

Imaginary Works of Art and Real Emotions

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ABSTRACT. In *The Principles of Art* Collingwood makes two claims that are hard to reconcile. On the one hand he gives a mind-dependent account of the artwork. On the other hand he assigns a central role to expression and communication. This paper shows that his insistence on a purely mind-dependent artwork is a remnant from an earlier account, which he provides in his 1924 *Speculum Mentis*. Collingwood fails to see the inconsistency in his later account because he partially addresses the arising problems by incorporating the production and the confrontation of a sensible object into his account of artistic activity. Finally I argue that dropping the idealist commitments does not harm the essential goals of Collingwood's theory.

There has been some recent interest in Collingwood's theory, both in whether it is successful or not and in drawing on his account in order to contribute to the recent discussion. The latter was beautifully done by Jenefer Robinson in her 2005 *Deeper than Reason*. Needless to say, when we draw on Collingwood for our contemporary discussion, we should be motivated to make sure that the elements of his account that we want to take up don't depend on a metaphysical basis that we want to reject. So our current interest in Collingwood's theory of expression should also make us interested in how the main elements of the whole picture he provides hang together and motivate us to explain why he holds the things we want to reject.

In *The Principles of Art* R.G. Collingwood makes two claims that are hard to reconcile. On the one hand he gives a purely mind-dependent account of the artwork by characterizing it as a special type of subjective experience. On the other hand he assigns a central role to expression

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and communication. But expressing or communicating involves mind-independent elements: the content of what is expressed or communicated is determined by something mind-independent, the tokens used have to be mind-independent, and there are intentions tied to expression and communication that go beyond one's own mind (Collingwood 1938, p. 301, all references not marked differently are to this work).

The first goal of this paper is to state Collingwood's theory insofar as it leads to the seemingly conflicting claims. There has been some debate over whether the claims are really conflicting or can be shown to be consistent after all by looking at the details of Collingwood's account. Richard Wollheim argued that there is a real conflict (Wollheim, 1972), Aaron Ridley argued that we can read Collingwood such that no conflict arises (Ridley, 1997). Agreeing with a recent discussion by David Davies (Davies, 2008), I will conclude that the conflict remains. The argument I want to give is more general than the one Davies gives in his paper. The second part of this paper adds a historical point. I will show that we can understand why Collingwood gives a mind-dependent account of the artwork in the *Principles of Art* by looking at his earlier works. The described conflict also plays a role in his 1924 *Speculum Mentis*. But there he takes a different perspective on it. He takes art to contain a fundamental error and to be a more primitive form of cognitive activity that has to be overcome. I will argue that what he says about the artwork as being self-contained and ideal in the *Principles of Art* is a remnant from his earlier theory, which fits well with his argumentation against theories he opposes in the *Principles*. He does not recognize that it does not fit his theory of expression and communication, which, motivated by other accounts of his time, he includes and develops in the *Principles*. The reason why Collingwood overlooks the fact that a conflict remains is that he addresses the issue partially and takes it to be solved. But a consistent theory of art as essentially expressive and communicative requires him to concede that the subjective experience central to art refers beyond itself.

I. Can Total Imaginative Experience Communicate and Express?

At the end of the first book of the *Principles* Collingwood introduces the work of art as an imaginary object. It may be "completely created when it

has been created as a thing whose only place is in the artist's mind" (p. 130). He illustrates this with the example of a tune. The tune is neither the notes written on a sheet (p. 135) nor the tones produced when the tune is performed; it is an idea in the composer's mind (p. 139). The artwork is "total imaginative experience." In creating or enjoying an artwork we unite elements associated with different senses into one experience.¹ Collingwood wants this unified experience to be independent of which senses are actually stimulated and finally independent of there being a sensible object at all.

Let me stick with the Pastoral Symphony a little longer. Hearing the piece we might imagine seeing a pastoral landscape and moving around in it, smelling the flowers and feeling the warm sun on our face. But we don't actually see, smell or feel anything and the fact that we actually hear something, according to Collingwood's remarks in the *Principles*, is coincidental. In some passages he goes even further and requires the activity of total imaginative experience to be purely self-contained. Having the status of an artwork is supposed to be independent of referring to something in reality at all: "Imagination is indifferent to the distinction between the real and the unreal" (p. 136). This contains the classical idea of disinterestedness as not referring to any external end but goes beyond that. An artwork does not contain any truth about reality although the experience of reality supplies us with material for aesthetic experience (p. 306).

Like Croce and Dewey, Collingwood believes that expression fulfills a clarificatory function. At the outset of the clarifying process we know that we are emotionally affected. But we are not able to pin down what exactly it is that we are feeling and this leads to a feeling of oppression. In making or enjoying an artwork we are able to get a grip on our emotions (p. 111). And this grip goes beyond the grip we would get if we learned to name, that is to classify, the emotion. The artwork can capture all the nuances of the particular emotion we are experiencing. We are able to individualize the emotion. Let me go to another example but stick with great symphonies. Assume that Dvorak's ninth Symphony is a product of

¹In his earlier aesthetic theories Collingwood makes it more explicit that imagination is concerned with unity. But as far as I can see there is nothing that would really oppose a reading of the imagination as a unifying faculty. In the *Principles* Collingwood still picks up on Kant's theory of the imagination as a faculty links other faculties (p. 187).

his emotional response to his new environment in the US. The emotional response is very complex. There are a lot of new things to see and learn, and he finds a lot of beauty and fascination in them. But he also misses the routine, the lifestyle and the people in Prague. Dvorak is homesick but there is more to learn about this feeling than the concept by itself can express.

Expression of emotion turns into communication of emotion if the emotions expressed by the artist are emotions he has in common with other human beings who can be his audience: “if what he is trying to do is to express emotions that are not only his own merely, but his audience’s as well, his success in doing this will be tested by his audience’s reception of what he has to say. What he says will be something that his audience says through his mouth and his satisfaction in having expressed what he feels will be at the same time, in so far as he communicates this expression to them, their satisfaction in having expressed what they feel” (p. 312). The audience is able to reproduce the clarifying activity of expression thereby being able to clarify emotions for themselves.

We can now clearly see problems arising: if total imaginative experience is fully self-contained:

- (1) What is it that we are clarifying (doesn’t it have to be something mind-independent)?
- (2) How can it be captured in a token?
- (3) How can it be communicated between different subjects?

(1) Answering the first question is a serious problem for Collingwood. In the process of expressing emotions we are concerned with learning something about our reality. We get to know our emotional consciousness of reality. A reply to this could be that learning about our faculties does not count as infringing the criterion of being self-contained. But clarifying our emotions is concerned with reality in a different way than a Kantian free play of the faculties would be. The process of expressing emotions is a reaction to a particular emotional affection with which reality confronts us. Collingwood’s expression of emotion is different from other cases in which we want to say that something is expressed, for example expressing a proposition. We don’t have *a grasp on* the content before expressing it.

Nevertheless it is important to note that the expression *has* a specific content: the nature of the emotion we are getting a grasp on.

(2) Collingwood addresses the second question. He states the problem clearly in the beginning of chapter XIV of the *Principles*. How can a token, being a real and not imaginary object (such as the painting on the wall, the sounds we hear sitting in the concert hall or the pages we are turning), capture an emotion? His answer is the following: producing the token as an artist or confronting the token as an audience is part of the clarifying process (p. 303). Either interacting with the token is part of the total imaginative experience itself or it is conducive to it. The relation between total imaginative experience and the interaction with the token is ambiguous in this respect.

We find a closely related ambiguity if we look at the relation between total imaginative experience and what Collingwood takes to be the artwork proper. His statements suggest two different ways of relating these two. First he says that “Works of art are only means to an end; the end is total imaginative experience which they enable us to enjoy” (p. 148). According to this the artwork is only a necessary condition for total imaginative experience, that is the token that the artist produces while having total imaginative experience, which again triggers total imaginative experience in the audience. But, shortly after this, he also gives the following definition: “a work of art proper is a total activity which the person enjoying it apprehends, or is conscious of, by the use of his imagination” (p. 151). Here the artwork is described as being identical to the total imaginative experience of artist or audience. In light of Collingwood’s picture as a whole, I think we can disregard the first reading or we have to assume that Collingwood uses “artwork” in two different senses. The artwork can’t be only the token because obviously the token is an object in reality and the artwork is supposed to be essentially ideal. If the artwork is not total imaginative experience itself the only thing it could still be is an *imaginary* object bringing about total imaginary experience. But this is to assume that there are two levels of imagination at work (one creating the artwork and one engaging in total imaginative activity), which is implausible, or at least needs further elaboration that Collingwood does not provide.

If we bring his solution of the conflict in chapter XIV together with

the second reading, according to which the artwork is total imaginative experience itself, the token becomes part of the artwork. This is contrary to some of the remarks he makes earlier on, suggesting that the artwork has no connection whatsoever to sensible objects, but it is far more plausible than the first reading. Other interpreters of the *Principles* seem to endorse this reading, too though they don't explicitly point out the ambiguity we find in the text. Ridley for example describes Collingwood as "emphasizing [...] the imaginative contribution of the spectator to the experience — not the divorce of that experience from its sensuous basis" (Ridley 1997, p. 268). The work of art is not something completely distinct from the notes written on a sheet or the tones produced when the piece is performed. It is reading the notes or hearing the tones *as* music.

These considerations show that the *Principles* do give an answer to the question what the status of a token is. But this account of tokens does not help us answer the third question: How is it that total imaginative experience can be communicated from one subject to another?

(3) Producing or sensing the token is very often part of the activity of total imaginative experience. But it by no means contains everything essential to it. This implies that the role Collingwood assigns to the token is not sufficient for giving an account of art as communication. The fact that producing the token belongs to the artist's imaginative activity in which he clarifies his emotions does not imply that the token enables the audience to clarify their emotions in the same way. There is no explanation as to why the audience should have "a total imaginative experience identical with that of the painter" which it should have according to Collingwood (p. 308). He concedes that we can never be completely sure about the identity (p. 309). But the issue can be pushed further: we have no reason to assume that they are engaging in the same (or even in a sufficiently similar) activity. Why should artist and audience or different members of the audience engage their sensory imagination in the same way and have the same emotions if the token by itself does not carry emotional content?

II. From Art as Primitive Cognition to Expression as the Specific Purpose of Art

I have argued that the theory of total imaginative experience in *The Principles of Art* can't accommodate the expressive and communicative role that it assigns to art. Collingwood takes himself to have addressed the conflict in chapter XIV but strictly speaking he only attends to the problem of making room for a sensible object as part of the total imaginative experience. He does make room for expressing and communicating emotional content. But it should now be clear that such content is required for the expression and communication he refers to. Collingwood's supposedly imaginary artworks have real emotions as their content. The reason why he does not explicitly concede that there is such emotional content present is that it conflicts with the self-contained character of total imaginative experience. Naturally the next question is: why does he take it to have this character? As I will show, we can explain this by seeing that he adheres to an idea formed in his earlier work.

In his earlier theory, spelled out in *Speculum Mentis*, Collingwood rejects that art has an expressive or a communicative role. There is no content that refers to anything beyond the artwork: "apparent statements are not statements, for they state nothing; they are not expressions, for they express no thought. They do not express his imaginations, for they are his imaginations" (Collingwood 1924, p. 63). He characterizes the desire to communicate as unnatural to the artist: "every artist who can recollect the actual aesthetic experience knows that in this experience the world of men and things is forgotten, and that any desire to communicate or seek an audience for his thoughts is subsequent and alien to the experience itself" (Collingwood 1924, p. 69).

Art is portrayed as a form of cognition that is to be overcome (Collingwood 1924, p. 86). The fundamental error art makes is precisely to assume both that the activity of the imagination can be purely self-contained and that it can reveal truth. His earlier theory altogether rejects the idea of art as conveying a form of truth. Art understood as pure imagination is cut off from reality: "for pure imagination there is no real world, there is only the imaginary world" (Collingwood 1924, p. 89). Art is only concerned with creating unity in experience. It is characteristic for artistic activity that we

abstract from all meaning that we might attach to these unities. Besides denying that art has any epistemological function Collingwood also denies that it has an ethical purpose. It is unable to “solve the problem of life” (Collingwood 1924, p. 69).

The concept of a self-contained activity of the imagination fits in very well with Collingwood’s argumentation against competing theories of art. All of them have in common that they don’t take artistic activity to be self-contained. Representation refers to something beyond itself, which it represents. Craft, magic and amusement all refer to some independent end that is supposed to be attained by them. Given the claims from his earlier theory it seems natural to assume that art proper is distinguished by its independence: it tells us neither what is the case nor what should be the case.

But, as I have pointed out, according to the *Principles* art *does* tell us what is the case. It tells us that we are having a specific kind of emotion. Being clear about our emotions can furthermore inform our moral decisions. Collingwood’s theory of total imaginative experience does contain an essential element of a truth-centered theory of art. It still contains the idea of unity in the concept of total imaginative experience in which imaginations associated with different senses interact in a certain form. But this unity expresses and communicates something beyond itself. I have further argued that Collingwood’s theory of communication requires him to permit emotional content independent of the subjective total imaginative experience that artist and audience go through.

Does Collingwood’s theory retain its core if it permits art to refer to our emotions as something that exists in reality independent of total imaginative experience? Can it attain its goals and at the same time admit that there is content captured in the object itself? I think that we can answer both questions positively. Total imaginative experience is still distinct enough to enable a fundamental critique of the other aesthetic theories Collingwood wants to reject. Expression remains to be more than just representation. An ordinary representation just refers us to an object. Expression brings out the nuances of its object. It gives it to us as a particular. But this does not mean that what we are gaining through expression is something unreal. The diffuse feeling we are having before we go through the clarifying process and the nuanced feeling we get a grip

on through expression are equally real. The emotion may be transformed through what Collingwood calls total imaginative experience but there is continuity in that what we have after the clarifying process is still the same response to certain features in our environment. Let's go back to the example we have used before: Dvorak in the new world is homesick. It is a response to being overwhelmed with many new things and to him missing his daily routine and being around the people he is used to. And this is the case whether he can pin down that he is homesick or not and whether he is aware of the details that trigger the emotional response or not.

The other main goal of Collingwood's theory is avoiding to get anywhere near an arousal theory or any other theories that can put art in the service of immediate pragmatic purposes. Conscious of the European political situation in the 1930s, he tries to show that the characteristics of actual art are incompatible with the characteristics of what has been put in the service of the propaganda machinery. But the fact that the expression and communication theory Collingwood provides in the *Principles* is tied to reality more closely than his earlier theory does not mean that he cannot achieve this goal. We can still understand the account as being far from an arousal theory: in order to be able to go through the clarifying process the audience already has to have the right emotional response to their own environment. The artwork only triggers the clarifying process not the original emotional response. Propaganda art speaks to very general emotional patterns such as fear, exultation and hatred. According to Collingwood art is supposed to help us get beyond these general patterns and get a better understanding of what it is that we are feeling.

Between his earlier and his later theory, Collingwood moves from characterizing art as losing its purpose once we move on to higher forms of cognition (Religion, Science, History and Philosophy), to claiming that there is one purpose that is unique to art and cannot be fulfilled by other forms of cognition. This purpose is the clarification of emotions through an instance of total imaginative experience. Total imaginative experience is very often the result of communication between artist and audience through the work. What artist and audience learn to understand through art are the nuances of their own emotional reactions to their environment. I have argued that, despite Collingwood's efforts to the contrary, making room for this purpose is inconsistent with still retaining a purely mind-

dependent and self-contained theory of the artwork. The theory we are presented with in the *Principles* has elements of both a truth-centered account and an account that focuses on unity of experience. We should therefore understand Collingwood's idealism about artworks as a remnant of his earlier theory that fits well into his argumentation against the aesthetic theories he is opposing. He wrongly assumes that he can hold on to both components of the theory because he can partially address the problem by integrating the sensible object into the total imaginative experience of both artist and audience. But, looking more closely, we can see that giving up on the strong idealist character of the account does not put at risk the main goals that Collingwood has set for himself. It is easier to draw on Collingwood's account for our contemporary debate, if we understand why he endorses the elements of his theory that we might want to reject.

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