A Proof of Collingwood's Thesis

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Introduction

Robin George Collingwood claimed in *An Autobiography*;

> 'In order to find out his [a man] meaning you must also know what the question was (a question in his own mind, and presumed by him to be in yours) to which the thing he has said or written was meant as an answer,'[1]

In another book he said

> 'Every statement that anybody ever makes is made in answer to a question'[2].

We could formulate his claim into the following thesis
　'every statement has meaning only in the relation to a question to which it is an answer',
that we will call 'Collingwood's thesis'.

Gadamar referred to Collingwood's idea of 'Logic of question and answer' and developed his method of hermeneutics based on it. (Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamar, 'Wahrheit und Methode', the 4. edition, J. C. B. Mohr Tuebingen, 1975, pp. 351-360.)As Gadamar put his attention on it, Collingwood's thesis' is provocative and would yield significant results in many fields of philosophy.

I am planning to develop the theory of meaning, philosophy of knowledge, and Social philosophy on the basis of Collingwood thesis. So it is very important to prove this thesis. But it does not seem to me that Collingwood provided us a strict proof of it. So, the aim of this lecture is to prove Collingwood's thesis strictly.

We would like to prove the Collingwood's thesis by paying attention on the concept of focus in linguistics.

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[1] R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography,* Clarendon Press Oxford, 1978, p. 31

[2] R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics,* Clarendon Press Oxford, 1998, p. 23. Gadamar referred to Collingwood's idea of 'Logic of question and answer' and developed his method of hermeneutics based on it. Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamar, 'Wahrheit und Methode', the 4. edition, J. C. B. Mohr Tuebingen, 1975, pp. 351-360.

In order to proof it I would like to proof two theses;

> Thesis 1: the focus represent an intrinsic constituent factor of meaning of every statement.
> Thesis 2: the focus can be determined only by the relation between question and answer.

If we can proof the two theses, we can deduce the Collingwood's thesis easily from them.
> Collingwood's thesis: every statement has meaning only in the relation to a question to which it is an answer.

1 Explanation of Focus

Except one word sentence, a sentence is usually comprised of many words.
This relation of many words constituting a sentence is called 'syntagmatic'.

$$W1 \; + \; W2 \; + \; \ldots \; + \; Wn$$

On the other hand, words which constitute sentences have meanings tacitly in the relation among similar words of the same kind. This relation is called 'paradigmatic'.

$$
\begin{array}{lll}
W1 \; + & W2 + \ldots + & Wn \\
W1' & W2' & Wn' \\
W1'' & W2'' & Wn'' \\
\ldots & \ldots & \ldots
\end{array}
$$

When we select a word from words of the same kind to construct a sentence, we must select it in a way like 'not others, but this'.

In the sentence 'S is P' both S and P are selected in the way like 'not others, but this'. But we cannot be conscious of selectivity about all words constituting a sentence.

By the way, we can be conscious of selectivity about only one word or phrase in the sentence.
This is similar with the relation of figure and ground in our perceptions.
Which the Gestalt Psychology pointed out.
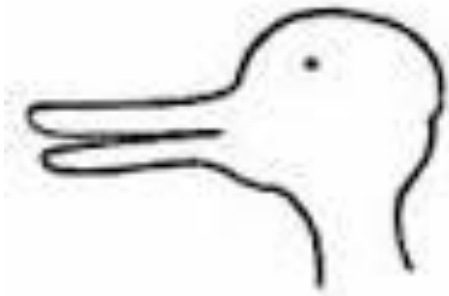
E. g. in a famous reversible figure of a rabbit and a duck, we cannot see it as a rabbit and as a duck simultaneously.

An apple	is	red
a peach		blue
an orange		yellow
……		……

Analogously e.g. in a statement 'An apple is red', supposed that 'an apple' is selected as focus position in the way like 'not a peach, not orange, not a pear, but an apple'.

And 'red' can be also selected as focus point in the way like 'not blue, not yellow, not green, but red'.

But we cannot take these two focus positions simultaneously, because we can select 'red', only after we select 'an apple' as a subject. Or, only after we select 'red' as a predicate, we can select 'an apple' as a subject.

In linguistics, this structure is usually called 'focus'.
The focus is placed ultimately only one place in a statement.

S is P
(not others, but) S is P
S is (not others, but) P

A sentence 'S is P' can be understood in two ways, but not simultaneously
  in one way a focus is put on 'S' and it means '(not others. but) S is P' and in another way a focus is put on 'P' and it means 'S is (not others, but) P'.

2   A Proof of Thesis 1

Here I would like to prove thesis 1. And in order to do it, I will prove the following two claims.

(1) The difference of the focus position is not accidental to the meaning of an utterance.
(2) The difference of focus positions is the logical difference of meaning.

(1) The difference of the focus position is not accidental to the meaning of an utterance.

The distinction between new information and known information can be used to explain why some part of the statement has a focus. This distinction depends on a context. This distinction is attached accidentally to meaning of a statement and not intrinsic for inner structure of meaning of a statement. And the distinction between focus and presupposition coincides in fact actually with the distinction between new information and known information. Therefore one might think that the distinction between focus and presupposition is also accidental to meaning of a statement. But, it is not the case. We shall prove it here.

The difference of focus position is not an accidental factor which is added to the statement in a context after the meaning of the statement is confirmed. Because, as I said before, when we think e.g. that S is P, we think it necessarily in one way, '(not others, but) S is P' or 'S is (not others ,but) P'. We cannot understand any meaning of a sentence without a focus, like in the perception of the reversible picture.Therefore we can say.**The difference of the focus position is not accidental to the meaning of a sentence or an utterance.**

Furthermore the difference of focus positions is not only a psychological matter but also a logical matter. I would like to show it.

(2) The Difference of Focus Positions is the Logical Difference of Meaning.

The difference of focus positions was neglected in the tradition of logic. It might be understood as a rhetorical subtle nuance of a statement as G. Frege claimed so. But it is not only a rhetorical difference but also a logical difference of meaning. E.g. let us think the following syllogism.

S is M. (minor premise)
M is P. (major premise)
    S is P. (conclusion)

How can we identify the focus positions in these sentences? If no clue is offered, the focus can be arranged in many ways.

But if this syllogism is treated as process for answering a question, then the positions of focus become explicit according to the following:.

What is S?
S is (not others, but) M. (minor premise)
M is (not others, but) P.   (major premise)
Therefore S is (not others, but) P. (conclusion)

The focus of the question 'What is S?' is on 'What'. Suppose that the first thought in response to 'What is S?' is 'S is M'. In this statement 'S is M', 'S' presents known information and 'M' represents new information, therefore the focus is on 'M'. If the next thought is 'M is P', then 'M' represents known information and 'P' represents new information. So in this statement 'M is P' the focus is on 'P'. At last, the conclusion can be derived as an answer to the question. The order of minor premise and major premise in this series of inference is significant and cannot be changed to its converse. Because it would be unnatural for the statement "M is P," which omits S, to be the firs reaction to 'What is S?'

Therefore a syllogism for answering the following question would involve changes in focus positions and in the order of premises.

What is P?
(Not others but) M is P.   (major premise)
(Not others but) S is M.   (minor premise)
Therefore (not others but) S is P. (conclusion)

The focus of this question is also on'What', therefore the focus of the conclusion as an answer to it is on 'S'. If one is asked 'What is P?' and thinks up 'M is P', then 'M' is the focus. Next, If the second response is s 'S is M', then 'S' is the focus. And the conclusion can be derived from them.

We can make the process of inference explicit by considering focuses. Therefore we can say, t**he difference of focus positions is the logical difference of meaning**

(1) **The difference of the focus position is not accidental to the meaning of an utterance.**

(2) **The difference of focus positions is the logical difference of meaning.**

Therefore we could claim

Thesis 1: the focus represents an intrinsic constituent factor of meaning of every statement.

3   A Proof of Thesis 2

We would like to prove

Thesis 2: the focus can be determined only by the relation between question and answer.

As mentioned above, the same sentence can have different focus positions, i.e. a focus holds in an utterance in a certain context and it does not belong to contents which are decided by semantic conventions. It is in the relation of question and answer that the focus position becomes explicit. So, the same sentence can be used as an answer to different questions. and the identical answer can have different focus positions. We can show the following examples.

The Faculty of Letters doesn't have this kind of entrance exam.

This sentence can have different foci in relation to different questions

Q1: Does the Faculty of Letters have this kind of entrance exam?
A1: The Faculty of Letters doesn't have this kind of entrance exam.

Q2: Which faculty does not have this kind of entrance exam?
A2: The Faculty of Letters doesn't have this kind of entrance exam.

Q3: What kind of entrance exam does the Faculty of Letters have?
A3: The Faculty of Letters doesn't have this kind of entrance exam.

This is not limited to the case of questions which request an *assertive* utterance as an answer. John Searle divided five kinds of illocutionary acts, i. e. assertive, directive , commisive, expressive, and declarative. We can say same thing also in other kinds of illocutionary acts. The focus of a

directive utterance like an order or a request are also made explicit in the relation to the question which request it as an answer as follows.

> Q4: <u>Which</u> do you want to put away?
> A4: Please put away **<u>this!</u>**

> Q5: <u>What</u> do you want me to do about this?
> A5: Please **<u>put away</u>** this!.

The focus of a *commisive* utterance like a promise is also made explicit in the relation to a question and answer like a following example.

> Q6: <u>Who</u> runs for us?'
> A6: <u>I</u> run.

> Q7: <u>What</u> do you do?
> A7: I <u>run.</u>

We could raise similar examples of *expressive* and *declarative* utterances. If we understand the wh-question to which a statement is an answer, then we can decide a focus position of the statement. On the contrary if we decide a focus position of the statement, we can make a wh-question which requests it as an answer. Therefore we can say that the focus position is decided only by the relation of question and answer.

But we could not say still that the focus position is decided <u>*only*</u> by the relation of question and answer. How could we prove it?

(1) Every utterance has only one focus.
(2) To understand a position of a focus is to pay attention to a particular part and understand the particular part as a result of selection from similar terms which are in a paradigmatic relation.
(3) Such selection is possible <u>***only***</u> as giving an answer like 'not others, but this' to a wh-question. (The interrogative words like 'what', 'which', 'how', 'when', 'where', etc indicate the selection.)

Therefore we can claim that the understanding of a focus position is possible *only* by the relation of question and answer.

Then we can claim thesis 2:

Thesis 2: the focus position can be determined only by the relation between question and answer.

We have proved the two theses

Thesis 1: the focus is an intrinsic constituent factor of meaning of every statement.

Thesis 2: the focus position can be determined only by the relation between question and answer.

From these two theses we can prove the Collingwood's thesis.

Collingwood's thesis: every statement has meaning only in the relation to a question to which it is an answer.

4 Another Proof of Collingwood's Thesis: Context, Inference, and Relation of Question and Answer

I would like to prove Collingwood's thesis from another point of view. It would be taken for granted in general that the meaning of an utterance is understandable only in a context. When we understand the meaning of an utterance from a context, we presuppose the context and infer the meaning of the utterance from it. Therefore we can say

Thesis3: to understand an utterance in a context is conducted only by a inference

If we can prove the thesis 4

Thesis 4: Every inference is possible only by relation to the question which has the conclusion of the inference as an answer.

We can prove the Collingwood's thesis from these two theses

So, I will prove the thesis 4 here. There are a lot of conclusions which is logically inferable from certain presuppositions.

$$S \text{ is } M$$
$$M \text{ is } P$$

'S is not non-M', 'Some M is S', 'Some non-S is non-M',

'M is non-P', 'Some P is M', 'Some non-M is non-P',

'S is P', 'S is not non-P', 'Some P is S', 'Some non-S is non-P', etc.

Suppose that a syllogism has two premises 'S is M' and 'M is P', then we can infer 'S is not non-M', 'Some M is S', 'Some non-S is non-M' etc. directly only from 'S is M', and we can also infer 'M is

non-P', 'Some P is M', 'Some non-M is non-P' etc. directly only from 'M is P', and we can also infer 'S is P', 'S is not non-P', 'Some P is S', 'Some non-S is non-P' etc. indirectly from the two premises. We cannot decide logically which sentence should be inferred as a *conclusion* from given premises. There are many logical possibilities. But we are inferring in fact one conclusion by inference. Why can we actually only one conclusion logically from premises? There must be something other than premises and it prompts us to infer *only one conclusion*. This is a question, or exactly speaking, a relation of question and answer.

In which situation do we make inferences? It is when we want to answer to a question. In order to find out an answer to a question, we make an inference. Let us remember the example which we described in section 2.

> <u>What</u> is S?
> S is <u>(not others but) M</u>. (minor premise)
> M is <u>(not others but) P</u>.　(major premise)
> Therefore S is <u>(not others but) P</u>. (conclusion)

We can infer many conclusions logically from these two premises. But in order to answer to the question 'What is S?', we are prompted to select one conclusion 'S is P'. **Only this among many logical possible conclusions** can be a reasonable answer to the question.

Therefore we can claim

> Thesis 4: Every inference is possible only by relation to the question which has the conclusion of the inference as an answer.

We can clam thesis 3 and thesis 4, therefore we can claim the Collingwood's thesis

5 Conclusion

The Collingwood thesis can be applied in many fields in philosophy
   ・**Logic between questions and answers**
   ・**Theory of meaning　Brandom Dammett Prawitz**
   ・**Theory of knowledge**
   ・**Social philosophy**