

A Peculiar “Faith”: On R.G. Collingwood’s Use of Saint Anselm’s Argument

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In this paper, I discuss the role of Anselm’s ontological argument in the philosophy of R.G. Collingwood. Anselm’s argument appears prominently in Collingwood’s Essay on Philosophical Method (1933) and Essay on Metaphysics (1940), as well as in his early work Speculum Mentis (1924). In the proof, Collingwood finds the central expression of the priority of “faith” in the first principles of thought to reason’s activities. For Collingwood, it is Anselm’s proof that clearly expresses this relationship between faith and reason. The two elements of this analysis that must be understood if one is to understand Collingwood’s use of the proof are what he means by “the idea of an object that shall completely satisfy the demands of reason” and the “special case of metaphysical thinking.” I analyze both of these elements and conclude by showing how Anselm’s proof is essential to Collingwood’s historical science of mind.

I. Introduction

R.G. Collingwood’s work includes an extended reflection on Saint Anselm’s ontological argument. The proof plays a significant, although puzzling, role in Collingwood’s historical epistemology. Collingwood defends the proof as a first-rate piece of philosophical reasoning and as an example of what he calls a historical metaphysics.¹ Further, he places it at the center of his discussion of the nature of philosophical inquiry. Some scholars have used Collingwood’s discussion of Anselm’s argument as evidence of his loyalty to Kant’s philosophical principles (D’Oro) and against those who argue that Collingwood is primarily indebted to Hegelian philosophy (Vanheeswijck, Burns).² I will argue that Collingwood’s use of the proof is essential to understanding his historical science of mind.

Collingwood’s teaching on the nature of mind includes the idea that mind is an object that changes as it understands itself. He writes:

If that which we come to understand better is something other than ourselves, for example the chemical properties of matter, our improved understanding of it in no way improves the thing itself. If, on the other hand, that which we understand

¹ See R.G. Collingwood, *Essay on Metaphysics*, Introduction and additional material edited by Rex Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 55 and 189–90. Collingwood claims that Saint Anselm is engaged in presenting his readers with a statement of the absolute presuppositions of Christian metaphysics. These absolute presuppositions would fit the historical metaphysical rubric that, “In such and such a phase of scientific thought it is (or was) absolutely presupposed that . . .” (55).

² See Guiseppina D’Oro, *Collingwood and the Metaphysics of Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 68ff; Gary K. Browning, *Rethinking Collingwood: Philosophy, Politics and the Unity of Theory and Practice* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004); and Guido Vanheeswijck, “Collingwood’s Metaphysics: Not a Science of Pure Being, but Still a Science of Being,” *International Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 2, (June 1998): 153–174.

better is our own understanding, an improvement in that science is an improvement not only in its subject but in its object also.³

In what manner does mind change? If the changes are superficial or accidental to the nature of mind, then the task of the philosophy of history is to seek the stable structure of mind that underlies its variety of appearances. This is the approach that Kant, Hegel, and Spencer (among others) take to the study of history. In contrast, Collingwood argues that the changes to mind are not superficial, but fundamental to the nature of mind. Such changes, for Collingwood, are the first principles that structure our experience and our thinking about the world. So, in order to understand Collingwood's theory of mind, we must understand his theory of the historical nature of first principles.

In this essay, I argue that Collingwood's reading of Anselm's proof of the existence of God is the key to understanding his theory of the historical nature of first principles. The proof appears prominently in *Essay on Philosophical Method* (1933) and *Essay on Metaphysics* (1940), as well as in his early work *Speculum Mentis* (1924). In the proof, Collingwood finds the central expression of the priority of "faith" in the first principles of thought to reason's activities. I explore the relationship of faith and reason in Collingwood's thought by examining the proof as an articulation of the starting point of all thinking and by examining the nature of scientific first principles compared with philosophical first principles.

I conclude with a discussion of Collingwood's theory of absolute presuppositions (first principles). I show that Collingwood's account of absolute presuppositions must be understood if we are to understand his position on the historical nature of mind.

II. "Faith" in Collingwood's Philosophy

The relationship between faith and reason in Collingwood's early work reveals a peculiar doctrine that weaves its way through all of his later work. In an early essay on the philosophy of religion (1928), Collingwood calls reason "faith cultivating itself."⁴ The idea of faith, for Collingwood, serves a fundamental epistemological function. Faith is the necessary belief in indemonstrable first principles of thought. This form of belief is necessary if any thinking is to proceed and is necessarily assumed in one form or another by all thinking. First principles provide reason with a basis from which it can articulate experience. However, this basis provides only the possibility of a limited and fallible account of experience. These principles can be altered or discarded as forms of thought are altered into new theoretical accounts of the whole of Being based on new articles of "faith."⁵ In this respect, these first principles, because of their

³ R.G. Collingwood, *Idea of History*, ed. by Jan van der Dussen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 84.

⁴ See R.G. Collingwood, "Reason is Faith Cultivating Itself" in *Faith and Reason: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* by R.G. Collingwood, ed. by Lionel Rubinoﬀ (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968).

⁵ Collingwood's "faith" is certainly the faith of reason in the philosopher's absolute. This is not the faith in the God of Revelation. For Collingwood, the distinction between God and the philosopher's absolute is a distinction between two opposed but dialectically related forms of experience. In *Speculum Mentis*, Collingwood portrays religion and philosophy, with art, science and history, as legitimate accounts of the whole of Being. Religious

limitations, are historical and are dialectically related in that the tensions within one constellation of first principles causes a dialectical transformation into another.

In Collingwood's philosophy, first principles of thought are objects of rational "faith," which are the conditions for the possibility of thinking in certain ways. As such, they are not demonstrable nor are they verifiable. This is because a demonstration or attempt at verification must assume these principles in order to proceed. Since they admit of no demonstration, Collingwood suggests it is equally valid (which is to say equally ineffective) to argue *a priori* either for their self-evident certainty or for their historical character. Collingwood contends that prior to the advent of historical consciousness, philosophers had uncovered the first principles of their thinking but had mistakenly assumed these first principles to be universal rather than the product of a particular form of mind. The recognition of the historical nature of first principles means that mind must be studied through the *a posteriori* evidence of its activities in history. We understand what mind is by studying what mind has done.

Collingwood's position on "faith" and the historical nature of first principles is a development of the modern rejection of substance and the consequent turn to subjectivity to seek the structure of reality. The direct influence on this doctrine comes from modernity, especially from Kant and from the English empiricist tradition. Hume's denial of intellectual substance brings with it the consequence that mind is a fundamentally practical activity that does not have access to the natures of things. Kant's famous response to this challenge to metaphysics is to make the transcendental turn and seek the structure of experience in subjectivity. Collingwood's own theory of mind agrees with elements of both thinkers. Mind, for Collingwood, is a fundamentally practical activity that must be agnostic about the ultimate natures of things (Hume) but operates on *a priori* principles that structure its experience (Kant). However, the definite structure of subjectivity that is universal for all human minds in Kant's philosophy becomes a product of the historical process in Collingwood's thinking.

The combination of Kant and Hume in Collingwood's thinking colors his reading of the rest of the history of philosophy. Collingwood reminds his readers that, from the beginning, western philosophy was aware of the necessity of assuming first principles that could never be verified. Collingwood cites Plato's discussion of perception and the knowledge of the external world as an example. Plato calls the intellectual disposition that accepts the information of the senses *pistis*, which Collingwood translates as "faith."⁶ Plato sees the necessity of this

consciousness presents an account of the whole of Being that is intermediate between art and science on the scale of forms that is consciousness' grasp of the whole. Religious consciousness, when it reflects on the nature of its object (God) or on its symbolic expressions of its object, becomes theology. In the end, as reason presses its demand for understanding, theology becomes science. Science, when it reflects on its object, discovers the abstractness of its concepts. In seeking the concrete, consciousness moves from science to history. Moving beyond history, reason discovers the unity of the universal and the particular or concrete in philosophy. See R.G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis* (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1924).

⁶ See Plato, *Republic VII*, 534a. Alan Bloom translates *pistis* as "trust." Paul Shorey renders it "belief." See Allan Bloom, trans., *The Republic of Plato* (Basic Books, 1991), VII, 534a; and Paul Shorey, trans., *Republic*, by Plato, in *Plato: Collected Dialogues*, ed. by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), VII, 534a.

intellectual “faith” since there can be no scientific (i.e., logical) demonstration of the external world. This is no scandal, nor was it a scandal when Descartes attempted the exercise of radical doubt of the external world. Collingwood’s point, and he believes it is Descartes’ as well, is that the first (and unverifiable) principle of the study of the external world is that it exists. Its presence must be accepted on faith. Plato, of course, goes on to argue for reason’s efficacy in knowing the principles that structure appearances. The *eros* of reason is drawn to the Idea of the Good. The addition (or subtraction?) that modernity makes to this idea of “faith” is to situate the first principles of thought in the subject rather than in the objective order, and so to pave the way for mind to be viewed as a historically conditioned activity. Put another way, if the existence of the external world is not a demonstrable certainty and substance is not ultimately knowable, then the truth of the first principles that structure our thinking about the world cannot be demonstrable certainties either. First principles are partial accounts of experience that are articulated as theoretical accounts of the whole (“reason is faith cultivating itself”). What can be known with certainty are the principles that are the *a priori* condition of thinking in a certain way. The question for Collingwood becomes, “Does the transcendental turn reveal the *a priori* structures of reason understood as a universal human possession?” Or, “Is Kant’s reflection both a revelation of the historical situation of the human knower and an example of a historical perspective—in this case of the enlightenment mind?” In the end, the weight of Collingwood’s own historical studies and his philosophical reflections lead him to argue for the latter.

For Collingwood, what Kant achieves is not the deduction of universal *a priori* categories of the understanding. Rather, Kant’s thought is the beginning of the articulation of the human knower as situated in a historical context. Kant does not provide the universal structure of reason, but reveals the first principles of the Enlightenment mind.⁷ Kant’s three critiques are an investigation of the “faith” of modernity. Within the critiques, Collingwood argues, is contained the implicit idea that the *a priori* structure of reason changes in the historical process. This implicit idea becomes manifest as historical consciousness blossoms in the nineteenth century.

In the next section, I will examine how Collingwood uses Anselm’s proof of the existence of God to establish the priority of faith in first principles to all rational endeavor.

III. Collingwood’s Reading of Anselm on the Priority of Faith to Reason: “We Must Believe in Order to See”

For Collingwood the epistemological function of faith is to give reason a starting point for its investigation of the whole of Being. The question of the starting point for reason’s investigation of the whole is a recurrent problem for philosophical thinking. What is the nature of the first principles that structure all thinking? How is it that reason can begin an investigation of the whole when a beginning requires an acceptance of some truth, a ground, a starting point? How can these principles be known to be true? Aristotle argued that first principles are non-demonstrable but self-evidently grasped by *nous*.⁸ Descartes sought the starting point of thinking

⁷ See *Idea of History*, “Kant,” 93–104.

⁸ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 1140b30–1141a8; and, *Posterior Analytics*, I, Chapter 10, 76a30–77a5.

in an intuited incontrovertible statement of the relationship of existence and thought.⁹ Collingwood argues that they are both right in the sense that each presents profound statements of the nature of “faith” or rational belief in the starting point of reason. However, whether these starting points are called self-evident or incontrovertible, they are still grasped by an intuitive intellectual act that admits no logical demonstration.¹⁰ For Collingwood, this means they are accepted or believed by an act of faith.

It is in Anselm’s proof of the existence of God that the historical nature of first principles is expressed. In Anselm’s dictum “For I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand,”¹¹ Collingwood finds a statement on the priority of “faith” to reason. First principles are the necessary preconditions for certain kinds of thought. What this means for Collingwood is that, in Anselm’s proof, one finds the “point at which faith and reason absolutely coincide.”¹² It is the demonstration that in at least one case there is a Being whose essence includes its existence. Put another way, the proof articulates a concept whose necessity reason must accept. Thought requires content – an object to think. Anselm’s proof is the demonstration of the absolute precondition of the possibility of thought – *that Being is*.

In the preface to the *Proslogion* Saint Anselm writes, “I wrote the following work on this [subject], and on various others, in the role of someone endeavoring to elevate his mind toward contemplating God and in the role of someone seeking to understand what he believes.”¹³ The original title of the work, he reports, was to be *Faith Seeking Understanding*. In Chapter One, Anselm writes, “For I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand. For I believe even this: that unless I believe, I shall not understand.”¹⁴ The repetition of this idea within the short space of the preface and the first chapter of the *Proslogion* is not lost on Collingwood. Collingwood argues Anselm’s project proves “not that because our idea of God is an idea of *id quo maius cogitari nequit* therefore God exists, but that because our idea of God is an idea of *id quo maius cogitari nequit* we stand committed to belief in God’s existence.”¹⁵ Collingwood’s reading of Anselm is as an investigation of the absolute

⁹ See, Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Part IV, trans. by Donald A. Cress, 3rd Edition (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, Inc., 1993), 19.

¹⁰ In addition, the necessity that joins the steps of logical argument is not an object of demonstration. The necessary relationship between ideas that reason grasps is an object of “faith” for Collingwood. These relationships can be taught and introduced. However, they must be believed—that is accepted by reason—in order to be understood. The necessity that obtains between the steps of a logical argument cannot be justified by any particular logical demonstration since logic must admit this necessity in order to make any argument at all. It can be grasped and seen by reason, but not strictly speaking *demonstrated*.

¹¹ Anselm, “Proslogion” in *A New, Interpretive Translation of St. Anselm’s Monologion and Proslogion*, trans. by Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1987), I, 225.

¹² “Reason is Faith Cultivating Itself,” 114. This is an important point. Those scholars who are interested in the ontological argument and have treated Collingwood’s thoughts on the matter have in general neglected to read his thoughts on the matter beyond the *Essay on Philosophical Method*. For one such example, see Charles Hartshorne, *Anselm’s Discovery: A Re-Examination of the Ontological Proof of God’s Existence* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1991), 250–3.

¹³ *Proslogion*, I, 215.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹⁵ *Essay on Metaphysics*, 190.

presuppositions of monotheistic science. He sees in Anselm the recognition that metaphysics seeks to understand the “faith” that precedes and is served by reason.

For Collingwood, the historical character of metaphysics is already implicit in the thought of Anselm, because the proof is an investigation of the absolute presuppositions or beliefs that structure monotheistic science.¹⁶ Metaphysical propositions are historical propositions for Collingwood in that they are matters of historical fact and accurately state the absolute presuppositions of a particular kind of scientific thought. What he calls the “metaphysical rubric” of these propositions is the formula “*in such and such a phase of scientific thought it is (or was) absolutely presupposed that...*”¹⁷ This rubric is implicit in all authentic metaphysical thinking – the kind of thinking that Collingwood attributes to Aristotle, Anselm, Spinoza, and Descartes, among others. What Anselm achieves in the *Proslogion* is the accurate statement and insightful exploration of one of the absolute presuppositions of monotheistic science assumed by and still operative in the Western mind. To use Aristotelian language, Collingwood’s metaphysics is not theology or ontology, but it is first science in the sense that it studies the ground of the other sciences.¹⁸ And to borrow a formulation from Kant, this ground is not found in the objective order, but rather in the structure of reason itself. Finally, Collingwood’s addition to these two thinkers is to argue that the structure of reason—in its first principles—changes in a historical process.

In *Essay on Metaphysics*, Collingwood calls first principles the absolute presuppositions of thought. As was stated above, absolute presuppositions (first principles) are not subject to demonstration nor are they subject to verification. They are the conditions for the possibility of thinking in a certain scientific way about the world. What, then, is truth for Collingwood? What is its criterion? Truth about the nature of the physical world is discovered by experimental science for Collingwood. It has a limited objective in that it studies Being as it reveals itself in some partial way (i.e., Being as quantifiable, Being as alive, but never Being as Being). Its standard is pragmatic; to the extent science can answer the questions and solve the problems it is confronted with, it is true. However, the ultimate natures of things are hidden from us. In this respect, Collingwood follows in the modern empiricist tradition and has some affinities with the contemporary positivist tradition he loathes. Propositions about the world are subject to experimental verification. Their truth is a function of their ability to fulfill a pragmatic purpose.

In the above section, I have argued that Collingwood reads Anselm’s proof as establishing the priority of faith in first principles to all rational endeavors. In the next section, I will argue that Collingwood’s reading of Anselm’s proof includes an argument for the

¹⁶ I say “monotheistic science” following Collingwood’s contention that monotheism (Platonic or Christian), in contrast to Paganism, brings with it the idea that the universe is one, rationally ordered, and intelligible. See *Essay on Metaphysics*, Chapter XX.

¹⁷ *Essay on Metaphysics*, 55.

¹⁸ There is an interesting consequence of this position related to Collingwood’s critique of positivism. It shows that positivism’s attack on metaphysics and its denial of the ontological argument are an attack on the basis of the natural science it held up as the only standard for knowledge. See “The Suicide of Positivistic Metaphysics,” in *Essay on Metaphysics*, Chapter XVI.

distinction between the hypothetical nature of scientific first principles and the categorical nature of philosophical first principles.

IV. Collingwood's Reading of Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God

In the *Essay on Philosophical Method*, Collingwood presents his most concise statement of what he believes the ontological proof to be. He writes:

Divesting [Anselm's] argument of all specially religious or theological colouring, one might state it by saying that thought, when it follows its own bent most completely and sets itself the task of thinking out the idea of an object that shall completely satisfy the demands of reason, may appear to be constructing a mere *ens rationis*, but in fact is never devoid of objective or ontological reference. . . . [I]n effect [Anselm's] argument amounts to this, that in the special case of metaphysical thinking the distinction between conceiving something and thinking it to exist is a distinction without a difference.¹⁹

The two elements of this analysis that must be understood if one is to understand Collingwood's use of the proof are what he means by "the idea of an object that shall completely satisfy the demands of reason" and the "special case of metaphysical thinking."

A. Collingwood's Reading of Anselm's Proof: Satisfying the Demands of Reason

Collingwood comments several times in his work that those who believe that the ontological proof is meant to prove the existence of God, especially the God of any particular religion, are mistaken. The proof demonstrates the character of an idea of an object that "completely satisf[ies] the demands of reason." This object is the object of metaphysical thought. It is "God in the metaphysical sense: the *Deus sive natura* of Spinoza, the Good of Plato, the Being of Aristotle."²⁰ What demand of reason does this object satisfy? For Collingwood, reason seeks the ground of its understanding of the world out of a desire to satisfy a deep-seated psychological need for reassurance. This desire drives reason to attempt to understand the whole of Being.²¹ The drive to reassure reason results in what he calls, in *The New Leviathan*, reason's theoretical consciousness. Anselm's proof indicates the "object" (i.e., the idea) that would satisfy reason's desire to understand the totality of what exists, to be completely reassured. Further, the philosophical absolute is the name for that idea that corresponds to that-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought in Anselm's proof. The negative formulation of this concept is necessary because of the fact that the whole of Being appears to the intellect as the most abstract concept possible for thought. The concept of the Absolute is a pure identity. It is an idea without

¹⁹ *Essay on Philosophical Method*, 125.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

²¹ See *New Leviathan*, 100–1. Collingwood resolves theoretical consciousness into practical consciousness. In so doing, Platonic *eros* becomes reduced to a psychological need to reassure the psyche that its account of reality—and so the basis of its solutions to the problems it is confronted with—is supported by good reasons.

differentiation, an idea of an object whose existence is identical with its essence. It is the undifferentiated ground that reason articulates in scientific thinking.

What the proof and the formulation show is that when reason presses its demand to know the whole it reflectively encounters the necessary rational conviction that there is a whole to know. In other words, for Collingwood, Anselm's proof is the justification of the starting point of all thinking in that it recognizes the unity of essence and existence that is the whole of Being. Anselm's proof, therefore, articulates the character of the concept that is the ground of all thinking. This concept is the Absolute idea. The insight of the proof, for Collingwood, lies in its recognition of the necessity that reason is confronted with in accepting the existence of its object. This is why Descartes found the proof so appealing and used it as the basis of modern scientific thinking. Essentially, to justify the activity of science one must first assume thought has an object, the whole of Being.

There can be no logical demonstration of the physical world, nor can there be such a demonstration of the existence of God or the philosopher's absolute. Collingwood accepts that we *cannot* move from the idea of a thing to its existence. However, what we *cannot avoid* is accepting the necessity of the concept indicated by Anselm's proof as a precondition for thought.²² For Collingwood, and if his reading of modern thought is correct, Descartes as well, the point of the proof is that any rationally organized investigation of any subject within Being *necessarily assumes* the truth contained in Anselm's proof, that there is Being and it can be investigated. This necessary assumption is what Collingwood means by the "faith" that is the ground of all thinking. The truth of the proof lies in the fact that it articulates the *a priori* condition for the possibility of reason's investigation of Being.²³

²² This distinction is lost on Gilbert Ryle who accuses Collingwood of a return to a form of dogmatic ontology. See Gilbert Ryle, "Mr. Collingwood and the Ontological Argument," in *The Many Faced Argument*, ed. by John Hick and Arthur C. McGill (New York: the MacMillan company, 1967), 246–261. Collingwood's position seems closer to Norman Malcolm's emphasis on the idea of *necessary* existence in *Proslogion* III. He writes, "Anselm is saying two things: first, that a being whose non-existence is logically impossible is 'greater' than a being whose nonexistence is logically possible (and therefore that a being a greater than which cannot be conceived must be one whose nonexistence is logically impossible); second, that *God* is a being that which a greater cannot be conceived." See Norman Malcolm, "Malcolm's Statement of Anselm's Ontological Arguments," in *The Ontological Argument from St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophy*, edited by Alvin Plantinga, with an introduction by Richard Taylor (USA: Doubleday & Company, Inc.), 1965. See also Guiseppina D'Oro's interesting discussion of the Ryle-Collingwood correspondence in Guiseppina D'Oro, *Collingwood and the Metaphysics of Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 68ff. D'Oro takes up the question whether the ontological argument is important for its focus on the problem of whether existence ever includes essence—i.e., the problem of the legitimacy of metaphysical inquiry.

²³ Collingwood's reading of Anselm certainly has a neo-Kantian flavor. This is not controversial in that many philosophers have adopted ideas from the history of philosophy to suit their own ends. However, it is controversial when a philosopher who is accomplished in the practice and methods of history suggests that Anselm *intended* his proof to be read this way. This is precisely what Collingwood claims. See *Essay on Metaphysics*, 189–90. Arthur McGill provides a helpful typology of six kinds of interpretations of Anselm's argument. Collingwood's reading has affinities with McGill's second and third types. In McGill's second type, Anselm's argument is a statement of a "noetic datum" and a recognition that "the cause of the logical necessity that the mind recognizes in it is God." In his third type, McGill suggests the argument sketches a "noetic limit, imposed by and therefore indicative of, reality itself." See Arthur C. McGill, "Recent Discussion of Anselm's Argument," in *The Many-Faced Argument*, John Hick and Arthur C. McGill, eds. (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1967), 79–80, 87.

This conception of Anselm's proof as the ground of all thinking, while absolutely assumed by all scientific consciousness, is not the proximate starting point for scientific investigation. The Absolute is undifferentiated in thinking and so cannot serve as the immediate basis of scientific investigation. For Collingwood, science requires a "limited objective,"²⁴ an *aspect* of Being as a starting point. The modern focus on the quantifiable aspect of nature is an example of such a limited objective. Greek science, in contrast, had an unlimited objective. It sought to deduce the properties of a thing from a single statement of that being's essence, its definition. Collingwood claims that modern science "no longer held that the properties of a given thing can be exhaustively deduced from one single essence, but there is still what may be called a 'relative essence,' an 'essence from our point of view'."²⁵ The idea of a 'relative essence' is of course a reduction of the scientific aim due to the modern presupposition that substance is inaccessible to the intellect.

The distinction between the limited objective that is the object of science and the Absolute that is the ground of thinking is the distinction between part and whole. The whole, assumed or presupposed as an object of rational faith, is not the direct object of scientific knowledge. It cannot be because the concept of the Absolute is a concept without differentiation. It is the most abstract concept and, therefore, for Collingwood, a placeholder in thought without concrete content. The result of this part-whole relationship in Collingwood's thought is that the limited objectives of the sciences, beginning as they do from first principles, which are articles of rational faith and which introduce an initial distinction within the otherwise undifferentiated concept of Being, give partial accounts of the nature of Being. In the process of cultivating the faith of their first principles, they articulate theoretical accounts of the whole of Being and practical accounts of the nature of human action. Both the process of articulating these first principles and the limited objective of the first principles themselves (and so the inevitable recognition of their limits followed by a reevaluation of these principles) mean that these first principles are discovered and articulated in the historical process.

B. Collingwood's Reading of Anselm's Proof: The Special Case of Metaphysical Thinking

Collingwood argues that the "special case of metaphysical thinking" involves distinguishing metaphysical thinking from scientific thinking. In this section, I examine Collingwood's contention that scientific thinking proceeds from hypothetical starting points. In contrast, metaphysical thinking proceeds from a categorical starting point. Further, for Collingwood, all legitimate metaphysics is systematic thought that uncovers and organizes the absolute presuppositions of the particular sciences.

In his middle and later work, Collingwood develops the idea that faith is an intellectual function that grasps an object that precedes but is then articulated by reason. The idea, found in his 1924 article, that "reason is faith cultivating itself" undergoes significant clarification but little fundamental revision in his later thought. In *Essay on Philosophical Method*, Collingwood

²⁴ *New Leviathan*, 253–4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 300.

clarifies this position by distinguishing between the kinds of starting points for reason's activities in science and the starting point of reason's activity in philosophy. The sciences, both empirical and exact, begin from hypothetical first principles. To have a hypothetical starting point, for Collingwood, means that science begins from a supposition that remains agnostic concerning the actual existence of its subject matter. In modernity, the exact (i.e., mathematical) sciences begin their deductions from suppositions of the form "Let x be such and such." These suppositions do not make any existential claims. They are merely assertions from which to begin thinking. For modern thinkers, leaving the issue of the existence or non-existence of a square unresolved is not an impediment to the analysis of the idea of an enclosed figure with four equal sides.²⁶

Empirical science also uses hypothetical starting points, although the presence of these is more difficult to see because of the use of observed data and the application of knowledge to existing cases in empirical science. Certainly the observed data of empirical science is expressed in categorical propositions. Collingwood uses the example of medicine. A patient's symptoms are not hypothetical. In addition, once the diagnosis of the patient is complete the application of medical knowledge in the form of treatment is categorical, not hypothetical, in that the existence of treatment and its effects are fundamental to administering treatment. However, if one considers the kinds of propositions that make up the body of empirical science one will see that they are neither strictly empirical nor are they strictly practical. They are hypothetical. Collingwood explains:

The universal propositions laid down by empirical science have a hypothetical character not unlike that of mathematical propositions. The statement in a medical or botanical text-book that all cases of tuberculosis or all rosaceae have these and these characteristics, turns out to mean that the standard case has them; but it does not follow that the standard case exists; it may be a mere *ens rationis*; and since that would not disturb the truth of the original statement, it follows that the original statement was in intention hypothetical.²⁷

Put another way, these propositions are descriptions and definitions that serve as guidelines for interpreting states of affairs. The explanations of science after the modern period aim at increasingly accurate but still only probable accounts of phenomena.²⁸ However, the truth of

²⁶ The issue of the existence or non-existence of mathematical objects is a serious one for classical Greek thought. Certainly the Pythagoreans held that numbers and mathematical relations had deep ontological significance. For two fascinating accounts of the development of modern algebra away from classical Greek contemplative mathematics, see David Lachterman, *The Ethics of Geometry: A Genealogy of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1989); and Jacob Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*, trans. by Eva Brann (Minneapolis, NY: Dover Publications, 1992).

²⁷ *Essay on Philosophical Method*, 121.

²⁸ Modern experimental science adopts Locke's optimistic probabilism. "For though the Comprehension of our Understandings, comes exceeding short of the vast Extent of Things; yet, we shall have Cause enough to magnify the bountiful Author of our Being, for that Portion and Degree of Knowledge, he has bestowed on us, so far above all the rest of the Inhabitants of this our Mansion . . . The Candle, that is set up in us, shines bright enough for all our Purposes." John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 45–6.

these propositions is not dependent on these states of affairs ever existing in complete conformity with the propositions.

In contrast to exact and empirical science, philosophy begins from and includes *categorical judgments*. Collingwood states, “In the special case of metaphysical thinking the distinction between conceiving something and thinking it to exist is a distinction without a difference.”²⁹ This striking claim is justified, Collingwood argues, based on the insight of Anselm’s proof. Thought cannot conceive of the Absolute other than as existing because no such distinction between existence and essence exists in the concept of the Absolute. Anselm makes this point clear when he writes, “If that than which a greater cannot be thought could be thought not to exist, then that than which a greater cannot be thought would not be that than which a greater cannot be thought – which is contradictory.”³⁰ Collingwood contends that if the object of metaphysical thought cannot be conceived as not existing then the same should hold true of the other philosophical disciplines as well. If they are philosophical pursuits, the judgments they make about their subject matter will be categorical, not hypothetical. Or, in other words, you cannot engage in philosophical pursuits without *committing yourself to the idea that your subject matter exists*.

Collingwood examines logic as the prime example of this phenomenon. Logic is the study of thought and is both normative (it gives an account of the ideal of thinking) and descriptive (it gives an account of how we actually think). In doing the work of logic the logician cannot help but assume the existence of his subject matter, thought, because his work is at the same time an instance of his subject matter. Collingwood explains, “It follows that logic cannot be in substance merely hypothetical. Geometry can afford to be indifferent to the existence of its subject-matter; so long as it is free to suppose it, that is enough. But logic cannot share this indifference, because, by existing, it constitutes an actually existing subject-matter to itself.”³¹ This is not the case for geometry or any other non-philosophical science. The substance of geometry, propositions about geometrical objects, is heterogeneous with its subject-matter, geometrical objects. As Collingwood points out, “when we say ‘all squares have their diagonals equal,’ we need not be either explicitly or implicitly asserting that any squares exist.”³² In contrast, the activity that is logic exemplifies itself and in so doing justifies itself. “Logic, therefore, stands committed to the principle of the Ontological Proof. Its subject-matter, namely thought, affords an instance of something which cannot be conceived except as actual, something whose essence involves existence.”³³

The discussion of Anselm’s proof with the example of logic reveals Collingwood’s position on the nature of metaphysics and of philosophical thought. This teaching will become the substance of the *Essay on Metaphysics* (1940). Briefly stated, philosophical thinking is second-order thought. It is thought about thought. The metaphysics that Collingwood practices is

²⁹ *Essay on Philosophical Method*, 125.

³⁰ *Proslogion*, III, 227.

³¹ *Essay on Philosophical Method*, 129.

³² *Ibid.*, 129.

³³ *Ibid.*, 131.

the search for the absolute presuppositions of thought. It is a search for the *a priori* principles which structure our thinking, and so our experience. This is why Collingwood scholars call his metaphysics a “metaphysics of experience” (D’Oro) or a “descriptive metaphysics” (Boucher, Van Der Dussen). As second-order thought, Collingwood’s metaphysics must contain categorical propositions simply because, like logic, it is homogeneous with its subject-matter. His metaphysics is thought about the ground of all thought. It examines the objects of rational faith, those ideas which are the *a priori* possibility of other ideas.

All of the philosophical sciences exhibit the character of metaphysics and logic. Collingwood writes, “Every philosophical science partakes of the nature of metaphysics, which is not a separate philosophical science but a special study of the existential aspect of that same subject-matter whose aspect as truth is studied by logic, and its aspect of goodness by ethics.”³⁴ The subject-matter that Collingwood refers to is thought. This understanding of the nature of metaphysics informs Collingwood’s understanding of the other philosophical sciences. Logic, as was discussed above, is the study of thought in its judgment of truth and falsity and in its correct operation; ethics is the study of moral consciousness or thought about what constitutes good action; political philosophy studies the thought that constitutes the structure of political communities and their understanding of the just; etc. The philosophical sciences study those ideas that are the condition for the possibility of thinking in certain ways and therefore are those ideas that comprise the structure of experience. This is why Collingwood’s thought is called “descriptive.”

However, the word *descriptive* is something of a misnomer. Collingwood asserts that the philosophical sciences are both *descriptive and normative*. Logic, for instance, is normative in its study of the valid and invalid forms of reasoning. If it ignored this aspect of thought, “it would be a psychology of thinking; like all psychology, it would abstract from the distinction of thoughts into true and false, valid and invalid, and would consider them merely as events happening in the mind.”³⁵ Ethics, for Collingwood, is similarly a combination of the descriptive and normative aspects of thought. Collingwood defines moral philosophy as:

Giving an account of how people think they ought to behave. Here the facts and the ideal of conduct are alike included in the subject-matter; but the ideals might seem to be reduced to a mere new kind or order of facts. To correct this it must be borne in mind that the question how people think is not in any philosophical science separable from the question whether they think rightly or wrongly.³⁶

Further, this kind of moral philosophy, which examines the moral consciousness as it understands action, must acknowledge the moral ideal. Collingwood explains, “It is clear that the moral ideal, which it is [the moral philosopher’s] business to conceive, cannot be conceived as a

³⁴ Ibid., 127.

³⁵ Ibid., 128.

³⁶ Ibid., 132.

mere thought wholly divorced from existence,”³⁷ because it is the idea that informs, motivates, and is embodied in action. It is this definition of moral philosophy that is articulated in *The New Leviathan* and in Collingwood’s lectures on moral philosophy entitled “Goodness, Rightness, Utility.”

To summarize, for Collingwood the “special case of metaphysical thinking” includes the idea that philosophical propositions are categorical in that they are judgments of thought about thought. This means that the philosophical sciences are both normative and descriptive. This is the case, as was argued above, with logic and moral philosophy. It is also the case with Collingwood’s political philosophy.

The historical character of mind is exemplified by the limited objective of modern science. Collingwood accepts the modern experimental model of science. He argues that all sciences have a “limited objective.”³⁸ In contrast, classical Greek science had an unlimited objective. That is to say, Greek science sought to deduce the properties of a thing from a single statement of that being’s essence, its definition. Collingwood claims that modern science “no longer held that the properties of a given thing can be exhaustively deduced from one single essence, but there is still what may be called a ‘relative essence,’ an ‘essence from our point of view.’”³⁹ In modernity, the way in which Being presents itself to reason is discovered by the investigation of experimental science, as it is motivated to solve definite pragmatic difficulties. In other words, Being is already categorically distinguished (of course, without the category of substance) by science before it comes to philosophical reflection. It is never grasped as Being itself, or Being as Being. The distinctions between the sciences and the modes in which Being manifests itself are made by the activity of science itself. They are not determined by philosophy. Metaphysics cannot be ontology for Collingwood. Metaphysics is first science. It is the reflective moment of thought on the foundations of the sciences. It is that activity of thinking that uncovers the articles of faith, the first principles, that structure and are investigated by scientific thinking. In so doing, philosophy becomes a historical investigation of mind’s activities. What mind has done reveals what mind is.

A related issue to consider here is that metaphysical thinking, as categorical thinking and as first science, is necessarily systematic for Collingwood. In both his early work (*Speculum Mentis*) and his middle period (*Essay on Philosophical Method* and *Essay on Metaphysics*), Collingwood emphasizes the systematic nature of philosophy. However, as a historical form of thought, it is a system that recognizes the inherent limitation of all systems and so is fallibilistic. Collingwood sums up his fallibilistic view of systematic thought when he writes:

The philosopher therefore, like every student, must sum up his progress from time to time, and express his conclusions in a systematic form, if progress is to continue. Owing to certain peculiarities of philosophy, this demands more

³⁷ Ibid., 133.

³⁸ *New Leviathan*, 100–1.

³⁹ Ibid., 300.

patience and a more critical outlook than the corresponding audit of history or science; but it cannot on that account be omitted. Nor does it in philosophy more than elsewhere imply a claim to finality. That must be recognized by all philosophies of the future.⁴⁰

In addition to their fallible nature, philosophical systems are also related to each other historically on a scale of forms. The organization of any single philosophical system consists first in the discovery of the first principles (absolute presuppositions) of the sciences. However, Collingwood's view of philosophy, as the reflective moment within the sciences, is not merely the regional study of the first principles of the individual sciences. Rather, it is the systematic organization of the first principles of the sciences considered as a general account of the whole of Being.⁴¹ Further, philosophy in Collingwood's hands emphasizes the historical nature of systems. And so, Collingwood's philosophy includes the idea that philosophical systems exist on a historical scale of forms that governs the *concept of philosophy itself*.⁴²

Having treated the issue of the "special case of metaphysical thinking" as it pertains to Collingwood's understanding of Anselm's proof, I conclude my presentation of Collingwood's reading of Anselm's proof with the specific aim of showing that the priority of faith to reason is the key to Collingwood's theory of the historical nature of first principles.

V. Conclusion: Collingwood's "Faith" and the Historical Nature of First Principles

Collingwood's teaching on the historical nature of first principles is made clear in *An Essay on Metaphysics* (1940). In this work he calls first principles the "absolute presuppositions" of thought. By characterizing first principles in this way, Collingwood is following Kant in the transcendental turn toward the study of the *a priori* conditions for thought. However in Collingwood's version, the transcendental turn does not discover inalterable structures of reason, but rather historically conditioned first principles of thought. The historical account of first principles in Collingwood's work stems not only from the influence of Kant's transcendental turn but also from the English empiricist tradition. The agnosticism of modern empirical thought concerning the nature of substance⁴³ leaves modern science with the limited objective of

⁴⁰ *Essay on Philosophical Method*, 180–1.

⁴¹ This is what Collingwood meant by his "map of knowledge" in *Speculum Mentis*.

⁴² See *Essay on Philosophical Method*, 188. Collingwood writes, "The concept of philosophy is itself a philosophical concept, and therefore its specific classes will overlap. It will be impossible to divide up the field of philosophical topics into mutually exclusive departments; ethical questions will show logical as well as ethical aspects, and vice versa; and the various philosophical sciences, instead of treating each a separate subject-matter of its own, should be regarded rather as treating each a distinct aspect of one and the same subject-matter."

⁴³ "The Idea then we have, to which we give the general name Substance, being nothing, but the supposed, but unknown support of those Qualities, we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist . . . without something to support them." John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 295–6; and, "When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion, that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent) we need but enquire, from what impression is that supposed idea derived? And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion." David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Eric Steinberg (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1977), 13. For Hume, the denial of the sensible experience of substance is, of course, a denial of the reality of substance.

studying the *manifestations* of substance, the phenomena encountered in experience. Collingwood's position is a direct challenge to Hume's skepticism. Where Locke's agnosticism leads Hume to a denial of substance, it leads Collingwood to an account of the structure of experience as reason articulates it historically. Concerns about the ability of reason to know substance in modern thought that lead Hume to a mitigated skepticism lead Collingwood to a historical account of the thought about experience. This account recognizes that thought is always checked by a pragmatic standard in its encounter with reality. And so, Collingwood turns toward history and pragmatism as he turns away from Hume.⁴⁴

How, then, do first principles function in thought for Collingwood? In *An Essay on Metaphysics*, Collingwood argues that all thought moves through its understanding of the world by question and answer. Thought manifests itself in the form of propositions and presuppositions. Every question is motivated by some presupposition. The answer to the question in the form of a proposition may become the presupposition of other questions. Presuppositions are either absolute or relative. Relative presuppositions are propositions that stand as answers to a question and as presuppositions that motivate other questions. Absolute presuppositions (first principles) are *never* answers to a question; they can only be presupposed. As the logical force in thought that generates questions, absolute presuppositions cannot be verified, nor are they propositions. They cannot be verified because "the idea of verification does not apply to them" and "to speak of verifying a presupposition involves supposing that it is a relative presupposition."⁴⁵ The function of absolute presuppositions is to provide the logical efficacy behind thought. They cannot be judged true or false because they are not propositions. They are what is assumed by all efforts at demonstration. So understood, the relationship of absolute presuppositions to thought is as the logical ground that generates the questioning activity of thought. That is to say, they are objects of rational faith which reason explores.

Reason's exploration of the first principles that order thought is what Collingwood meant when he said reason is "faith cultivating itself." Reason explores its first principles by constructing systematic theoretical accounts of the whole based on them.⁴⁶ To the extent that these accounts are effective in articulating the reality and then solving the problems confronting them, they endure. However, the fact that first principles are neither true nor false but are conditions for thinking combined with the modern agnosticism in regard to knowledge of substance means that first principles are mind's practical (pragmatic) attempt to order the phenomena given to it in consciousness. As such, first principles are the horizon within which reason articulates reality, but lack an ontological grounding beyond the merely pragmatic. To say

⁴⁴ For Collingwood, reason's activities in science do reveal the character of reality, however only in part. The science of the laws of nature does reveal something about the nature of reality. This is evident in that nature is intelligible when understood in terms of laws. However, this is not the whole story. And, all systems of thought are subject to historical revision as they are understood and criticized.

⁴⁵ *Essay on Metaphysics*, 32.

⁴⁶ All legitimate philosophy is systematic and historical for Collingwood. He writes, "Metaphysics aware of itself as an historical science will be systematic in the sense in which all historical thought is systematic and in no other. Its systematic character will be exhibited in the clear-cut and orderly manner in which it states problems and marshals and interprets evidence for their solution. But the idea that these problems form a closed repertory, or even a repertory with the door ajar, is the purest illusion." *Essay on Metaphysics*, 65.

that all systems of thought are limited by the limited nature of their first principles, for Collingwood, means that first principles are the broadest organizing principles of thought for what is found in experience. To say that they are limited in their ability to generate thought that articulates experience is to say that all systems are fallible, subject to revision, and, therefore, historically conditioned entities.