

AUTHOR'S PRE-PROOFED COPY. DOES NOT ENTIRELY MATCH
PUBLISHED VERSION. PLEASE CITE PUBLISHED VERSION:
METAPHILOSOPHY VOL. 50, NO. 5, PP. 747–51 (2019).

Collingwood on Philosophical Methodology.
Edited by Karim Dharamsi, Giuseppina
D'Oro, and Stephen Leach. Cham: Palgrave
Macmillan, 2018. Pp. xiii + 270.

The metaphilosophy, or philosophical methodology, of R. G. Collingwood pervades every aspect of his philosophy, from his metaphysics to his aesthetics to his philosophy of history to his ethics. There has never been a book-length attempt to engage with his metaphilosophy, however, despite him having written a rich monograph of his own on the topic, *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, first published in 1933.¹ Rather, philosophers too often rely on their own assumptions of what his philosophical methodology was, with interpretations that have almost always been egregious. This collection of hermeneutically careful

- 1 Which is not to say that there have not been any attempts on smaller canvases, although there have been precious few of these, too: see Mink 1969, which is an overview of Collingwood's philosophy but singular in giving Collingwood's methodology its due, D'Oro and Connelly 2005, or the 2016 special issue of *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies* on Collingwood's philosophical methodology.

and philosophically sympathetic essays marks, one hopes, a turning of that tide, despite some weak chapters and uneven editing.

The volume opens with a brief presentation of some of the leitmotifs of the collection followed by the authors' abstracts. This is fine so far as it goes, though it could have done more to introduce readers to Collingwood, his context, and his continuing philosophical importance, or to introduce the volume in a way that does more to suggest that its chapters are not just a mere agglomeration, as the bare procession of abstracts suggests.

The first chapter proper, "An Essay on Collingwood" by Bernard Williams (originally published posthumously in Williams 2007), was written in order to rectify an injustice of neglect of Collingwood. It is a characteristically charming and competent essay, though there is some irony in the fact that while it was written to encourage people to take Collingwood more seriously, it is probably the least sympathetic chapter in this volume. It is a good choice of opening for the volume, not just because it sets the historical context nicely, but also because Williams' concerns—Collingwood's possible historicism and his theory of absolute presuppositions—recur throughout.

This is followed by another scene-setting chapter, James Connelly's admirably thorough "The Development of Collingwood's Metaphilosophical Views." This is a clear and careful historical survey of Collingwood's intellectual development, in which Connelly relies not only on Collingwood's published works, but also on private notes and correspondence. Until recently, philosophers have felt able to use Collingwood as a representative of views and errors that no serious scholarship

could attribute to him. This has begun to change, largely thanks to Connelly himself, and his chapter in this volume felt to me to signal a watershed: no longer is this lazy appropriation admissible.

After Connelly's chapter come several close readings of Collingwood. Jan van der Dussen's "Collingwood on the Relationship between Metaphysics and History" reads Collingwood's late *An Essay on Metaphysics*, originally published in 1940, through a roughly contemporaneous unpublished essay of Collingwood's in order to buttress van der Dussen's anti-historicist reading of Collingwood.² Vasso Kindi's "Presuppositions and the Logic of Question and Answer" makes some good points about its topics and their historical precedents, though I could not discern any clear overall argument.

Elena Popa's "Collingwood, Pragmatism, and the Philosophy of Science" and Karim Dharamsi's "Oscillation and Emancipation" each connect Collingwood to more contemporary philosophy: in Popa's chapter, pragmatism, and in Dharamsi's, McDowellian naturalism. Both are well written, with careful exegesis of the contrasting philosophers, and the contrasts and similarities brought out well. Popa could have dealt with *more* contemporary pragmatism—the text she considers most carefully is from 2001—and a critical element to

- 2 "Anti-historicist" or "anti-relativist." The "historicist" or "relativist" position is that propositions are true only relative to a particular context—for example, a historical period—and was imputed to the later Collingwood by, for example, T. M. Knox. The anti-historicist interpretation of Collingwood is endorsed by every contributor to this volume who discusses it.

both her and Dharamsi's comparisons would have given their discussions some more bite. (Dharamsi might respond that a critical element would not be possible because, as he concludes, "McDowell's liberal naturalism rests on certain ontological presuppositions that . . . Collingwood's philosophy of historiography seems to bypass" (202). This is true, but I still wanted to know whether Collingwood was right to bypass McDowell's concerns, or, conversely, whether McDowell's naturalism really required ontological presuppositions, if Collingwood is able to bypass them.)

Giuseppina D'Oro's "Why Epistemic Pluralism Does not Entail Relativism" and Chinatsu Kobayashi and Mathieu Marion's "The Later Collingwood on Method" do have this critical element. D'Oro argues that although Collingwood is indeed an epistemic pluralist, he is not (therefore or at all) an epistemic relativist, and that pluralism is not open to the standard objections to relativism. It is a clearly written chapter of subtle and sophisticated philosophy that I would hope finally puts to bed this objection to Collingwood's metaphilosophy. Kobayashi and Marion analyse how Collingwood's logic of question and answer and his theory of re-enactment together form a method of inquiry, arguing that the method is not deductive (as has often been assumed) but rather abductive. The analysis is careful, with much helpful formalisation of argument (even if, my own formal logic being rusty, I would have preferred the main text to more clearly translate the formal sentences).

Finally, Jonas Ahlskog's "Collingwood and the Philosophy of History" and Stephen Leach's "Collingwood and Archaeological Theory" each connect Collingwood to debates in these "applied" philosophies. Leach's contribution is, so far as I am

aware, the first by a Collingwood scholar to consider how archaeological theory has incorporated one of its forefathers. The chapter does not attempt much more than a historical overview, but it is interesting and well done. Ahlskog's chapter is more philosophical, arguing that Collingwood's account of "reenactment" as an epistemic tool does not conflict with modern accounts of historical understanding, such as "retrospective description" (viz., understanding things in light of subsequent things), but rather is their "presupposition" (215). The scope then broadens to (yet) another discussion of the connection between philosophy and history, but one that is set apart from the others in this volume by being more positive: Ahlskog (without ever being in danger of historicism) sees the closeness of the disciplines as something occasioning reflection on how each can grow from the other.

The chapters in this volume are mostly strong. More important, every one of them is strong in the key respect of interpreting Collingwood: I did not notice any definite hermeneutic errors at all. This said, many of the chapters are marred by uneven writing, particularly in terms of argumentative structure and signposting, but also in terms of ambiguous or confusing sentences and occasional typographical errors. A firmer editorial hand throughout would have benefitted the volume subtly but enormously.

Even these details aside, though, the collection is somehow less than the sum of its parts. This is, first, because of the substantial overlap between them: the volume deals with only a few related areas of Collingwood's metaphilosophy—roughly, the historicist objection, absolute presuppositions, and the lo-

gic of question and answer. The problem is not that these few topics dominate eight of the volume's ten chapters (and the other chapters, Ahlskog's and Leach's, are not far away, conceptually): it is that the editors made no attempt to bring the chapters into any sort of conversation with each other, even by something as simple as some cross-referencing, or a mapping of the various authors' positions in the introduction so as to highlight the differences between their approaches to the issue. (This would also have made it easier for the reader to orient themselves in each chapter.)

The obverse problem to the soupiness of the volume's focus on only a few aspects of Collingwood's metaphilosophy is that other aspects become conspicuously absent. Where are the chapters about how Collingwood's metaphilosophy impacts his ethics or his philosophy of art? Where are the chapters on his theory of concepts (and his notorious "scale of forms"); his account of how exposition and criticism are ineluctably bound up in philosophy; the connections between philosophy, science, and literature; and the idea of a philosophical system—all topics that feature prominently in *An Essay on Philosophical Method*? Where are the chapters *critically* connecting his work to contemporary metaphilosophical debates, or to topics to which his metaphilosophy has not yet been brought to bear? Where are the chapters using his metaphilosophy to do new philosophy?

The editors are presumably not at fault here: there may well be no-one on earth working on these topics, let alone anyone who submitted a good paper on them; but these are still all missed opportunities. (The silver lining, of course, is that the

missed opportunities highlight just how much work there is yet to be done on and with Collingwood.)

A final weakness is that this collection would have been an excellent place in which to provide an overview of the reception of Collingwood's philosophical methodology since his death. The introduction briefly surveys the debates concerning his supposed historicism, but, beyond a reference on page 6 to the special issue of *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies* on his methodology, that is it. This is a shame, as there is much more to Collingwood's philosophical methodology than his brushes with historicism. Further, the literature is small enough that it is still possible to provide a comprehensive review of it fairly easily, and so the absence of such a review is needless as well as disappointing.

Because of all this, the collection is not one that I could recommend reading through, or using for teaching. This said, many of the chapters are good (some of them very good), and the volume occupies an important historical place as the first collection on the metaphilosophy of this philosopher of the highest calibre. Accordingly, it would make a valuable addition to any university library as a resource for Collingwood scholars.

References

Collingwood, R. G. 2005 [1933]. *An Essay on Philosophical Method*. Edited with introduction and additional material by James Connelly and Giuseppina D'Oro. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- . 1998 [1940]. *An Essay on Metaphysics*. In *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, special issue on Collingwood and metaphilosophy, 22, no. 1.
- D'Oro, Giuseppina, and James Connelly. 2005. Editors' introduction to Collingwood 2005.
- Mink, Louis O. 1969. *Mind, History and Dialectic*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Williams, Bernard. 2007. *The Sense of the Past*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.