

# Feeling, Emotion, and Imagination: In Defence of Collingwood's Expression Theory of Art

In *The Principles of Art* (1938), R. G. Collingwood argues that art is the imaginative expression of emotion.<sup>1</sup> So much the worse, then, for Collingwood. The theory seems hopelessly inadequate to the task of capturing art's extension: of encompassing all the works that we generally suppose should be rounded up under the concept. Numerous artworks, and several art forms, have no obvious involvement with emotion.

But it would be surprising were Collingwood philistine enough to think that art is always and only concerned with quotidian affective states such as anger, fear, or love. Most likely, he has some more sophisticated notions of emotion and expression in mind. And I'll argue that those sophisticated notions can be moulded into an extensionally adequate version of the expression theory. If we interpret Collingwood as saying that expression is a particular application of imagination, that imagination is the faculty that refines ideas of emotions, and that "emotions" are the phenomenal feels of experiences, then his expression theory can accommodate apparently problematic artworks.

That's plenty for one paper, so I won't be concerned with Collingwood's (alleged) idealism about artworks, nor with several questions one might have about the expression theory that emerges.<sup>2</sup> I aim only to meet the extensional challenge, and in so doing, to explore Collingwood's thoughts about imagination, expression, and, especially, emotion.

## I. Collingwood in context

Collingwood's expression theory is often treated alongside those of several near-contemporaries, including Tolstoy (1897), Croce (1902), and Dewey (1934).<sup>3</sup> Despite their differences, some finical, some substantial, these theories all commit to two theses: first, that art essentially involves expression; second, that what is expressed is an artist's state of mind. Any relatively faithful interpretation of Collingwood's theory must respect these two commitments, but only in the senses he intends them to be respected. His first commitment is easy to expound, but his second is more complicated, and best explored in relation to a history of expression theories running from Plato to Kant and his Romantic followers.

Collingwood and contemporaneous expression theorists claim that works of art essentially, or at least normatively, express things. Expression theories so understood contrast with, for example, mimetic or representational theories of art, according to which artworks imitate or represent the world. The glut of expression theories in the first half of the 20th century was perhaps the last serious, concerted movement to attempt an essentialist definition of art—a specification of what art is in terms of something intrinsic to artworks. Anti-essentialism has dominated post-war aesthetics, owing in large part to the practice of artists (see §2 below).<sup>4</sup> Insofar as contemporary aesthetics is interested in expression, it's interested in the *expressiveness* of art: the question of how some artworks might (seem

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<sup>1</sup> All unattributed page references are to this book.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. whether an artwork, being mindless, can really express anything (Davies 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Hospers (1971) presents a nice selection.

<sup>4</sup> Anti-essentialism has two versions. One, inspired by Wittgenstein, argues that defining art is impossible: it's a family resemblance concept (Weitz 1956). The other gives definitions in terms of extrinsic properties of works, such as their relations to artworld institutions or to historical exemplars (Dickie 1984; Levinson 1990).

to) express things such as emotions, independently of whether the artist ever felt the relevant feelings, and absolutely not as a definitional feature of art.<sup>5</sup>

A faithful interpretation of Collingwood must preserve his intention to *define* art, not merely to describe a quality of some art. Certainly, there's plenty of textual evidence that this is his aim.<sup>6</sup> However, Aaron Ridley argues that Collingwood offers a definition that's deliberately "uninformative" (Ridley 1998, 34). It says that all artworks are expressions—expression is not a property they have, but the (or a) kind of thing they are. Nothing much general can be said about which things will fall under that kind, or what properties they'll fall under it in virtue of: we can't say anything definitive about *how* things might manifest expression, or *which* things (or sorts of things) might be able to do so. So if essentialists aim to give a rule for determining the art status of objects, or to say what kinds of objects can be artworks, Collingwood isn't an essentialist. Ridley is probably right, but even if Collingwood isn't an essentialist in that sense, he's all the same aiming to define art, and a faithful interpretation should respect this aim.<sup>7</sup>

A faithful interpretation must also preserve Collingwood's commitment to the idea that an artwork expresses an artist's state of mind. Some expression theorists argue that artists express something else. For example, Robert Stecker (1992) points out that, in *Ion*, Plato suggests that poets are literally "inspired" by the muses or gods: they take in the divine breath, and exhale it transmuted into words.<sup>8</sup> This is an expression theory, insofar as it defines poetry (and, by anachronistic extension, art) as the expression of something. But what's expressed doesn't exactly belong to the poet; she's a conduit, performing a communicative role.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps, as Peter Kivy (1978) suggests, Thomas Reid first proposed the idea that artists express their own states of mind, but Collingwood is closer to Kant. As Paul Guyer (1994) argues, despite the suggestions of formalism in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Kant's settled view is that "fine art" is concerned with the expression of "aesthetic ideas", which are representations of imagination to which no determinate concept of reason is adequate (Kant 1790, §49 313–4).

So Kant holds that artists express things that are, in some sense, (parts of) their states of mind. And there are further significant similarities between Kant's view and Collingwood's. For example, Kant says that there can be no rule or technique for expression (§§47–8), and so does Collingwood: he argues in the first part of the *Principles* that art isn't craft, a technical production process with a predetermined end. Given this, it's somewhat peculiar that Collingwood doesn't make more explicit reference to Kant's aesthetics. The reason he doesn't, I think, is his preoccupation with the version of the expression theory that Kant inspired in the Romantic poets, particularly Coleridge.<sup>10</sup>

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5 Suzanne Langer arguably makes the first steps away from expression towards expressiveness in *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), though *Feeling and Form* (1953) moves back towards expression. Questions about expressiveness are often explored with reference to music (e.g. Kivy 1980; Davies 1994).

6 "We must proceed to a definition of the term 'art'" (p. 2) is one of many telling examples. A referee suggests that Collingwood is offering a "norm" of art, not a definition. I believe the weight of textual evidence bears against this suggestion, but if you're tempted by it, you can read everything I say as exploration of a (very important) norm.

7 Ridley's book is short and sweet: there's much to like about the readings offered. I hope that the present paper and Ridley's interpretation are mostly complementary.

8 Plato is often associated with a representational theory of art, in the context of his banishment of poets in the *Republic*. But Collingwood himself argues that this is a misinterpretation (ch. III §3). Plato distinguishes representational poets from others, and banishes only the former; so there must be some other class of poets.

9 The conduit idea reappears in the broadly Marxist theory that art is an expression of aspects of the artist's society. Paul Taylor makes a convincing case that W. E. B. Du Bois is an expression theorist in a similar sense (Taylor 2015 ch. 3).

10 Admittedly, the textual evidence in *The Principles* is circumstantial; this is because, as Collingwood says, he gives "hardly any space ... to criticizing other people's aesthetic doctrines", even though he has "studied them" (p. vi). So we only have intimations of his targets. But the tenor of the theory and the tone of his comments tell in favour of this anti-Romantic account of his motivation (see, e.g. ch. XIV §6).

Collingwood probably understood Kant's aesthetics; Coleridge assuredly didn't. His writings on imagination, mind, and art are confused and confusing appropriations of Kantian ideas. He holds that artists possess a particular faculty which allows them to express things that the rest of us can't. It's not quite apparent what Coleridge thinks this faculty is, but his division of imagination into primary and secondary kinds, and attribution of the second to artists only, gives us some notion. This secondary imagination facilitates a kind of deep-diving into one's own psyche. Therein, the artist, and the artist alone, finds things that are worth expressing: feelings of an especially sensitive mien, or uniquely revelatory insights into worlds and lives. Exactly how this happens is something of a mystery, not least to artists themselves; the art pours forth in a torrent of inexplicable inspiration.<sup>11</sup>

Whether this is a legitimate reading of Kant is open to question.<sup>12</sup> But the point is that Coleridge's version of the expression theory attributes to artists unique faculties, and special states of mind, over which they have little or no conscious control. Artists are a class apart from the rest of us. This Romantic idea, on Collingwood's telling, came to dominate the late nineteenth century, and it's clear from his references to that era that he views this as a grievous mistake (e.g. ch. VI §6).

Collingwood's commitment to the idea that artists express their states of mind is best understood in the context of opposition to this Romantic individualism and exceptionalism about artists. With the Romantics, and against the Plato of *Ion*, he believes that what is expressed comes from artists themselves. But against the Romantics, Collingwood wants to insist that artists are no different in kind to the rest of us: they have no special imaginative faculty, nor some unique capacity for finer feelings or deeper insights. Artists express feelings or emotions of the sort that everyone has. Imagination, in a perfectly ordinary sense, is the capacity employed to express those feelings. The states of mind that the artist expresses thus do belong to her, in that she herself feels them and expresses them; but they aren't unique to her, and her task as an artist is to guide the rest of us to grasp fully the same feelings in our own mental lives.<sup>13</sup> What's important to Collingwood isn't that *the artist's* states of mind are expressed, but that the artist expresses *states of mind*.

So an expression theory faithful to Collingwood's commitments should hold that expression is definitional of art. It should be a theory on which what is expressed is some state of mind of the artist, something she herself actually felt. But it shouldn't be a theory on which artists have special faculties or feelings; expression and artistry inhere in faculties enjoyed universally.

On an unsophisticated interpretation of his expression theory, Collingwood achieves this by saying that art is essentially a matter of the expression of emotion. Emotion, clearly, is a state of mind of the artist. Equally clearly, most of us have emotions. And we all, pretty much, are able to express them, one way or another. But Collingwood surely can't have held the unsophisticated version, since it quite obviously fails the extensional challenge. We'll begin exploring his real theory once we've established just what the extensional challenge is.

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<sup>11</sup> The principal text is *Biographia Literaria* (1817), but the secondary literature is better than the primary: see Abrams 1953; Warnock 1976, pt. III.

<sup>12</sup> Kant does indeed say that only people with "genius" are able to generate aesthetic ideas, and to properly express them. Genius is an "inborn productive faculty" (§46 307), whose workings are mysterious even to those who have it: "the author of a product that he owes to his genius does not know himself how the ideas for it come to him" (§46 308). However, other plausible readings of Kant bring his views closer to those of the egalitarian Collingwood I present. For example, on Samantha Matherne's "inclusive interpretation" (2013), aesthetic ideas seem more like Collingwood's "feelings"—especially on the interpretation of "feeling" I give in §4. And Keren Gorodeisky has suggested in conversation an understanding of "genius" that brings the two closer together (thanks also to her for several comments that greatly improved the present section).

<sup>13</sup> On Collingwood's conception of the relation between artist and audience, see Paul Guyer's paper in the present special issue of this journal.

## 2. The extensional challenge

Most expression theories face the same stark problem: numerous artworks don't seem to express emotion, or indeed anything.<sup>14</sup> There've probably been unemotional artworks for as long as there's been art, but until about the middle of the 20th century, the weight of counter-examples was sufficiently light that expression theories could bear it well enough. However, artistic practice since has massively increased that weight. Ready-mades, pop art, conceptual art; Duchamp, Warhol, Fluxus; so much contemporary art has nothing to do with emotion or feeling. Nor will it do to finesse the notion of feeling, for it really doesn't seem that many or any of these artists are expressing anything at all. Thus, the very existence of such art apparently refutes the expression theory. Doubtless, some art has some expressive properties, but saying that art essentially involves expression is archaic.

The challenge is usually put just as bluntly as this, but it's worth dwelling on what exactly it is. Almost any artwork can legitimately be described as saying, or communicating, or at least presenting something: the most abstruse conceptual art still presents a concept. Insofar as the challenge concerns expression, then, it must be predicated on an understanding of expression as something more than mere communication. Part of that understanding concerns what can be expressed, and this is the more difficult part of the problem. Even if, say, conceptual art is expressive in a meek sense of communication, what it communicates is ideas, or concepts, or statements, or jokes. And none of that is remotely emotional. So the core of the extensional problem is this: what sense can an expression theory make of the idea that such art expresses things like *emotions*?<sup>15</sup>

Now, the bullet could be bitten: maybe unemotional art isn't true art. Tolstoy, for one, seems ready to bite: he even argues that some of his own work isn't true art.<sup>16</sup> But this is a pyrrhic course of action. If we want to keep the expression theory, we should mould it into a shape that allows much of what we commonly call art, or at least most of the art-forms we acknowledge, to genuinely count as such. Furthermore, it's not impertinent to suggest that Collingwood would want to account for such art. He explicitly intends to account for the artistic practice of his time with a theory apt for future evolution (p. vi), and his distinction between art and craft (ch.s II–III) doesn't force unemotional art into the latter category. The case for calling it expressive isn't presumptuous.

But why should we want to keep the expression theory? One answer, essentially Collingwood's, is just that the theory is correct. He says that his work in *The Principles* is mainly sedulous tidying of a concept that's become disorderly (ch. I §1), making explicit and clear what we already know implicitly and obscurely. Another answer, on which I can't expand much here, is that the theory seems to capture something intuitively central to our conception of art and artistic practice: the idea that, somehow, art communicates to us something of the artist's mind, or that the artist tries to "tell us something" through their work. This intuitive idea is remarkably resilient in the face of developments in artistic practice. What we often look for in art is precisely meaningful expression: we want works to say something to us, to bring us into contact with a meaning or message that's related to the vision and viewpoint of someone else. We want art not merely to speak or inform, but to speak with a voice.

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<sup>14</sup> The difficulty is so obvious that it barely needs attribution, but for one statement, see Danto (1986).

<sup>15</sup> The extensional challenge also cuts the other way: if everything that counts as an expression is a work of art, many implausible things will be classed as artworks. Collingwood is especially susceptible to this problem, given his extraordinary claim that "every utterance and every gesture that each one of us makes is a work of art" (p. 285). This claim is grounded in the weakest part of *The Principles*, an unfortunate excursion into a bog of ideas concerning relations among language, art, and expression (ch.s IX, X). Those ideas seem peripheral to the main expression theory, and so could perhaps be jettisoned without undermining it. Nonetheless, the point about the unusual extension of the expression theory remains. One could swerve it by adding an extra condition to the theory, but this would be *ad hoc* and inimical to Collingwood's definitional intentions. The best response, I think, is Ridley's: he argues that Collingwood shows "that much of what we value in works of art (normally so-called) is really only a heightened and concentrated version of something we would value wherever we found it" (Ridley 1998, 39). Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

<sup>16</sup> Gary Kemp also suggests in an informal context that one attraction of Collingwood's view is that he "would not have any time for conceptual art" (Marshall 2012).

It's exactly this wish that many people feel is not met by unemotional or conceptual art; they find it rebarbative because it seems silent. So one point of showing that the expression theory can apply to such art might be to help make challenging artworks more accessible, by explaining how even the most abstract piece of conceptual art can be said to be expressing something, and by clarifying the means by which we might work out what it's expressing. Since Collingwood was concerned with the role of arts in society, and with demystifying cults of genius, I suppose that he'd approve of this application of the theory. So it's worth seeing whether it can be so applied.

### 3. Two readings of Collingwood

Unsurprisingly, given Collingwood's status in aesthetics and the expression theory's intuitive appeal, attempts have been made to meet the extensional problem on his behalf. Both John Dilworth and Gary Kemp offer readings of Collingwood's theory that try to "rehabilitate" it (Dilworth 2004, 10). In both cases, the rehabilitation involves replacing one of Collingwood's technical notions. For Dilworth, the idea of expression has to go, replaced by "interpretation". For Kemp, "emotion" is unsatisfactory, and should be swapped for a quasi-Croce-Kant idea of "intuition". I'm not going to disagree directly with either reading, though differences will emerge *passim*. I mainly present them to illustrate my own interpretative approach.

Dilworth primarily focusses on expression. He doesn't gloss "emotion", and only towards the end of his paper acknowledges that Collingwood's conception of it is "highly theoretical" (Dilworth 2004, 27). By that point it hardly seems to matter what emotions are, since Dilworth's version of the expression theory says that art is interpretation of a subject matter, with emotion an awkward auxiliary to this process.

Dilworth first offers a reading of Collingwood. He states that Collingwood thinks of the mind as having three levels: the "psychical", the imaginative, and the intellectual. Emotions occur first at the psychical level, but can figure in all three. Dilworth's Collingwood invokes two sorts of expression: "same-level" expression, where an emotion is fully expressed in a way appropriate to one level, and "conversion" expression, where an emotion is changed into material appropriate for employment at a higher level. "Expression" is "an equivalence relation between items of content", such that a "correct" expression of an emotion will be some distinct item with the same representational content as that emotion (Dilworth 2004, 24). Collingwood also invokes a further distinction between "ampliative" and "non-ampliative" expression, where the latter involves straightforward replication of the initial emotion's content, and the former involves expanding on that content. Dilworth maintains that almost all artistic creation involves conversion expression and ampliative expression: what the artist ends up with typically has representational content that's far more complex and substantial than that of the original emotion.

On the basis of this reading, Dilworth identifies a major problem for Collingwood's view, a "conversion dilemma" regarding conversion expression. Suppose an artist has an emotion, and sets out to express it. This emotion either "retains its precise qualitative identity throughout the process of its being ... expressed, or it does not" (Dilworth 2004, 13). But if it does so, there's nothing genuinely creative about the artist's expression: they don't make something new by expressing, but rather make manifest a change in their epistemic relation to their own emotion. On the other hand, if it doesn't, what is eventually expressed is not the initial emotion, but some distinct emotion. On one horn of the dilemma, we lose the idea that artists are genuinely creative; on the second horn, we lose the idea that art is genuinely expressive.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Insofar as this is a version of the paradox of analysis, Collingwood answers the point in chapter 1 of his *Essay on Philosophical Method* (1933), in which he endorses what Michael Beaney (2013 pt. 1) calls a "Socratic Principle", according to which the point of philosophy is "to know better something which in some sense we knew already" (p. 11). This is neither a mere epistemic change in relation to the object of knowledge, nor exactly a process of coming to know something entirely new. As with philosophy, so with artistic expression, one might think. I admit regretfully that the present paper would benefit from more thorough engagement with Collingwood's other works than I'm currently capable of. Thanks to Michael

Dilworth's diagnosis is that Collingwood's notion of expression is inadequate. We need some idea of expression that allows for amplification, and hence for an ontological distinction between initial emotion and expression. Or rather, we need a new idea, since expression, being an equivalence relation, can't do the work. Dilworth proposes "interpretation", which is "a kind of function of, or operation on, a given content ... anything that *does something* with a content or subject matter, rather than merely reproducing it untouched" (Dilworth 2004, 21). An artist starts with a "sparse" interpretation of some subject matter, an awareness that an interpretative approach to it is possible, and aims to provide a "comprehensive", "maximally ampliative" interpretation of it (Dilworth 2004, 22–23).

So Dilworth thinks Collingwood's idea of expression is untenable, and you might also wonder how committed he is to the idea that art essentially involves emotions. He argues that their involvement is predicated on the fact that artists "feel ... passionate about the importance of the interpretations" they're offering (Dilworth 2004, 21). So any work they produce expresses emotion in that, and insofar as, it expresses this passion for interpretation.

Dilworth's reading of Collingwood is, in one sense, sound: taking Collingwood's claims literally, something like the "conversion dilemma" bulks large and problematic. But surely the right approach is to sympathetically interpret what he's trying to articulate, rather than hang him by the letter of what he actually writes.<sup>18</sup> For example, it seems quite clear that Collingwood understands expression exactly as a matter of "doing something", rather than as an "equivalence relation". Furthermore, the role for emotion that Dilworth allows seems highly circumscribed, contingent, and frankly implausible. Given this, we might wonder why his theory counts at all as a "rehabilitation" of Collingwood's. The reading I'll offer is, I hope, more obviously close to the source.

Kemp reads Collingwood rather more sympathetically. He treats Collingwood's ideas as one aspect of what he calls (following Hospers 1954) the "Croce-Collingwood theory". He acknowledges that to understand Collingwood's theory correctly, we need to understand the "general metaphysics of the mind" in which it's embedded, and in particular the place of imagination in that metaphysics (Kemp 2003, 173). Kemp claims that this theory of mind is in some important senses Kantian (though "neither philosopher can be happily classified as Kantian" in a full-blooded sense (Kemp 2003, 173)). Accordingly, he says that imagination "delivers experience in the form of non-conceptual representations—unified states with necessary formal characteristics that can constitute the contents of experience and the objects of thought" (Kemp 2003, 173). These representations are non-conceptual, because they're always particular, while concepts are "essentially general". Expression, then, is "the formation ... of essentially individual contents of experience ... that activity of the imagination that delivers awareness of a particular to a self-conscious subject" (Kemp 2003, 173).

The non-conceptual representations that expression delivers aren't representations of emotions. For both Croce and Collingwood, "emotion is an intrinsic feature of every experiential state", where an experiential state is sensuous awareness at what Collingwood calls the psychological level (Kemp 2003, 174). For Collingwood specifically, emotion is a "charge" on a sense-datum; the emotional charge and the sense-datum together constitute a "feeling". Kemp identifies this emotional charge as an "expressive property" of sensory experience, lurking perhaps on the periphery of conscious attention, which imagination is tasked with bringing to consciousness (Kemp 2003, 176). However, he also points out that Collingwood identifies a class of "emotions of consciousness", which require self-consciousness (examples include shame and pride). But Collingwood's account of self-consciousness is problematic: it entails that we cannot have emotions of consciousness without being fully aware of them, which is implausible (Kemp 2003, 177). So the Croce-Collingwood theory should take its account of what's expressed in art from Croce, and say that it's intuitions, not emotions. Still, emotion is "intrinsic to the intuition", and so any expressed intuition will include expressed emotion (Kemp 2003, 178). On

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Beane for pointing out the relevance of the *Essay*.

<sup>18</sup> Compare Ridley, who, having laid out a problem similar to the conversion dilemma, says that the fact "that Collingwood lays himself open to such an easy objection is a sure sign that his philosophical baggage has got in the way of what he wants to say", and goes on to concentrate on the view intended, not the baggage containing it (Ridley 1998, 5).

Kemp's reconstruction, then, the expression theory is that "art is the presentation of [expressed] intuition", which incorporates emotion (Kemp 2003, 178).

There's much to like about Kemp's reading. But his aim differs somewhat from mine. He's concerned with deriving from Croce and Collingwood's joint efforts the best version of the expression theory possible. This is a well-motivated project, insofar as Croce is a clear influence on Collingwood, and insofar as the resultant theory may well be better than that given by either alone. Nonetheless, my rather cruder project is to concentrate on what Collingwood alone says, and see whether what he gives us alone is adequate.

There's also a reason to be wary of Kemp's version of the expression theory: it doesn't obviously meet the extensional problem. The Kemp-Croce-Collingwood theory excludes from the extension of art any work that is not readily conceptualized as the presentation of intuitions, where those are understood as non-conceptual formal organisations of sensations (Kemp 2003, 179). This would apparently exclude conceptual art. Perhaps a version of the expression theory might be outlined that includes it.

## 4. A third reading

How else, then, might we interpret Collingwood? As Kemp emphasizes, since expression is an application of imagination, understanding the expression theory means understanding imagination. It also means understanding emotion. My argument, briefly, is that Collingwood thinks of imagination as the faculty concerned with refining and clarifying ideas, and of expression as imagining via a medium. By "emotion", meanwhile, he means the phenomenal feel of experience. Since every experience has a phenomenal feel, every experience is apt for expression; since "experiences" encompasses thoughts, which have concepts as constituents, conceptual art (and all the other troublesome cases) are accounted for by the expression theory.

### 4.1 The problem of imagination

Collingwood's theory of imagination emerges from his account of the philosophical history of attempts to substantiate the "common-sense" distinction between imagining and "really seeing", given that the two can be subjectively indistinguishable (ch. VIII §4), both in terms of the characters of the acts (what it feels or seems like to imagine or see), and in terms of their contents (the sensuous material that represents the object of the act).<sup>19</sup> In order to retain any confidence that we can correctly apprehend a reality distinct from our mental states, we need some way in which the mind can sort these experiences (it's not enough that they're distinct: they need also to be distinguishable. The problem is epistemological as well as ontological).

According to Collingwood's history, philosophers of the early modern period saw the problem pessimistically. Descartes admits an ontological distinction between seeing and imagining, but denies that it can be detected. Hobbes, Spinoza, and Leibniz all deny that there's a distinction of kind, claiming either that all sensory experiences are real, or all are imaginary (ch. IX §2).

To reality's rescue ride the empiricists. Locke first makes the key move: concentrate on ideas, the deliverances of sensory experiences, and look for a distinction among those, rather than among the experiences themselves. Ideas, here, incorporate both the contents of the original act and its character: both what was sensed, and the experience of sensing. While Locke's own efforts to find a distinction among ideas result in "outrageous sophism" (p. 177), Berkeley offers two plausible ways to sort real and imaginary ideas. On the "introspection theory", ideas of sense (real ideas) are distinguished from those of imagination by virtue of being more forceful. This is not a distinction among the contents of acts:

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<sup>19</sup> In the contemporary literature on perception, this is usually put in terms of sorting perception from hallucination. When, and why, the "bad" case became hallucinatory rather than imaginary is an interesting question, but the philosophers Collingwood discusses, and he himself, apparently think of hallucinations as especially wild imaginings.

the claim is not that the contents of seeing are somehow livelier. Rather, the claim is that the experience of seeing is more forceful, less subject to the will, than that of imagining (ch. IX §3).

However, this proposed distinction is refuted by the existence of unbidden imaginings (p. 179). Berkeley therefore turns to the “relation theory”, according to which ideas of sense are related lawfully to each other, following in predictable and comprehensible sequences, while ideas of imagination are “wild” (ch. IX §3). But this won’t do either. First, ideas of imagination can be related to each other in law-like ways. Second, if we’re meant to decide of each idea whether or not to relate it to some others in the “real” set, we need to know whether or not it’s real: and so the principle by which we sort real and imaginary ideas must be prior to that relating, rather than predicated on it (p. 182).

Recognising this failure of the relation theory, Hume tries again to distinguish ideas of sense (in his terms, impressions) from ideas of imagination (ideas) on introspectible grounds, alighting again on the relative force or vivacity of the experiences (ch. IX §5). But, again, such things as dreams arise as counter-examples, and Hume ends up appealing implicitly to the relation theory in order to explain how we sort vivid dreaming from real seeing (p. 184). He’s partially rescued from this solecism by Kant, who recognizes that what we should be looking for isn’t a distinction between two sorts of idea, but rather a distinction between two ways in which ideas can be related to understanding (or, as Collingwood calls it sometimes, intellect): waiting at the imaginative level to be “interpreted” by understanding, and put into relations with each other by that interpretation (ch. IX §6).

I won’t discuss whether Collingwood’s history is sound. The point is to understand the derivation of his view of imagination, which is rooted in both Hume and Kant. Hume’s achievement, according to Collingwood, was to recognize that ideas derive from impressions, but are somehow different from them, not just etiolated traces. However, he couldn’t define the difference, so he overlooked his own accomplishment (p. 201). Kant gives us a way to understand the difference between real and imaginary ideas: the distinction is not between two classes of ideas, but rather between two relations in which ideas can stand to the mind’s active faculties (p. 194). It’s somewhat unclear whether what follows from this in *The Principles* is intended as elucidation or elaboration of these two insights; and though the view looks simple enough at first glance, I’ll argue shortly that this appearance belies confusions, albeit ones that can be disentangled.

We start with the three-level model of the mental outlined above. The lowest level, the psychical, consists in a transient flux of evanescent “feelings” (ch. VIII §2). Feelings are experiences of complexes of sensuous content and “emotional charges” on that content. A whole feeling incorporates the sensuous content, the emotional charge, and the act of experiencing them. If a particular feeling is consciously attended to, it’s lifted from the psychical level to that of imagination. At this level, the feeling becomes an idea, and can be modified in several ways: divided, refined, clarified, focussed, intensified. The idea that results may be of the feeling or of one of its elements (such as its emotional charge or its sensuous content, or some aspect thereof), and can be retained and revisited. The idea can thus be taken up at the third level, intellect. There, ideas are “interpreted”: classified, accorded titles such as “real” or “illusory”, related to other ideas, and so on. Imagination is the deliquescence of the stuff of sensation into the matter of thought.

Collingwood then “solves” the problem of imagination. The word “real” can be variously applied to acts of seeing and ideas, and the mistake is assuming that “real” has the same meaning in both cases. Furthermore, in either application, the contrastive of the real isn’t the imaginary. To “really see” is to undergo (as we can’t help but to undergo) the constant, forceful, vivacious flow of feelings at the psychical level. At this level, there is no meaningful distinction between really seeing and not really doing so: a pure flux of sensation can’t be false or true, correct or incorrect. It simply is (p. 157). A real idea, on the other hand, is an idea correctly interpreted as belonging to one or another of a related set or series of ideas. An idea is real not insofar as it’s derived from some “real” act, but insofar as it’s classified correctly in relation to other ideas. Here there is a meaningful contrast, but it’s between real ideas and illusory (incorrectly interpreted) ideas, not between real and imaginary ones. At neither level does imagination provide a contrast with the real, because imagination is the level that sits between



them. To imagine is just to attend to and perpetuate a feeling, or some element of it: this produces an uninterpreted idea. The common-sense distinction between seeing and imagining is reconstituted as a dual distinction between two stages in the life of an idea, and two sorts of act: (correctly) interpreted and uninterpreted ideas, and acts of sensation and acts of imaginative attention (ch. X §6).

## 4.2 What imagination is

So perhaps Collingwood thinks imagination is the level of the mind where impressions are converted into ideas. However, there are intimations that his view is somewhat more complicated than this, and at times confused (or confusing). For one thing, the relation between consciousness and imagination is less clear than it might be. He at times suggests that the two are synonymous. But he also, sometimes in the same paragraph, suggests a distinction: “imagination is ... the new form which feeling takes when transformed by the activity of consciousness” (p. 215). And consciousness, he also says, is a form of thought, but distinct from “thought par excellence”, the preserve of the intellect (p. 215). For another thing, Collingwood says of perception, as opposed to (mere?) “real seeing”, that it involves imagining the occluded parts of objects, and this doesn’t sound like ideation: it sounds like a way of projecting images or ideas into egocentric space (p. 192). For a third thing, Collingwood sometimes seems to claim that imagination is the only way in which ideas can be produced, but he also says that thought, intellect, can produce ideas (p. 204). Finally, though it sometimes seems that imagination’s only role is the conversion of feelings into ideas, he also says that imagination can perform a sort of synthesis of ideas (pp. 253–4). So imagination’s precise relation to conscious experience is unclear, and so is its role in the mind: first, because it seems to do more than ideate, second, because other mental states ideate, and third, because it seems to ideate in multiple ways.

Part of the problem is probably that Collingwood trips over his own terminology. He seems to slip between three or four different uses of “imagination” or “imaginative”. There’s “imagination” understood as the level of the mind intermediary between feeling and intellect; “imagination” understood as the conscious manipulation of feeling at that level; “imagination”, or “imaginative”, applied to the products of such manipulation; and, perhaps, “imagination” as the unifying principle of conscious experience.<sup>20</sup> Without doing the painstaking and painful work of disentangling all that, I’ll offer a reconstruction in Collingwood’s spirit that concentrates on the second of these senses of imagination, imagination as conscious manipulation of feeling, on the premise that this is the sense relevant to the expression theory.

The first step is to clarify relations among consciousness, attention, and imagination. Attending is the distinctive operation of consciousness; to be conscious of a feeling is to attend to that feeling, and in so doing, to acknowledge it as one’s own, take possession of it (ch. X §7). Imagination is a particular way of attending. To imaginatively attend to a feeling is to do something with it, by dividing, clarifying, attenuating, intensifying. Consciousness is the attentive level between sensation and intellect, at which acts of imagination take place. Just attending to a feeling suffices for consciousness of it, while imagination involves active manipulation of feelings.

If this is right, there should be a way of being conscious of a feeling besides imagining it. The obvious candidate is perception. But this is complicated by Collingwood’s comment that perception involves imagination. If the one is involved in the other, they can’t be two contrasting modes of consciousness. I think that Collingwood has in mind a view of perception on which it consists in feelings, or bare sensational presentations, bound with representations of the occluded parts of objects, such that an object appears present. The binding is done by attention. Owing to the various ways in which Collingwood uses “imagination” and “imaginative”, he unhelpfully calls those representations of occluded parts “imaginative”, and perhaps also the attentive binding of representations to presentations.<sup>21</sup> But we can avoid this confusion by rephrasing. A certain sort of attention binds

<sup>20</sup> This last sense seems to be what Kemp has in mind.

<sup>21</sup> William Desmond interprets Collingwood as holding that perception isn’t a direct communion with the external world; what is perceived is “a result issuing from imagination and thought mediating the immediacy of the sensuous” (Desmond

representations of possible presentations to actual presentations. This complex conscious state is perception, and it contrasts with imagination insofar as imagination is concerned only with possible, or non-present, presentations.

So at the level of consciousness, we can distinguish three modes of attention. One, which perhaps rarely actually occurs, is awareness of a presentation purely as such: attention to a mess of colour and shape and affect with no resolution into perceptual objects. This attention is both necessary and sufficient to make an idea of a feeling; that is, to make it something that can be perpetuated, held before the mind, retained and returned to. But it is not a transformation of the feeling. To transform a feeling is to actively attend to and manipulate it: that's imagination. Alternatively, the presentation can be attentively bound with representations: that more complex state is perception.

This reconstruction allows that, besides imagination, both bare attention and perception can deliver ideas to consciousness. This denies the doctrine that imagination is the sole source of ideas, but squares more solidly with the Humean aspect of Collingwood's views, given that Hume thinks that simple ideas of impressions can be delivered wholesale to the intellect, without further imaginative transformation. Given this, we need to understand better what's distinctive about imaginative ideation, especially since it seems that Collingwood also thinks intellect can generate ideas. Hume accords to imagination the task (among others) of deriving general ideas from particular impressions. Collingwood, though, denies that imagination delivers general ideas of things such as properties: "[imagination] divides, but it doesn't abstract ... if we abstract ... the quality of redness ... we do so not by attending but by thinking" (p. 204). So Collingwood doesn't think imagination fashions *general* ideas from feelings. It's imagination's job to deliver to the intellect refined ideas derived from particular feelings. It's intellect's job to catalogue, order, compare, and relate those ideas, and to extract abstract concepts from them. The product of imagination is always particular. Intellect, meanwhile, leaves behind the particular in search of the general and the abstract. This suggests a distinction between the two types of ideation. Imaginative clarification can be carried only so far as the idea under attention retains some individuality or singular reference. The limit case of imagination is one where some bare trace of particularity lingers in the idea. Pure form is the preserve of intellect.

So Collingwood has imagination as a process of ideation, distinct from perceptual or barely attentive ideation on the grounds that it involves refinement rather than reproduction, and from intellectual ideation on the grounds that it concerns the particular rather than the abstract. We now need to address two things: what "refinement" amounts to, and what sorts of things might be possible subjects of refinement.

Collingwood suggests that imaginative transformation of feelings into refined ideas might take one of several paths. Imagination might divide feelings, by attending to one part or another: it might, for example, separate the emotional charge of a feeling from its sensational content (pp. 161, 204). Whatever is attended to is then altered and manipulated: refined, concentrated, focussed, distorted. Importantly, these are not just matters of etiolation—a view that's sometimes ascribed to Hume, though Collingwood seems to think he and Hume are in agreement when he says that imaginative ideas are not "mere relics ... like an after-taste of onions" (p. 201). Imagination can amplify as well as attenuate its targets. The ideas produced might be less vivacious or forceful than the feelings from which they derive, but might alternatively, through focus and concentration, be more intense and lively.

This suggests that we're going wrong if we try to identify *the* way in which imagination attentively manipulates ideas. Rather, we should think of imagination as a set of lenses. By training lenses on targets, you can produce all sorts of images, depending on what lenses you use and how you use them. Like a set of lenses, the various imaginative processes are all manipulative mediations between targets and ideas, but there isn't a particular kind of manipulation that all the members of the set have in common.

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1976, 94).

Collingwood apparently does think of imagination's processes as diverse. In addition to refinement of individual ideas, he also describes a sort of imaginative combination. When he hears the song of a thrush, he says, his experience of the sounds as a song is facilitated by imagination: "the whole sung phrase is present to me ... at a single moment" (p. 253). And then:

I may now go on to a further act, by which I imagine alongside of this present May thrush-song the thrush-song of January. So far as the entire experience remains at the level of imagination ... these two songs are not imagined separately as two things with a relation between them. The January song coalesces with the May song, and confers upon it a new quality of mature mellowness. Thus what I imagine, however complex it may be, is imagined as a single whole, where relations between the parts are present simply as qualities of the whole.

(Collingwood 1938, 253)

So imagination can deliver a new idea by seamless fusion (of, perhaps, two imaginative ideas, or a perceptual idea and an imaginative one). In terms of lenses, think of a pair of binoculars. They consist in two sets of lenses, each of which delivers a separate image. But they produce one seamless, fused image of the target. This distinguishes the imaginative combination involved in, say, writing a novel, from the intellectual combination required to make an argument, or the mechanical imitation involved in writing a generic thriller. The joins of an argument are visible: the premises are divisible. But a true novel presents an individual and seamless whole.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the emerging idea of imagination isn't apt to solve Collingwood's "problem of imagination". But never mind that: regarding the expression theory, the move just made importantly expands imagination's ambit. What Collingwood suggests is that imagination can generate, not just ideas of actual particular experiences, but ideas of *possible* particular experiences: the experience, as it might be, of some particularized thrush song, with particular qualities, correlated to no actual experience of song. This greatly widens the scope of the expression theory: the artist is no longer constrained to clarify only their own feelings or experiences, but rather is free to bring into focus any experience imaginable.

This idea that artists can express possible experiences may seem to illegitimately downplay the parts of *The Principles* where Collingwood apparently suggests that art is a sort of spelunking of the caverns of one's own psyche (e.g. p. 109). If expression is a voyage of self-discovery, it can't be a matter of possible experiences: they need to be actual. I do accept that my interpretation downplays those elements of the text. The question is whether this is illegitimate. Anyone trying to interpret Collingwood on this point has to weigh in the balance those parts of the text where it seems that the artist's responsibility is to themselves alone, and those parts where Collingwood's anti-individualism and concern for the role of expression in and for societies comes to the fore (e.g. ch. XIV). The artist is charged at various points with bringing feelings to light not just for, but on behalf of, their audience, and Collingwood's exemplar of true art is collaborative theatre, where feelings are clarified through shared endeavour (ch. XIV §5). Given my view of his anti-Romantic motivations, I suspect that, where Collingwood apparently cleaves to an individualistic account of art, he's explaining the simplest case, that of the individual artist and their actual experiences, in preparation for the full explanation, which encompasses possible experiences and collaborative expression.<sup>23</sup>

### 4.3 Emotions as feels

A further illegitimacy might be alleged: I've slid into speaking of the expression of experience, where Collingwood says that art is the expression of emotion. However, I think that he's best understood as using "emotion" to mean something like the phenomenal feel of experience, where "experience" is construed widely to encompass any conscious mental state.

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<sup>22</sup> Collingwood thinks that many alleged novels are not true art, because they generalize rather than individualize (ch.VI §3).

<sup>23</sup> Michael Beaney kindly points out (in correspondence) that this is a common characteristic of Collingwood's works and methodology; later material in a given text elaborates and expands on earlier material. The point might nevertheless be pressed: does this interpretation faithfully preserve Collingwood's commitment to the idea that what's expressed is a state of mind *of the artist*? As I suggested in §1, I think Collingwood is more concerned that states of mind are expressed, rather than that they are the artists'. And an imagined possible state of mind is nonetheless an expressible state of mind.

It's true that Collingwood concentrates on emotional charges on *sensa* as the objects of expression, and these might readily be understood as something like affective colourations of experience. Expression might then be understood as a matter of isolating and clarifying that affective colouration. That would give us thin stuff for a theory of art. But Collingwood doesn't think that only *sensa* have emotional charges. Rather, he thinks that *every experience* has such a charge: sensational, intellectual, the lot (pp. 234, 266–7). With regard to feelings, this would mean that every particular *act* of sensing would have a particular emotional charge, constituted by the combined charge, or feel, of the act-type and the particular content.

Let me clarify what I mean by the feel of an act-type. Acts have *character*: manifestations in the phenomenal feel of experience. There's something it's like to see, hear, or touch, independent of what it's like to see or touch *that*. So to say that the act-elements of sensation have charges, or feels, that partially constitute the emotional charge of the whole feeling is to say that there are phenomenal, felt aspects of experience distinct from those associated with the contents of the experience. These characterful phenomenal manifestations are available to imagination and introspection as felt aspects of experience in just the same way as emotional charges on sensory contents.<sup>24</sup>

So a complete feeling has an emotional charge of its own, over and above the emotional charge attendant on the *sensum*. While imagination, or expression, might concentrate on the emotional charge on the *sensum*, it might instead be employed to refine the feel of the total experience: to express what it is like to see that thing in this manner.

This idea that imagination might clarify and refine the overall feel of a particular act extends the range of expression beyond sensory acts. Collingwood holds that every conscious experience has a particular emotional charge, including the high-level experiences of intellectual thought. These emotional charges are proper targets of imagination, too. You can (for example) have a belief, and that experience will have a certain charge, a way it feels to have that belief. That feel can be attended to by imagination, refined and returned as a new idea. This brings within the ambit of imagination, and thus of expression, any sort of mental state at all. If every experience has an emotional charge, and every emotional charge can be a subject of imagination, any experience at all can be such a subject.

This reading of emotional charge as phenomenal feel departs quite radically from the ordinary meaning of "emotion". The question is whether it's a departure that can credibly be ascribed to Collingwood. Granted, he uses "emotion" consistently to name that which is attendant on sensation and consciousness, and that can be expressed. But it seems implausible that, when he claims that every intellectual experience has an attendant emotion of consciousness, he genuinely has in mind some sort of affective colouration of that mental state. Even if there is always such affective colouration, it's incredible to suppose that he really thought artists express *that*. Reading "emotion" as equivalent to phenomenal feel renders the view comprehensible. It's certainly true that every conscious state has some phenomenal feel, and it's plausible enough that what artists express is what it's like to be in some mental state. Further, this provides the best way to understand Collingwood's discussion of the difference between a painter, who expresses with his art what it's like to see his subject *in the manner in which he sees it*, and the plain person who sees the same subject but just (imaginatively) refines "what it looks like" (ch. XIV §2).

If all this is sound, we have a version of the expression theory that might cope with unemotional art. Every experience has a particular character, feel, or charge; it's that charge, the phenomenal feel of the experience, that's expressed. So long as a work can be understood as expressing the phenomenal feel of an experience, the expression theory can accommodate it.

The example of conceptual art presents a test for this interpretation. In fact, the test cuts two ways. On the one hand, it might seem that an artwork that (effectively) consists in the presentation of a concept is not apt to be described as an expression of phenomenal feel. On the other hand, such an artwork

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<sup>24</sup> I talk mainly of phenomenal "feel" to emphasize the legitimacy of interpreting Collingwood thus, but "phenomenal character" would serve equally.

would seem to present a *generality*, if we take it that concepts are general. And this would clearly violate Collingwood's insistence that artworks are expressions of particularities (ch. XI §3). So if the interpretation can't accommodate conceptual art, it's not met the extensional challenge; if it can, it's not an admissible interpretation of Collingwood.

But the interpretation can survive this test. Regarding the extensional challenge, the crucial point is that what's expressed in conceptual art is not a concept in itself, but rather the particular feel of what it's like to entertain that concept. Take, for example, Damien Hirst's "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living", the shark suspended in formaldehyde.<sup>25</sup> What's expressed by this work is not some concept associated with death, or the holding of contradictions; it's the phenomenal feel of what it is like to (fail to) entertain the concept of death in the face of life. Of course, often, as part of expressing what it's like to be in a certain mental state, the contents of the mental state will be represented: it's hard to express what it's like to see something without, somehow, showing what it looks like. But as Ridley points out, Collingwood doesn't hold that artworks *only* express; they can also represent, for example, or achieve various other aesthetic effects (Ridley 1998, 35).

As to whether it's permissible to interpret Collingwood as allowing for the expression of generalities, I'm not interpreting him so. I'm interpreting him as saying that, with regard to conceptual art, expression is concerned with the particular and specific feel of holding in mind a certain concept (quite possibly, a very complex and specific concept). What's expressed, thus, is not at all general. It's true, as I just said, that a general concept might be presented by an artwork in the service of expressing what it's like to hold in mind that concept; but, again, it's not inconsistent to say that artworks might present generalities as part of expressing the specific feel of entertaining them.

#### 4.4 Expression

Since the extensional problem mainly concerns the possible contents of expression, my focus has been on those contents. But I should say briefly what I take expression to be. Now, perhaps Collingwood thinks that all imaginative clarification of feeling is expressive. Certainly, he can be interpreted as saying so. But I think we make best sense of his views if we think of expression as a certain application or use of imagination.<sup>26</sup>

My reasons revolve around Collingwood's antagonistic relation with Romanticism. Against the Romantics, he wants to argue that the principal point of expression is neither to self-indulgently plumb the depths of one's own mind, nor to generously act as a hierophant for those who lack access to some special realm of thought. The point is to help others come to express things they too have felt, but haven't been able to articulate. The artist is "not singular in his having that emotion or the power of expressing it ... [but in their] ability to take the initiative in expressing what all feel" (p. 119).

If this is so, it's vital that expression takes place in a medium of communication. There's no way to show others how to express the same feeling if your expression can't be shared. I take it that at least some of the imaginative processes I outlined above might result in ideas that are refinements or fusions or otherwise products of precursors, but are nonetheless not shaped into a form that's apt for sharing. If I refine my complex perceptual experience of a possum walking along a fence at night into a sharpened, focussed mental image of a possum, I've done something imaginative, but I've not yet produced anything I can share with you.

What's distinctive of expression is that it involves doing imaginative refining in and through a communicative medium: of "transmuting", as Collingwood puts it (p. 307), the feeling of an experience into something that can be shared, rather than (effectively) distilling it into a more concentrated, private idea of essentially the same kind. Expression is imagining through working with materials, both to clarify what a feeling is and at the same time to show others what it is. This material

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<sup>25</sup> I pick this example owing to its relative familiarity, rather than any judgement of merit.

<sup>26</sup> Perhaps it's best to say that *good* or *worthwhile* expression is the use of imagination I'll explain.

may be language, and so this doing might be private in that it's not manifest in a product such as a painting, but if what is produced is linguistic, it's still something that could be shared.<sup>27</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

The interpretation I offer of Collingwood departs markedly from ordinary conceptions of expression and of emotion. But it seems that any commentator trying to shape the expression theory so that it can accommodate such things as conceptual art will be forced to ascribe such departures to Collingwood. I hesitate to claim that my reading is definitive, since *The Principles* is a rich and complex book. But I think the reading does a plausible job of holding in balance what Collingwood says, and what needs to be said to accommodate conceptual art. If “emotion” is read as “phenomenal feel”, and it's emphasized that all experiences have such feels, we can make sense of Collingwood's claims about emotions of consciousness, and explain how even art that seems as far as can be from any affective content might be thought of as expressing a feeling. This rescues the expression theory from the extensional challenge.

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<sup>27</sup> I here again agree with Ridley, who argues that expression is “necessarily mediated”, and is as much an exploration of one's medium as of the emotion being expressed (Ridley 1998, 27). There's much more to be said on how Collingwood understands the relation between expression and media, and his related ontology of art (e.g. Ridley 1997; Davies 2008).

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