Collingwood’s Logic of Question and Answer against the Relativization of Reason

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1 Introduction

Fearing that his health would not permit him time to leave to the world the full range and depth of his offerings in philosophy, R.G. Collingwood sat down in the late summer of 1938 with the intention of getting as much of his thinking down on paper and out in public as he could in the time left to him. The result of this flurry of activity was An Autobiography: a short, bold, and stylistically informal book that is not only immensely readable as the life-story of an unceasingly active man, but also philosophically rich, in places intriguing and, above all, accessible to any reader. After four chapters of what are mostly memoirs of his youth, chapter five of this Autobiography describes one of the fundamental concepts of Collingwood’s thinking on various subjects: namely, what he calls his “logic” (or “theory”) of question and answer. It is an extremely suggestive and deceptively complex chapter—which is probably part of the reason why Collingwood scholars have offered so many different accounts of the significance or “place” of “question and answer” in Collingwood’s philosophy.

In less that fourteen pages Collingwood explains the importance of “the questioning activity” to human knowledge, and how it offered a theory of truth and contradiction distinct from both the “correspondence” and “coherence” theories of truth. Most provocatively as far as intellectual historians are concerned, Collingwood also begins to explain here how “question and answer” showed that in order to know what a man means by a certain proposition you must reconstruct the question to which it is intended as an answer. And,

4 Collingwood, Autobiography, 36.
most relevant to the discussion at hand, Collingwood explains how something he had learnt in his work as an archaeologist brought about in him a “revolt against the current logical theories of the time.”5 “I know that what I am going to say is very controversial,” he warns, “and that almost any reader who is already something of a logician will violently disagree with it.”6

Although it might have been offensive to his peers, much of what Collingwood says about his “logic of question and answer,” especially concerning the “conspiracy” of modern logicians7 and the nature of his “revolt” against them, is likely to find a receptive audience among many of today’s historians of philosophy. Either because we are more historically sensitive to the changing questions of the past than our predecessors typically were, or because we are familiar with certain “pluralistic” tropes of later philosophy, some of us are more receptive than Collingwood’s contemporaries were to his claim that “Meaning, agreement and contradiction, truth and falsehood, none of these belonged to propositions in their own right […] [but] only to propositions as the answers to questions: each proposition answering a question strictly correlative to itself.”8 In the first half of this chapter I have outlined the reasoning behind Collingwood’s critique of his contemporary logicians, comprising some of what he says explicitly about it, and much of what he does not. But there are also certain warnings in Collingwood’s philosophy concerning what is lost by what we might call the retrospective relativizing of reason, and these warnings have implications which I think will be met with rather more hostility today. In the second half of this chapter I have explained what I think those warnings are, and closed by offering reasons for thinking those implications might be worth paying attention to.

2 Logic and Knowledge

As well as an historian of Roman Britain9 and the Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy from 1935 until 1941, Collingwood was also an amateur archaeologist. It was this experience of his work in archaeology, he says in his Autobiography, that brought about in his mind “a revolt against the current

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5 Collingwood, Autobiography, 30.
8 Collingwood, Autobiography, 33.
9 See Collingwood, Autobiography, 120–121.