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## R. G. COLLINGWOOD AND THE HERMENEUTIC TRADITION

### INTRODUCTION

Robin George Collingwood (1889-1943), who is typically described as an "English philosopher and historian" (Donagan 1967, 2: 144) rarely, if ever, figures in the discussion on the subject of hermeneutics. There is no substantive discussion of Collingwood in Richard Palmer's well-known introductory volume (1969) in which he spells out the increasing importance of hermeneutics as a theory of interpretation and understanding in contemporary philosophy, theology, and literary theory.<sup>1</sup> In *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy* (Wachterhauser: 1986), a collection of interpretive and critical essays on philosophical hermeneutics, Collingwood is not mentioned at all, either in the body of the work, in the sixty page introduction, or in the extensive bibliography. Gerald L. Bruns' recent historical survey *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (1992), like the preceding, makes no reference to Collingwood or even hints at any possible contribution by him to this vital area of concern. The consensus would seem to be that as far as philosophical hermeneutics is concerned, R. G. Collingwood is a non-player, an invisible man.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Collingwood is cited twice in the Index of Palmer's book in regard to his concept of historical knowledge (p. 51), and in relation to his notion of reconstructing a question (p. 200). Apart from these brief references, he receives no recognition as a contributor to the hermeneutic tradition.

<sup>2</sup> Another recent source which surveys the terrain of philosophical hermeneutics, but does not mention Collingwood is Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, ed., *The Hermeneutics Reader* (1992).

But perhaps we need to look deeper. Perhaps the volumes referenced above have overlooked a necessary and important link in the hermeneutic chain. Perhaps R. G. Collingwood, the Waynfleet Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy at Oxford from 1935 until 1941, is the "wildcard" thinker who makes no mean contribution to this area of inquiry in the social and human sciences.

Hans Georg Gadamer, for example, in his monumental *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960; *Truth and Method*, 1975) refers to Collingwood on three separate occasions, and finds a special link with him in his (Gadamer's) own formulation of the concept of the "logic of question and answer" which he proposed as a means to understanding an historical text (1975: 333).<sup>1</sup> Additionally, noting Collingwood's fusion of the fundamental hermeneutical questions with critical historical methodology, Rudolph Bultmann in his Gifford Lectures<sup>2</sup> in 1955 stated that "the best that is said about the problems of history is in my view, contained in the book of R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*. . . ."<sup>3</sup> And finally, John Hogan is of the opinion that Collingwood has had "a seminal influence on the development of hermeneutics in the twentieth century" and believes it is possible to trace a "hermeneutical thread" that runs throughout Collingwood's major

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<sup>1</sup> In explaining the notion of the "logic of question and answer," Gadamer states that "Almost the only person I find a link with here is R. G. Collingwood. In a brilliant and cogent critique of the 'realist' Oxford school he developed the idea of a logic of question and answer, but unfortunately never developed it systematically" (333). Furthermore, at Gadamer's suggestion, Collingwood's *Autobiography* was published in German translation under the title of *Denken* (see note 273, p. 527) presumably because of the important contribution it made to the question and answer concept.

<sup>2</sup> The series of lectures delivered in the Scottish Universities under the foundation of Adam Gifford, Lord Gifford (1820-1887) "for promoting, advancing, teaching, and diffusing the study of natural theology, in the widest sense of that term, in other words, the knowledge of God, and the foundation of ethics." Presenting the prestigious lecture series is seen as a high point in a distinguished theologian's or philosopher's career.

<sup>3</sup> Analogously, Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 206 says that "what Collingwood taught about the historical imagination, historical evidence and the logic of question and answer" remains central to the concerns of historical hermeneutics.

philosophical works (1989: 1, 21). Composing "the first full length treatment of Collingwood from a hermeneutical perspective," Hogan asserts that his "theory of history provides deep insights into the linkage between two interpretive operations: the hermeneutical movement from the text forward to the present and the historical movement from the text backward to the event," a contribution that has especially been taken up by theological interpreters of history and Scripture (1989: 1, 3).<sup>1</sup>

Following in the footsteps of Dilthey, Collingwood was interested in the process of understanding and its relationship to the epistemology of historical knowing. In this area he raised radical, hermeneutical, and critical questions: "What is history?" "What is history for?" "How do we know what happened in the past?" "How is historical knowledge possible?" For history to answer questions like these, it must break free from the bondage of the methods of natural science, and develop its own unique methods of historical knowledge. In fact, what Kant's critique of pure reason had done for natural science, and as Dilthey before him had sought to do the same for history, so Collingwood desired to present his own critique of historical reason (or principles of an epistemology of history) calling upon philosophy to understand history, and vice versa. For Collingwood, this was no idle task, engendered as it was by his awareness of the threat that irrationalism posed to Western civilization (Bertoldi 1989). In opposition to the fragmentation that was leading to the disintegration of Western man, Collingwood attempted to integrate and understand human experience and knowledge, and to bring together history and philosophy in such a way that both would be preserved along with the culture they were meant to serve (Hogan 1989: 9).

Collingwood's historical hermeneutic consisted of several elements including the logic of question and answer, the doctrine of absolute presuppositions, the concept of historical imagination, the notion of historical evidence, and the theory of the re-en

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in the writings of Rudolph Bultmann, Bernard Lonergan, and Wolfhart Pannenberg.

actment of history. In this paper, I will concentrate on the first two items in this list since they are especially germane to hermeneutics. But before proceeding directly to an analysis of these topics, I would like first of all to review Collingwood's own treatment of Wilhelm Dilthey, the "father of hermeneutics," whose historical methodology will direct our attention to the concept of history as lived experience which is analogous in Collingwood's system to the concept of the re-enactment of history.

### **COLLINGWOOD'S ANALYSIS OF WILHELM DILTHEY**

During the mid 1930s, Collingwood's speculations on the subject of history were increasingly developed. His inaugural lecture as Waynefleet Professor at Oxford was the occasion of the essay, "The Historical Imagination" wherein history is presented as a science of mind in which the construction of the historical past is dependent upon imagination, and less and less on "fixed points supplied from without" (cited in Hogan 1989: 31). In 1936, Collingwood wrote a lecture entitled "Human Nature and Human History" in which he asserted that just as science is the right method for explaining nature, so history, if it is to be history, must cast off the methods of science and proceed with its proper goal of the self-knowledge of the mind. These essays culminated in Collingwood's final treatise on the subject entitled *The Idea of History* written during 1936 to 1939, but published posthumously by Oxford Press in 1946.<sup>1</sup> In the Introduction, Collingwood defines "philosophy of history" and discusses the nature, object, method and value of history. In Parts One through Four, the Oxford author presents a

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<sup>1</sup> According to T. M. Knox, the editor of *The Idea of History* and author of the Editor's Preface, "From *The Idea of History* onwards, Collingwood's writings contain an impressive argument for the recognition of history as productive of results no less entitled to be called knowledge than those of natural science. But he was not content to argue . . . against positivistic attempts to absorb philosophy into natural science as the sole form of knowledge; he went farther and took up a position equally intransigent . . . claiming for history what his opponents claimed for science. A mere *rapprochement* between philosophy and history had ceased to content him" (1946: xiii). Note: all remaining page numbers cited in this section are from *The Idea of History*, designated IH in the parentheses.

history of historiography, tracing the steps and stages by which the modern European idea of history came into existence from the Mesopotamian era to the time of the Italian historian Benedetto Croce (1866-1952). In Part Five, the "Epilegomena," Collingwood sets forth his most profound thinking on a philosophical understanding of history and on historical method which are matters most closely related to hermeneutics. The treatment of Wilhelm Dilthey, that "lonely and neglected genius" as Collingwood calls him (IH, 171), comes in the fourth section which is concerned with the rise of "Scientific History" in England, Germany, France, and Italy which as a movement was designed to replace positivistic approaches to the discipline of history.

Scientific, or perhaps hermeneutical history, was not a revolt against the intellect *per se*, or against science itself, but rather was a rebellion "against the [positivistic] theory which limited the intellect to the kind of thinking characteristic of natural science." In other words, scientific history sought "to vindicate history as a form of knowledge distinct from natural science and yet valid in its own right" (IH, 134).

Collingwood's sketch of Dilthey begins by mentioning how he became dissatisfied with his original theory of history in which concrete individuals were treated as isolated past facts. Realizing that historical personages "were not integrated into a genuine process of historical development," he wanted to know "how the historian actually performs the work of coming to know the past, starting . . . from documents and data which do not by themselves reveal it." His answer was that the documents offered to him "the occasion for reliving in his own mind the spiritual activity which originally produced them" (IH, 172). Collingwood believed that this conception of the historian as living in his object, or making his object live in him, was a great historiographic advance among Dilthey's German contemporaries. He explains Dilthey's view in greater detail with these terms.

It is in virtue of his own spiritual life, and in proportion to the intrinsic richness of that life, that he can thus infuse life into the dead materials with which he finds himself confronted. Thus genuine historical knowledge is an inward experience

(*Erlebnis*) of its own object, whereas scientific knowledge is the attempt to understand (*begreifen*) phenomena presented to him as outward spectacles (IH, 172).

However, according to Collingwood, a problem still remained for Dilthey in that life, for him, meant immediately lived experience, as distinct from reflection and knowledge. The only way to move from simply reliving historical experience, say that of Napoleon or Caesar, to an understanding and knowledge of historical experience was by means of psychology. Just as psychological analysis enables a person to know himself and understand the structure of his personality, so also

the historian who relives the past in his own mind must, if he is to be an historian, understand the past which he is reliving. By simply reliving it, he is developing and enlarging his own personality, incorporating in his own experience the experience of others in the past; but whatever is so incorporated becomes part of the structure of his personality, and the rule still holds good that this structure can be understood only in terms of psychology (IH, 173).<sup>1</sup>

Collingwood sees a major problem with Dilthey's perspective in that psychology as the key to history is not history at all, but science, a science constructed on naturalistic principles. "To say that history becomes intelligible only when conceived in terms of psychology is to say that historical knowledge is impossible and that the only kind of knowledge is scientific knowledge" (IH, 173). The historian can only experience life and immediate experience, and only the psychologist can explain it. In the end, then, Dilthey, like his contemporaries, relapses into positivism (IH, 174).

Collingwood, however, proposed a solution to the Diltheyian reduction of history to psychology. He suggested that when an historian relives in his own mind an

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<sup>1</sup> Collingwood believes that Dilthey's psychological view of history is also reflected in his *Weltanschauungslehre*—his doctrine of world views—in which he reduces the history of philosophy "to a study of in the psychology of philosophers, on the principle that there are certain types of mental structure, and that each type has a certain necessary attitude to, and conception of the world" (173; see Dilthey's *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5). For Collingwood, "philosophy handled from this psychological point of view ceases to be philosophy at all" (173). And the same he says holds true for history as well.

experience of the past, he retains his own distinct identity and personality, and is not confused with the thing he is reliving; rather, he distinguishes himself from the experience, and yet at the same time makes the experience under consideration his own. That the historical past must become part of the historian's own personal experience in the present is recognized. For Dilthey, the object of historical knowledge that was being relived in the present was so fused with the historian's own personality structure as an aspect of immediately lived experience, the only way for the historical entity to become known was by means of psychological analysis that shut off the past. But this is not history. For Collingwood, since the past was not a dead past, but lived on in the present, the reliving of an historical event, kept separate from the historian's own personality structure, enabled him to obtain "knowledge of the past in the present, the self knowledge of the historian's own mind as the present revival and reliving of past experiences" (IH, 175). This self-knowledge of the mind in its reliving of past events was identical with history for Collingwood which he conceived as a separate sphere of valid knowledge having delivered it from bondage to positivism.

Historical knowledge is the knowledge of what mind has done in the past, and at the same time it is the re-doing of this, the perpetuation of past acts in the present. Its object is therefore not a mere object, something outside the mind which knows it; it is an activity of thought, which can be known only in so far as the knowing mind re-enacts it and knows itself as so doing. To the historian, the activities whose history he studying are not spectacles to be watched, but experiences to be lived through in his own mind; they are objective, or known to him, only because they are also subjective, or activities of his own (IH, 218).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hogan is of the opinion that "this quote indicates in a summary fashion the significance of Collingwood for contemporary hermeneutics. He admits to no 'hard' historical facts isolated from interpretation. History studies 'facts' but only as they are made known in human action. The meaning of such action is grasped through the prism of human understanding. What the historian seeks is the 'inside' of an event or thought. Historical method consists in the reconstruction or reenactment of past thoughts which are woven together by interpolation, inference and imaginative reconstruction. Human actions, the externalization of thoughts, are the processive unfolding of mind. History is the tracing of that continuous process. The past is significant because it remains itegral to the present and incapsulated into it" (1989: 24).

This re-enactment of the past in the mind of the historian (see IH, 282ff.) is a major component in Collingwood's philosophy of history, and is the proper link to hermeneutics. ". . . his [Collingwood's] controversial theory of re-enactment is an apt description of what actually takes place when an interpreter attempts to understand the past by interpreting its remains in the present. Re-enactment links the historical task of reconstruction to the hermeneutical tasks of understanding and interpretation" (Hogan 1989: 4).<sup>1</sup> In other words, there is still the matter of interpreting the historical events, texts, and personages that are relived or re-enacted in the mind of the historian, and Collingwood's logic of question and answer, and his doctrine of absolute presuppositions are key aspects of this hermeneutical process.<sup>2</sup> To these matters we will now turn our attention.

### **COLLINGWOOD'S "LOGIC OF QUESTION AND ANSWER" AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO HERMENEUTICS**

According to R. M. Hare, and certainly with Socratic approbation, interrogatives or questions have "assumed great importance in the thought of some philosophers" (quoted in Somerville 1989: 526). This is certainly true in the case of R. G. Collingwood. As he tells the story in his *Autobiography*, in 1917 he drafted a piece entitled *Truth and Contradiction* that contained his first installment of the concept of the logic of question and answer. Unfortunately the manuscript was refused by the publisher and later destroyed by Collingwood after he completed his *Autobiography*. All that survives

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<sup>1</sup> Hogan continues by saying that "Collingwood may be seen as a forerunner of the next integrative step in hermeneutics as pioneered by Gadamer. He provides clarifying links for Gadamer's effort in that his approach more clearly articulates the relation between the interpretation of texts and the reconstruction of the historical past in the functioning of the historically effective consciousness" (1989: 4).

<sup>2</sup> In the Introduction to *The Idea of History* in answer to the question, "How does history proceed?", Collingwood unequivocally states: ". . . historians will agree that historical procedure, or method, consists essentially of *interpreting evidence*" (10, emphasis added).



of this original work is found in summary fashion in his *Autobiography* (pp. 24-43) and in chapter four ("On Presupposing") of his *Essay on Metaphysics*. Despite this loss, the basic contours of this theory are clear from these two extant sources.

Before attempting to describe the notion of the logic of question and answer, two preliminary points need to be made. First, even though it appears *prima facie* that Collingwood's question and answer hypothesis was intended to replace formal and modern logic, it is more likely that he meant for it to serve as a theory of inquiry: "it's locus is, so to speak, not logic but reflection on logic" (Mink 1969: 123). As such, and this is the second point, Collingwood's dialectic of question and answer is intensely hermeneutical. "The Logic of Question and Answer is not a theory of logic at all, in any ordinary sense of that term, nor is it even a theory of semantics; it is a hermeneutics" (Mink 1969: 131). With these two thoughts in mind, the second of which will be developed in greater detail later, I will now offer a brief overview of the essence of this most basic methodological tool.

### **The logic of question and answer**

Collingwood provides this summary statement of his logic of question and answer in his *Autobiography* (30-31).

. . . a body of knowledge consists not of "propositions," "statements," "judgements," or whatever name logicians use to designate assertive acts of thought (or what in those acts is asserted: for "knowledge" means both the activity of knowing and what is known); but of these together with the questions they are meant to answer; and . . . a logic in which the answers are attended to and the questions neglected is a false logic.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The last sentence in this quotation is important hermeneutically in that it suggests that propositions apart from questions do not constitute knowledge for knowledge demands a question and answer complex. Also, the meaning of statements is impossible apart from questions: "In order to find out his meaning you must also know what the question was . . . to which the thing he has said or written was meant as an answer" (A, 31). References to Collingwood's *Autobiography* and *Essay on Metaphysics* are respectively referred to as A and EM in parentheses.

In his *Essay on Metaphysics*, he presents the essence of his view much more succinctly: "Every statement that anybody ever makes is made in answer to a question" (EM, 23). He is quick to point out that whether we realize the truth of this proposition or not is determined by whether or not we are thinking scientifically or unscientifically, or perhaps as we would say today, critically or uncritically.

In proportion as a man is thinking scientifically when he makes a statement, he knows that his statement is the answer to a question and knows what that question is. In proportion as he is thinking unscientifically he does not know these things. In our least scientific moments we hardly know that the thoughts we fish up out of our minds are answers to questions at all, let alone what questions these are. It is only by analyzing the thought which I expressed . . . that I realize it to have been an answer to the question . . . and come to see that I must have been asking myself that question although at the time I did not know I was asking it (EM, 24).

Recognition of the logic of question and answer is largely a reflective, retrospective or historical process and from this it is not hard to see how this method can be readily applied to the problems of history (more on this later).

Furthermore, Collingwood points out that "every question involves a presupposition" (EM, 25) and though it may be debated whether any question that has ever been asked involved one presupposition only and no more, it can be firmly asserted that at least directly or immediately, "any given question involves one presupposition and only one, namely that from which it [the question] directly or immediately "arises" (EM, 25). The direct or immediate presupposition itself is presupposed by other presuppositions which are themselves indirectly presupposed by the original question. The fact that something causes a certain question to arise is called the "logical efficacy" of that thing (EM, 27) and this "logical efficacy of a supposition does not depend upon the truth of what is supposed, or even on its being true, but only on its being supposed" (EM, 28). This is important especially in the domain of science "in which the entertaining of a hypothesis gives rise to questions about ways in which it could be confirmed or disproved" (Mink 1969: 126).

There are several additional features or corollaries of Collingwood's question and answer model that are worthy of note (cf. Mink 1969: 126ff. and Hogan 1989: 44ff.). First of all is his doctrine of relative and absolute presuppositions. A relative presupposition "stands relatively to one question as its presupposition and relatively to another question as its answer" (EM, 29). "An absolute presupposition is one which stands, relatively to all questions to which it is related, as a presupposition, never as an answer" (EM, 31). This issue will be examined in detail later on in this paper. Second, because Collingwood had an aversion to "big problems" that needed to be subdivided into smaller ones (the "principle of limited objective" as he called it in his book *The New Leviathan*), he argued that questions and answers are tightly related in that a precise statement can be drawn out only by a precise question, and conversely that a precise question will only elicit a precise answer. This corollativity of question and answer—right and well-defined questions leading to right and well-defined answers—prevents vagueness and ambiguity.<sup>1</sup> Third, he asserted that two propositions do not contradict each other unless they are the answers to the same question (A, 33). Implied here is the idea that the meaning of a statement is a function of the question to which it is an answer, and thus it would seem from Collingwood's perspective that there are no logical relations among propositions unless they are answers to the same question. Finally, truth and falsity is seen not as a property of propositions as in traditional logic, but rather as a function of "complexes consisting of questions and answers" (A, 37). An answer or

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<sup>1</sup> Excavation work as a young archaeologist may have provided Collingwood with the experiences that led not only to the question and answer concept, but also to this correlativity principle in that it was necessary to know exactly what one was digging for and why. Only a precise answer to questions like these would properly guide the archaeologist. "For example," Collingwood writes in his *Autobiography* (122), "long practice in excavation had taught me that one condition—indeed the most important condition—of success was that the person responsible for any piece of digging, however small and however large, should know exactly why he was doing it. He must first of all decide what he wants to find out, and then decide what kind of digging will show it to him. This was the central principle of my 'logic of question and answer' as applied to archaeology."

proposition is not true or false *per se*, but is right or wrong depending upon the question asked. The right or correct answer is one which allows the questioning process to move ahead. Even if an answer is materially false, it may still be "right" in that it provides an inquirer with the connection that is needed in the question and answer sequence, and thus it promotes the openness that allows for clarification and correction (Hogan 1989: 46).

Collingwood's method of question and answer was innovative and insightful. Surely he did not mean it to be an attack, and certainly not a replacement for formal logic; if he did, it is open to profound criticism. As Hogan notes, the logic of question and answer "is not primarily concerned with truth but rather with the process of how one comes to understand. Its goal is discovery, not proof, and as such, it supplements formal logic but does not replace it" (1989: 44). Understood in this manner the question and answer construct makes a profound contribution to hermeneutics.

### **Question and answer and contemporary hermeneutics**

The first step in relating Collingwood's dialectic of question and answer with hermeneutics is to understand what it really is. It is not a new system of logic; it is a hermeneutic. Mink establishes this point by contrasting the type of question that Collingwood was asking in his system of question and answer, and the kind of question that is asked in traditional logic.

*His [Collingwood's] question—in its most general terms—was: What are the generic features of the process by which we can correctly interpret the meanings of statements? The logical question is: What are the formal features of statements in virtue of which they can sustain logical relationships independent of their meanings? The Logic of Question and Answer is not a theory of logic at all, in any ordinary sense of that term, nor is it even a theory of semantics; it is a hermeneutics (1969: 131).*

But in what precise way is it hermeneutics? The logic of question and answer is directly related to the issues of history and hermeneutics when we realize that the texts

that a historian seeks to understand are essentially specific answers to questions that were proposed, consciously or not, by historical actors and situations. The method of question and answer suggests that the only way to understand a text is by discovering the exact question to which it is the precise answer. Ascertaining the logically efficacious presuppositions that gave rise to the questions which in turn found specific answers embodied in various texts is hard to do, especially since these things are often unstated in many writers, and since there is often a significant difference in time or culture between the historical "text" and the interpreter.

In order to obtain the meaning of the "text," a method must be employed which uncovers the question presumed by the artifact. For Collingwood, this can be accomplished by reconstructing the question historically, an endeavor which entails the discovery of presuppositions and the theory of history as the imaginative re-enactment of past thought (Hogan 1989: 48). But first there must be the discovery of the question followed by a search for the evidence that is the answer to the question. As Collingwood himself put it,

The beginning of historical research is therefore not the collection or contemplation of crude facts as yet uninterpreted, but the asking of a question which sets one off looking for facts which may help one to answer it. All historical research is focused in this way upon some particular question or problem which defines its subject. And the question must be asked with some reasonable expectation of being able to answer it, and to answer it by genuinely historical thinking; otherwise it leads nowhere, it is at best idle "wondering," not the focus of a piece of historical work. We express this by saying that a question does or does not "arise." To say that a question arises, is to say that it has a logical connection with our previous thoughts, that we have a reason for asking it and are not moved by mere capricious curiosity (cited in Debbins 1965: 137).

Hence, while the logic of question and answer itself cannot supply the questions themselves and their logically efficacious presuppositions, it does profitably suggest that this is what must be done if the meaning of a text is to be grasped.<sup>1</sup> This ingenious

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<sup>1</sup> This seems to be Mink's basic understanding of the hermeneutic significance of Collingwood's conception. He writes that "the question-and-answer complex is a model,

hermeneutical methodology has virtually been canonized in the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer who perhaps more than any other has systematized the hermeneutic enterprise.

In his own treatment of the historical/hermeneutical problem, Gadamer asserts that interpretation becomes possible when the historical text presents a question to the interpreter. Interpretation always entails a relationship to the question that is asked of the interpreter and to understand the text means to understand this question. But understanding the question always involves an understanding of the hermeneutical horizon within which the sense of the text is determined. The one who seeks to understand must question what lies behind the text and understand that it is an answer to a question and if we go behind the text, we will ask other questions that go beyond what is said in the text. In other words, "we understand the sense of the text only by acquiring the horizon of the question that, as such, necessarily includes other possible answers. Thus the meaning of a sentence is relative to the question to which it is a reply, ie [sic] it necessarily goes beyond what is said in it. The logic of the human sciences is, then, . . . a logic of the question" (Gadamer 1975: 333). Gadamer's dependence upon Collingwood for these notions is openly admitted.

Despite Plato, we are not very ready for such logic. Almost the only person I find a link with here is R. G. Collingwood. In a brilliant and cogent critique of the "realist" Oxford school he developed the idea of a logic of question and answer, but unfortunately never developed it systematically. He clearly saw what was missing in naive hermeneutics founded on the prevailing philosophical critique. In particular the practice that Collingwood founded in English universities of discussing "statements" though perhaps a good training of intelligence, obviously

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not of a logical system of interrogative and indicative sentences, but of stages in the process of inquiry or of active thought in general" (131). A bit later on in his book he states that "Collingwood, in effect, elucidates, in his theory of question and answer, the logic of *interpretation* which has become almost a matter of consensus in the historiography of ideas" (137). And finally he notes that "Collingwood compares the Logic of Question and Answer with the programs for method introduced by Francis Bacon and Descartes, and this in itself is evidence that he was proposing not a substitute for formal logic but a new *Organon*, that is, a set of canons for the prosecution of inquiry" (138).

failed to take account of the historicity that is part of all understanding (1975: 333).

For both Gadamer and Collingwood, tradition plays an important role in interpretation. Understanding only occurs upon the platform of a shared tradition. The tradition of the text is often times strange or unfamiliar to the interpreter, and yet there must be common ground which makes the task of interpretation possible. Only when there is a "fusion of horizons" or traditions between the text and the interpreter on a plain called the "Between" (so Gadamer) can interpretation take place. For both thinkers, the fusion of horizons is not a psychological happening as in Schleiermacher or Dilthey. For Collingwood, the fusion takes place when the interpreter grasps the original thought patterns of the original historical actor, in the historical reconstruction of the question presupposed by the text. For Gadamer the point of meeting is not in the author's intended meaning of the text, but rather in the text itself, or more properly, in the language of the text. "Language is the universal medium in which understanding itself is realized. The mode of realization of understanding is interpretation" (1975: 350). The text forms the basis on which the interpreter can reconstruct the question. For Gadamer this enterprise has nothing to do with reconstructing the mental processes of the author in order to reconstruct his original intention. Rather, the sense of the text goes beyond the author's intended meaning insofar as the text itself allows the interpreter to ascertain the horizon of the question that goes behind and beyond what is written.

Both philosophers, as has been seen, understand the hermeneutical process to entail a dialectic of question and answer and a fusion of horizons. While much more could be said about the influence of Collingwood's notion of question and answer on Gadamer, perhaps what has been noted will be sufficient to establish the significant conversation that has taken place between Oxford and Heidelberg.

But it is important to continue, however, by noting the intimate connection between Collingwood's logic of question and answer and his doctrine of presuppositions which also plays a significant role in his hermeneutics.

### **COLLINGWOOD'S DOCTRINE OF ABSOLUTE PRESUPPOSITIONS AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO HERMENEUTICS**

While Collingwood's model of question and answer has been well received for the most part, his doctrine of absolute presuppositions (APs) has generated a whirlwind of controversy and criticism.<sup>1</sup> Before moving on to a description of this latter theory, we should make the connection between these two aspects of his thought clear. Mink has offered this helpful description of the relationship between them.

Most of Collingwood's discussion of the Logic of Question and Answer consisted of an examination of the relations in which questions, answers, and presuppositions can stand to each other, and, . . . what Collingwood says implies that they constitute linear series, which move forward as an answer to the last question becomes the presupposition from the which the next question arises. *Mutatis mutandis*, in the reconstruction of such a series, the recovery of a question to which a statement is an answer leads on to the discovery of the presupposition in whose absence the question would not have arisen, and this presupposition in turn is regarded as the answer to a prior question. The process of inquiry itself . . . has no *terminus ad quem*; its future will include questions which cannot even be guessed at before their presuppositions emerge as the answers to present and future questions. But at the same time any given process of inquiry does have a *terminus a quo*; this consists of a set of "absolute" presuppositions differing from "relative" presuppositions in that they are not, as relative presuppositions are, themselves answers to any questions (1969: 141).

#### **Collingwood's doctrine of absolute presuppositions**

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<sup>1</sup> See Kenneth Laine Ketner, *An Emendation of R. G. Collingwood's Doctrine of Absolute Presuppositions*; Michael Krauz, "The Logic of Absolute Presuppositions"; Eugene F. Bertoldi, "Absolute Presuppositions and Irrationalism"; John Llewelyn, "Collingwood's Doctrine of Absolute Presuppositions"; Vergil H. Dykstra, "Philosophers and Presuppositions."



Collingwood has set forth most of what he teaches about APs in his *Essay on Metaphysics*. In these pages he makes two fundamental points. First APs are presuppositions of some questions, but answers to none. Second, he asserts that APs are not propositions, and as such are not capable of being true or false.<sup>1</sup> In addition to these points, several other characteristics of this theme are germane (Mink 1969: 141ff.; Ketner 1973: 17-20). First, APs, like relative presuppositions (RPs) are presuppositions of questions, not beliefs. While an RP may give rise to one question, APs give rise to many. This is why APs are the *terminus a quo* of an entire inquiry, while an RP is only one step in a given process. Second, APs may be made by individuals alone and also by groups in the sense that individuals can share APs communally. It is possible, therefore, to speak of the APs of a given society or culture. Third, APs are the APs of science. Here the word science is not limited in scope but connotes in Collingwood's own terms, "any body of systematic or orderly thinking about a determinate subject matter" (EM, 4). As such it refers to the inquiries undertaken by a people into the details of what they regard as the world, and this may include not only intellectual but also practical thought as well (like "making a table or organizing a secretarial staff or defeating an enemy" EM, 85). Hence the notion of APs is general and practical ranging from highest level of human thought and activity to the lowest. Fourth, APs do not occur alone, but only as an assemblage. They are not propositions and do not form a logical system; nevertheless, they come only in sets or in constellations "all made at once in one and the same piece of thinking" (EM, 66). Furthermore, constellations of APs are also "consupponible" meaning that with any one of them it must be possible to suppose all the others, although it is not necessary to suppose any. No single AP can be deduced from another, or from the consupponible whole. As far as one AP is

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<sup>1</sup> Later on in the *Essay on Metaphysics*, Collingwood develops three examples of APs: the existence of God, the metaphysics of Kant, and causation. For a discussion of the first of these three, see Hogan, p. 84ff.

concerned, it will be consupponible with one constellation of APs, but not with another set. Fifth, groups of APs, however, can possess discordant or non-consupponible APs indicating that such constellations are out of balance, or under strain and tension. In fact, most systems of APs contain this kind of stress in which recessive APs may become dominant, thus enhancing the strain. There is, therefore, a dynamism to sets of APs and it is possible to analyze and understand how, when, and why internal strains occur, and in the extreme how "one set of presuppositions has turned into another" (A, 66).<sup>1</sup> Sixth, APs, whether in a consupponible constellation or by themselves, are not subject to proof or to disproof. Since they are not propositions (and only propositions are capable of verification or falsification according to Collingwood), then it follows that presuppositions are not capable of being true or false. After all, he says "it is proof which depends on them, not they on proof" (EM, 173). Also, if an AP could be proven by something else, then it would not be absolute. Finally, empirical evidence cannot be employed to verify or falsify an AP since an AP is not a product of experience in the first place: "it [an AP] cannot be undermined by the verdict of 'experience' because it is the yard-stick by which experience itself is judged" (EM, 193-'94). Seventh, the logical efficacy of APs does not depend on their epistemological verity, or even in their being

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<sup>1</sup> This aspect of the doctrine of APs relates closely to Collingwood's controversial understanding of metaphysics. He suggests that, "metaphysics is the science of absolute presuppositions" (EM, 41), and "the analysis which detects absolute presuppositions I call metaphysical analysis" (EM, 40). On these grounds, Collingwood has argued that metaphysics is really a historical discipline: "Metaphysics is the attempt to find out what absolute presuppositions have been made by this or that person or group of persons, on this or that occasion or group of occasions, in the course of this or that piece of thinking" (EM, 47). Bertoldi's explanation is helpful at this point: "So the argument of the *Essay* [on Metaphysics] is that metaphysics is the science of absolute presuppositions and moreover that it is the role of the metaphysician simply to discover what absolute presuppositions are being (absolutely) presupposed in his own time, or in some time in the past. His job is not to criticize, weigh, evaluate or pass judgment on the truth or falsity of these absolute presuppositions. To try to make such judgments is to engage in a kind of 'non-sense' which Collingwood describes as 'pseudo-metaphysics'" (1989: 158).

believed to be true, but only on their being supposed. Eighth, APs for the most part are held unconsciously. Rarely does the person holding them examine them, even though such examination and recognition is possible. Human beings are not aware of their APs directly, but are discerned only by means of an intensive analysis which could also be applied to others and to one's society. In knowing one's presuppositions, however, they are neither eliminated nor reinforced. In seeking to discover whether some presupposition is relative or absolute, Collingwood suggests that if the presupposition is relative, the one challenged to affirm or abandon it with accept the task with aplomb. "But if the presupposition is absolute, the invitation will be rejected, and violently so" (Mink 1969: 144). Now if the assignment to examine APs is undertaken, it must be recognized that the process of inquiry itself is not presuppositionless: no matter what constellation of APs it may uncover, the investigation itself proceeds from its own set of APs, which includes the presuppositions of all consciously historical thought (EM, 63-64).

These are the main features of Collingwood's doctrine of APs, but despite the fact that he has told us what APs do, "nowhere did he explicitly say exactly what an AP is" (Ketner 1973: 20). This has led various interpreters to attempt a definition. They have been described as "synthetic a prioris" (Rubinoff 1970: 245); "a priori concepts" (Mink 1969: 146),<sup>1</sup> as "principium" or "beliefs" (Ketner 1973: 3, 21),<sup>2</sup> and as "ontological

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<sup>1</sup> Mink finds parallels between Collingwoodian APs and Kant's "categories of the understanding," Wittgenstein's notion that language incorporates a conceptual system, and W. James' notion of "system of concepts" (1969: 146-157).

<sup>2</sup> Ketner's study of the concept led him to this critique and revision: "Thus, it seems reasonable to assert that Collingwood's phrase 'absolute presupposition' is an unhappy choice of words, not only because of difficulties with 'presupposition', but because APs are not truly absolute, in that they change . . . . This result does not mean that there is no genuine phenomenon corresponding with Collingwood's phrase; it only means that an inappropriate set of words were [sic] chosen to describe the phenomenon" (1973: 20).

commitments" (Krausz 1972: 240).<sup>1</sup> In my estimation, amid the many criticisms of this concept, the best explanation of them—what they are and what they do—has been provided by Bertoldi who breaks down the ontological distinction between relative and absolute presuppositions, and redefines the latter concept in a new way.

This means that they are in important respects relative, relative to the historian who discovers them and relative to the orderly, scientific thought to which they give rise—the evidence that the historian uses to discover them. They are absolute only in the sense that they are 'obvious,' or simply 'given' for the historical agent who employs them, and absolute in the further sense that the historian can discover no evidence that will lead him beyond them. These results seem to qualify and temper Collingwood's own more schematic of absolute presuppositions<sup>2</sup>

Another way to state this might be to suggest as Ketner does, that Collingwood's designation of some beliefs as APs stemmed from "his intention to develop a relational account, that is, a description of the systemic aspect inherent in belief systems by means of which the system is ordered, one set of beliefs thereby being more 'basic' [read "absolute"] than others" (1973: 21).

This becomes the connection with hermeneutics in that for understanding to occur, it must take place on the basis of presuppositions, in the context of a shared frame of reference that is founded and bounded by congeries of systemic, consupposable presuppositions. As Peters puts it, "Presuppositions are inevitable; they are shared;

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<sup>1</sup> Krausz asserts: "Collingwood adduces no presuppositionless example of an absolute presupposition. . . . All [of] Collingwood's examples presuppose existential statements. This might suggest that, ultimately, Collingwoodian absolute presuppositions are ontological commitments, and that one's systematic inquiries vary with one's ontology" (1974: 240).

<sup>2</sup> Bertoldi adds these thoughts to his revision of Collingwood's notion of APs and RPs: ". . . the distinction between absolute and relative presuppositions is a relative one: relative to the historian and his evidence, but relative also to the historical setting in which it is discovered. This is not meant to minimize the importance of absolute presuppositions, for surely Collingwood is correct in thinking that for the thinker possessed of an absolute presupposition it is indeed absolute, and for that thinker it may well be so far beyond any truth and falsity as to be not even recognizable as a presupposition but only as an 'obvious feature of reality'" (1989: 164).

they determine the form of the questions we ask; and they provide the condition for the possibility of acquiring any new understanding" (1974: 219). The fact that interpretation and understanding is based on, and carried out within a set of assumptions is now a highly accepted affirmation or axiom. The relationship of the Collingwoodian notion of presuppositions and twentieth century hermeneutics will now be presented.

### **Absolute presuppositions and contemporary hermeneutics**

Presuppositions are basic to interpretation. "In order to interpret anything, we must begin by projecting the pre-understanding of what it is we are about to interpret" (Peters 1974: 213). However, this notion runs counter to the most fundamental intellectual proposition of the Enlightenment, especially it was formulated by Rene Descartes. Descartes has been catalytic to hermeneutical thinking in that he called for an approach to knowledge that is independent from the influence of authority and tradition, or as I should say in this context, free from the presuppositions of authority and tradition. Knowledge is acquired only in the transaction between an *unassuming or presuppositionless* self and everything that stands over against the person (Lundin 1991: 158). This agenda gave rise to Descartes' quest for an epistemological method that could render knowledge possible after tradition and authority had been dismissed.

The Collingwoodian doctrine of absolute presuppositions seems to challenge profoundly this very premise, and it is this theme that seems to have been one of the hallmarks of contemporary hermeneutical thinking as examples from Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer will point out.

Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962) is perhaps one of the most important hermeneutical works in the twentieth century, in that it challenges the fundamental assumptions of the Enlightenment project, and has stimulated considerable debate about the nature of interpretation for half a century. In this difficult tome, Heidegger challenges the Cartesian premise about our ability to cast off pre-understandings or

presuppositions in the search for knowledge. To attempt to "bracket" our assumptions is impossible since, for him, there is no such thing as naked, unmediated, direct perception. All judgments about things are formed by prior conceptions, even if they are unrecognized. This is especially true in the hermeneutic enterprise. "In interpreting, we do not, so to speak, throw a 'signification' over some naked thing which is present-at-hand, we do not stick a value on it . . . . In every case this interpretation is grounded in *something we have in advance*" (1962: 190-191). This reality, of course, creates the "hermeneutic circle," the idea that because of our pre-judgments, we already understand something before interpreting it. We do not come to an object to be interpreted with a blank slate, but with one laden with pre-understandings. Given this state of affairs, unfortunate though it may be, the goal is not to avoid the circle as a vicious one, but to come at it in the right way.

But if we see this circle as a vicious one and look out for ways of avoiding it, even if we just "sense" it as an inevitable imperfection, then the act of understanding has been misunderstood from the ground up. . . . What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come to it in the right way. This circle of understanding is not an orbit in which any random kind of knowledge may move; it is the expression of the existential *fore-structure* of Dasein itself (1962: 294-95).

Now if this is the case, then for Heidegger, Descartes is dead, but Collingwood is alive! Though he does not credit Collingwood for this notion, nonetheless there is a close affinity between Heideggerian "pre-understandings" and Collingwoodian "absolute presuppositions." For both men, these cannot be set aside for without them, the world and its objects would be unintelligible (that is, we could not understand or interpret it!).<sup>1</sup>

Paul Ricoeur in his early work, *The Symbolism of Evil* (1967), makes essentially the same point as Heidegger. In this study, Ricoeur denies the possibility of "pure

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<sup>1</sup> As Alasdair MacIntyre affirms in *After Virtue* (79-80), "a world of textures, shapes, smells, sensations, sound and nothing more [that is, no pre-understandings or pre-suppositions) invites no questions and gives no grounds for furnishing any answers."

reflection" in the Cartesian tradition—a move, which if attempted, would end up distancing the interpreter from life. Also, the Cartesian doctrine is negated by our use of language which bears the history of humanity in all its shame and glory. Words, even prior to their use, are saturated with significance (a form of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis?)<sup>1</sup> and impose their powerful nuances on our conceptions. Hence, for Ricoeur, there is no presuppositionless thought, philosophy, or act of interpretation. When it comes to thinking about thought, he states, "the illusion is not in looking for a point of departure, but in looking for it without presuppositions. There is no philosophy without presuppositions" (1967: 348). Again, the affinity with Collingwood is self-evident.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, who heartily embraced Collingwood's logic of question and answer, is also sympathetic, though in an unacknowledged way, to the Englishman's doctrine of absolute presuppositions. The acknowledged inspiration for Gadamer's understanding of the reading and interpreting process is Heidegger whose insights he spells out in the aforementioned volume *Truth and Method* (1975). Similar to both Heidegger and Ricoeur, Gadamer takes his own stand against the "global demand of the enlightenment" by opposing the "Cartesian ideal of self-dispossession" (Lundin 1991: 160) which had resulted in what Gadamer called a "prejudice against prejudice." According to him, Heidegger was correct to understand "pre-judice" (or pre-understanding, or presupposition) not as a hindrance to interpretation, but as the only

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<sup>1</sup> *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (16: 536) has described the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis as follows: Language is culture, culture is stated in language; language mediates action, action is described in language. Accordingly, cultures, as systems of behavior, have their being in and are known from the ideas that man forms concerning the universe about him. Man's ideas about the universe consist of what he says about it when talking to himself; he talks to himself in the language he learns from those who nurture and teach him. When man talks to his fellows, he is uttering the ideas that he formed by talking to himself. These utterances impel those who listen to engage in culturally approved actions; the actions are the behavior of the society whose culture was being talked about. The pathways from language culture and from culture to language, from culture to social behavior and from social behavior, form closed circles, and movement along these pathways is constant.

basis upon which it can take place. This frame of reference or "horizon" is something that is a part of us prior to any act of understanding another person, text, or aspect of the natural world. As Gadamer puts it,

In fact history does not belong to us, but we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being (1975: 245).

Rather than casting prejudices aside to take on those of another, they become the foundation for understanding. While the process of testing, clarifying, modifying, and expanding our assumptions may and should be undertaken, nevertheless, the act of interpretation and understanding happens when the horizon of our prejudices is fused with the horizon of the text or the person we are trying to understand. In Gadamer's words, "The task of hermeneutics is to clarify this miracle of understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning" (1975: 292). To Collingwoodize this notion, meaning results when the absolute presuppositions of the interpreter overlap with those of the hermeneutic object, and in the overlapping process a common or shared meaning emerges.

While there may be little or no textual evidence in the writings of Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Gadamer demonstrating how Collingwood might have directly or indirectly influenced their thinking about the relationship of presuppositions and hermeneutics, at least it can be proposed that there is an affinity of concepts between the Englishman and the Germans at this point. Surely Collingwood's notion of absolute presuppositions contributed to the intellectual milieu in which these, and other writers,<sup>1</sup> thought and worked.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Rudolph Bultmann, in his essay, "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?," states emphatically that "there cannot be any such thing as presuppositionless exegesis." Longergan's concept of horizon, reminiscent of Gadamer, presents essentially the same thesis: "To say that the historian should



## CONCLUSION

Collingwood's notions of question and answer and absolute presuppositions form the foundation for his historical method, and directly or indirectly contribute to development of contemporary hermeneutics. His contribution, while notable, has lamentably been overlooked, not only in hermeneutics, but also in other areas of thought and cultural analysis.

I say that the neglect of Collingwood is lamentable because to me, his concept of presuppositions, while deficient in some ways, is very helpful at both a personal and cultural level. At the cultural level, according to Bertoldi (and others), Collingwood formulated the theory of absolute presuppositions as a response to and as an attack upon irrationalism which he described as the "metaphysical disease" of his day. His line of thought runs something like this (from Bertoldi 1989: 168f.).

For Collingwood, the notion of the existence of God was the basic presupposition of culture generally. In a certain sense, this was true even of Greco-Roman culture, but many thinkers, including the great Aristotle, failed to realize this. Because of this failure, Greco-Roman culture decayed, became moribund, and collapsed, not because of forces from without, but from forces within, especially the failure of metaphysics to identify and affirm the culture's fundamental presuppositional commitments.

Christian culture, which built upon but also replaced Greco-Roman culture, recognized what had happened, and thus articulated their conception of Christian trinitarian monotheism as its absolute presupposition with this lesson in mind: that a civilization

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operate without presuppositions is to assert the principle of the empty head, to urge that the historian should be uneducated, to claim that he should be exempted from the process variously named socialization and acculturation, to strip him of historicity. For the historian's presuppositions are not just his but also the living on in him of developments that human society and culture have slowly accumulated over the centuries" (1972: 223).

which becomes confused about and fails to recognize and keep alive its fundamental convictions will die because of this costly "error in metaphysical analysis" (EM, 224).

Collingwood believed his own moment in history to be such a turning point, that a crisis of cultural authority had arrived in the form of irrationalism, and this very fact inspired him not just to formulate his doctrine of absolute presuppositions, but to formulate it in the specific and peculiar way that he did.<sup>1</sup> Bertoldi explains this thesis well.

I think it is clear that Collingwood (and others) thought that western civilization had reached, in the 1930s, just such another watershed, that a metaphysical disease which he styles irrationalism was creating confusion as to the absolute presuppositions of that civilization, and that it was the job of metaphysicians to save thought and culture from the destruction that would follow this crisis. That salvation was to consist of an exhibition and reaffirmation of the fundamental convictions that animated this civilization (1989: 169).

Perhaps I myself am an incarnation of the spirit of R. G. Collingwood in the 1990s, for I, too, feel that a metaphysical disease has infected the culture of which I am a part. All around me it appears, in the words of Keats or Shelley (I forget which), that "things are falling apart, and the center cannot hold." As I recently read,

In much public debate in America today there is no longer clear distinction between human and animal, male and female, word and image, war and peace, invasion and liberation, law and violence, reason and madness, civilized and primitive, knowledge and ignorance, doctor and patient, citizenship and tribalism, persuasion and propaganda, art and pornography, reporting and fiction, character and instincts. The double impact of modern technologies and post-modern theories has led to a breaking, blunting, blurring, and blending of categories without precedent in Western history (Guinness 1993: 30).

These things indicate to me, and I am also told, that we are in the midst of a culture war (Hunter 1991) in which two divergent world views, one "traditional" and one "progressive," are slugging it out for the soul of America in which every thing is at stake: law, government, business, politics, art, family, religion, etc. Who and what we will be

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<sup>1</sup> His configuration of APs entailed these characteristics: (1) that there are such things as APs; (2) that they precede rather than result from experience; (3) that they were logically efficacious regardless of their truth or falsity; (4) that they were presuppositional rather than propositional emphasizing thereby the act of presupposing and its efficacy rather than the content proposed. It was these features of his AP doctrine that provided him "a weapon against irrationalism" (see Bertoldi 1989: 169).

as a nation and as a civilization will ultimately depend on the outcome of this battle of ideas—or should I not say "absolute presuppositions?" In essence, what all this seems to mean, *a la* Collingwood, is that there is a major crisis going on at the level of absolute presuppositions for "Under the impact of modernity, the beliefs, ideals, and traditions that have been central to Americans and to the character of American democracy—whether religious, such as Jewish and Christian beliefs, or civic, such as Americanism—are losing their cultural compelling power" (Guinness 1993: 27). What we have on our hands could be styled a crisis of "cultural authority": by what set of ultimate principles will we order our personal lives and the social, cultural and political life of our republic? Among all of America's problems that so rivet our attention—massive economic, political, and social sea-changes and challenges, etc.—none is more important than this "crisis of cultural authority, if only because it is bound to prove decisive in America's response to them all" (Guinness 1993: 26). This, it seems to me, is what Collingwood's absolute presuppositions were all about. Collingwood put his finger on something that was profound and practical, and it concerns us today. I believe that we all, at this "American hour" have something we need and must learn from him.

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