts and ideas about it. These ideas are the a priori conditions of possibility of our experience, nothing else but the absolute presuppositions of thought.

In the 2-th century other authors but Collingwood considered the role of presuppositions in delimitating the specific subject matter for philosophy (Wittgenstein, Rorty, Taylor). Also there are ideas that Collingwood shares with philosophic realism too (Whitehead, Foster, Newton-Smith). Finally, Lobonț sets

¹³ Ibidem, p. 32.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

forth a metaphysical project that he finds very similar to Collingwood's, that of the Romanian thinker Eugeniu Speranția.

In my very own thesis I tried to show the importance that Collingwood's identification of metaphysics to a historical and hermeneutical discipline has, and I insisted upon the role that absolute presuppositions play in all fields of research (epistemology, the history of ideas, hermeneutics) with the purpose of proposing new parallels and analogies to the ideas of the British philosopher. Consequently, I set forth a series of alternative readings of Collingwood's ideas (Eliade și Culianu, Gadamer, Foucault, Kuhn, Wittgenstein). I consider my method to be hermeneutic as I also identified authors that considerably influenced Collingwood and followed the way that he read them and assimilated their ideas, that he interpreted or criticised (Bradley, Spengler, and Whitehead). The natural line of argumentation built in order to answer the question how metaphysics can be possible within the context of analytic philosophy, as Collingwood is generally considered an analytic philosopher and still he proposes the metaphysics of absolute presuppositions that makes a critic of analytic philosophy out of him. From Collingwood's metaphysics of presuppositions I passed to showing that it is a hermeneutics that reasons if not even identifies with history and next to his practical philosophy that I illustrated by applied ethics that was a preoccupation of the English author at a certain point.

My probably unorthodox intention to show similarities between Collingwood and Romanian philosophy by considering Eliade and Culianu is an essay to enlarge the context of discussing Collingwood's theory of presuppositions. The more daring it seems the more we think that neither Eliade nor Culianu ever mentioned Collingwood. Still, they somehow paradoxically use Collingwood's theory of presuppositions when they try to understand human culture.

As I showed in a paper of mine, Eliade makes a point that Collingwood himself did not make but that can be read between the lines if we consider his *Folk Tales Manuscripts* in the new light of the theory of presuppositions systematically exposed in his *Essay on Metaphysics*. Culianu, moreover, although gives us a reverse version of the theory can be seen as some peculiar specimen of an idealist as he would have never perhaps considered himself to be so.

Both Eliade and Collingwood talk of re-enactment; of understanding the ways of the primitive man, subsuming this task under the more general theories of the sacred, mythical or magical; of certain beliefs or preamble data that determine practices, customs, magical or religious behaviour. They both detach their accounts from pure ethnological, psychological, or sociological as they are not resumed to these disciplines but go beyond them by putting the particular matter of understanding and interpreting past, ancient or archaic experiences that man lived. By reading Collingwood through Eliade the theory of presuppositions can be expanded as to covering new domains and cultural spaces, the magical and religious experiences, and the archaic cultures. And when talking about the basis of magical practices, customs and beliefs in his *Folk Tales Manuscripts* Collingwood

may not have made evident but what we could call today, after studying his systematic theory, the ‘presuppositions’ of the primitive man’s thinking and behaviour. What I want to suggest is that after reading Eliade, moreover after reading Collingwood the way I do, through Eliade, it becomes clear to us not only that we preserve behaviours and basic data from the archaic times, but primary that the archaic man is entitled to possess such fundamental beliefs or ‘presuppositions’. What I suggest is that Collingwood’s theory of presuppositions can be applied to the thinking of the primitive man. We can take the beliefs of the archaic people to be as much presuppositions as our own ‘civilized’ ones.

As for Culianu, I discussed his method within the context of Collingwood’s theory of presuppositions. As a consequence of both Culianu’s method and Collingwood’s theory of presuppositions the meaning of hermeneutics changes, it can be no longer defined as an endeavour to decipher a hidden meaning (as it still was for Eliade), but something different, and in this way the subject matter of understanding is placed within a broader context. Culianu’s relation to the idealist thesis becomes very significant as his theory brings forth the idea that reality is but the construction of our mind. Culianu’s main idea is that everything (religion, science, philosophy, even our life) can be defined in terms of some mind game; everything is but a system of ideal objects that appear by means of some binary logic. Culianu’s method consists of a set of rules (premises) and a binary generating mechanism. The set of rules corresponds to Collingwood’s presuppositions and it consists of a series of elementary ontological beliefs, such as “here is another world”, “there are gods”, etc., while the generating mechanism is a way of choosing between two opposite options (yes and no) that can go on infinitely. The method applies to any mind game (religion, philosophy, science, literature) and has as a result the construction of ideal objects (theories, dogmas etc.), an infinity of solutions that complete a system. What interested me most was seeing how Collingwood’s theory of presuppositions can be read in a new way or even extended along the lines of Culianu’s method. Following Culianu but also extrapolating what he generally says about human creations – that starting from certain premises our mind necessarily tends to combine them into certain solutions – we can further say that if thinking logically human mind will not only think by implying presuppositions but, moreover, it will construct a theory of presuppositions.

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