

# An Essay on Philosophical Method

*R.G.Collingwood*

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What is philosophy? Is that a question in philosophy? Very much so, Collingwood claims, philosophy is unlike most other disciplines self-referential. It is about thinking, in particular thinking about thinking. A way of clarifying what philosophy is, is to suggest a method of philosophy. This has been done successfully in the past. First in antiquity by Socrates and Platon, then by Descartes, who made it very explicit in his *Discourse de la Méthode*, and then not to forget by Kant., whose *Krtik der reinen Vernunft* amounts to a revival of metaphysics, not to its rejection which has erroneously been assumed. The method proposed by Descartes turned out not really to be a method of philosophy at all, but of science, nevertheless it was a contribution of philosophical thinking, as it clarified the philosophy of science. And one may remark, I think, the basis for Russell's remark that when a part of philosophy becomes solid and exact enough, it branches away and becomes a science on its own. Collingwood is very concerned about finding a demarcation for philosophy, to show how it differs from the exact sciences, among which he chiefly means mathematics, and the empirical.

The main thing about philosophy is that it does not really, unlike science, enter new grounds. Everything philosophy is concerned with is already known to man, it is in the words of Plato and Socrates, hidden knowledge, temporarily forgotten, but teased out of amnesia, through pointed questions and reflection. Socrates famously talked about midwifery. The child to emerge is there already, it is just a matter of getting it out. Thus philosophizing means readdressing the well-known, to see it from new angles, to get to know it and understanding it better.

Philosophy differs from science in that it cannot be taken apart, in the words of the author, it cannot be divided into separate classes, they all overlap. Everything in philosophy bears upon everything else, there is no way of isolating concepts. That is however the case in the sciences, and the reason for their success and their undeniable progress. In the sciences there are technical vocabularies, such presuppose exact definitions, and exact definitions require non-overlapping classes. But not all of the vocabulary of language is technical. That would be impossible, because the meaning of a technical word and its corresponding concept is conveyed by definitions using words. This can obviously not go on for ever. Thus there is a core to language, where meaning of words are not defined in terms of other words, but are somehow intrinsic and learned instinctively, i.e. by context. A typical example is 'truth', which cannot be given a 'true' definition. Philosophy does not need a technical vocabulary, such only obscures and is to be seen as intellectual vanity, or worse, as an effort to ape the sciences. What philosophy needs is just basic language, an aggregation of words whose meanings are not fixed but fluid and can be made to do work everywhere and become known through the contexts in which they find themselves. After all in philosophy there are overlaps everywhere, and real non-technical words, overlap with each other. They do not have fixed meanings, they are not launched by fiat, but almost

living things, with which all thinking creatures are familiar.

Collingwood tries to make a distinction between philosophical thought and mathematical thought. In this task he is severely handicapped by his ignorance of mathematics, a failing he unreservedly admits to. His acquaintance with mathematics is basically confined to that of Euclid, and hence he sees mathematics as the deductive science *par excellence*. He recognizes three levels in mathematical pursuits. First the axioms, the starting points, second the mathematical reasoning, and thirdly the results of that reasoning. In short the production of theorems<sup>1</sup>. He also makes a point that mathematics, as science in general, is hypothetical. It reasons as if. The distinction he makes of mathematical reasoning and philosophical, no doubt goes back to Plato's distinction between deductive and dialectical, and of course like Plato he holds the second higher. But his writing on this score is a bit confused, taking him literally, he seems to argue that all reasoning in mathematics is forward reasoning that unlike dialectical reasoning it does not go back and question the assumptions. Has Collingwood never encountered a proof by contradiction? The objection may be considered a bit naive, and if not it merely points to Collingwood's ignorance, of which he anticipates making a half mocking half humbling query whether he will be so fortunate as to have a mathematical reader<sup>2</sup> as well as positing that some parts of mathematical reasoning may very well be philosophical in nature. Furthermore, what he also may have in mind is a deeper questioning, while in science there is a tacit adherence to a method, or more fancily a paradigm in the words of Thomas Kuhn, in philosophy a sustained perseverance in questioning a tacitly accepted method maybe the norm.

Philosophy is categorical. It treats its assumptions not as mere hypothesis but as truth. Logic is a prime example. When you reason about logic, you need to know and do that logically. You have to adhere in your reasoning to the principles you expound. As somewhat naively expressed in the metaphor, that an English grammar has to be grammatical. But the logic of reasoning is something that you make true, because otherwise there would be nothing true. It is compelled, in fact the emergence of logic and what it basically amounts to, the faith in rational reason, is very much an illustration of the ontological proof by Anselm of the existence of God. This is a kind of reasoning that seems to be made in the spirit of a spoof. Obviously it is wrong, but it is, as many philosophers have noted, not obvious in what way it is wrong. Collingwood seems to take it serious, at least tongue in cheek. This championing of an old scholastic argument gets him into trouble by modern philosophers. Either he is pulling your leg or he is a dotty old fool. But Collingwood insists. First he asks the question of what kind of deity is brought into existence by the argument. Clearly it is not a deity onto which you can foist all the traits of a deity you would personally prefer. It is not a question of being giving a wish to be fulfilled, as in the proof that the perfect spouse will be married to you, otherwise she would not be perfect. What comes into existence is rational logical reasoning. This is

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<sup>1</sup> I very much recall, an otherwise rather dismal vacation in the Adriatic sea-resort of Riccione in 1965. I then made this same three-tiered distinction, although admittedly in a clearer way than Collingwood does. The first I considered to be part of theology, this did not interest me that much, the third I thought of as part of technology, and that too I was contemptuous about, but what really excited me was this in the middle. The reasoning itself, the power of thought.

<sup>2</sup> How many mathematicians have seriously read him? Would he so be honored only posthumously?

indeed a very abstract sense of a deity, but one which we are compelled to believe in. By reasoning about logic and rationality we inevitably bring it into being by virtue of that very reasoning which becomes compelling. As C.S. Peirce points out, there are two kinds of logic, mathematical logic in the sense of being a part of mathematics, and moral logic being the way we actually reason about mathematics, and in particular mathematical logic. The playfulness of mathematical logic is merely hypothetical, it has little if any bearing upon our real mathematical reasoning. It thus becomes part of science, exact science admittedly, and is removed from philosophy. But real logic, is according to Peirce a part of ethics. This anticipates beautifully Collingwood's claim about the overlapping of classes in philosophical thought. One cannot isolate logic from ethics, they are part and parcel of the same thing<sup>3</sup>.

Collingwood takes his claim of philosophical unity very seriously, and he builds a rather elaborate structure, by invoking a kind scale of form. It is not clear what it really amounts to, but it is intimately connected to the notion of progress in philosophy. Philosophical inquiry does not uncover new ground, the setting, like the surface of the earth, is already set; what it does is to raise our understanding to a higher level, by so doing it does not contradict what comes before, only making it more clear. The analogy with levels of abstraction in mathematics is obvious, but something I fear Collingwood would have been unfamiliar with, given his limited mathematical background. He also on he basis that opposites somehow must coincide makes a vague and confused, and hence interesting reference to measure, saying that the lower end of a scale is not zero but unity. This is somewhat prosaically suggestive of Weber's law, namely that objectively linear scales are perceived logarithmically<sup>4</sup> He spends a lot of time and effort elucidating the concept without necessarily clarifying it.

His concluding reflections on literature are exquisite. He makes a distinction between prose and poetry. In prose there is formal beauty and meaning, but the formal beauty is not an end to itself but a means to an end, namely that of conveying meaning. To write beautifully the author has to be an artist, but to write meaningfully he needs to be a thinker. As in all philosophical inquiry, there is no way you can properly separate the two, there is as always an overlap. They are indeed intimately linked. Beauty of form helps the thinking, just as the thinking forces a beauty of form. In poetry there is no longer this tension between beauty of form and profundity of thought. Beauty is no longer a servant to thought but is its master. What matters about a poem is not the depth of its thought (but that could be a bonus) but the beauty of its language. In poetry you are allowed to be carried away by a metaphor, in prose you should never let metaphors command attentions to themselves as such, they should only serve to make a meaning clear, not substitute for meaning. A metaphor that is taken literally is a poetic flight, while in prose such an interpretation becomes just silly. While prose is objective, poetry is subjective. The poetic expression is an expression of intimacy, the author invites you into his world.

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<sup>3</sup> In a sense the same phenomenon can be seen in mathematics, if admittedly only from a philosophical perspective, namely the remarkable interconnectedness of mathematics, everything bears upon everything else.

<sup>4</sup> What Weber's law really says is that there is an absence of absolute units, everything we perceive is related to something else, we can thus not speak so much about differences as quotients.

As writing philosophy should of course be prose, but not the prose of scientific writing, it should eschew, as we have already noted, all technical vocabulary and concern itself with natural ordinary language. But philosophy is a kind of poetry as well, or rather to make the analogies more precise, philosophical writing shares with poetry many significant features. Unlike prose it is intimate, it invites the reader to share the world of its author. But this is not a world of emotion, it is a world of reasoning and intellect. But unlike straight prose it is not a fixed world it is a world in a flux. To make it more clear. Historical writing we consult, while in philosophy we follow. A historian presents to the reader the fruits of his labor, he does not disclose the work behind it, thus it is didactic in tone and purpose. As readers we need to take the historian on his word, we have no way of checking him, unless we become historians ourselves. In philosophy it is different, here we are not as much presented with results, but with the work of thought itself, the work that goes to present results. Yet again, an analogy with mathematics should not be amiss, is not a proof a way of inviting the reader into the work of the author? Not quite. True a deductive proof allows the reader to check the reasoning, unlike the case in a historic exposition, but it does not give the full story. Far from it in fact. Regrettably what is often missing in mathematical exposition is underlying motivation. A formal proof does not reflect the labour that went into its discovery, in fact in many ways it is an obfuscation of the same. What you really need to understand a proof is not the formal steps but the motivations and the ideas that guided the author, the analogies that fired his imagination, along with an indication of dead-ends and blind alleys and temporary confusions. If such material would be included, and they almost never are, a mathematical exposition would indeed be more philosophical in nature. This points to another difference between philosophical literature and mathematical. The former is personal, because it is an invitation to join in the intellectual struggles of the author, the latter strives to comply with an objective standard, making the personality of the author more and more irrelevant.

How should a philosophical texts be read? It should be followed, as noted above, not consulted. There are no facts, no theorems in a philosophical text, there is only a mental struggle. The obligation of the reader is to listen and not to obtrude himself, at least not initially. He is obliged to think the thoughts of the author, not just to note them. He needs to put himself in the shoes of the philosopher, to make a concerted effort to understand him sympathetically. But of course no true understanding is possible without criticism. Criticism is not a case of rejection, it is a case of sympathy, of adopting the viewpoint of the author and to ask whether he also sees what the author sees, in short whether the author speaks the truth.

What is the best way of presenting a philosophical discourse? Artistry is a necessity, and Plato, even among his philosophical detractors, is seen as a superb artist, and the form he chose, and maybe even invented, was the dialogue, which according to Collingwood is a superb vehicle of philosophical presentation, allowing a full range of viewpoints to be presented. Strange though that it has been used so sparingly in modern philosophical literature.

This points to tradition and its importance in order to understand philosophy, and eventually Collingwood would take the stand that it was paramount, that philosophy was in fact history, that human history is about the development of thought, in particular the

development of points of views and thus a climbing up the ladder of the scale of forms. A philosophical idea can only be properly understood once you take part in the ongoing discussion to which it has been subjected, in other words only if you have tried to follow the thoughts that have been lavished on it.

May 3, 2012 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se