Self-Expression: Problems of Expression, Problems of Self

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Responding to John Gingell's essay on self-expression is a delightful but daunting task — delightful because I agree with virtually everything he says and wish I had said it; daunting because I agree with virtually everything he says and wish I had said it. Because of this similarity of views, I take my role here as more commentator than critic, providing clarification, elaboration, and exemplification, as well as a case to test both our perspectives.

Gingell's central claim is that the notion of self-expression in the arts is highly problematic and that, in fact, the demand for self-expression is "completely devoid of significant content." There are, I think, really two separate but interconnected foci of his criticism. One concerns the problems with viewing art as expression. The other centers on problems with the notion of self.

Expressivist theories of art tend to focus on the imagination and emotions of the artist as the sources of creativity and originality in works of art. The essential characteristic of art is not that it represents the world, but rather that it is an expression of the unique vision, feelings, or experiences of the particular artist. The problems with expressivist views are many, but several are particularly relevant for present purposes. The first concerns what exactly it is that a work of art is thought to express. Robin Collingwood's view that it is a disturbing but inchoate emotion seems highly implausible when dealing with works of any degree of complexity. Accounting for Hamlet or Beethoven's ninth symphony in terms of an inchoate emotion seems not only woefully inadequate, but also to miss what is most essential about these works. One might argue, instead, that it is the ideas of the artist which are expressed, but this is, in some sense, trivially true and thus decidedly uninformative. It does nothing to explain the nature of artworks, to distinguish art from non-art, or to provide criteria of judgment, but these are all tasks which various expressive theories set out to fulfill.

Another problem with expressive theories is the one pointed out by Gingell in his critique of Collingwood, namely their reliance on private mental processes. Gingell's criticism of Collingwood's view focuses on the problematic nature of the relationship between the inchoate emotion of the artist and the work of art itself. Given that the work is an imaginary object, and thus not publicly accessible, there is no way for the audience members to identify the public manifestation of the work (such as a painting or a novel) with the private emotion of the artist. But even if one rejects Collingwood's view of the work of art as imaginary object, and offers an expressivist view which acknowledges the work itself as the expression, I would argue that the problem which Gingell describes still obtains. There is no way of knowing from the work itself whether the artist went through a particular process. In focusing on private mental states and processes, expressive theories provide no criteria for identifying, characterizing, or making judgments about actual works.

A related problem concerns what it could mean for a work of art to express something, be it an emotion, an idea, or an experience. In everyday life, expressions of emotion might include tears, a scream, or the stamping of a foot, and an idea would likely be expressed by the simple stating of it. Something quite different seems to be involved in artistic creation. The artist does not simply express, but rather gives form to a particular content. It is interpreted and shaped through the medium, so that the final work is imbued with expressive qualities. Thus we are led to an expressive view like Langer's which locates expression in the formal properties of the work itself. Such a move avoids the problems regarding access to private mental processes, but accomplishes this at the cost of the original motivation of expressive theories, which is the locating of the originality and value of works in the imagination of the individual artist. The "self" in self-expression seems to be lost, as Gingell aptly points out.

This brings us to the second cluster of problems surrounding self-expression, which is problems surrounding the notion of self. If art is self-expression, then what is the nature of the self that is expressed? What is it that does the expressing? And what distinguishes expression of self from non-expression or the expression of something other than self? In order to address these questions, I shall focus on an area where the notion of self-expression has been particularly salient, that of drama education.

A view which grounds much drama education practice is that there is a pure, authentic self beneath the layers of cultural accretion, and that this self can emerge through dramatic improvisation if one is not inhibited by dramatic conventions or the demands of communication. This type of self-expression is not seen to be available in activities related to theatre since the latter are highly convention-bound and focus on communication of the ideas of others, rather than on the experience of the participants.[1]

Numerous theorists have demonstrated the difficulties inherent in this type of Romantic view of an authentic self apart from culture and have argued persuasively that our "selves" are, rather, constituted through our interactions with and actions within culture. Charles Taylor, for example, argues that "We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining an identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression."[2] Moreover, improvisational drama cannot be viewed as an acultural and nonconventional arena for the emergence of authentic selves. Rather, students engaging in improvization are likely to draw on unrecognized conventions, a point which Gingell aptly raises. In this case it will likely be the conventions of television or of Hollywood films. Naturalism in theatre is, after all, also a convention.

Gingell's move, in order to sidestep these problems while still retaining some notion of self, is to reconceptualize the issue, moving it from a question of self-expression to one of individuation. He thereby relocates self-expression from the realm of private processes to the arena of public presentation. Arts education, then, becomes focused on style rather than on psychology.

This seems to me to be exactly the right move. Yet I want to offer a recent experience with dramatic presentations as a potential challenge to Gingell's (and hence also my) account. A class of student teachers, whose instructors had put considerable emphasis throughout the semester on personal reflection and the taking of risks, made dramatic presentations which drew heavily on their own experiences. These experiences were highly personal, often emotionally charged, and obviously very significant to the students, and the presentations were, without exception, extremely powerful and moving. They seemed to be different in some important way from the presentation of scripted texts, and it is a difference which does not seem to be accounted for adequately in terms of individuation and style. It is difficult to resist the temptation to characterize this difference and to account for the dramatic power of the presentations in terms of the students' authenticity of feeling and their self-expression.

The question which this example raises for me concerns the relationship between authenticity of feeling and aesthetic power. The example might tempt one to argue that the former is a necessary condition for the latter. Yet actors constantly give moving performances in contexts where they are not communicating their own experiences. Advocates of the "method" orientation would likely argue that actors must evoke their own authentic feelings, even in fictional contexts, in order to be dramatically effective. Yet this view would be countered by a more craft-oriented perspective which emphasizes the role of skill in dramatic portrayal and which would deny the necessity of the actor actually experiencing the relevant emotion. This divergence of perspectives is nicely illustrated by the story, likely apocryphal, of an exchange between Laurence Olivier and Dustin Hoffman on the set of the film "Marathon Man." Hoffman arrives on the set one day looking a complete wreck, and in response to Olivier's query about his state, relates that he has been staying up nights and not eating in order to get himself into the appropriate physical and emotional state for the scene in which he is to be tortured. And to this Olivier replies, "Haven't you heard of acting?"

An additional argument against positing authenticity of feeling as a necessary condition for aesthetic power is the one offered by Gingell, that we have no way of determining what the artist is feeling, if anything. I have made an assumption that the students in the presentation were drawing on their own experiences and feelings based on my knowledge of the students and on the nature of the exercise. Yet I have no way of knowing whether this was in fact, the case. Perhaps some of them were just telling good stories.

Even if authenticity of feeling is not a necessary condition of aesthetic power, could it be that it is sufficient, that is that a genuine expression of emotion will always result in aesthetically powerful art? Yet clearly the work of the students would not have been dramatically powerful if they had not had the skill to communicate their experiences in dramatically effective ways. They did not simply relate their stories but rather gave them dramatic shape and interpreted them through interaction with dramatic media. Although most of the students were not trained actors, there was enough dramatic experience and aesthetic sensibility within the groups to allow skillful creation and performance.

It seems, then, that authenticity of feeling is neither necessary to nor sufficient for the creation of aesthetically effective works. Nonetheless, I would still want to maintain that there was something special and educationally significant about the nature of the dramatic work that those students engaged in. The rejection of emotion or certain types of experience as either necessary or sufficient for aesthetic worth does not imply that these have no role to play in art or art-making. There are many starting points for works of art, including a specific observation or perception, a philosophical idea, the desire to represent, or even a technical problem within the discipline. But artworks sometimes do have their inception in certain strongly felt emotions or certain significant experiences, and the creation of the work can be a way to explore and to understand these feelings and experiences by giving them form. Self-expression is not the best description of what is going on here. It is, rather, a case of giving aesthetic form to ideas, feelings, and experiences. And engaging in art activity of this kind gives students the experience of creating art and of attempting to understand their experiences through artistic activity. It is important to note that this is very different from what is entailed in the notion of self-expression. The emphasis is not on the individuals' psyches, and the worth of the product and the activity is not located there. Rather students are participating in aesthetic traditions, using artistic conventions, and creating works which have a place in the realm of public presentation. And it is here that the issues which Gingell highlights with respect to the initiation into artistic traditions and conventions, the fostering of originality within the context of continuity, and the development of a personal style become crucial.

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1. See, for example, Gavin Bolton, *Drama As Education: An Argument For Placing Drama at the Centre of the Curriculum* (London: Longman, 1984).

2. Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, Ontario: Anansi Press, 1991), 33.