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"WAS HE RIGHT?"

R. G. COLLINGWOOD'S *RAPPROCHEMENT* BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

R. G. Collingwood's declaration that belief in "eternal questions" in philosophy is "merely a vulgar error, consequent on a kind of historical myopia which, deceived by superficial resemblances, failed to detect profound differences" has been vigorously discussed over the last sixty years, thanks partly to its resurrection by Quentin Skinner. But another of Collingwood's provocative claims has been relatively neglected. If the claims and arguments of classic authors in the history of philosophy provide answers to questions that are not ours, but that are in fact limited to the context of their own time; and if the purpose of history is to illuminate those answers in light of their historical contexts, should historians ask – as Collingwood claimed they "must" – not only "what was So-and-so's theory on such and such a matter?", but also "*was he right*?"? Should the historian of ideas in a world of changing questions nevertheless describe a theory as "false" or "true", as Collingwood does, or is truth assessment no proper part of the history of philosophy? This essay draws on the full range of Collingwood's writings, and presents his strongest case for the claim that historians "must" ask "the truth question" about old philosophy.

KEYWORDS: R. G. Collingwood; history of ideas; philosophy of history; methodology; contextualism.

1. OLD PROBLEMS

"During the [First World] War…" Collingwood recounts in his *Autobiography*, "I set myself to reconsider this 'realist' attitude towards the history of philosophy. Was it really true, I asked myself, that the problems of philosophy were, even in the loosest sense of that word, eternal? Was it really true that different philosophies were different attempts to answer the same questions? I soon discovered that it was not true."[1]

Collingwood's dismantling of eternal questions was provocatively reformulated by Quentin Skinner in his 1969 article, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas".[2] According to Skinner, Collingwood was one of the formative influences on John Dunn, J. G. A. Pocock, and himself.[3] Thus, part of the foundation myth of Cambridge School "contextualism" is that it rescued history of political thought from the kind of bad history produced by the "historical myopia"[4] identified by Collingwood. Previously, the contextualists now said, the classic texts were being studied and discussed as though their authors were ageless contemporaries, with scholars attributing to them paradigms and perennial questions which they could not have shared, and meanings which they could not have intended.[5]

Closing his article, Skinner points to two "vital implications" of what he discusses: (1) that "the classic texts cannot be concerned with our questions and answers, but only with their own"; and (2) that "there is in consequence simply no hope of seeking the point of studying the history of ideas in the attempt to learn directly from the classic authors by focusing on their attempted answers to supposedly timeless questions."[6]

This second implication, however, puts Skinner at odds with Collingwood, who argues that, "in addition to understanding his author, the reader *must criticize him*."[7] For Collingwood, historians of philosophy should in fact assess whether past authors were right, and what they said true.[8] (Here I will call this asking "the truth question",[9] though the same could be indicated by "evaluation", "criticism", "view", or "value judgement".[10]) Collingwood explains:

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1 R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography and Other Writings*, ed. David Boucher and Teresa Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) (hereafter *Autobiography*), 60-61; see also 18-22.

2 Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas", *History and Theory*, 8 (1969), 3-53.

3 See Skinner, "Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action", *Political Theory*, 2, no. 3 (1974), 277-303, 283.

4 Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 60-1.

5 Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding", 9.

6 Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding", 50.

7 R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, ed. James Connelly and Giuseppina D'Oro (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005) (hereafter *Philosophical Method*), 216-17 (emphasis added). This "must" appears to be sometimes descriptive and sometimes prescriptive (see below).

8 Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 68.

9 Collingwood distinguishes between the "right" answer to a question and "truth"; the distinction pertains to his theory of "supposing", and does not affect the argument presented here. See *Autobiography*, 37–8.

10 Collingwood uses "judgements of value" and "value-judgements". See "Can Historians be Impartial?", in R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of History and other writings in philosophy of history,* ed. W. H. Dray and W. J. van der Dussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 209-218, see 216-218.

> It was a doctrine of 'realism' (and this was why Prichard was so cross with me) that in this sense of the word history there is no history of philosophy … In that sense, the question, 'what was Aristotle's theory of duty?' would be an 'historical' question. And it would be wholly separate from the philosophical question, 'was it true?' Thus the 'history' of philosophy was an inquiry which had nothing to do with the question whether Plato's theory of Ideas (for example) was true or false, but only with the question what it was.[11]

But "For me," Collingwood adds, "…there were not two separate sets of questions to be asked, one historical and one philosophical, about a given passage in a given philosophical author. There was only one set, historical."[12]

Skinner has never really argued that historians must *not* ask the truth question – though he has been attacked for taking that position.[13] Charles Taylor asks him to be categorically clear: Can an historian "avoid taking a stand on the truth of the ideas he is examining"?[14] Skinner's reply is that "no historian can ever perform such an act of forgetting, and that it would in any case be most unwise to try."[15] Taylor asks further, "what is the truth value of the theories the texts expound?",[16] to which Skinner replies, "in most of the cases investigated by historians of ideas, the suggestion that we need to consider the truth of the beliefs under examination is I think likely to strike an historian as strange."[17] He continues:

> Take for example … Machiavelli's fervently held belief that mercenary armies always jeopardize political liberty. Perhaps there is nothing to stop us from asking whether this is true. But the effect of doing so will be somewhat analogous to asking whether the king of France is bald. The best answer seems to be that the question does not really arise.
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> I am not of course adopting the position… that we are *precluded* from asking about the truth of such beliefs … I am merely insisting … that our task as historians is to try to

11 Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 59.

12 Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 72.

13 See Robert Lamb, "Recent Developments in the Thought of Quentin Skinner and the Ambitions of Contextualism", *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 3 (2009), 246-265, 249 n. 11. Some commentators have claimed that evaluating past thought is illegitimate, on the grounds that it imposes anachronistic, inappropriate "logics" on authors to whom they do not pertain. I have dealt with this argument in Christopher Fear, "R. G. Collingwood's Logic of Question and Answer against the Relativization of Reason" in *Other Logics: Historical and Philosophical Alternatives to Formal Logic*, ed. Admir Skodo (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2014), 81-100.

14 Charles Taylor, "The hermeneutics of conflict" in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, ed. James Tully (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 218-228, 224.

15 Quentin Skinner, "A reply to my critics" in Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context*, 231-288, 236.

16 Taylor, "The hermeneutics of conflict", 219.

17 Skinner, "A reply to my critics", 256. See also Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1, *Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 52-53.

> recover Machiavelli's point of view; and that, in order to discharge this task, what we need to employ is solely the concept of rational acceptability, not that of truth.[18]

The operative words here are "our task as historians".[19] To put it plainly, if *P* = the historian must ask the truth question, Skinner's claim is *not P*.[20]

In today's practice, the history of philosophy as a field roughly comprises two distinct modes, shadowing the distinction recognized by Skinner: the historical mode on the one side, in which we aim to establish what our author thought he was saying or doing; and, on the other side, the philosophical mode, in which old ideas can be interrogated, reworked, and/or redeployed.[21] The philosophical mode is also a useful aid to teaching the great texts to undergraduates who are encountering them for the first time, and who engage better with long-dead authors by "arguing" with them.

2. COLLINGWOOD'S *RAPPROCHEMENT* BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND HISTORY

Collingwood's call for a "*rapprochement* between philosophy and history" presupposes a bipartite split exactly like this.[22] He describes this *rapprochement* as his "life's work";[23] the idea goes back at least as far as 1926,[24] and may have been a motivation for his writing *The New Leviathan.*[25] The term "*rapprochement* between philosophy and history" covers several interrelated points in Collingwood's thought.[26] It includes (1) recognizing that philosophical questions change through time and their answers change with them – recognizing, as we might now say, the historicity of philosophical thought and language; which means

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18 Skinner, "A reply to my critics", 256-257.

19 Collingwood also argues that *philosophers* must ask the truth question of their predecessors: see *Philosophical Method*, 132. That however is a less controversial claim than that appraised here, that *historians* must ask the same. Part of the present evaluation, therefore, consists in asking whether Collingwood is assuming that historians of philosophy have philosophical ends in mind. Often in *Philosophical Method* Collingwood refers not to "the historian" or "the philosopher", but to "the reader"; see 216-17.

20 In recent years Skinner is said to have taken a "genealogical turn" which, for some commentators, constitutes a *rapprochement* of his own. See Melissa Lane, "Doing Our Own Thinking for Ourselves", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 73, no. 1 (2012), 71-82; see 71-72. See also Lamb, "Recent Developments", 256-258. Clearly however Skinner still does not tell historians of ideas to ask the truth question; his position is still *not P*.

21 See Kenneth Minogue, "Method in intellectual history: Quentin Skinner's *Foundations*" in Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context*, 176-193, see 178.

22 Recently, David Vessey has described a "peaceful coexistence" between these two approaches to old philosophy. See David Vessey, "Gadamer's Logic of Question and Answer and the Difference Between the History of Philosophy and the History of Ideas", *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 8 (2014), 360-379; 366-368. Because Collingwood's position is that historians *must* ask the truth question, rather than only that they *may*, he seems unable to agree to such a settlement. For Collingwood, the two are created by a separation that ought not to be there. Christopher Rolliston has already discussed Collingwood's other *rapprochement*, between theory and practice, in the *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, and in a way that in places touches on the present study, largely due to the ambiguity of the term "value", and because of the relation between the two *rapprochements* described here. See Christopher Rolliston, "Collingwood and the Relation between Theory, Practice and Values in Historical Thinking", *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 3 (2009), 146-166.

23 Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 77.

24 See R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* [1946], ed. Jan van der Dussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 425.

25 See David Boucher, *The Social and Political Thought of R. G. Collingwood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 37.

26 Collingwood maintains important distinctions between philosophy and history; they are *not* the same thing for him. See for example *Philosophical Method*, 208-10.

recognizing (2) that philosophers have to become better historians in order to better understand the philosophy they are studying; and also (3) that historians have to become better philosophers, in order to address the philosophical assumptions behind their own practice. Skinner, I think, follows Collingwood this far. But Collingwood argues further that such a *rapprochement* would also involve (4) the philosophical demonstration that history affords self-knowledge of the mind,[27] which therefore explains why (5) the study of the history of thought – which for Collingwood is what *all* history is[28] – is essential for the maintenance of progress and civilization.[29]

The aspect of Collingwood's *rapprochement* to which I would like to pay exclusive attention here, however, is the notion (6) that historians must ask the truth question about old arguments.[30] This "must" is ambiguous. It appears sometimes to be a descriptive and/or what William Dray calls a logical or conceptual "must".[31] For example, Collingwood writes in his *Autobiography*: "History did not *mean* knowing what events followed what. It *meant* getting inside other people's heads, looking at their situation through their eyes, and thinking for yourself whether the way in which they tackled it was the right way."[32] And in *The Idea of History:* "What is *required*, if I am to know Plato's philosophy, is both to re-think it in my own mind and also to think other things in the light of which I can judge it."[33] But in other places Collingwood clearly intends a methodological prescription:

> we, as historians, must not shrink from this responsibility. Let us realize that, as historians, we have taken upon ourselves the serious task, not only of discovering what actually happened, but of judging it in the light of our own moral[34] ideals. We are the present of man, passing judgement on his own corporate past. If we dislike shouldering that responsibility, we have none the less accepted it in so far as we are historians at all. If we feel that we cannot shoulder it, we ought to drop historical studies and do something else. What we cannot do, is to continue playing with historical research and yet shirk the

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27 Collingwood, *Autobiography,* 107-119.

28 Collingwood, *Autobiography,* 109-110.

29 See Collingwood, *Idea of History,* 334; and *Autobiography,* 90-92, 115.

30 This was not always Collingwood's position. In the 1920s he was speaking against it. See *Idea of History*, 396-404. David Vessey does not seem to recognize that Collingwood argues that historians must ask the truth question. He recognizes Collingwood as an "intentionalist", but thinks that the reconciliation of intentionalism with "presentism" is the achievement of Gadamer. See Vessey, "Gadamer's Logic of Question and Answer", 376–7. Similarly, Rolliston thinks Collingwood's "real" position is that historians' narratives must contain "value relevance" (*Wertbeziehung*), and not "value judgements" (*Werturteil*), Rickert's distinction. See Rolliston, "Collingwood and the Relation between Theory, Practice and Values", 164. I use the term "old" rather than "past" deliberately, for the reason that "old" implies "still present" in a way that "past" does not.

31 William H. Dray, *History as Re-Enactment: R. G. Collingwood's Idea of History* [1995] (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), 278-279.

32 *Autobiography,* 58 (emphasis added). See also *Idea of History,* 215-216.

33 *Idea of History,* 301 (emphasis added); see also 215-216.

34 Collingwood explains that he means "moral" in a very broad sense: "Can Historians be Impartial?", 215.

responsibility of judging the actions we narrate: saying this was wise, that foolish; this courageous, that cowardly; this well done, that ill.[35]

As I have said, this is the argument of Collingwood's that seems directly threatened by a fundamental thesis that the contextualists nailed to the door at the dawn of their Reformation. According to Skinner, the truth question requires a kind of deliberate historical naivety,[36] it has nothing to do with historical understanding and, as we have seen, asking it is not part of the historian's task "as historian".[37] Skinner, then, has been defending the separation in philosophical theory and historical practice that Collingwood's *rapprochement* is meant to resolve – which he calls "the doctrine of the historian as eunuch".[38]

3. WHY "MUST" THE TRUTH QUESTION ARISE?

For historians of philosophy, Collingwood's *rapprochement* would have obvious consequences. Historians would describe old philosophy *and* delineate its proofs and errors. Now it is easy to demonstrate that intellectual historians sometimes do this anyway – and examples in Collingwood's work are easy to come by.[39] However this shows not that evaluative questions are unavoidable, but merely that some do not even try to avoid them. How, then, does Collingwood demonstrate that historians "must" interrogate answers to questions that are "not their own"?

a. The Leibniz example

Collingwood's *Autobiography* offers two first-hand accounts of how the truth question arises: one of how teaching undergraduates to look for authors' questions gives way to philosophical problem-solving;[40] and the other of following others' arguments in academic seminars – which too is, for Collingwood, to "think historically".[41] "[T]he reader can easily see … for himself," Collingwood says, how this distinction between historical thinking and philosophical thinking "broke down in the light of the question 'how is the so-called philosophical issue to be settled?'"[42] But in fact it is not so easy, and Collingwood's example raises more problems than it solves:

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35 "Can Historians be Impartial?", 218.

36 Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding", 50.

37 Skinner, "A reply to my critics", 257; *Visions of Politics*, 53.

38 "Can Historians be Impartial?", 211.

39 See R. G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan; or Man, Society, Civilization and Barbarism* [1942] (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), lx, and 311 (37.4); *Philosophical Method*, 16, 25; *Idea of History,* 76, 173.

40 Collingwood*, Autobiography,* 75.

41 Collingwood*, Autobiography,* 55-58.

42 Collingwood*, Autobiography,* 68-69. James Connelly observes that Collingwood asserts his *rapprochement* in his *Autobiography*, rather than argues for it. See James Connelly, *Metaphysics, Method and Politics* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2003), 162.

> Perhaps we label [Leibniz's] problem *p*14. Then comes the question 'Does Leibniz here deal with *p*14 rightly or wrongly?' The answer to this is not quite so simple as the 'realists' think. If Leibniz when he wrote this passage was so confused in his mind as to make a complete mess of the job of solving his problem, he was bound at the same time to mix up his own tracks so completely that no reader could see quite clearly what his problem had been. For one and the same passage states his solution and serves as evidence of what the problem was. The fact that we can identify his problem is proof that he has solved it; for we only know what the problem was by arguing back from the solution.[43]

Here Collingwood seems to be arguing that if the "realist" distinction between the "what did he say?" and the "was he right?" really collapses, it is only because the answer to the second is fixed as "yes, he solved it" whenever the first can be answered at all, which is not convincing, as it seems to make critical affirmation a necessary condition of understanding. There follows another example for the same argument, this time a "practical" example rather than a philosophical one:

> Naval historians think it worth while to argue about Nelson's tactical plan at Trafalgar because he won the battle. It is not worth while arguing about Villeneuve's plan. He did not succeed in carrying it out, and therefore no one will ever know what it was. We can only guess. And guessing is not history.[44]

Next Collingwood claims that an historian who asserted that an author's solution had failed would be (wrongly) attributing to him an eternal question in place of the historically-particular question that he had tackled.[45] This is not however very convincing either. Collingwood's denial that a problem could be clear to the reader even though it was not solved by the author (or actor),[46] is based on two conflations: first of an historically-discoverable problem with a solved problem, and second of identifying an unsuccessful solution with attributing an eternal problem. Actually an ostensible solution to a problem can be evidence of the problem without the solution being successful; and we can identify others' errors without mistaking the question they are trying to solve. Another passage in *An Autobiography*, however, shows Collingwood assuming that the historian (in this passage the archaeologist) *is* able to judge whether or not the solution was a good one: "Whenever you find any object you must ask, 'What was it for?' and, arising out of that question, 'Was it good or bad for it? i.e. was the purpose embodied in it successfully embodied in it, or

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43 Collingwood, *Autobiography,* 69-70.

44 Collingwood, *Autobiography,* 70.

45 Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 71-2. See also *Idea of History*, 470 n. 16.

46 Gadamer also notices this, which is probably what brings it to Skinner's attention later. See Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2006), 364.

unsuccessfully?'"[47] – which suggests that he does in fact recognize that the historian's interpretation and his criticism are different things.

These errors in the Leibniz example are targeted by Hans Georg Gadamer in his attack on Collingwood's logic of question and answer as a whole. What Collingwood argues only works, Gadamer says, if one subscribes to an Hegelian assumption about the world-historical importance of victors.[48] Quentin Skinner picks on the same thing,[49] also referring to Collingwood's Leibniz example (the same page features the Villeneuve example). The Collingwood specialist Jan van der Dussen has also noticed this tangle, and includes it as one of the "puzzling aspects" of Collingwood's logic of question and answer in his study, *History as a Science*[50] – but he declines to discuss it.

My view is that the argument Collingwood offers in *An Autobiography* (1939), which uses the Leibniz and Villeneuve examples, is a misstatement. Collingwood is attempting to shortcut for his *Autobiography* a better argument that he had already mapped more fully elsewhere (see below), but in doing so he short-circuits it. Unfortunately it is the bad argument that Collingwood offers only once, in his *Autobiography*, that is read and attacked by Gadamer and Skinner, and noted by their readers. There are however other (and better) arguments that Collingwood had deployed in support of his claim that historians of philosophy "must" ask the truth question.

b. All thinking is critical thinking

In 1936 Collingwood had presented one of these arguments to the Stubbs Historical Society, under the title "Can Historians be Impartial?" As we think "historically", Collingwood argues – that is, as we follow another's reasoning – we catch ourselves already evaluating that reasoning: "Judgements of value are nothing but the ways in which we apprehend the thought which is the inner side of human action", he claims.[51] In following an argument, Collingwood says elsewhere (also in 1936), the historian "forms his own judgement of its value [and] corrects whatever errors he can discern in it."[52] He continues:

> This criticism of the thought whose history he traces is not something secondary to tracing the history of it. It is an indispensable condition of the historical knowledge itself. Nothing could be a completer error concerning the history of thought than to suppose that the historian as such merely ascertains 'what so-and-so thought', leaving it to some one else to

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47 Collingwood, *Autobiography,* 128. For a more detailed explanation of how understanding and truth are separate for Collingwood, see Giuseppina D'Oro, "Re-Enactment and Radical Interpretation", *History and Theory*, 42, no. 2 (May 2004), 198-208.

48 Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 364-365.

49 Skinner, "A reply to my critics", 65. Skinner cites Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 70.

50 J. W. van der Dussen, *History as a Science: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 295-296.

51 Collingwood, "Can Historians be Impartial?", 217.

52 Collingwood, *Idea of History,* 215-216 [March 1936].

> decide 'whether it was true'. All thinking is critical thinking; the thought which re-enacts past thoughts, therefore, criticizes them in re-enacting them.[53]

One of Collingwood's readers who finds himself in agreement on this point – perhaps surprisingly, given the critical nature of most of his assessment ("Collingwood's Philosophy of History") – is Leo Strauss. For Strauss it is "indeed impossible to understand a line of Plato if one is not concerned with what Plato was concerned with … and hence if one does not inquire whether what Plato thought about them was true."[54] (A very similar argument is presented by Gadamer himself in *Truth and Method*.[55]) Collingwood's argument here is that historians can read and describe their authors' arguments, but when they do so they are alert to the rightness of the argument – to its reasoning, its considerations, its evidence, etc. They can deliberately keep that alertness and its language out of their narratives – and many have, do, and perhaps always will. But this does not prove that they had succeeded in avoiding philosophical evaluative thinking.

But although this evaluative apprehension does indeed happen sometimes, exceptions are easily produced. The reader has probably understood a great number of other people's arguments perfectly well while thinking little more than "Well, that's his argument." It would seem dogmatic to retort that this ability to withhold truth judgements is proof that the reader has not understood those arguments. If Collingwood's claim that historians should ask the truth question is based on the idea that asking it is a psychological inevitability – "all thinking is critical thinking" – then it seems to fail. We (can) ask the truth question when there is something at stake for us, when we are "interested". But when we are not, we really can follow reasoning more passively. Understanding[56] another's reasoning does not necessarily involve or lead to criticising it; they are distinct activities.

c. The truth question in An Essay on Philosophical Method

Oddly, Collingwood had in fact already distinguished understanding and criticism in *An Essay on Philosophical Method* (1932). There he writes that the task of criticizing a doctrine, "or determining how

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53 Collingwood, *Idea of History,* 215-216 [March 1936]. See also R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics*, ed. Rex Martin (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 107-108.

54 Strauss, "Collingwood's Philosophy of History" in *The History of Ideas: An Introduction to Method*, ed. Preston King (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble; London and Canberra: Croom Helm, 1983), 153-176, 174. Strauss only ever refers to *The Idea of History*, which is why it is a little surprising that he comments on Collingwood's claim that understanding and criticism are distinct but not separable, which is expounded not in *The Idea of History*, but in *An Essay on Philosophical Method*.

55 Gadamer writes: "Reconstructing the question to which the text is presumed to be the answer itself takes place within a process of questioning through which we try to answer the question that the text asks us. A reconstructed question can never stand within its original horizon…" *Truth and Method*, 366. David Vessey, who notices this, seems to agree on this point, which he understands as an implication of Gadamer's logic of question and answer – itself derived, Vessey explains, from Collingwood. See Vessey, "Gadamer's Logic of Question and Answer", 374–5.

56 Much ink has been spilled in recent decades in pursuit of a technical definition of "understanding" for history. For all intents and purposes, understanding another's philosophical thoughts means, for Collingwood, "re-enacting" or (better) *following* his reasoning. See Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 301.

far it is true and how far false, is altogether secondary"[57] to understanding it – which task, he says, is essentially what we do when reading poetry. But although comprehension and criticism of old philosophy are distinct, he writes, they are not separable.[58] Though it is possible to read philosophy as we read poetry, to do so is to miss something essential to the nature of philosophy. Unlike poetry, philosophy is "criteriological", it aims at logical order.[59] He writes: "Since the philosopher's experience consisted in … the search for truth, we must ourselves be engaged in that search if we are to share the experience".[60] In order to understand an author, the reader must begin by being "a good listener", "keep[ing] quiet", giving "silent, uninterrupted attention" to the author, and refraining "from obtruding his own thoughts".[61] But, as he goes on to explain in *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, before the historian can complete the task of "sharing the experience", he must criticise,[62] "disentangl[ing] the true elements … from the false."[63] These are, then, two distinct phases, or "moments", of the historian of philosophy's task. Skinner's approach is all about the first, being a "good listener", and refraining (for now) from offering criticisms. But for Collingwood, unless I also complete the second phase, asking myself "Is it a good argument?", I do not fully understand the situation faced by a past philosopher – a situation of which self-criticism is a major feature.

This argument is more sophisticated than those others already canvassed, distinguishing between primary and secondary tasks that are distinct but not separable, and between the process involved in a task and what is required to complete it. But there is another conflation here which spells this argument's failure. There remains a difference between (on the one hand) following an author's reasoning, knowing *that* self-criticism was part of his ideational writing context, and knowing what that would have been like; and (on the other) being obliged to criticise his work yourself. Taking the same attitude towards an argument, or sharing an author's intentions, are not necessary conditions of understanding that argument. So still, deciding what an author says and means, and deciding whether he was right about it, appear not only distinct, which Collingwood acknowledges, but also separable, which he denies.

4. PRACTICE, THEORY, AND "ACADEMIC" PROBLEMS

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57 Collingwood, *Philosophical Method*, 215. See also 217: "the question whether a man's views are true or false does not arise until we have found out what they are."

58 Collingwood, *Philosophical Method*, 217. The notion of concepts being distinct but not separable, i.e. "overlapping", is a major component of Collingwood's meta-philosophy.

59 Collingwood, *Principles of History*, 84. It is relevant that Skinner is more interested in the rhetorical than the logical success of an argument.

60 Collingwood, *Philosophical Method*, 215-216. Collingwood is appealing here to his well-known "doctrine of re-enactment", according to which understanding what an author means in philosophy demands following his reasoning in your own mind. This very brief summary of what Collingwood means by "re-enactment" is more fully detailed and evidenced in my (so far) unpublished doctoral thesis, *Old Problems Re-Opened: R. G. Collingwood and the History of Ideas* (University of Exeter: 2013). My claim is that "re-enactment" really refers to following another's reasoning, rather than to experiencing something like "what it was like" for him.

61 Collingwood, *Philosophical Method*, 215-18.

62 Collingwood, *Philosophical Method*, 218-20.

63 Collingwood, *Philosophical Method*, 219.

If Collingwood fails to demonstrate that historians of philosophy "must" ask the truth question, it is because his attempts to do so focus too much upon analysing, respectively, (a) the nature and limits of evidence, (b) the process of understanding, and (c) the nature of the material being understood (i.e. that philosophy is "criteriological"). None of these is the sort of thing that alone can generate methodological prescriptions for what is essentially a type of investigation.

So either Collingwood's contention that historians of philosophy must ask the truth question is in fact merely a preference, or it must presuppose something that is hidden more deeply in his reasoning. It seems to me that this aspect of Collingwood's *rapprochement* between philosophy and history presupposes another *rapprochement*, namely that between "theory and practice".[64] The historian's obligation to ask the truth question comes not from the nature of evidence, the nature of philosophy itself, or from the process of understanding, but from the practical, social, and lived experience out of which historical questions should arise.[65] As far as I am aware, Collingwood does not say that one of his *rapprochements* presupposes another.[66] But it seems that his claim that historians must ask the truth question can only be maintained if a particular relation between theory and practice is posited.

It is in *The New Leviathan*, Collingwood's magnum opus of social and political theory, that a certain principle left implicit in the *Autobiography* is explicated:

> Reason is distinguished into *theoretical reason* and *practical reason*: i.e. reason for 'making up your mind *that*' (reason for what logicians call a proposition) and reason for making up your mind *to*' (reason for what moralists call an intention). We shall see that, of these two, practical reason is the prior: it is the original form of reason, theoretical reason being a modification of it; and by the Law of Primitive Survivals *a practical element is always present in a case of theoretical reason*.[67]

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64 For a detailed account of the *rapprochement* between theory and practice in all of Collingwood's work, see Boucher, *Social and Political Thought,* 51-57. Boucher emphasises this *rapprochement* between theory and practice as one of the "long-term considerations" in the context of which *The New Leviathan* is to be seen.

65 For more on the "relativity to the present" of Collingwood's account of history, see Dray, *History as Re-Enactment*, 283-291.

66 Neither have the specialists I have read posited that these two *rapprochements* are so related. Rolliston, whose focus is the *rapprochement* between theory and practice, recognizes however that it has something to do with making value judgements; see "Collingwood and the Relation between Theory, Practice and Values", 151-155. See also Boucher, *Social and Political Thought*, 37-51.

67 Collingwood, *New Leviathan*, 100 (14.3) (emphasis added). See also 14.38; 1.66-68; and *Idea of History,* 406-7. Michael Oakeshott offers a similar distinction in "The activity of being an historian", *Rationalism in politics and other essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 158.

History for Collingwood is a form of "theoretical reason".[68] In fact, he says not only that historical questions *can* arise in this way, but that "*Every* historical problem ultimately arises out of 'real' life … historical problems arise out of practical problems."[69]

What, then, is the "practical element" that survives in those cases of theoretical reason that we call "history", or more specifically "history of philosophy"? Collingwood does not say. But if the practical element of the history of philosophy as a theoretical discipline can be identified with the posing of the truth question, then it seems to me that Collingwood offers a strong argument – albeit in fragments. Historians of philosophy must ask whether past authors' claims were right if (and perhaps only if) they want their work to affect present "practice".[70] And if (and only if) historians of philosophy have come to their particular lines of theoretical reason by modifying practical questions, they must want this.

For example, I might well study and understand old arguments for vegetarianism, and be interested in the structure of those arguments, the rhetorical tropes, the influences and developments discernible in them, etc., and have therefore no need to assess them for truth. But if I have come to study arguments for vegetarianism because I wish to decide whether to stop eating meat, then I really must ask whether they were (and are) right. The practical purpose out of which my study arises demands it.[71] The age of the texts is irrelevant.

For Collingwood's argument to work, there must always be a need to "make your mind up *to*" which (1) has given rise to the theoretical reasoning at hand, and (2) is ultimately to be served by it. The relation might be a simple one of deciding what actions to perform, as in the above example. Or it might concern the "practice" of philosophy itself: to advance (my) *sophía* on a given point might be the "practical" need that motivates my study of work already done, with a view to improving on it.[72] We must understand and criticise any system "we set out to supersede",[73] which is why, for Collingwood, history provides for us more than "a mere inventory of our intellectual possessions at the present time" by answering the question "by what right we enjoy them".[74]

But although Collingwood claims that "Every historical problem ultimately arises out of 'real' life … historical problems arise out of practical problems",[75] he does not deny that there are theoretical

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68 The principle that practical problems and practical thinking survive into all theoretical problems, and all "abstract" thinking, pertains in Collingwood's thinking to more than just history. But history is the subject at hand. See *New Leviathan*, 100-101 (14.32–35); 126 (18.13); 52-53 (7.64-7).

69 Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 114 (emphasis added). David Boucher has already provided an interesting discussion of this point, of how it relates to the *rapprochement* between theory and practice more widely, and the historical background to it (via Croce) in his *Social and Political Thought of R. G. Collingwood*; see 51-7, especially 56. See also Dray, *History as Re-Enactment*, 288-289.

70 For Michael Oakeshott too, "it is to the practical attitude towards the world that our judgements of approval and disapproval … belong." "The activity of being an historian", 159.

71 Importantly, I do not have to be investigating Singer because I wish to prove that he was right. For more on the distinction I intend here see Rolliston, "Collingwood and the Relation between Theory, Practice and Values", 155.

72 Collingwood, *Philosophical Method*, 179, 198; see also *An Essay on Metaphysics*, 21-33.

73 Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 334.

74 Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 230.

75 Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 114.

problems with no obvious practical origin or consequence. His name for such problems is "academic"; they are "pretence problems";[76] "academic discussions", he says, are "make-believe discussions".[77] What makes them "make-believe", and not "real",[78] is that they do not arise from a need to "make up your mind *to*". Collingwood is perhaps too quick to identify and dismiss "academic" history: a great deal could be said for it. Strauss's desire to "learn something of utmost importance from the thought of the past which we cannot learn from our contemporaries",[79] for example, would seem to lend ample support to "academic" history of philosophy. But Collingwood's broader point is not easily dismissed. Those historians of philosophy should (or must) ask the truth question who are doing their work *because* they want to discover the truths and/or disentangle the errors of old philosophy; that is, those historians whose historical reasoning arises out of the demands of present practice. Indeed, it is obvious put this way that the methodological prescription is an effect of the historian's aim.

My point is that Collingwood presupposes that the "theoretical" study of old philosophy is born of "practical" philosophical requirements. I do not intend to highlight this presupposition as a weakness of his argument: his explanation in *Speculum Mentis* of why philosophy is "higher" might serve to support the further claim that the philosophical perspective should be taken. I do intend to point out, however, that Collingwood does not seem fully aware of that presupposition. If he had been fully aware of it, he might have avoided offering a collection of arguments for asking the truth question that raise more questions than they solve. It seems that in fact it is only from the point of view of present practice that critical evaluation in history can be the necessity that Collingwood claims it is.[80]

5. CONCLUSIONS

From all this I would like to draw three conclusions: one concerning Collingwood himself, and two concerning methodology in the history of philosophy. First, throughout his work Collingwood presupposes, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, that history is done for a practical reason, and that an element of that practical reason survives into "theoretical" inquiry in such a way that some kind of evaluation must be done before the historian of philosophy's purpose is satisfied. Secondly, the history of philosophy, for the philosopher, is not only for answering questions about what ideas were held by someone, or what arguments were dominant during a given period, or what logic was commonly accepted as demonstrative of truth. It is also for establishing whether those ideas and logics can stand in the present uncorrected. If those ideas were wrong, and we have among us a vicious inheritance, something "must" be

76 Collingwood, *New Leviathan*, 12 (2.55).
77 Collingwood, *New Leviathan*, 193 (26.22).
78 Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 114.
79 Strauss, "Collingwood's Philosophy of History", 175.
80 Collingwood, *Philosophical Method*, 194-195; see also 181-182 and 218-220.

done about the error: it must be criticized and corrected.[81] Through history of this kind, we come not only to know what settled answers to past questions and problems we have inherited, but also to appreciate the legitimacies and identify the illegitimacies among them. This sort of history of philosophy is, then, (or should be) critical in the full sense, and initiated by questions of present importance. This "presentism" will perhaps strike some readers with an interest in old philosophy for its own sake as unattractive, perhaps utilitarian.[82] But (and thirdly), although Collingwood is too quick to dismiss "academic" history as "make-believe", nevertheless we ought not to dismiss his insistence that history should be relevant, that it should make a difference, and that the idea of doing the history of philosophy for its own ends should not be synonymous with doing it for *no* end. Historians of philosophy have long faced charges of antiquarianism, and the demand to demonstrate the extrinsic value of their work, whatever its intrinsic value. Collingwood's *rapprochement* between philosophy and history reminds us that examining our practical reasons for investigating *this* problem in the history of philosophy rather than *that*, is often a very good way to go about meeting that demand.

81 See Andrius Gališanka, "History as Philosophy? Genealogies and Critique", *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 9 (2015), 444-464.

82 See Leo Strauss, "Collingwood's Philosophy of History", 155.