

COLLINGWOOD ON ART AS IMAGINATIVE EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

A work of art, our common-sense view suggests, is the product of the artistic activity. The artistic activity in question involves the manipulation of any kind of physical medium, and a work of art results from that manipulation. Sometimes, the activity of manipulating the medium is possible solely in the artist's head exercising no physical medium. Literature and music are such kinds of art, though we find literature and music in certain kinds of physical forms. However, these physical forms are not works of art in their real nature. R. G. Collingwood¹ (1889-1943) espouses a view regarding the ontology of art that a work of art exists in the artist's head which is essentially an imaginary thing. In this article, I will scrutinize Collingwood's ontological claim regarding art, that art is an imaginary thing. I will deal with the shortcomings of the imaginative theory and show that this theory is a viable theory of art in relation to the artistic media.

The Work of Art as an Imaginary Thing

Art is defined in *The Principles of Art* (hereafter, referred to as *Principles*) as being expressive and imaginative. Collingwood states, that by saying art is imaginative we mean what it is, and by saying that art is expressive we mean what it does. It is a way of expressing one's unknown and unexpressed emotional states through imaginative

¹ Robin George Collingwood was a British philosopher famously known for working on the philosophy of history, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and specially on aesthetics. He is a well-known expressivist aesthetician. Contemporary aestheticians are continuously enlightened by his theory of art. Some of his famous works are, *Speculum Mentis: Or, The Map of Knowledge* (1924), *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* (1925), *The Principles of Art* (1938), *Essay on Metaphysics* (1940), *The New Leviathan* (1942), *The Idea of History* (1946), etc. Collingwood's early writings on aesthetics are found in the *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* but not as much developed as his latter writings on aesthetics found in *The Principles of Art*.

activity. An artist engaged in the creative activity of art is intending to express his/her unexpressed emotion. This creative activity especially takes place in the mind. It is a way of noticing one's emotions imaginatively. Hence, Collingwood says, a work of art is already complete and perfect when it exists only in the mind. Though art is expressive and imaginative, I will focus only on the imaginative aspect of art in order to maintain the primary concern of the article. Collingwood uses the words 'imagination,' 'imaginative,' or 'imaginary' to indicate art. Sometimes he uses 'imagination' as conscious manipulation of the feeling or a process of expression. It helps to express our feelings. In some places in the *Principles*², he identifies 'imaginary' or 'imaginative' as a product of such conscious manipulation that exists in the mind. But the common thing about the phrases such as 'imaginative activity,' 'imaginative experience,' and 'imaginary thing' attributed to art is that they imply that art can be understood with reference to the mental engagement or mental entity.

According to Collingwood, art is an imaginary thing and a kind of making or expressing. This making is very similar to creation, where the artists are creating art deliberately and responsibly. They know what they are doing, but they do not know about the resultant objects that will come out of their processes because art is not a means to a predetermined end. Art is neither made followed by a certain preconceived plan, nor by employing a new form to materials. Unlike other creations, Collingwood says, artwork need not be real or public and physical. It is something to be imagined whose only place is in the artist's mind. Art is not the making of an artifact. Making an artifact comprises two stages; (I) creating the thing in the mind; and (II) fabricating the thing which is like imposing a certain form on some given matter. The activity of art is completed in the first stage, which means it is completed when it is created in the artist's mind, and the latter stage is unnecessary. For instance, a tune is already an existing thing when it has been created in the artist's mind, we may call it an imaginary thing. After that, the artist

² Collingwood divides *The Principles of Art* into three. He named the first part of the book as Book I where he says, that art is an imaginary object. The second part known as Book II provides the philosophical theory of imagination, and the final part named as Book III where he talks about the externalization of art.

may sing it publicly or write it down on paper, this could be called a real tune. Despite that, “The actual making of the tune is something that goes on in his head, nowhere else.... The actual making of the tune is therefore alternatively called the making of an imaginary tune” (Collingwood, 1938, p. 134). Thus, the making of a tune is an imaginative creation, and the same applies to literature, painting, and other works of art.

Artwork implies something physical that can be accessible to all. A piece of music is in the collection of noises, a painting is on its canvas, etc. However, Collingwood claims that the real work is something imaginative, whose only place is in the artist’s mind. Apparently, these two views seem paradoxical. Collingwood assures it is not paradoxical at all, because of the two senses of art, art as a physical object, and art as an imaginary thing, it is only the latter that is actual art. To put it in another way, the artwork is already completed in the composer’s head. Later on, the composer may play the tune publicly but that is not an essential aspect of an object for its being an artwork. Even Mozart and Beethoven thought that “the real work of composition is done in the mind, with writing it down being a trivial matter. Notation, as they describe it, is not something integral to the creative process at all; it comes strictly after the event” (Cook, 1998, p. 64).

The external form of a work is not art proper³. It can be regarded as a means through which an audience can reach the real work that is an imaginary thing or an imaginative experience. The only importance, as Collingwood suggests, of the physical media of art is for the audience who can reconstruct the imaginative experience that the artists had or gone through with the help of it. In order to clarify this, he gives an example of experiencing a scientific lecture that is like experiencing art. Suppose that a man attends a scientific lecture. Usually, the lecture comprises the collections of sounds created by the speaker. The man who attends the lecture is not merely looking for the sounds coming from the speaker, but for the essence of the lecture which primarily consists of the meaning or the expressed experience of the lecturer. The essence of the lecture can be grasped if the man understands what the speaker is trying to express, and if the man

³ In *The Principles*, true art is known as ‘art proper’ that is an imaginative activity whose function is to express emotion.

imaginatively experiences the same content or meaning as experienced by the speaker himself. Only then the man can enjoy the lecture. Likewise, if a man who attends a concert and makes a certain amount of effort for experiencing the sounds as music, can imaginatively reconstruct the experience that is the same as the artist's imaginative experience, only then he can grasp the real work of art.

Comprehensive Character of Imaginative Experience

When it is claimed by Collingwood that a work of art is an imaginary thing or an imaginative experience, it is not suggestive of partly seeing and partly imagining, rather it is a total imaginative activity. It is a comprehensive way of experiencing art. In the creative process of a painting, the painter not merely records what he sees in his surroundings, but he records what he feels, and how he moves in the surroundings. In the picture, the felt content is reflected in the art through the process of imagination. When a spectator experiences a painting, he also (if he knows how to look at a painting) experiences all the manner of motions and hears the sounds which can only be experienced imaginatively, because those things are not accessible to the eyes. The value of any art is determined not by the delightful experiences of sensuous elements that present before the senses, but by the delightfulness of imaginative experiences whose range is far beyond the senses. Taking an example of poetry where an imaginative experience of total activity has been expressed, Collingwood remarks,

Poetry has the power of bringing before us not only the sounds of which constitute the audible fabric of the 'poem', but other sounds, and sights, and tactile and motor experiences, and at times even scents, all of which we possess, when we listen to poetry, in imagination (1938, p. 147).

Thus, a work of art is not only an imaginary thing, rather it is an imaginative experience of total activity which consists of two parts. The first one is an experience of seeing or hearing or the specialized sensuous experience; the consequent part of the experience is a non-sensuous imaginative experience. In the words of Collingwood, "This imaginative experience from the specialism of its sensuous basis, that we may go so far as to call it an imaginative experience of total activity" (1938, p. 148).

Some may argue that the extra content of the total imaginative experience of an artwork is subjective. Experiencing this extra content in a work absolutely depends on the beholder. Since a painting is a collection of its colours, the experience of sounds and motions is not present to our eyes. If the beholder has the power of imagination, then he can experience something more that is not there in the artistic media. The beholder's imaginative power is necessary for experiencing something more that is not primarily available to the senses. If the imaginative experience is regarded as the artwork, we cannot claim that in our world there is only a single piece of Beethoven's 9th symphony, for instance, rather there are countless numbers of Beethoven's 9th symphony imaginatively experienced by countless audiences all over the world because no one's imaginative experience is the same with the other. Even though our experience of a work is very similar to the other. Here Collingwood says if the artist knows how to create a work and if we know how to appreciate a work, then the experience in the work put by the artist and received by the audience would be very close. Thus, an artist's comprehensive imaginative experience is expressed in the art that is shared with the audience.

An Alleged Ideal Theory

Idealism is a philosophical view according to which things or objects exist not in the outer world but in our minds. The ideal theory of art claims a work of art exists in the mind of the artist as well as in the mind of the audience irrespective of its existence in the physical world. In recent times, idealism is a dated viewpoint about the world. We are always keen to refute an idealist point of view about the world, especially about the things that are taken to exist in the empirical world. Collingwood's conception regarding the ontology of art as discussed above is none other than the Ideal theory of art (Wollheim, 1972, 2015; Dilworth, 1998; Kemp, 2003). What Collingwood in his *Principles* says supports the view of the Ideal theory of art. He says,

A work of art need not be what we should call a real thing. It may be what we call an imaginary thing. ...A work of art may be completely created when it has been created as a thing whose only place is in the artist's mind (1938, p. 130).

From the realist point of view, the Ideal theory of art can be theorized in three propositions. Firstly, a work of art consists of an inner state of the artist, i.e., called an expression. Secondly, work is not given but is a product of the process. Finally, an expression can be developed in an artistic media, i.e., as an externalized form of the artist's inner state, but it need not be externalized (Wollheim, 2015). A conclusion can be inferred from these propositions that the Ideal theory only values a work that exists in the artist's mind on the one hand, and on the other, it ignores the value of the artistic media. This is an extreme shortcoming of the Ideal theory that will be discussed below.

Issues in Ignoring Artistic Media

1. Richard Wollheim in the *Art and its Objects* (2015) enquires, that if a work of art is only an imaginary thing or an inner or mental object that exists only in the artist's head, then how is the relationship between the artist and the audience established? It is because of a shared medium that two shores can be linked. Here, the artists and the audiences are the two shores. But we have no bridge between them if we accept that the bridge exists only in the mind of one shore. Hence, only the artists can know or have access to the work.
2. A consequent part of the former objection can be put forth in this way: the Ideal theory promotes the claim, that artwork is free and unmediated and also ignores the importance of the physical medium of art. John Hospers (1956) highlights, as far as the Ideal theory is concerned, that an expression is completed before the artist's engagement with the artistic media, before its externalization. Besides this, Wollheim objects, that according to the ideal theory, a man can be regarded as an artist only because he has an expression in the mind, "the artist is an artist solely in virtue of his inner life" (Wollheim, 2015, p. 76). Empirical evidence insists that artwork exists in a physical medium. The artist's engagement with the public medium is not a trivial matter for his artistic expression. Most artists are enabled to express their emotions successfully only when they interact with the artistic media.

3. It is true that in creating music, the imaginative power of the composer is important. However, it is not only a composer's imaginative experience but the collection of sounds that is the revelation of the artist's soul. If there is disharmony in the sounds, then the performers as well as the listeners can easily get distracted and will not have the intended experience. Thus, it is hard to believe that music only exists internally, and the same applies to the other arts (Saxena, 1994).

Not Ideal Theory

According to the so-called ideal theory, something exists solely in the mind, regardless of its physical existence. The so-called ideal theory of art promotes art as being imaginative and simply rejects the importance of artistic media, and this is the main fault of the so-called ideal theory of art argued against by the realist thinkers, as mentioned above. Aaron Ridley's (1997, 1998, 2011) interpretation of Collingwood's notion of art rescues Collingwood from being labeled as an idealist by showing the significant role of artistic media in his conception of art. Ridley argues that Collingwood was an antirealist "according to which the world is constituted by the thoughts we have about it. Call this Collingwood's Global Idealism" (Ridley, 1998, p. 397). Unlike so-called ideal theory, global idealism acknowledges the importance of the physical embodiment of art. According to Global idealism, artworks are mental items that exist in people's heads. This statement neither implies, according to Global idealism, "the relationship between works of art and the media of their public embodiment must be secondary and contingent" (Ridley, 1998, p. 397) nor "no work of art need ever received embodiment in a publicly accessible medium" (Ridley, 1998, p. 397). In order to understand Collingwood's conception regarding art under his Global idealistic position we need to bracket off his metaphysical position and understand 'thing in the head' as in 'thing in the world,' then it would be clear that when he says, art exists in the artist's head he does not deny its existence in the world. The statement 'thing in the head' has a significant role in his philosophy of art, as Ridley states,

Collingwood is making points about art that do depend on a narrower (but not an Ideal) reference to the mind - points relating to the difference between understanding a work of art and not understanding it. The mediated, publicly accessible work of art is a “thing in the head,” from this perspective, when someone has engaged with it imaginatively and understood it (Ridley, 1998, p. 397).

Very similar to this, we can highlight the crux of Collingwood’s identification of total imaginative activity with language “And language... is inextricably related to bodily behaviour” (Sclafani, 1976, p. 355) that is public. In the case of music, the meaning of music and its verbal reference cannot be understood separately. Mental activities apart from their external manifestation are unintelligible (Sclafani, 1976). Thus, when Collingwood says that art is an imaginative activity it never implies that it is not there as a being in the world.

A step forward in rejecting the ascription of the so-called ideal theory to Collingwood, Ridley (1997) states that a real ideal theory implies a contingent relation between the physical medium of art and its imaginative form. If the relation is contingent, then one can experience the physical form without experiencing its imaginative form, and *vice versa*. In this sense, a work of art becomes purely ideal. But Collingwood holds that art is a total imaginative experience that comprises a physical part and an imaginary part, and these two parts are inseparable. One cannot experience a work of art without experiencing other parts of the work. With a painting,

There are two experiences, an inward or imaginative one called seeing and an outward or bodily one called painting, which in the painter’s life are inseparable, and form one single indivisible experience, an experience which may be described as painting imaginatively (Collingwood, 1938, p. 304-305).

The physical form consists of a collection of audible noises (in the case of music), or a collection of colours on a canvas (in the case of a painting) that is the ‘basis’ for an imaginative experience of the work. The physical medium provides stimuli to the audience, following which the audience can reconstruct the work. Thus, Collingwood

never ignores the importance of the artistic media, but rather says, “Take away the language⁴, and you take away what is expressed” (Collingwood, 1938, p. 244).

Collingwood never ignores the artistic media, but for him, work is mediated; its externalization is not a trivial matter. The making of an artwork is a bodily activity from its starting point. Art, Collingwood reckons, is language and language is a specialized form of bodily gesture. An aesthetic experience for an artist such as the painter is possible when

The painter puts a great deal more into his experience of the subject... in addition, the whole consciously performed activity of painting it... he records there not the experience of looking at the subject without painting it, but the far richer and in some ways very different experience of looking at it and painting it together (Collingwood, 1938, p. 308).

Collingwood understands the importance of the relationship between the artist and the audience and mentions, “The artist’s relation to his audience is thus essential to his being an artist” (Collingwood, 1938, p. 300). The externalized or bodily work is the bridge between the artist and his audience. An artist puts his imaginative experience of total activity into an artistic medium, for example, in a painting, and “we construct for ourselves when we look at the picture” (Collingwood, p. 149). Since work is bodily work, the audience has to access the work and experience the same as the artist experienced. Collingwood remarks,

If he knew how to paint and if we knew how to look at a painting, the resemblance between this imaginary experience of his and the imaginary experience which we get from looking at his work is at least as close as that between the colours he saw in the picture and those we see; perhaps closer (1938, pp. 149-150).

Collingwood did not ignore the significant role of the artistic media. Once the role of bodily work is established and successfully explained, we can say that disharmony in the external medium may obstruct an audience to reconstruct the imaginative experience.

⁴ Language is similar to an artistic medium or publicly accessible medium.

This line of thought implies that, to some extent, the imaginative experience depends on external work.

It is important to note that Collingwood's insistence on the artistic media is very close to his concept of expression. The activity of expressing emotion presupposes one's involvement in the artistic activity (artistic activity is possible when an artist is physically engaged with the artistic media, for example, in the activity of painting or sculpturing.). This point reinforces the importance of artistic media that exist in the outer world.

Understanding 'Inconsistency' in Collingwood

Collingwood's acceptance of artistic media is an easy way to get out from an alleged account of the Ideal theory of art, though this claim about the artistic media does not provide sufficient reason to state that Collingwood did not make an idealistic claim (Dilworth, 1998; Kemp, 2003). Eventually, an acknowledgment of the artistic media makes Collingwood's whole theory of art inconsistent. Our present consideration focuses on the inconsistency in Collingwood's theory of art.

Art as an expression presupposes the significant role of artistic media for the successful expression of emotion. One cannot clarify an emotion without engaging in an act of expressing one's emotion in the artistic media. It is necessary in order to develop and define an experience in the mind an artist must engage himself with the artistic media. Collingwood states in Book III of his *Principles*, "One paints a thing in order to see it. ... A good painter – any good painter will tell you the same – paints things because until he has painted them, he doesn't know what they are like" (1938, pp. 303-304). But in Book I Collingwood puts forth, "A tune... is already complete and perfect when it exists merely as a tune in his (the artist's) head" (p. 139). These two views taken together make Collingwood's whole theory of art seem inconsistent.

The reason for the inconsistency in Collingwood's whole theory of art is that in Book I Collingwood chooses music as an example of art that exists in the mind. He generalizes this concept to other works. In Book III he chooses painting as an example of art and

proves the necessity of artistic media. Now the problem at issue is that it may be possible for music or a short poem to exist in the head. But the same cannot apply to painting. We cannot say that a painting exists in the head in the same way as a poem or music exists in the head (Wollheim, 1972; Davies, 2008). To understand this, the discrepancy becomes important in our consideration of the art process and the resultant work. The discrepancy is very least between a short poem or music that exists in the head and that exists on paper. A poem or music that is on paper is close to its referred imaginative poem or music. This discrepancy would be great between a painting that exists imaginatively and a painting on a canvas (Wollheim, 1972). So, the discrepancy argument entails that other works exist externally and are implausible to exist in the mind only.

Though it seems inconsistent that in Book I Collingwood claims art as something imaginative and in Book III art as an expression involved with the artistic media. But we can positively conclude that the whole theory of art explained in the *Principles* is not inconsistent, though this theory is complex and different from our ordinary understanding. Collingwood asserts,

The artist, as such and essentially, produces... two things. Primarily, it is an 'internal' or 'mental' thing, something (as we commonly say) 'existing in his head' and there only: something of the kind which we commonly call an experience. Secondly, it is a bodily or perceptible thing (a picture, statue, & c.) whose exact relation to this 'mental' thing will need very careful definition (Collingwood, 1938, p. 37).

Thus, the artwork consists of both a mental experience and its physical manifestation. We see above that Collingwood's 'thing in the head' implies 'to understand a work that exists physically.' John Grant (1987) clarifies that 'thing in the head' does not suggest 'exclusively thing in the head.' Physical work is public property. Here, Collingwood uses the word 'public' which means something gets into the head when people engaged intelligently with the artistic media. This point assures that the artistic media and its imaginative experience are inextricably connected. Though an imaginative experience dominates over the physical medium.

It is very difficult to answer the discrepancy argument positively. We can say that on the surface, the creative process is similar for every work, but their differences become visible when the artists engage with the medium. We must agree with Wollheim, that in what sense a poem could exist in the head, a painting, or a more complex artwork like a film could not exist in the head in the same sense. If so, then Collingwood does not make a legitimate generalization, i.e., a work exists in the head, for example, music, and the same applies to painting and other works.

Conclusion

Collingwood holds throughout his *Principles*, that an imaginative experience and an external experience depend on each other, although it is the imaginative experience that he identifies with art. All the confusion is derived from this identification of art with the imaginative experience that exists in the mind which he supported in Book I, and this claim does not match with a realist understanding of art. A realist understanding of art supports, that art is a physical product of the artistic activity, and this product can be accessible by all. In this view, an experience of art commonly known as an aesthetic experience is different from an artwork. An aesthetic experience depends on the concrete physical form of art. It is reasonable to think, that apprehension of aesthetic experience (or any experience) is possible when we mentally engage with the object. Enjoying an aesthetic experience is a mental process, but this does not entail that an aesthetic experience itself is to be recognized as a work of art. Hence, if we follow Collingwood's latter claim on art where he gives importance to the external medium of art, according to which physical form of art is not something incidental but a necessary condition for communicating one's emotion, and an imaginative experience is valued for enjoying an aesthetic experience, then all the confusion will be dissolved.

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