

BETWEEN REALISM AND IDEALISM: A.N. WHITEHEAD AND R.G. COLLINGWOOD

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Abstract. When A.N. Whitehead left for the U.S., where he would write his major metaphysical works, Robin G. Collingwood (1889-1943) lost a major ally. The philosophical climate in England between the two wars was characterized by an anti-metaphysical attitude which manifested itself first in Cambridge, from the thirties onwards became dominant in Oxford, and eventually found a programmatic expression in A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*. In this analytic and in part even neo-positivistic climate, Robin George Collingwood, appointed professor in metaphysics at Magdalen College in 1935, in fact was a "lone wolf." Hence, it cannot be surprising at all that in this period he felt more related to Whitehead's metaphysical thinking than to the ideas of his "Oxbridge" colleagues. In this article my aim is to show in four stages the relation between the two authors from a very specific view, i.e. their interpretation of the relation between realism and idealism and the impact of these interpretations on their respective concepts of metaphysics. First, I present Collingwood's interpretation of what Whitehead meant by "a transformation of some main doctrines of Absolute Idealism onto a realistic basis" (*PR*, xiii). Subsequently, the concepts of 'eternal objects' (Whitehead) and 'abstract entities' (Collingwood) are presented as the respective building-stones of their philosophies' idealist flavor. Against that background, the specific task of the metaphysician is elucidated and a comparison is made between Collingwood's definition of metaphysics as the historical study of absolute presuppositions and Whitehead's definition of philosophy as framing "a scheme of ideas, the best that one can, and unflinchingly to explore the interpretation of experience in terms of that scheme" (*PR*, xiv). Finally, it is shown that, whereas Collingwood's aim was to rescue the philosophical status of metaphysics by studying the historical development of absolute presuppositions, Whitehead applied an identical view of metaphysics so as to correct the philosophers' failure to detect the correct absolute presuppositions in his own era.

Keywords: Whitehead, Collingwood, Realism, Idealism, Metaphysics.

"Whitehead, of course, was well aware of the problem of historical knowledge, of the impossibility of 'mere knowledge', without taking into account the

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presuppositions or standards of the historian. But Whitehead did not dwell on it, as Collingwood did, or let it warp his overall view”

F.L. Baumer, *Modern European Thought. Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600–1950, 1977, 496*

When A.N. Whitehead left for the U.S., where he would write his major metaphysical works, Robin G. Collingwood (1889–1943) lost a major ally. The philosophical climate in England between the two wars was characterized by an anti-metaphysical attitude which manifested itself first in Cambridge, from the thirties onwards became dominant in Oxford, and eventually found a programmatic expression in A. J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic*. In this analytic and in part even neo-positivistic climate, Robin George Collingwood, appointed professor in metaphysics at Magdalen College in 1935, in fact was a “lone wolf.” Hence, it cannot be surprising at all that in this period he felt more related to Whitehead’s metaphysical thinking than to the ideas of his “Oxbridge” colleagues.

If this philosophical congeniality may be admitted, it is noteworthy that hardly any mention of the relation between Whitehead and Collingwood has been made. Victor Lowe does not even mention his name once in his biography of Whitehead; James Connelly is the only one who refers to the biographical relation between both authors¹ and there are sparing references to their respective friendship with Samuel Alexander.² In this paper, my aim is to fill up this gap by showing in four stages the philosophical affinities between the two authors, albeit from a very specific view, i.e. their interpretation of the relation between realism and idealism and the impact of these interpretations on their respective concepts of metaphysics.

First, I present Collingwood’s interpretation of what Whitehead meant by “a transformation of some main doctrines of Absolute Idealism onto a realistic basis”. Subsequently, it is shown how both authors make a clear-cut distinction between realism, subjective and objective idealism. Next, the concepts of ‘eternal

¹ <https://encyclopedia.whiteheadresearch.org/entries/bios/scholarly-legacy/r-g-collingwood/>: “Despite outliving Collingwood, Whitehead was his senior by some twenty eight years. The two met on various occasions, undoubtedly at the International Congress of Philosophy held on Oxford in September 1930 and, prior to that, at meetings of the Aristotelian Society in London in the years immediately before Whitehead’s departure for the USA in autumn 1924. The key point however is that Collingwood expressed an enormous admiration for Whitehead and that there were important affinities between the two.”; see as well: James Connelly, ‘Natural Science, History and Christianity’. In David Boucher & Bruce Haddock (ed.), *Collingwood Studies*, IV, 1997, 101–132.

² James M. Connelly, “Becoming Real: The Metaphysics of Samuel Alexander and R.G. Collingwood”. In A. R. J. Fisher (ed.), *Marking the Centenary of Samuel Alexander’s Space, Time and Deity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 193–210 (2021); Guido Vanheeswijck, “R.G. Collingwood and A.N. Whitehead on metaphysics, history, and cosmology”, *Process studies*, 27 :3–4 (1998), p. 215–236.

objects' (Whitehead) and 'abstract entities' (Collingwood) are presented as the respective building-stones of their philosophies' idealist flavor. Against that background, the specific task of the metaphysician is elucidated and a comparison is made between Collingwood's definition of metaphysics as the historical study of absolute presuppositions and Whitehead's definition of philosophy as framing "a scheme of ideas, the best that one can, and unflinchingly to explore the interpretation of experience in terms of that scheme".

Finally, it is shown that, whereas Collingwood's aim was to rescue the philosophical status of metaphysics by studying the historical development of absolute presuppositions, Whitehead applied an identical view of metaphysics so as to correct the philosophers' failure to detect the correct absolute presuppositions in his own era.

1. COLLINGWOOD'S CHARACTERIZATION OF WHITEHEAD'S IDEALISM

In his posthumously appeared *The Idea of Nature*, Collingwood made a distinction between Whitehead's realism and that of analytic philosophy:

His work in philosophy forms part, and a very important part, of the movement of twentieth-century realism; but whereas the other leaders of that movement came to it after a training in late-nineteenth-century idealism, and are consequently realistic with the fanaticism of converts and morbidly terrified of relapsing into the sins of their youth, a fact which gives their work an air of strain, as if they cared less about advancing philosophical knowledge than about proving themselves good enemies of idealism, Whitehead's work is perfectly free from all this sort of thing, and he suffers from no obsessions; obviously he does not care what he says, so long as it is true. In this freedom from anxiety lies the secret of his success. (*IN*, 165).

In *An Autobiography*, he radicalized that distinction, interpreting Whitehead's realism as contradictory to the realistic epistemology of the neo-positivists. Collingwood interpreted Whitehead's own characterization of his cosmology as "a transformation of some main doctrines of Absolute Idealism onto a realistic basis" (*PR*, xiii [viii]) as follows:

In Whitehead the resemblance is more with Hegel; and the author, though he does not seem to be acquainted with Hegel, is not wholly unaware of this, for he describes the book as an attempt to do over again the work of 'idealism', 'but from a realist point of view'. Actually, however, if 'realism' means the doctrine that the known is independent of, and unaffected by, the knowing it,

Whitehead is not a ‘realist’ at all; for his ‘philosophy of organism’ commits him to the view that everything which forms an element in a given ‘situation’ is connected with everything else in that situation, not merely by a relation of compresence, but by interdependence. It follows that, where one element in a situation is a mind, and a second element something known to that mind, the knower and the known are interdependent. This is precisely the doctrine which it was the chief aim of the ‘realists’ to deny. (A, 45–46)

Hence, he concluded that Whitehead’s cosmology was in fact constructed on an anti-realistic principle.³ This statement must be understood in a very specific way, i.e. as a rejection of epistemological realism. Adherents of realist epistemology hold the doctrine that the known is independent of the process of knowing, whereas their idealist opponents hold that the process of knowing is intimately related to what is known. In that sense, it is definitely clear that Whitehead’s process philosophy of organism is based on a non-realistic epistemology.

Does the fact that the recognition of the interdependence of the knower and the known automatically imply that Whitehead embraced an idealist epistemology? In his article, “Whitehead, idealism and relativity”, Ronny Desmet argues convincingly that Whitehead opposes epistemological idealism as well: “In *SMW*, he writes: ‘I am speaking of the philosophic idealism which finds the ultimate meaning of reality in *mentality that is fully cognitive*’ (*SMW* 63 – his emphasis). In other words, according to Whitehead, one can only speak of idealism if the experience that is given ontological priority is identified with full cognitive mentality, whereas in his philosophy of organism – also called process philosophy – occasions of experience are occasions of ‘*prehension*’, and a prehension may or may not be a ‘*cognitive apprehension*’, but in general is an ‘*uncognitive apprehension*’ (*SMW* 69).”⁴

Even if it may be granted that Whitehead rejected idealist epistemology for its exclusive emphasis on cognition at the detriment of non-cognitive apprehension, the question remains how he related to, for instance, Kant’s subjective idealism or to absolute idealism, embraced by a number of his neo-Hegelian colleagues and friends in Great-Britain and the United States in that period? Collingwood’s remark that the resemblance of Whitehead’s epistemology is more with Hegel, seems to point into the latter direction. But before trying to find an answer to that question, one has to distinguish between an epistemological variant of idealism and an ontological one. Again, Collingwood may act as a guide to clarify that distinction.

³ A, 46. Collingwood’s characterization of Whitehead as being not a realist needs to be nuanced. Whitehead is a realist in the sense that he repudiates representationalism; it is in this sense as well that Collingwood calls Bradley (and himself) a realist: cf. *TNMS*, 27 / *EM*, 370–371.

⁴ See R. Desmet, “Whitehead, idealism and relativity”, published in this volume, see pp. 293–314.

2. COLLINGWOOD'S DISTINCTION BETWEEN REALISM, SUBJECTIVE IDEALISM AND OBJECTIVE IDEALISM

Both in his 'Correspondence with Gilbert Ryle' and in *An Autobiography* (A, 56) Collingwood bluntly rejected being labelled as 'idealist' and considered the old dichotomy of Idealist-Realist as completely out of date:

In point of fact, I was brought up as a Cook-Wilsonian Realist (we *did* use *that* label, freely, before the war) and since rebelling against that creed I have been working towards a position based on what is, for me, almost an axiom (evidently not for you), that the old dichotomy of Idealist-Realist is as out of date in philosophy as the Gilbertian Liberal-Conservative in politics. In this enterprise I represent nobody but myself: and 'protest' no particular allegiance to 'Plato, Kant in his less Humian moods, and Hegel'. In fact, I protest allegiance to nobody. (CGR, 2 / EPM, 256)

However, in the opening lines of the never published manuscript, "Realism and Idealism. Central Problems in Metaphysics"⁵, Collingwood holds out the prospect of arguing how the very emergence of objective idealism, the metaphysical theory he adheres to, results from the disappearance of the old dichotomy between realism and idealism:

If we scrutinise the actual meanings of the terms, and the essential points of the doctrines for which they stand, we shall find that, when certain side-issues and misunderstandings are cleared up, there is a tendency for the two types of theory to converge and for the apparent antagonism between them to disappear. The result of this disappearance is the emergence of a type of metaphysical theory which in the concluding lectures I shall describe under the name of *objective idealism* (italics mine); and it is the main thesis of these lectures that some such theory is alone capable of dealing with the problems which today confront the metaphysician. (RI, 1)

The major part of *RI* depicts indeed into detail the historical background of the modern controversies between epistemological realism and idealism, against which Collingwood then develops the main characteristics of the metaphysical theory he defines as objective idealism. Moreover, he clarifies his allegiance to Plato, Kant and Hegel in the elaboration of that theory which "is alone capable of dealing with the problems which today confront the metaphysician."

In fact, what Collingwood had in mind, was to find a middle course between epistemological realism and ontological materialism on the one hand and subjective idealism on the other. Actually, his metaphysical theory of objective

⁵ The manuscript will be published in 2026 (Oxford University Press, eds. Mathieu Marion & Guido Vanheeswijck).

idealism was an answer to the main problem that was set, for him in particular and for post-Kantian philosophy in general, by the opposition between subjective idealism and realism/materialism. Kant insisted that nature is constructed according to the a priori categories of the human mind; science and common sense on the other hand agreed in thinking not only that the material world of nature existed long before mind began to exist, but also that mind is in some sense the child of nature:

If materialism had been enough, there would have been no need for subjective idealism, which was in fact a one-sided insistence on the reality and rationality of mind. If subjective idealism had been enough, there would have been no attraction in materialism, which was a one-sided insistence on the priority of matter to mind in the actual course of the world's history (*RI*, 95/101).

Put differently, Collingwood agreed to the realist / materialist in saying that the material world was prior to mind, and to the subjective idealist in believing that the material world could not exist except as logically posterior to ideas or categories as unity and plurality, reality and negation. He never doubted Kant's assertion that we must possess ideas a priori in order to have any experience of the material world. But the question was whether these ideas can only exist in people's heads or can exist in themselves, as Plato and Hegel thought they did, in the shape of pure ideas, independently of our thinking them.

Subjective idealism begins as a theory of knowledge, and works round to metaphysics from that starting-point. [...] Objective idealism also says that reality consists of ideas. But by this it means something quite different. Idea is here not an epistemological term but a metaphysical term. [...] In saying that reality consists of ideas, [objective idealism] is saying that there is a distinction between the ideas or principles exemplified in natural things and these things themselves; that the principles are not mere abstractions and processes [...] (*RI*, 104)

In subjective idealism a priori ideas are abstractions of the human mind; within an objective idealist perspective they are part of an immaterial realm, a logical framework within which alone the worlds of nature and mind can arise. They are the building-stones of an evolutionary process in which things are brought into actual existence which in the previous stage existed only potentially:

Thus [objective idealism] conceives the world of nature as something derived from and dependent upon something logical prior to itself, a world of immaterial ideas; but this is not a mental world or a world of mental activities or of things depending on mental activity although it is an intelligible world or a world in which mind, when mind comes into existence, finds itself completely at home. (*RI*, 104)

In the last sections of *RI* Collingwood explicitly links this theory of ‘objective idealism’ to the future of metaphysics. Neither naïve realism nor subjective idealism can bridge the modern gap between the subjective and objective worlds, which had originated in late medieval nominalism. Following Hegel, he states that “the mistake of subjective idealism [...] was to think that ideas could exist only in our heads, whereas [...] the mistake of the materialist is to think that ideas could exist only as embodied in matter.” (*RI*, 99–100) Only objective idealism will break down the mutual antagonism between the two worlds:

[...] the main metaphysical idea which inspired [Hegel’s system], the conception of objective idealism, is the most promising of all the metaphysical ideas current today, and in my judgment the only one which is likely to prove fertile in the metaphysical work to be done in the near future. (*RI*, 102)

Since objective idealism is not an epistemological theory of knowledge but a metaphysical theory of reality, there need be no quarrel with epistemological realism as a theory of knowledge. The objective idealist agrees to the realist that we know the reality as it is but amplifies this view in a twofold way. Whereas epistemological realism adheres to a clear-cut distinction between truth and error and rather tends towards a pluralistic ontology, objective idealism maintains the doctrine of the degrees of truth and rather tends to monism: “Thus, what this view really implies about knowledge is not that in order to know any one thing we must have an exhaustive knowledge of everything in the world, but that in order *really* to know any one thing [...] we must have some general conception of the world as a whole, a conception which becomes more and more precise as it approaches those particular things which are especially relevant to the one we know.” (*RI*, 118c-d)⁶

And since objective idealism is a metaphysical theory of reality, there need be no quarrel with subjective idealism either. As heir to the Kantian so-called Copernican revolution, Collingwood knows that “knowing makes a difference to what is known” and accordingly that unqualified realism is untenable. However, accepting the historical context of *each* possible approach towards reality, as Collingwood does, not only undermines the universal claims of the Kantian transcendental subjectivity, it also seems to give rise to cognitive relativism. In order to evade the danger of cognitive relativism, due to the historicizing of transcendental subjectivity, objective idealism amends subjective idealism by taking recourse to the Hegelian position that ideas do not only exist in people’s heads but are pure ideas, independent of our thinking them.

⁶ Here, Collingwood attacks Russell’s often heard objection to idealism. Cf. Rusu & Desmet, “Whitehead, Russell, and Moore: Three Analytic Philosophers”, p. 219: “[...] Russell ascribed the organic view to idealists like Bradley and Joachim and rejected it by means of the argument that it would render knowledge impossible because ‘a thorough knowledge of one thing would involve a thorough knowledge of the whole universe’. This rejection, which stood at the center of Moore and Russell’s revolt against idealism, opened the door to an atomic view of isolated things and propositions, only externally instead of internally related.”

3. WHITEHEAD'S DISTINCTION BETWEEN REALISM, SUBJECTIVE IDEALISM AND OBJECTIVE IDEALISM

Let us now return to the question whether or not Whitehead was an idealist, and if so, what kind of idealism he embraced. Like Collingwood, Whitehead seems to relativize the opposition between idealism and realism at first glance, “by saying that the ‘distinction between realism and idealism depends on what university you have been brought up in’ [...] If you have been brought up in Oxford, you call yourself an idealist, but if you have been brought up in Cambridge, a realist.” (*HL1* 347–349)⁷

Obviously, Whitehead rejects subjective idealism as well. In the preface to *Process and Reality*, he repudiates the Kantian doctrine which considers the objective world as a theoretical construct of the human experience. In the third chapter of the second part, he explains this repudiation:

The philosophy of organism is the inversion of Kant’s philosophy. The *Critique of Pure Reason* describes the process by which subjective data pass into the appearance of an objective world. The philosophy of organism seeks to describe how objective data pass into subjective satisfaction, and how order in the objective data provides intensity in the subjective satisfaction. *For Kant, the world emerges from the subject; for the philosophy of organism, the subject emerges from the world* (italics mine). (*PR*, 88 [135–6])

Also regarding Hegel’s position, he had a rather ambivalent relation. Inspired by his friend Haldane, Whitehead read books about Hegel. In his autobiographical notes he confessed to have attempted to study some of Hegel’s remarks on mathematics. Because they struck him as complete nonsense, he was no longer interested in a first-hand acquaintance with the German idealist, who failed to connect his philosophy with science. Nonetheless, Whitehead’s confession in the Preface to *PR* that the final outcome of *PR* “is after all not so greatly different from Bradley’s” (*PR* xii–xiii) is consonant with two of the very scarce references to Hegel in *PR*. There he writes “that the final analogy to philosophies of the Hegelian school, noted in the Preface, is not accidental” (*PR* 167) and that the concrescence of an occasion of experience as the development of a subjective aim “is nothing else than *the Hegelian development of an idea* (italics mine).” (*PR* 167).⁸

The congeniality with Collingwood’s approach to Hegel is apparent. In *IN*, he formulates concisely his ambivalent relation to Hegel’s position: “Hegel was struggling to bring about a synthesis. [...] He was right in thinking that a synthesis

⁷ I borrow these quotes from Desmet, “Whitehead, idealism and relativity”, published in this volume, p. 299. For my presentation of Whitehead’s approach to idealism, I am strongly indebted to this article.

⁸ For this information, I am again indebted to Ronny Desmet, “Whitehead, idealism and relativity”, published in this volume, p. 298.

was needed. I do not say that he was right with regard to the particular synthesis at which he arrived.” (*IN*, 132) In *PH* Collingwood makes the explicit point that “in respect of its relation to logic, Hegel did not even claim autonomy for history, far less achieve it” (*PH*, 107), whereas his final verdict in *IN* with regard to Hegel’s approach to natural science is that “[Hegel] was in a hurry, and tried (having committed himself to an unsatisfactory distinction between natural science and philosophy) to solve by philosophy the problems of natural science, not seeing that natural science must solve its own problems in its own time and by its own methods. He tried to anticipate by philosophy something which in fact could only be a future development of natural science.” (*IN*, 132)

Collingwood’s ambivalence towards Hegel was summarized concisely in the following quote: “His system, imposing as it is and forming one of the most impressive monuments of philosophical thought, perhaps the most impressive since the close of the Middle Ages, contains a great deal of jerry-building and could not possibly be accepted even by his warmest admirers now, a hundred years after his death.” (*RI*, 104)

Moreover, Whitehead’s confession that the final outcome of *PR* “is after all not so greatly different from Bradley’s” reminds us of Collingwood’s attitude towards Bradley, who interpreted the latter’s work as a form of realism, antithetical to subjective idealism but compatible with objective idealism: “The most general name for this school of thought [he refers here to Bradley] is Realism; but in using that name, with its implied antithesis to Idealism, we must always be careful to think of Idealism as a name not for the objective or absolute idealism of a Plato or Hegel, but for the subjective or psychological idealism of the nineteenth century.” (*TNMS*, 27)⁹

Against that backdrop, it is no surprise that Collingwood considered Whitehead’s cosmology as an improved version of Hegel’s, more in accordance with recent scientific findings:

[...] this is a remarkable fact about modern cosmology, that the physical science of to-day has arrived at a view of matter and energy which so far agrees with the implications of Hegel’s theory of nature, that a philosopher-scientist like Whitehead can restate Hegel’s theory (not knowing that it is Hegel’s, for he does not appear to have read Hegel, so far as I can judge) and allow that theory to take him wherever it likes, setting his sails to it with a good conscience and cheerfully resolving the concept of nature, as he says himself, into the concept of pure activity. What is possible for Whitehead, however, was not possible for Hegel, because the physics of Hegel’s day was still the physics of Galileo and Newton, a physics conceived in terms of things ‘simply located’ (to use Whitehead’s term) in space. (*IN*, 127–128).

⁹ Collingwood’s reappraisal of Bradley’s *Appearance and Reality* was elaborated in the manuscript “The Metaphysics of F.H. Bradley: An Essay on ‘Appearance and Reality’” (dated Christmas 1933). It was reprinted in the revised edition of *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, pp. 227–252.

4. ETERNAL OBJECTS AND ABSTRACT ENTITIES: THE BUILDING-STONES OF OBJECTIVE IDEALISM

I would like now to focus on one aspect of their common idealism, viz. the status and function of what Whitehead calls ‘eternal objects’ and Collingwood ‘abstract entities’. What Collingwood actually had in mind was not only to find a middle course between subjective idealism and realism, but between the epistemological variants of realism and nominalism as well. In his ‘Correspondence with Ryle’ (*CGR / EPM* 253–326) he actively took position on this issue by arguing against the unquestioned assumptions of nominalism:

I conclude with an attempt, which I recognize as a perilous one, to sum up. It seems probable, to me, that the fundamental point at issue between us is concerned with the way in which we answer the question ‘what is a universal?’ [...] It looks to me as if, in your logic, this question was answered by saying ‘a universal is a class’; i.e. that whenever we make a statement (assent to a proposition) about ‘all x ’ we are really making n statements about the n instances of x which exist. The theory of universals is thus, so to speak resolved into the theory of classes. It seems to me that this analysis applies not only, as at first sight one might suppose, to enumerative or ‘every’ propositions about classes of ‘matters of fact’, but also (following Russell) to ‘any-’propositions concerned with ‘relations between ideas’: the general doctrine being that any account of a ‘universal’ can be analysed without residue into an account of ‘class’. *This would represent a line of thought more or less identical with logical nominalism.* (italics mine)

In my own view, this line of thought is so far from satisfactory that it inverts the necessary order of analysis and is thus a case of *obscurum per obscurius*. I am disposed to think that what makes a number of things instances of a class is their common possession of some common nature, and that this common nature (the so-called ‘universal’) is thus the *ratio essendi* of the class as such. Instead of resolving the theory of universals into the theory of classes, I should therefore be inclined to take the opposite line, of resolving the theory of classes into the theory of universals. *This of course is akin to logical realism.* (italics mine)

[...] So the question which most fundamentally seems to divide us appears to me the question: Is a universal simply a class, or is it that which makes the class a class? – where you take the first alternative and I the second.” (*CGR*, 28 / *EPM*, 291–293)

Collingwood’s option to take the opposite line of Ryle by resolving the theory of classes into the theory of universals is reminiscent of Whitehead’s equating the forms of definiteness with Platonic ideas or universals: “these forms of definiteness are the Platonic forms, the Platonic ideas, the medieval universals.” (*FR*, 26)

It is abundantly clear that in the thirties, Collingwood got more and more influenced by Whitehead's ideas, in particular by the latter's notion of 'eternal objects'. Already in the manuscript "Method and Metaphysics" from 1935, he elaborated the theory of objective idealism by distinguishing three kinds of reality: "abstract entities", "minds" and "bodies". Abstract entities are in his view merely potentialities, logically preceding both material reality and human thought. Apart from "minds" and "bodies", they remain pure potentialities, which can only be actualized *in both*. The way in which he defines abstract entities in this manuscript suggests a strong analogy between them and what Whitehead calls "eternal objects", as interpreted by Collingwood both in *CNM* and *IN*.¹⁰

Moreover, in the same manuscript he explicitly addressed the ontological status of what he circumscribes as 'abstract entities' in comparison with that of bodies and minds, by applying the method of scale of forms, developed in *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, to the relation between the three of them. Accordingly, he defined a priori knowledge of 'abstract entities' as a kind of knowledge in which they are not merely contemplated as instanced here or there in the world of body or mind, but in themselves; and that on the assumption that we know things as they are, 'abstract entities' are not merely instanced in bodies or minds but are in themselves (*MM*, 15–16 / *EPM*, 341–342).

Put differently, Collingwood wished to demonstrate that these three components of reality – bodies, minds, abstract entities – constitute a scale of forms by showing in a reverse order that their mutual relationship is characterized by the combination of differences of degree with differences of kind (*MM*, 17–18/ *EPM*, 354–346); by the combination of distinction and opposition (*MM*, 18–20/ *EPM*, 346–348) and by the fact that each term in the scale sums up the scale to that point (*MM*, 20–24/ *EPM*, 348–352).

On the basis of this threefold analysis of the interrelation between abstract entities, bodies and minds, Collingwood concluded with regard to their respective ontological status or, in his own terminology, their degree of reality, that:

The world of bodies is more real than the world of abstract entities, and there is some justification for feeling, as I think that most of us do feel, whatever we are told to the contrary, that the world of abstract entities is only a ghost-world – unearthly ballet of bloodless categories – a shadow world as compared with what by contrast we call the real world. (*MM*, 22–23/ *EPM*, 350)

In 'Realism and Idealism. Central Problems in Metaphysics', Collingwood clarified the meaning of the term 'abstract entity' – the term '*a priori*-idea' is a synonym – against the contrastive background of the epistemological theory of subjective idealism and the metaphysical theory of objective idealism in the following, already partly quoted sentences:

¹⁰ See *MM*, 14–27 / *EPM*, 340–355; cf. *IN*, 169–173; *CNM*, par.33 and following / *PH*, 262–270.

In saying that reality consists of ideas, [objective idealism] is saying that there is a distinction between the ideas or principles exemplified in natural things and these things themselves; that the principles are not mere abstractions and processes [...] Thus it conceives the world of nature as something derived from and dependent upon something logical prior to itself, a world of immaterial ideas; but this is not a mental world or a world of mental activities or of things depending on mental activity although it is an intelligible world or a world in which mind, when mind comes into existence, finds itself completely at home. (*RI*, 104)¹¹

A priori ideas are no abstractions of the human mind, but form an immaterial world of potentialities, that are not only preconditions of the sensible reality, but also of human thought itself. Collingwood's introduction of 'abstract entities' and his stress on their sheer potential character illustrate his middle course between Kantian subjective idealism and naïve realism on the one hand and ancient / medieval realism and nominalism on the other. Therefore, he finally rejected the Whiteheadian term 'eternal objects' in favour of the term 'abstract entities', because in his eyes the former still smelled too much of ancient realism. By using the term abstract entities, he wished to underline their sheer potential character, being part of a 'ghost-world – unearthly ballet of bloodless categories – a shadow world' in comparison to the visible world.

Against that backdrop, Collingwood emphasized that objective idealism must always remain unfinished:

Objective idealism [...] holds that this distinction between sheer knowledge and sheer error, as two compartments into which our supposed or pretended knowledge can be sorted out, is a vicious over-simplification; and that in fact any example of so-called knowledge is partly truth and partly falsehood. But this does not mean that it is a compound, in which there is a certain amount of truth and a certain amount of falsehood juxtaposed, like a mixture of sugar and sand. The fact is rather that, whatever we know, we know it in a more or less confused way; we never actually, in any of our thoughts, attain that complete or final clarity and distinctness that would entitle them to be called absolutely true, and the confusion on the other hand is never so complete as to justify describing the thought as an absolute unmitigated error. This view implies that the element of error in our thought is the same thing as the element of confusion; and since there cannot be a confusion unless there is something there to be confused, there can be no such thing as pure error or pure illusion, and consequently the problem of error, meaning by that the problem "what is pure error?" does not arise. (*RI*, 110/116)

Notwithstanding Collingwood's rejection of the Whiteheadian term 'eternal objects', precisely this aspect of Collingwood's objective idealism is analogous to

¹¹ An identical concept has been elaborated in *IN*, 174–177.

Whitehead's position regarding the status of knowledge as partly true and partly false in *The Function of Reason*:

There is a conventional view of experience, never admitted when explicitly challenged, but persistently lurking in the tacit presuppositions. This view conceives conscious experience as a clear-cut knowledge of clear-cut items with clear-cut connections with each other. This is the conception of a trim, tidy, finite experience uniformly illuminated. No notion could be further from the truth. In the first place the equating of experience with clarity of knowledge is against the evidence. In our own lives, and at any one moment, there is a focus of attention, a few items in clarity of awareness, but interconnected vaguely and yet insistently with other items in dim apprehension, and this dimness shading off imperceptibly into undiscriminated feeling. Further, the clarity cannot be segregated from the vagueness. The togetherness of the things that are clear refuses to yield its secret to clear analytic intuition. The whole forms a system, but when we set out to describe the system direct intuition plays us false. Our conscious awareness is fluctuating, flitting, and not under control. It lacks penetration. The penetration of intuition follows upon the expectation of thought. This is the secret of attention. (*FR*, 63)

5. METAPHYSICS AND SCIENCE. RESCUING THE PHILOSOPHICAL STATUS OF METAPHYSICS (COLLINGWOOD) VERSUS CORRECTING THE PHILOSOPHERS' FAILURES (WHITEHEAD).

At first glance, Collingwood's famous definition of metaphysics as the historical study of absolute presuppositions in *An Essay on Metaphysics* is analogous to Whitehead's definition of philosophy as framing "a scheme of ideas, the best that one can, and unflinchingly to explore the interpretation of experience in terms of that scheme" in *Process and Reality*. But in the context of this article, viz. regarding the specific role of idealism in Collingwood's and Whitehead's concepts of metaphysics, the first question popping up is how Collingwood's definition of metaphysics as a historical study of absolute presuppositions is related to his definition of metaphysics as objective idealism.

In order to answer this question, the metaphysical theory of objective idealism and the view of metaphysics as the historical study of absolute presuppositions must be seen as two sides of the same coin. While on the ontological level Collingwood considers immaterial ideas ('abstract entities') as the 'things' upon which the world of nature and mind depends, on an epistemological level he sees historically changing absolute presuppositions as different human expressions of these 'abstract entities' in different eras. By tracing their inner dynamics, the metaphysician attempts "to find out what we can about the general nature of reality". Only a form of metaphysics which focuses upon the relation between 'abstract entities' and its historically changing manifestations on the one hand and

the internal strains between these historically evolving actualizations on the other, can evade both relativism and dogmatism. It is this metaphysical doctrine that Collingwood defines as objective idealism, being the theoretical background for the practice of metaphysics as a historical discipline.

Therefore, Collingwood's aim was to rescue the philosophical status of metaphysics by studying the historical development of absolute presuppositions. In his eyes, the metaphysician's task is twofold: first to trace the absolute presuppositions of different epochs, and then to reconstruct the historical process by which one constellation of absolute presuppositions turns into another. Only in that way can it be made clear how being manifests itself in the evolution of human thought. Accordingly, the metaphysician's main task is to give an accurate description of which absolute presuppositions were held in a definite period.

Is that concept of metaphysics akin to Whitehead's concept of metaphysics? In my view, it is. Whitehead applied an identical view of metaphysics so as to correct the philosophers' failure to detect the correct absolute presuppositions in his own era:

Insofar as philosophers have failed, scientists do not know what they are talking about when they pursue their own methods; and insofar as philosophers have succeeded, to that extent scientists can attain an understanding of science. With the success of philosophy, blind habits of scientific thought are transformed into analytic explanation. (*FR*, 48)

Moreover, Whitehead underlined the importance of a historical approach towards the relation of metaphysics and natural science in a similar vein as Collingwood: "This antagonism between philosophy and natural science has produced unfortunate limitations of thought on both sides. Philosophy has ceased to claim its proper generality, and natural science is content with the narrow round of its methods. The seventeenth century had built the categorical notions of the sciences so firmly that the divorce from philosophy practically had no effect on immediate progress. We have now come to a critical period of the general reorganisation of categories of scientific thought." (*FR*, 50)

This strong analogy between Whitehead's view on cosmology as an historical discipline and Collingwood's attempt to rescue the philosophical status of metaphysics by studying the historical development of absolute presuppositions is most obvious in the following passage:

At certain epochs a cosmology may be produced which includes its predecessors and assigns to them their scope of validity. But at length, that cosmology will be found out. Rivals will appear correcting it, and perhaps failing to include some of its general truths. (*FR*, 71)

It is also worth mentioning that the term ‘objective idealism’, used by Collingwood, is not found in Hegel’s writings. In the manuscript ‘The Nature of Metaphysical Study’, Collingwood distinguishes between “the objective or absolute idealism of a Plato or Hegel” (*TNMS 27 / EM*, 370), thereby suggesting that the term ‘objective idealism’ is rather Platonic than Hegelian. Actually, the term itself is found in Whitehead’s *Science and the Modern World*, more specifically within a context where the latter examines the distinction between realism and idealism:

The distinction between realism and idealism does not coincide with that between objectivism and subjectivism. Both realists and idealists can start from an objective standpoint. They may both agree that the world disclosed in sense-perception is a common world, transcending the individual recipient. But the *objective idealist* (italics mine), when he comes to analyse what the reality of this world involves, finds that cognitive mentality is in some way inextricably concerned in every detail. This position the realist denies. Accordingly these two classes of objectivists do not part company till they have arrived at the ultimate problem of metaphysics. (*SMW*, 90–91)¹²

Whether Collingwood was familiar with this passage is not certain. Either way, Collingwood’s objective idealism is, as indicated, indeed more akin to Whitehead’s position than to Hegel’s absolute idealism. In my view, Collingwood fully agreed to Whitehead’s statement that the concrescence of an occasion of experience as the development of a subjective aim “is nothing else than *the Hegelian development of an idea* (italics mine).” (*PR* 167). This Hegelian development of an idea is the building-stone of Collingwood’s concept of objective idealism as well.

6. HISTORICAL METAPHYSICS AND COSMOLOGICAL METAPHYSICS

At first sight, Collingwood’s historical and Whitehead’s cosmological concepts of metaphysics seem to have not much in common. By means of the foregoing comparative analysis, I have tried to show that both authors in fact have the same purpose. Their basic inspiration is identical: elaborating a metaphysics in terms of which the nature of being can be interpreted. In order to construct a metaphysical system both authors do not only take into account actual entities or concrete events, but also the potentialities or formative elements (‘abstract entities’ or ‘eternal objects’) that are actualized in these events.

In respect to the way these eternal objects or abstract entities are actualized, Collingwood, unlike Whitehead, distinguishes explicitly between actualization on the

¹² See also p. 67, where he examines Berkeley’s variant of idealism. Wilhelm Dilthey often makes use of the term objective idealism as well, but in a completely different sense from Collingwood. For more information, see Vanheeswijck 2025, 71–99.

conscious level of thought and on the non-conscious level of material reality. I am aware that this difference between the two authors must be mitigated, since Whitehead is fully aware of the different shape prehension might take on respectively conscious and non-conscious levels. But Collingwood, more than Whitehead, explicitly makes use of that distinction so as to elaborate his concept of metaphysics. Put differently, in opposition to Whitehead's 'reformed subjectivist principle', Collingwood takes as a *methodological* starting point the ontological distinction between 'minds' and 'bodies'. On the basis of this divergent methodological starting point, Collingwood's project is called a *historical* metaphysics and Whitehead's project a *cosmological* metaphysics.

However, this formulation might suggest Collingwood is ruling out the cosmological aspect of a metaphysical inquiry, which is, of course, not the case. Both history and cosmology play a role in his view of metaphysics, but the historical study of human thought is primordial, cosmology or the study of nature being itself a product of human thought. Collingwood still holds this view of the relation between cosmology and history, elaborated from 1935 onwards, in *The New Leviathan* that dates from 1942. This is the conclusion of the first part, "On Man":

18.91. The object of scientific study, for a man who has taken part in the progress of human thought down to the present time, is history. The world of Nature, first the law-abiding Nature of modern science and second the end-seeking Nature of Greco-medieval science, is as real as you will; but it is not history, it is the background of history.

18.92. It is in the world of history, not in the world of Nature, that man finds the central problems he has to solve. For twentieth-century thought the problems of history are the central problems: those of Nature, however interesting they may be, are only peripheral. (*NL*, 129)

Accordingly, the differing appearance of their concepts of metaphysics has especially to do with a different background and, consequently, a different methodology. Collingwood, as an historian, is especially interested in the question how being manifests itself in the history of thought. To answer this question he shows, by means of a historical-logical analysis of the evolution of absolute presuppositions, how the eternal philosophical questions in every epoch have manifested themselves in a different way, and how the different metaphysical answers can only be understood as answers to these questions. Accordingly, the metaphysician's task is twofold: first to trace the absolute presuppositions of different epochs, and then to reconstruct the historical process by which one constellation of absolute presuppositions turns into another. Only in that way the metaphysician might clarify how being manifests itself in the evolution of human thought.

In Whitehead's metaphysics, this historical aspect comes less to the fore. Trained in logic, mathematics and positive sciences, his main intention was to bring philosophy once again in touch with the sciences of his era (electromagnetism,

quantum mechanics, relativity theory, non-mechanical biology) and to elaborate a cosmological-metaphysical theory on the basis of the analysis of their presuppositions.

I call their differing concepts of metaphysics *complementary* for two reasons. First, Whitehead complements Collingwood by not only constructing a concept of metaphysics, but also by elaborating a metaphysical system. Mainly due to his premature death, Collingwood did not elaborate a metaphysical system of his own, only making some tentative endeavors in the manuscripts *NTM*, *MM* and *CNM*. After 1936, he confined himself to the justification of the possibility of the project of metaphysics in response to neopositivist attacks, without being able to elaborate that project himself.

Second, Collingwood complements Whitehead by stressing the question of the transcendental conditions of the possibility of a metaphysical project.¹³ On the one hand, Collingwood participates in (and has undoubtedly contributed to) what may be called (cultural, epistemological and ontological) contextualism, i.e., the idea that reason does not function as the external criterion of culture, but is indebted to the culture in which it operates. On the other, Collingwood thinks – unlike contextualism – that this culture-bound rationality must be criticized time and again by rationality itself. History neither evolves as a continuous process determined by eternal rational principles nor is it unreasonable because reason itself is historical. Precisely in following the inner process of historically changing absolute presuppositions, the metaphysician follows the way in which the ‘abstract entity’ being evolves.

As a result, the kinship between Collingwood and Whitehead becomes most obvious in those writings in which they discuss the status of philosophical rationality. In this respect, there is a particularly strong resemblance between Whitehead’s small and suggestive work in the philosophy of science, *The Function of Reason*, and Collingwood’s methodological treatise, *An Essay on Philosophical Method*.¹⁴

In *The Function of Reason*, Whitehead makes a distinction between practical and speculative reason, between the reason of the foxes and the reason of the gods.¹⁵ Practical reason is bound by factors in the world, making use of efficient methods to grasp them and to dominate the world. But human nature transcends the urge to dominate the world; it wants a ‘better life’. Therefore, another function of reason is needed, that of theoretical reason, looking for an insight into the complexity of reality as a whole. This theoretical or speculative reason, anarchist in its search for transcending the existing methods to deal with reality, is itself bound to method: even

¹³ Still one may not forget that Whitehead treats the concept of history and the conditions of the possibility of metaphysics as well in his discussions with Descartes, Locke, Hume and Kant (see Whitehead 1978, 39–60), without making them a central issue.

¹⁴ In this respect I also refer to the resemblance between Whitehead’s concept of metaphysics, as elaborated in the first chapter of the first part of *Process and Reality*, “Speculative Philosophy”, and in the second part of *Adventures of Ideas*, “Cosmological”, and Collingwood’s concept of metaphysics in the manuscripts “Correspondence with Gilbert Ryle”, “Notes towards a Metaphysic” and “The Function of Metaphysics in Civilization”.

¹⁵ *FR*, 7.

in transcending (practical) methods, speculative reason is bound by a (speculative) method.

This method is twofold: on the one hand, speculative philosophy builds systems of abstractions in terms of which all elements of our experience can be interpreted. Simultaneously, it is acutely aware of the incompleteness of every abstraction and the endlessness of the philosophical search for always more perfect abstractions. Hence, it is typical of speculative reason to criticize time and again its own abstractions. Speculative reason only transcends itself by criticizing itself. However, speculative reason is inhibited by the massive ‘obscurantism’ of human nature, the refusal to speculate freely about the limits of traditional methods. Obscurantism of every generation finds its primary spokesmen in those who maintain the dominating methodology. In the first part of the twentieth century, Whitehead saw the (neo)positivists as its paradigmatic representatives.

In *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, Collingwood defines a philosophical system as a scale of forms, in which every form differs in kind and in degree. In conformity to this definition the historical development of metaphysics is also seen as a development of a scale of forms. Such a definition implies that no metaphysical system is applicable to every situation, in all instances. On the contrary, every new situation demands a *modification* of the system. Hence, an unchangeable method by means of which all philosophical problems can be solved is completely out of question. But admitting this does not imply that philosophy/metaphysics is without method: its own method consists precisely in the repudiation of a rigid method. Philosophy/metaphysics demands

not a random flexibility, a mere looseness in the application of a method nowhere quite appropriate; it is a uniform or methodical flexibility, in which the method changes from one topic to another because form and content are changing *pari passu* as thought, traversing its scale of forms, gradually approximates to the ideal of a perfectly philosophical subject-matter treated by a perfectly philosophical method. (*EPM*, 192)

Collingwood, like Whitehead, refers to the positive scientists and neopositivist philosophers as ‘obscurantists’ who repudiate the methodology-transcending thought of genuine metaphysics:

Throughout the [19th] century the tendency of European thought was increasingly to deny and neglect metaphysics. Natural science, by the mouth of positivism, presented itself not only as a natural science, but as a substitute for history (under the name of sociology), a substitute for religion (under the Comtian name of ‘la religion de l’humanité’) and a substitute for metaphysics (under the name of positive philosophy). The contempt for metaphysics, openly expressed on all sides, as e.g. in the slogan of the German positivists, *keine Metaphysik mehr*, did not mean that natural science was not to be allowed any

presuppositions. Whatever, it did not mean that no metaphysical propositions were to be accepted. It meant that such propositions were not to be catalogued or codified. It meant that they were to be kept hidden and not promulgated. They were to do their work in the dark. *The ruling class of natural scientists, like so many tyrannies in the course of history, regarded a refusal to publish the laws by which it ruled as an indispensable instrument of its own tyranny* (italics mine). The class of persons on whom by the tradition of centuries the task fell, of bringing to light the hidden presuppositions of everyday thought, whether scientific or historical, (I refer of course to the official teachers of philosophy) were treated with a contemptuous neglect. (*FMC*, 29–30 / *EM*, 380–381)

In the manuscript ‘Notes Towards a Metaphysic’, Collingwood’s terminological resemblance with Whitehead’s terminology is most striking. There Collingwood defines philosophy as a thought systematically fighting against its own abstractions¹⁶, describing the development of metaphysics as appealing “to a world of ideal objects towards which the world of experience has an asymptotic nusus”¹⁷, a metaphor Whitehead also makes use of in *The Function of Reason*. (*FR*, 43)

In sum, Collingwood, like Whitehead, insists that metaphysics lives on systematic thought: to understand is to see connections. At the same time they share the acute awareness of the incompleteness of each metaphysical system: it is dependent on an unlimited background of presuppositions, out of which it arises and to which it continuously refers. Still, it offers a matrix to interpret all the elements of our experience. Each metaphysical system is an effort to elucidate the mystery of being, to make explicit its implicit meaning. At the same time, its primary task consists in criticizing the elucidation achieved: “Rivals will appear correcting it, and perhaps failing to include some of its general truths.” (*FR*, 71) In this way, according to Whitehead, “mankind stumbles on in its task of understanding the world.” (*FR*, 71)

Stumbling on in its task of understanding the world, the historian Collingwood cannot but situate his own concept of metaphysics within the great metaphysical tradition:

To a person who does not understand what philosophy is, or by what processes it moves, the history of sixty generations appears as a chaos, the record of random movements hither and thither by wandering planets, which no theory of epicycles can reduce to reason. But this appearance of irrationality, I make bold to say, cannot survive the discovery that philosophical thought has a structure of its own, and the hypothesis that in its changes it is obeying the laws of that structure. Thus, from the point of view of a rational theory of philosophy, the past history of philosophical thought no longer appears as irrational; it is a body of experience to

¹⁶ *NTM*, E, 58.

¹⁷ “[Theoretical reason] does not abolish consciousness or experience, but it appeals to a new world which is not and never can be experienced: a world of ideal objects towards which the world of experience has an asymptotic nusus.” (*NTM*, D, 87)

which we can appeal with confidence, because we understand the principles at work in it, and in the light of those principles find it intelligible. (*EPM*, 224)

To illustrate his great admiration for Whitehead, the latter's metaphysics is greeted by Collingwood as a new stage, in continuity with that metaphysical tradition:

In Whitehead's work all the leading conceptions of these new sciences have been fused into a single view of the world which is not only coherent and simple in itself but has also consciously connected itself with the main tradition of philosophical thought; Whitehead himself, [...] claims continuity with the philosophical tradition. Whitehead has escaped from the stage of thinking that the great philosophers were all wrong into the stage of seeing that they were all right; and he has achieved this, not by philosophical erudition, followed by an attempt at original thought, but by thinking for himself first and studying the great philosophers afterwards. (*IN*, 170)

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Abbreviations:

For Collingwood:

Published works:

- A*: *An Autobiography*. London: Oxford University Press, 1939. Rev. ed. With essays on Collingwood's life and work edited by David Boucher and Teresa Smith, 2013.
- EM*: *An Essay on Metaphysics*. Revised Edition with "The Nature of Metaphysical Study", "Function of Metaphysics in Civilization", "Notes for an Essay on Logic". Edited with an Introduction by Rex Martin. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998.
- EPM*: *An Essay on Philosophical Method*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933; rev. edn. With an Introduction and Additional material edited by James Connelly and Giuseppina D'Oro, 2005.
- IN*: *The Idea of Nature*. Ed. T.M.Knox. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945.
- NL*: *The New Leviathan*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942. Rev. edn. With an Introduction and Additional material edited by David Boucher, 1992.
- PH*: *The Principles of History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, edn. With an Introduction by W.H. Dray and W.J. van der Dussen, 1999.

Manuscripts:

- CGR*: "The Correspondence with Gilbert Ryle" (1935). Reprinted in *EPM*, 253–326.

CNM: "Conclusions to Lectures on Nature and Mind" (1934, 1935). Reprinted in *PH*, 251–270.

FMC: "Function of Metaphysics in Civilization" (1938). Reprinted in *EM*, 379–421.

MM: "Method and Metaphysics" (1935). Reprinted in *EPM*, 327–55.

NTM: "Notes Towards a Metaphysic" (1933–34). A small part reprinted in *PH*, 119–39.

RI: "Central Problems in Metaphysics. Realism and Idealism" (1935). Unpublished manuscript.

TNMS: "The Nature of Metaphysical Study" (1934). Partly reprinted in *EM*, 356–78.

WCM: "What Civilization Means" (1940). Reprinted in *NL*, 480–511.

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FR: *The Function of Reason*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1929.

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