

Expressing a Certain Vision — James, Collingwood and the Value of Artistic Pursuits

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ABSTRACT. Within philosophical aesthetics, discussions of value tend to focus on the aesthetic values of particular things (e.g. artworks, or natural objects), leaving the question of the value or worth of creating and experiencing art – a pressing question for artists, art educators and policy makers – comparatively unaddressed. Drawing on R. G. Collingwood’s account of art, this paper offers an answer to the question why the pursuit of artistic activities is valuable, arguing that, when artworks are engaged with as expressions to be understood ‘historically’, in Collingwood’s sense, doing so can offer a solution to the moral and epistemic problem of ‘value-blindness’ discussed by William James in his essay “On A Certain Blindness in Human Beings”, and so gives at least one reason why artistic pursuits are of value.

I. Introduction

Discussions of aesthetic value tend to focus on the aesthetic values of *things*, leaving unanswered the broader question of why aesthetic activities and experiences are themselves worth engaging in. Why should people bother with art in the first place, rather than spending their time on other things that might give them pleasure or be worthwhile in other ways? What good are works of art beyond their ‘entertainment value’ or the enjoyment that can be derived from them? Without a ready answer to questions such as these, no satisfactory reply can be given to one who reduces aesthetic judgments to mere personal taste and thinks that someone’s judgment of a work of art as good just means that she ‘likes that sort of thing’, or to those who dismiss art as frivolous – as *just* entertainment.

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The aim of this paper is to provide an answer to such questions by putting forward a position on the value of engaging in artistic pursuits – both the creation of artworks by artists and their reception by spectators – drawn from the thinking of William James, and in doing so to highlight the relevance of James’ philosophy to questions in aesthetics. As Richard Shusterman (2011) notes, James never wrote directly on aesthetics, despite his frequent use of examples from art and literature to illustrate his ideas (2011: 347-49), and perhaps it is because of this that there has been almost no discussion of James’ thought in relation to aesthetic concerns. While Shusterman has applied sections of *The Principles of Psychology* to an account of aesthetic experience, I wish here to examine James’ 1899 *Talks to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*, particularly his essay “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings”, arguing that an engagement with art, when done in light of R. G. Collingwood’s idea of art as expression and using his method of historical understanding, can offer a solution to the ‘blindness’ with which James is concerned – and this, in turn, provides an answer for why artistic pursuits are valuable.

2. James and Value Blindness

A few years prior to 1899, James was riding through the mountains of North Carolina when his carriage passed several ‘coves’, patches of land between the hills that had been roughly cleared and settled by homesteaders. Describing the scene encountered, James writes:

The settler had in every case cut down the more manageable trees, and left their charred stumps standing. The larger trees he had girdled and killed, in order that their foliage should not cast a shade. He had then built a log cabin, plastering its chinks with clay, and had set up a tall zigzag rail fence around the scene of his havoc, to keep the pigs and cattle out. Finally, he had irregularly planted the intervals between the stumps and trees with Indian corn, which grew among the [wood] chips... (1899a: 842)

His immediate impression was, as he puts it, “one of unmitigated squalor” (Ibid.: 842). The forest that had once stood was destroyed, with the clearing seeming to be “without a single element of artificial grace to make up

for the loss of Nature's beauty" (Ibid.: 842-43). However, when his driver, a native of the area, remarked that the region's inhabitants took pride in these coves and were only happy when "getting one of [them] under cultivation" (Ibid.: 843), James was struck by the difference between *his* way of taking the scene and *theirs*. He felt at once that he'd missed the "whole inward significance of the situation" (Ibid.: 843); that he had been blind to the meaning and value the clearings had for those who'd built them and in whose lives they featured. Following this realization, it occurred to James how the settlers would see the coves: the stumps would appear as reminders of their hard work, with the crude cabins and fences speaking of safety for themselves and their families. "The clearing," James writes, "which to me was a mere ugly picture on the retina, was to them a symbol redolent with moral memories and sung a very paean of duty, struggle, and success" (Ibid.: 843).

This incident inspired "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings", in which James discusses the common tendency of thought of which his initial judgment of the coves' ugliness was an instance. This tendency, the 'blindness' James refers to, is an habitual lack of awareness of the feelings of others, especially when these differ from our own, and is held by James to have negative moral and epistemic consequences. The moral danger is made clear in "What Makes a Life Significant", a companion talk given to the same students, in which James states that this blindness is "at the root of most human injustices and cruelties" (1899b: 861), and that an awareness of the feelings of others, and how these feelings inform their values, actions and lives, is of "the most tremendous practical importance [and] the basis of all our tolerance, social, religious, and political" (Ibid.: 861). The epistemic consequence concerns the way value-blindness limits our awareness of the world, narrowing the scope of our feelings and judgments to a single perspective, thereby making our judgments of others and their actions more likely to be mistaken. If judging from a limited perspective leads us to misjudge those who are the very sources of the alternative perspectives that would, if understood, put us in a better position to judge more accurately, these misjudgments are likely to reinforce our 'tunnel-vision', furthering our entrenchment in an insular understanding which is false insofar as it misses the differences and diversity of experience that exist in life. The limitation this puts on our judgments relates back to the

moral concern; as James notes, “judgments concerning the worth of things ... depend on the *feelings* the[y] arouse in us” and so “[i]f we were radically feelingless ... we should ... be unable to point to any one situation or experience in life more valuable or significant than any other” (1899a: 841). While few of us are ‘radically feelingless’, having a *narrower* range of feeling limits the value and significance we can find in life, along with limiting *the ways in which* we are able to find things valuable or meaningful. This leaves us less equipped to discriminate between the worth of things – to judge one thing as better or worse than another – and so restricts our ability to make the discriminations necessary for ethical judgments.

The epistemic limitations to which this blindness leads can be seen throughout James’ examples. Comparing a dog and its human owner, he points out that, despite their living closely together, the owner is blind to “the rapture of bones under hedges, or smells of trees and lamp-posts” and the dog to “the delights of literature and art” (Ibid.: 841). Just as we don’t fully realize how these things are felt or experienced by dogs, they are incapable of fathoming what we’re doing when reading: as James notes, it would appear to them that we sit motionless, staring at an unchanging object. Each side misses what the experience is like for the other, and so their judgments of the nature and worth of these activities (to the extent, of course, that dogs can be imagined to judge) will miss the mark.

This situation is echoed in a passage in which James contrasts Walt Whitman, immersed in the flow of public life whilst people-watching aboard the Brooklyn ferry, with a practically-minded man going about his daily business. The practical man, James writes, would likely characterize Whitman’s activity as “loafing” and judge it to be a waste of time (Ibid.: 854). Such an observer would similarly dismiss the behaviour of the boys described in Robert Louis Stevenson’s “The Lantern-bearers”, from which James quotes at length, who went around at night carrying tin lanterns under their coats, not for the light they shed (which was kept concealed) but as a sort of token of membership in a community of peers, the value of which seemed mainly to consist in its being a secret from others. In both cases, James suggests, an observer judging ‘from the outside’, without being aware of what the actions *meant for* the ones acting, would judge falsely. As he says, repeating a line of Stevenson’s for emphasis, “to miss the joy is to miss all” (Ibid.: 847), implying the meaning of a human action

lies in the reason why it is done as felt by the one acting, and so can't be captured by a description of the 'bare external facts'.

If value-blindness is the problem with which James is concerned, what solution does he offer? From what he says in certain places it would be easy to conclude that he thought the problem to be an unavoidable fact of human nature, and was drawing our attention to something we could do nothing about. For example, in one place he calls it "the blindness with which *we are all* afflicted" (Ibid.: 841, my emphasis) and in another says that when one judges another person's actions, the "judgment *is sure* to miss the root of the matter" (Ibid.: 842, my emphasis). However, to draw this conclusion would be to take these phrases out of context. The greater part of James' talk consists of a series of examples and quotations from people who, in the particular moments described, are *not* 'blind' to the significance of things as felt by others. James' personal example shows not only how he became aware of his own blindness but how he overcame it by realizing not just *that* others would feel differently, but *what* they would feel. The only example of his where we would *necessarily* miss the mark is that of the dog finding value in its buried bones; but it can be seen that this is because the dog has a different form of life. From James' other examples, it would seem that when we do share a form of life with the one whose activity we are judging, understanding is possible so long as we don't 'miss the joy' – which, being a human joy, is imaginable to us and so, in principle, knowable.

3. Collingwood and Historical Understanding

The sort of understanding James' examples suggest would be an antidote for value-blindness is remarkably close to what Collingwood, in *An Autobiography*, termed historical understanding. He tells of an incident from his life similar to James' realization in North Carolina. While working in London during the First World War, Collingwood would walk daily past the Albert Memorial and became captivated by its appearance. "Everything about it was visibly mis-shapen," he writes;

for a time I could not bear to look at it, and passed with averted eyes; recovering from this weakness, I forced myself to look, and to face

day by day the question: a thing so obviously, so incontrovertibly, so indefensibly bad, why had Scott done it? ... What relation was there, I began to ask myself, between what he had done and what he had tried to do? Had he tried to produce a beautiful thing; a thing, I meant, which we should have thought beautiful? If so, he had of course failed. But had he perhaps been trying to produce something different? If so, he might possibly have succeeded. If I found the monument merely loathsome, was that perhaps my fault? Was I looking in it for qualities it did not possess, and either ignoring or despising those it did? (1939: 29-30)

This train of thought contributed to the development of his method of historical understanding, which holds that “you cannot find out what a man means by simply studying his spoken or written statements ... you must also know what the question was ... to which the thing he had said or written was meant as an answer” (Ibid.: 31). While he refers here to uses of language, his approach to understanding extends to any purposeful human action, along with the artefacts that are the products thereof. His realization about the memorial – that there was something its maker had been trying to do by making it, and that to properly judge its quality or success required an understanding of what this was – is a clear example of this method being applied to an aesthetic object. Similarly, Collingwood writes of witnessing at a young age the painterly activities of his parents and their friends, seeing the various stages of the creative process and becoming aware of an artwork “not as a finished product exposed for the admiration of virtuosi, but as the visible record ... of an attempt to solve a definite problem” through the medium or art form to which the work belonged (Ibid.: 2).

A two-fold objection might be raised to the effect that making art is not always a matter of an artist having a definite problem in mind and trying to solve it by what he or she creates, and that to think so would contradict the position taken by Collingwood in *The Principles of Art* against the reduction of art to craft because the former is not merely a matter of executing a pre-formed plan, as one might follow a recipe (1938: 15-16). If, for example, Scott, the creator of the Albert Memorial, had made it *in order to* solve some problem through the medium of sculpture, it would,

seemingly, reduce the Memorial to a means to an end and so wouldn't fit Collingwood's own standards for counting it a work of 'art-proper' (Ibid.: 20-21). However, this second worry rests on an interpretation of Collingwood's remarks against craft being the 'essence' of art as saying that real art *couldn't* involve craft or technique, but as Aaron Ridley has insisted, this is not what Collingwood was claiming, so there is no real contradiction here (Ridley 1999: 14-16). And indeed, one of the central points argued in Collingwood's *An Essay on Philosophical Method* is that philosophical concepts overlap such that a distinction between concepts does not necessarily entail a difference in referents (1933: 28-29, 31); in other words, to draw a conceptual distinction between the notions of 'craft' and 'expression' is not to imply an exclusive disjunction between the thing to which each term is being used to refer, and so by Collingwood's standards a work being both one of craft *and* art-proper presents no problem.

In response to the first worry, Collingwood's writings show that he wasn't referring primarily to problems or questions a person has in mind prior to their solution. Reflecting, in his *Autobiography*, on his own philosophical process he writes: "when I am in the early stages of work on a problem[, u]ntil the problem has gone a long way towards being solved, I do not know what it is; all I am conscious of is [a] vague perturbation of mind, this sense of being worried about I cannot say what" (1939: 4-5). He holds this to be true of artistic creation, as can be seen from his example of a sculptor playing with clay, watching it take shape under his fingers, working out its form as he goes without planning in advance (1938: 22). Discussing his notion of 'art-proper' as involving the expression of a particular emotion, Collingwood writes: "Until a man has expressed his emotion, he does not yet know what emotion it is" (Ibid.: 111). As Ridley explains, since expression for Collingwood is the *working out* of an emotion through a particular medium, the expression, being a clarification of that emotion that raises it to consciousness, just is the answer to the question "What *is* it I feel?" (Ridley 1999: 32), with the question itself becoming clear only once the answer has emerged.

It is apparent from this that Collingwood's historical approach to understanding *can* be applied to artworks without contradicting his aesthetic theory, with the 'problem' to which the work is seen as a solution being the successful expression of a certain feeling of the artist's. What remains

to be seen is what this has to do with James' concern with value-blindness.

4. Aesthetic Engagement as a Solution to James' Problem

Even if one accepts that value-blindness, as James describes it, is problematic due to its moral and epistemic consequences, and that Collingwood's historical approach to understanding another's actions would be an antidote to this, it could still be asked why art is of particular importance in this regard. Even if art can be understood historically, it's not the only thing that can be and so it can't be claimed to be *the* solution to James' problem. However, it can be seen as *a* solution insofar as artworks are expressions of artists' feelings and perspectives, or ways of 'taking' things, and so to understand them historically *as* expressions involves imaginatively reconstructing these feelings and perspectives for ourselves; thus, they can give us practice in becoming aware of ways of feeling other than our own. In other words, because expressive artworks convey or make clear an artist's feeling towards something rather than just delivering information about it, they give us what Roger Scruton has called knowledge-what as opposed to the knowledge-that conveyed by a factual report – i.e. knowing *what it is like* to feel a certain way, rather than knowing *that* someone feels this way (see Scruton 2007: 34-35). This is not unlike Aristotle's point that poetry captures the meaning of events while records chronicling 'what happened when' (what Collingwood refers to as "scissors-and-paste" history) give only the bare external facts of the matter (see Aristotle 1984: 234-35). This view can also be seen in Collingwood's distinction between *betraying* an emotion, which makes the percipient aware that someone feels a certain way, and *expressing* one, which allows the percipient to experience something of that emotion for him or herself, and thereby know, to some extent, what it feels like (1938: 122-24).

James takes a similar view to Aristotle and Collingwood as to the kinds of meaning to be found in poetic expression versus the scissors-and-paste sort of history, prioritizing the "higher vision of an inner significance" over what is known "in the dead external way" (1899a: 848), and the view that art is something that shows us the former is implicit in his writings. Notably, all the examples James gives in his talk involve aesthetic matters,

either being taken from poets and novelists or describing an appreciation of natural beauty; even in his dog example he chooses art and literature as the objects of human significance to which the dog is blind. Moreover, his discussions of the poets Whitman and Wordsworth depict them as seeing a greater range of significance than the practically-minded due to their imaginative openness to other perspectives and feelings. The practical man seeing Whitman as a loafer is in a position towards him comparable to the dog's position towards its owner; knowing only one way to take what he observes and assuming it to be the extent of the truth, he fails to see Whitman's attunement to the flow of life for what it is, just as the dog can't see reading for what *it* is. A similar point is made when James speculates that Wordsworth's neighbours "tightly and narrowly intent upon their own affairs" would have thought the poet walking in the countryside, "filled with ... inner joy, responsive ... to the secret life of Nature roundabout him", to be "a very insignificant and foolish personage" (Ibid.: 849-50). It should be noted that James wouldn't hold to any hard-and-fast categorization of people as *either* 'practical' or 'imaginative', but rather thinks of these as attitudes anyone can take up, although those habitually entrenched in one would be less likely or less able from want of practice to take up the other. "Only in some pitiful dreamer," James writes, "some philosopher, poet, or romancer, or *when the common practical man becomes a lover*, does the hard externality give way, and a gleam of insight into ... the vast world of inner life beyond us ... illuminate our mind" (Ibid.: 847, my emphasis).

It isn't a stretch to suppose that James would hold aesthetic engagement to be another way for the 'common practical man' to rise above this 'hard externality', sharing in Emerson's view that artists "are free, and ... make free" (1844: 301). If artists see more of the inner significance of things by looking beyond the limitations of their own practical needs and habits, and if they express this significance through their work, it follows that an engagement with these works – as expression to be understood rather than as entertainment to be consumed, as Collingwood would have insisted (see Collingwood 1938: 78-82 on 'amusement art') – can allow others to 'see' as the artist did, looking past their own personal concerns to imaginatively identify with the concerns of another. If the ability to 'walk a mile in another's shoes' would help combat value-blindness, artists, in

making works that express and thus make public a part of their emotional experience of the world, can be seen as offering us a pair of their 'shoes' to try on.

Collingwood is not alone among philosophers in this understanding of art; for example, Scruton says an artist "presents us with a way of seeing (and not just any way of thinking of) his subject" (1981: 582) and writes that paintings "present to us a vision that we attribute not to ourselves but to another man; we think of ourselves as *sharing in the vision of the artist...*" (Ibid.: 581, my emphasis). Admittedly, if taken literally this is false (we would not claim, for example, that Picasso *literally saw* a person's eyes on the same side of their face, nor their nose as a triangle) but it should be noted that these references to seeing and vision are at least somewhat metaphorical. Rather than thinking of a work as *reproducing* the visual experience of the artist, it is more fitting to see it as the expression of an inner emotional or imaginative experience she had while perceiving her subject – not what she saw, but what she felt as she saw it. To experience the work 'feelingly' is to become aware of the way the artist felt when perceiving it, based on the work's expressive qualities. As Collingwood describes (1938: 306-09), the process an artist goes through while creating a work of 'art-proper' involves her adopting the positions of both creator and spectator: when a painter is working she is both painting and looking at what is taking shape on the canvas, seeing and feeling the results of her brushstrokes; when a composer writes a song he is attending to how the notes he chooses sound together; when a poet writes she is reading as she goes, assessing the effects of her word choice and prosody. In this sense, when we experience a work of art we *do* perceive something the artist perceived: the work itself. If this work counts as the successful expression of a feeling the artist had, it does so because she saw, heard or read in what she had done something she recognized as capturing this feeling; and if we take the finished work before us as having been felt about in this way by the artist when she perceived it, we can attempt to 'get on the artist's wavelength', so to speak, and imaginatively reconstruct this feeling for ourselves.

Moreover, since Collingwood holds any work of art-proper to be "a certain thing" rather than "a thing of a certain kind" (Ibid.: 114), the account of art he offers is particularly suited to providing a solution to the problem James raises. Because value-blindness is likely to come about through

the attribution of a general or ‘universal’ emotion to someone in order to understand her behaviour, as this will lead one to overlook any particularities of what she is actually feeling that may not be contained within the general concept, people will be less likely to be blind to the actual feelings of others if they habitually engage with artworks by (i) taking them to be expressions of *particular* rather than general feelings – e.g., as expressing a particular feeling the artist felt on a certain occasion that could be described as an instance of, say, sadness, rather than expressing ‘sadness-in-general’ – and (ii) seeking to understand them in their particularity. Engaging with art in this way is likely to better prepare one to recognize and understand more correctly the feelings of the other people one encounters in life, which Collingwood and James would agree will be particular occurrences of unique feelings rather than instances of generic, universal emotions. Also, insofar as an active engagement with art involves attending closely to *perceptual* details as potential sources of meaning, it could be said to give practice in understanding the emotions of others as revealed through body language, facial expression, tone of voice, etc. – perhaps to a greater degree than other forms of moral education, since these things must first be perceived before they can be conceived or understood as expressing (or even ‘betraying’) such-and-such a feeling.

5. Conclusion

The position outlined above as to the benefits of engaging with art may sound similar to the common (and admittedly vague) claim that art ‘broadens one’s horizons’. However, by specifying that it is our *range of perspectives* as to the possible value or significance of things that is in question, the current position makes clear just what is ‘broadened’, and how. By holding that it is the perspective the artist took to her subject that is beneficial to engage with, this view avoids the problems arising from assuming that a work’s content – for example, the characters and situations in a narrative – is what is to be identified or empathized with. There is a difference between imagining oneself in the place of a fictional character and imaginatively adopting the artist’s way of viewing people and their behaviour, just as there is a difference between imagining being in the place depicted in a painting and attending to the painter’s way of seeing this place and

learning to be able to see like this for ourselves. In the case of a narrative work, it is a question of identifying with, for example, Shakespeare and his understanding of the human condition as expressed in, say, *Hamlet*, rather than with the character of Hamlet and his actions. This applies equally to non-representational art; we can learn through their works to ‘hear feelingly’ like Beethoven or Chopin or Mingus did, or to see with feeling similar to the way Pollock or Kandinsky or De Kooning saw.

Art has the potential to take us out of ourselves and allow us to feel, understand and ‘take’ the world as another has taken it, which is morally and epistemically beneficial insofar as it helps us break the habit of value-blindness James warns against and makes us less likely to judge the actions of others narrowly or falsely. While this may sound to some as if it were an invitation to relativism, James is not saying we *can’t* judge others who feel or value differently than we do; rather, he implies that we’re only in a position to judge when we do so with an understanding of what things are like for them. It would be a mistake to read James’ pluralism as saying that any feeling is as good as any other; in *A Pluralistic Universe*, he explicitly states that one person’s ‘vision’ may be more or less valuable than another’s (1909: 34). Of course, we can’t be in a position to judge this comparative value unless we understand what the different visions involve – and as both James and Collingwood would insist, we can only do so ‘from the inside’. It is my suggestion that works of art, when understood historically as expressions of another’s way of ‘taking’ and feeling towards parts of the world can give us practice in doing just this.

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