

Collingwood and “Art Proper” — From Idealism to Consistency

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ABSTRACT. Collingwood’s “art-proper” definition has caused long controversies. For Wollheim, the theory of imagination assumes the nature of artwork exists solely in the mind and damages the relation between the artist and audience; therefore, Collingwood is an Idealist and inconsistent in his theory. In contrast, Ridley claims that Collingwood’s expression theory saves him from Wollheim’s accusations; hence he is consistent and not an Idealist. However, I defend the view that Collingwood is consistent in his theory, unlike Wollheim and an Idealist, unlike Ridley. The justification for this can be made as follows: first, the role of imagination in Collingwood’s theory determines the ontology of artworks with respect to his philosophy of mind; second his expression theory functions as a mediator between the levels of consciousness and necessary for the epistemology of art and last, his Idealist attitude in art cannot be taken apart from his Global Idealism.

I. Introduction

Collingwood defines an artwork in *Principles of Art* as an imaginary experience by which we express our emotions¹. This so called “art proper” definition in his work however caused controversies in the philosophy of art. Wollheim had attacked Collingwood with the so-called Ideal Theory. According to him, Ideal Theory asserts the following; the work of art is something non-physical, it is something mental or even ethereal whose place is the mind or some other spiritual field. Therefore, the audience does not have direct access to it; they just “infer it, intuit it or imaginatively re-create it from its embodiment”². Wollheim gives two main objections.

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¹ R. G. Collingwood, *Principles of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 151. Hereafter: *PA*.

² Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 35.

First, he says the relation between the audience and the artist is severed due to engendering a kind of solipsism; second, the "Ideal Theory totally ignores the significance of the medium"³. Consequently, Wollheim criticizes Collingwood for committing an inconsistency in the third book of *PA* where he emphasizes the role of audience for artist and artwork to be essential. As a result, Wollheim asserts that although Collingwood himself rejects it⁴; the first book of *PA*, where Art-as-Imagination is asserted and the third book of *PA*, where the role of audience as collaborator is claimed, are contradictory to each other.

On the other hand, in contrast to Wollheim, Ridley⁵ asserts that Collingwood surely is not a supporter of Ideal Theory and therefore, he is indubitably consistent. He claims that we should read *PA* "more carefully and more charitably"⁶. What Wollheim and his followers had done so far is a misinterpretation of Collingwood and the reason is a neglect of expression theory.

I am fairly confident that I can show that if one takes his Expression theory seriously, and if one makes a (careful, charitable) effort to see how it might fit in with the chapter on imagination, the temptation to read Collingwood as defending the so-called Ideal theory at all should evaporate.⁷

He says that if we "wrench out" the expression theory "from its proper context", then it would suppress much more than to illuminate⁸. As a result, we would end up with the wrong uncharitable conclusion that the physical medium is an accidental outcome of the imagined artwork:

...the dirty-handed artist's idea is *essentially* embodied in its public manifestation and that the active-eared spectator, in engaging imaginatively with the manifestation, understands it."⁹

³ Ibid.

⁴ Richard Wollheim, On an Alleged Inconsistency in Collingwood's Aesthetic. In *On Art and the Mind*. (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974), 250-259.

⁵ Aaron Ridley, Not Ideal: Collingwood's Expression Theory. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 55-3, (1997), 263-272

⁶ Ibid., 263

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 266.

⁹ Ibid., 267. Italicized by the author.

Therefore, according to Ridley, what Wollheim and others have attacked on behalf of Collingwood cannot be tenable because "Collingwood cannot really have espoused" any theory as Ideal Theory¹⁰.

Then what precisely says Collingwood? I agree with Wollheim on the view that for Collingwood, imagination is the sufficient condition for art. However, Wollheim misreads the role of audience and externalization. I claim Collingwood asserts them to be necessary for the distinction of good art and bad art; not pseudo-art and art proper. Externalization and audience is necessary for art's epistemology not ontology. Therefore, Collingwood is consistent. And against Ridley, I agree with John Dilworth¹¹ who had said that while trying to be charitable to an author, we might also abstain from changing what the author had really meant which would definitely be not charitable to him. Collingwood, for sure would have not been very happy to be told that after writing a big book on explaining how art is something imaginary and expressive, what he had said is totally not so. These would, then, indicate "either to his confusion of the theory or not being able to write clearly enough". For an author, surely rather than these conclusions, the former would be more charitable¹². Lastly, against the argument of Ridley, I claim that Art-as-Expression is parasitic on Art-as-Imagination which works as a mediator between the phisic level and the consciousness.

2. Imagination: Ontology of Art

The first and foremost thing to prove is the sufficiency of imagination for something to be art. Collingwood in the first book of *PA* says "The work of art proper is something not seen or heard; but something imagined"¹³. It is for the end of "total imaginative experience". This term, "total imaginative experience", signifies a crucial part in Collingwood's work because, as he says the art work is not only an imagined sound or paint but rather it is

¹⁰ Ibid., 269.

¹¹ John Dilworth, Is Ridley Charitable to Collingwood? In *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 56-4, (1998), 393-396.

¹² Ibid., 394.

¹³ Collingwood, *Principles of Art*, 142.

this experience in totality¹⁴. Hence, he gives the example of Cezanne, who in his view, had started to paint “like a blind man”¹⁵. When one looked at Cezanne’s pictures, one was not only “seeing” but able “to touch” them¹⁶. The pictures had gained a textile dimension. This is the same in the case of audience. For the audience, “art is also a matter of imagination work”. He says, what we do, when we look at a Masaccio is “not a matter of walking to it”, or “striding in the gallery” but rather imagining ourselves as if we were moving in those roads¹⁷. Hence, Collingwood concludes; “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”¹⁸. These remarks from Collingwood has to be counted as the first signs for the role Imagination plays in his theory as marking an artwork’s ontological feature.

The second book of *PA* is more about his philosophy of mind; how human mind works and what faculties play role. It explicates that imagination is the main agent between thinking and feeling¹⁹. Collingwood defines the immediate givens as sensations by the term “impression” like Hume. Impressions we bear from external world reside in our psychic level and we become aware of them as “ideas” by means of our imagination. He continuously quotes from Kant, for whom “imagination is the blind but indispensable faculty”²⁰. With respect to this, Kemp²¹ asserts that the role of imagination in Collingwood’s philosophy of mind is significantly Kantian and his art theory is a lot like Crocean²². Kantian metaphysics of mind rejects the priorly held Cartesian and Humean mind-as-theater conception.

¹⁴ Ibid., 151.

¹⁵ Ibid., 144.

¹⁶ Ibid., 146.

¹⁷ Ibid., 147.

¹⁸ Ibid., 151

¹⁹ Ibid., 161-164.

²⁰ Ibid., 171.

²¹ Kemp, The Croce-Collingwood Theory as Theory. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 61-2, (2003), 171-193.

²² This Croce-Collingwood similarity is a lot older than the assertions of Gary Kemp. The views on these issues could be seen in Hosper, J (1956), *Croce-Collingwood Theory of Art*, Royal Institute of Philosophy, 31 (119), 291-308, Cambridge University Press; Donagan, A. *The Croce-Collingwood Theory of Art*, Royal Institute of Philosophy, 33 (125) 162-167, Cambridge University Press; Sclafani, R. (1976), *Wollheim on Collingwood*, Royal Institute of Philosophy, 52 (197), Cambridge University Press

Kant claims that, mind is not a passive recipient that looks like a stage, but rather it itself actively creates its content which is called synthesis²³. Understanding is formed by giving responses to sensations and awareness occurs by means of imagination²⁴. "Imagination contrasts with sensation as something active with something passive, something we do something we undergo..."²⁵ However, before imagination takes up, consciousness or attention is requisite. Consciousness is a state of the mind which enables the *sensa* to be interpreted. As a result, Kemp illustrates Collingwood's philosophy of mind as follows [FIGURE I]:²⁶

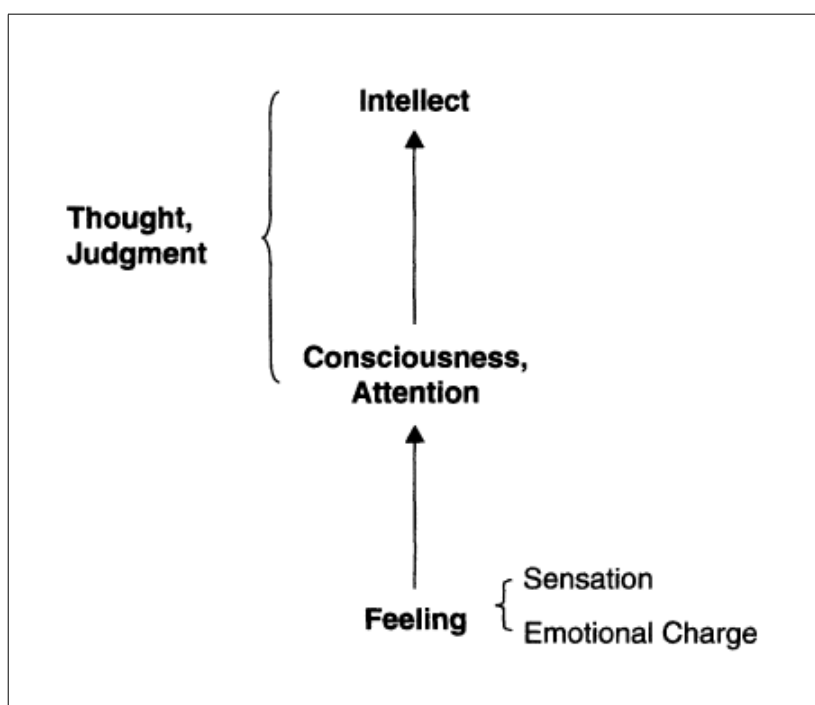


FIGURE I.

Thus, the sensations that we receive from the external world, namely impressions are transmuted into ideas by means of the work of consciousness. Consciousness interprets the raw data (feelings) and gives out ideas

²³ Kemp, *The Croce-Collingwood Theory as Theory*, 173.

²⁴ See the matchbox example in Collingwood, *Principles of Art*, 192-194.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

²⁶ Kemp, *The Croce-Collingwood Theory as Theory*, 176.

that endorse meaning. However, without the faculty of imagination, consciousness in itself would not be able to fulfill this function. It is by means of this faculty that consciousness can enable the “transmutation” process to take place. In other words, whereas consciousness or the act of being attentive might fulfill the requisite work, it is impotent without its aiding agent which is imagination, working as the agent of synthesis between feeling and intellect. Furthermore, with respect to their ontological features, although imagination can be described as a faculty of the mind, consciousness could be named as a state of it since it is necessary for the function of imagination to take place. Lastly, since the transmutation of sensations into ideas takes place by means of imagination, the end-result, ideas, exist inferentially in the imagination as “the ideas of imagination”. Therefore, we can give a slight change to the graph and add the faculty of imagination and its outcome as follows [FIGURE 2]:

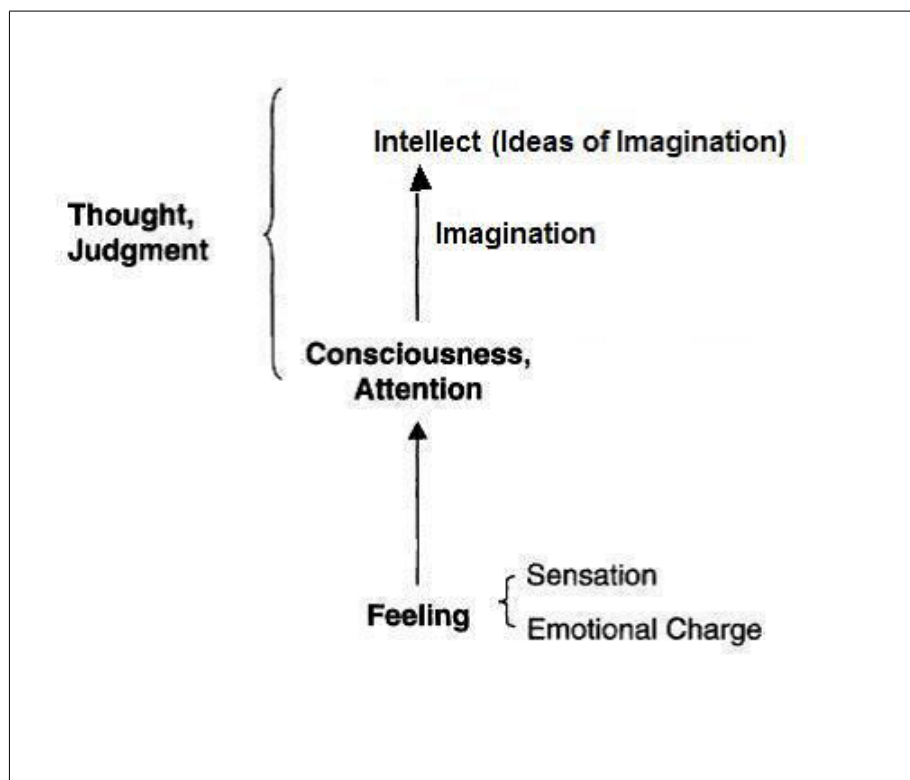


FIGURE 2.

This is also summarized and shown by Collingwood in the following sentences:

The sensuous experience need not exist by itself first. It may come into being under the very eyes, so to speak, of consciousness; so that it no sooner comes into being that it is transmuted into imagination. Nevertheless, there is always a distinction between what transmutes (consciousness), what is transmuted (sensation) and what is transmuted into (imagination).²⁷

3. Expression: Necessary for Imagination

The second theory of Collingwood which Art-as-Expression forms the greatest part of contradiction between the scholars is his theory. I state that expression ranks subsidiary to imagination and works for the epistemology of art as well as being irrelevant to its ontology. Moreover, expression in Collingwood's theory forms unity and totality. First of all, we should bear in mind that the theory of Collingwood, so-called Art-as-Expression was the one, which enabled an emotion that the artist himself was not aware, to be raised to the level of consciousness. As Collingwood writes:

When a man is said to express emotion... at first, he is conscious of having an emotion, but not conscious of what this emotion is. All he is conscious of is a perturbations or excitement... but of whose nature he is ignorant. While in this state, all he can say about his emotion is "I feel. I don't know what I feel". From this helpless and oppressed condition he extricates himself by doing something which we call expressing himself. This is an activity which has something to do with the thing we call language: he expresses himself by speaking. It has also something to do with consciousness: the emotion expressed is an emotion of whose nature the person who feels it is no longer unconscious.²⁸

²⁷ Collingwood, *Principles of Art*, 307

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

We understand that expression can be classified as “language” and as an “act of consciousness”. It raises an emotion which lies hidden in the unconscious to the level of conscious. Therefore, for the artist it works like a translator between these levels. This can occur either by means of a “physical medium”, an external and concrete process, or “conceived medium”, an inner process of expression. Wollheim gives Croce’s quotation of Leonardo “when he stood for days in front of the wall he was to paint, without touching it with his brush” for an evidence of a “conceived” medium²⁹.

In *PA*, Collingwood writes first Art-as-Expression, and then Art-as-Imagination. A comparison of the subtitles of each chapter even displays their proper values. Whereas the chapter on Art-as-Imagination includes subtitles such as “Making and Creating”³⁰, “Creation and Imagination”³¹ and “The Work of Art as Imaginary Object”; in the chapter on Art-as-Expression, there is no single title that indicates a relationship between creation and making or about the ontology of art-proper, but rather all subtitles deal with how emotion and expression are interrelated with one another such as “Expressing Emotion and Arousing Emotion”³², “Expression and Individualization”³³, “Expressing Emotion and Betraying Emotion”³⁴. This displays that when emotions are expressed, artwork is not finished yet. Here, we are still at an intermediate phase of it. This just indicates that emotions are translated to the conscious level from the psychic level. Hence, expression is an intermediary station for the creation of an artwork, between the conscious state and sensation. The reason is, as stated above once more, expression helps the agent to lift his/her emotional charges which are blind data to be raised into the level of consciousness so that they can be readied consequently for the interpretative work of imagination. Expression is necessary for Imagination. In other words, it is parasitic on imagination where artwork *is*.

What has been asserted is not that the painting is a work of art,

²⁹ Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, 40.

³⁰ Collingwood, *Principles of Art*, 128.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 130.

³² *Ibid.*, 109.

³³ *Ibid.*, 111.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

which would be as much as to say that the artist's aesthetic activity is identical with painting it; but that its production is somehow necessarily connected with the aesthetic activity, that is, with the creation of *the imaginative experience which is the work of art*.³⁵

Thus, we can finish our graph as follows [FIGURE 3]:

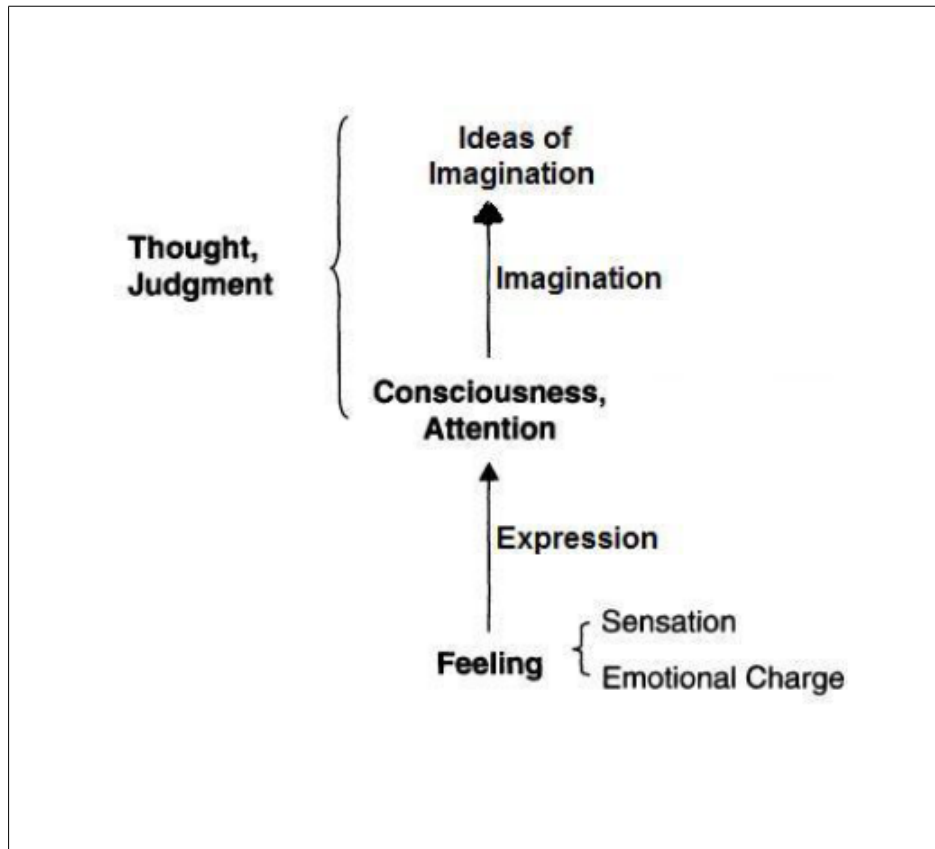


FIGURE 3.

4. Collingwood and Consistency

The whole inconsistency debate was about the third book of *PA* where Collingwood declares audience is essential for art. For Wollheim, if art

³⁵ Ibid., 305.

was something existing in the mind, then the essentiality of the audience was totally contradictory because, Ideal Theory, according to him, would entail art to be a private entity rather than a public one. Primarily, I reject a view of Idealism as such. It is true that by means of maintaining ontology of artworks to be in the mind and imaginary, Collingwood seems to me limiting art within the borders of an individual. However, idealism does not have to mean since art is something imaginary; every artwork needs not to be externalized, nor shared with some other one. This is one of the main deficient points of Wollheim. He takes the Idealist view to the extremes, even coming to assert that no artwork needs to be externalized, since what we have in our mind is already complete as an artwork. Collingwood had already known for sure, art needs interaction.

Individualism conceives a man as if he were God, a self-contained and self-sufficient creative power whose only task is to be himself... But a man, in his art as in everything else, is a finite being. Everything that he does is done in relation to others like himself. As artist, he is a speaker... Like other speakers, they speak to those who understand.³⁶

However, this interaction is necessary not for the ontology of art but for its epistemology. Epistemology of art is concerned with “the nature of artistic appreciation, understanding and the conditions under which it is possible”³⁷. In Collingwood, audience and externalization is necessary for *knowing* if it is a good art or a bad one, not to differentiate between “art-proper and pseudo-art”. Collingwood says that bad art is “the unsuccessful attempt to become conscious of a given emotion”³⁸ whereas good art is the one which achieves this. In order to “know” if something is good art or a bad one, in order to appreciate it; it would be helpful to externalize it in a physical medium and leave it to be checked by the audience.

However, it should also be remembered that the physicality is only one of the modes of an artwork’s existence. As stated before, as well as revealing itself as a “physical medium”, an artwork can also exist as a “conceived medium” and rest as the way it is in the mind.³⁹ Although this mode of

³⁶ Ibid., 317.

³⁷ Davies, *Art as Performance*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 26.

³⁸ Collingwood, *Principles of Art*, 282.

³⁹ See the footnote 29 for detail.

existence would not damage at all the artwork's ontological status as existing in imagination, when it remains as a "conceived medium" it loses the chance of being checked as an achievement of consciousness or a failure. The artist needs to pass a justification test, physicality and interaction with audience is necessary for this. As a result, in contrast to Wollheim, the relationship between artist and audience in Collingwood, rather than being inconsistent, supports what he had said in the first part of *PA*. Audience are there to "reconstruct" the work in their own minds as "total imaginative experience", they transmute these impressions to ideas by means of their imagination and the physical object is just a "recording" of what the artist has in his/her mind⁴⁰.

What is meant by saying that the painter "records" in his picture the experience which he had in painting it? With this question we come to the subject of the audience, for the audience consists of anybody and everybody to whom such records are significant. It means that the picture, when seen by someone else or by the painter himself subsequently, produces in him...sensuous-emotional or psychical experiences which, when raised from impressions to ideas by the activity of the spectator's consciousness, are transmuted into a total imaginative experience *identical* with that of the painter.⁴¹

This term "recording" is highly important as a proof for Collingwood's idealism and consistency. In recording, what one does is, s/he "deposits an authentic copy" of the original form⁴². Hence, in recording, the thing does not undergo any kind of change, but is just "copied". Meaning that the original, authentic form of the artwork rests in the mind, and "the copy" of it is formed through externalization. However, as mentioned above, this is for the control of the consciousness of the artist to be corrupt or not, to find out if it is a failure or an achievement, a good art or a bad art; not an ontological difference such as pseudo-art or art proper. Hence, the philosophy of Collingwood is consistent; still, the nature of the artwork resides in the mind.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 308.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² URL Merriam-Webster English Dictionary <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/record>>, accessed at 01.02. 2012

... Tune is already complete and perfect when it exists *merely* as a tune in his [artist's] head, that is, an imaginary tune. Next, he may arrange for the tune to be played before an audience. Now, there comes into existence a real tune, a collection of noises. But which of these two things is the work of art?... The answer is implied in what we have already said: the music, the work of art, is not the collection of noises, it is the tune in the composer's head. The noises made by the performers, and heard by the audience, are not music at all; they are only *means* by which the audience, if they listen intelligently... can reconstruct for themselves the imaginary tune that existed in the composer's head.⁴³

5. Collingwood's Global Idealism

It is also noteworthy to mark that Collingwood has been significantly attached to the Crocean and Gentilean tradition. Croce is for sure defended as one of the forefathers of Idealist aesthetics. It is obvious that there is a big influence of Croce and respectively Gentile on Collingwood. To count some is that "Collingwood had translated Croce's study of Vico, his autobiography and his *Aesthetica in Nuce*, of the *Ultimi Saggi*. He translated two works of De Ruggiero *La Filosofia Contemporanea* and *Storia del Liberalismo Europeo* and he revised the translation of a long passage from Gentile's *La filosofia dell'Arte* by E.F. Carritt, a passage appearing in Carritt's *Philosophies of Beauty*"⁴⁴. Moreover, in a letter written to Croce in 1938, he tells that *PA* "follows Croce's aesthetics in all essentials"⁴⁵. It is for sure that as Bennett had said in order to understand a philosopher we have to understand what fits best to the intentions of the time when he was writing⁴⁶. Not only this but also, a philosopher can be understood best in a context where all of his other ideas cohere and fit with each other globally. So, it is clear that Collingwood's ideas on art have to resonate with his other ideas on various branches of philosophy such as metaphysics and epistemology. As a

⁴³ Collingwood, *Principles of Art*, 139.

⁴⁴ Brown, *Neo-Idealistic Aesthetics: Croce, Gentile, Collingwood* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), 184.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers: Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume*. Vol.1. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

sign of this, it is important to mark that Collingwood had strictly attacked the Cook Wilson-Prichard realist tradition in Oxford in the years of 1930s. He gives a great account of how realism is on "decay" and the assertions of Wilson and Prichard has significant defects⁴⁷. He signified the realist tradition as "the undischarged bankrupt of moral philosophy"⁴⁸. Moreover, in his *Essay on Metaphysics*, he says that "the cause of change in body is something external, but the cause of change in mind is within itself" adding the note that "the more real is the more self-dependent"⁴⁹.

A discussion on Idealism has also occurred between Collingwood and Ryle when he was alive in 1938. Against his Ontological Argument, Ryle writes a letter to Collingwood asserting that his ideas resonate with the Idealist tradition. As a reply to Ryle, Collingwood strictly denies such a commitment to a school and writes back the following response.

You say I am "presumably to be classified, for what such labels are worth, as an Idealist". This puzzles me completely...Why not see what a man's views are, before deciding to what class...you shall refer them? And if (though I don't understand the need) you feel this urge strong upon you, why presume me an Idealist? I have nowhere in this essay or another publication or lecture so described myself, and I do not see why you should attach the label to me without giving some reason. I am afraid I resent both the label and the irresponsible manner of attaching it...then, I complain that you have falsified the issue, and orientated your criticism not towards my actual views but towards the views you (rightly or wrongly) ascribe to a school or alleged school of thought to which I do not belong.⁵⁰

It seems that Collingwood really did not want to be attached to a school as such, however before coming to a conclusion and being persuaded by him, let's suspend our judgment for a moment and evaluate what Ryle replies in turn which would be my last remarks and replies on him.

About my classification of you as an Idealist, I don't set much store by "Isms", I do not regard "Idealist" say or "Russelian" or "Realist"

⁴⁷ Collingwood, *Autobiography*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 44-47.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁹ Collingwood, *Method and Metaphysics*. In *An Essay on Philosophical Method*. (Intro. and Ed. D'Oro. G.& Connelly, J. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 347

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 255-257.

as denoting a person who swears by a specific proposition or set of propositions. But I do think that the labels, do give handy indication of the general type of interest, approach and affiliations of different philosophers (just as "liberal" and "conservative" do in politics). And I think if you asked any ordinary reasonably well read philosopher in, say, Edinburgh, whether he would classify you with the Cambridge Oxford tutors, or with the Cook Wilson-Prichardish ones, or with the "Idealists", he would plump for the last. No one – myself included – likes to feel that he has a classifiable philosophical cast of mind; but it obviously is so, save in the case of the unimportant folk who sit on the fence all the time... My motive in referring to you as an Idealist was to give an indication to people who haven't met you or read your books that you are a) *not* of the Russell-Moore-Broad cast of mind, and b) not of the Cook Wilson, Prichard, Larid etc. cast of mind c) but rather of the Kant-Hegel-Bradley- Joachim-Croce cast of mind... Nor am I persuaded of its inaccuracy.⁵¹

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⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 296, 297

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