

The Expression Theory of Art

Expression Theory: Some Preliminaries

- What can be expressed?
 - Feelings/emotions/moods
 - Thoughts/ideas
- How can things be expressed?
 - The model of self-exploration or articulation.(Collingwood)
 - The model of communication.(Tolstoy)
- The scope of today's discussion:
 - The expression of feelings/emotions/moods in **the model of communication.**





The cat is on
the table





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the table



Expression Theory: Some Preliminaries

- In the Introduction lecture, we have learnt that art theory generalizes and provides accounts for some particular phenomena associated with art. So what is generalized and explained by the expression theory?
- The expression theory, according to Freeland, theorizes **the way in which art is used as a vehicle for communication of emotion**. That is, the expression theory is developed to answer those questions such as what does an artist do during the process of artistic creation, why artworks are expressive and how artworks are used to communicate certain emotions/feelings and/or ideas/thoughts to us.
- Generally speaking, the expression theory of art concerns on the fact that we always feel something (most of time some emotion) when we appreciate certain kinds of artworks. Why can we feel emotion in artworks? Why are artworks expressive? Who should be eventually responsible for the expressiveness of artworks and the fact that we feel emotions in artworks?

Expression Theory: Some Preliminaries

- At a basic level, the expression theory attempts to explain how emotions/moods/feelings are communicated through artworks.
- While, it can be put to undertake different theoretical roles beyond what mentioned above, that is, it can be used to define the essence of art and to function as a criteria for the evaluation of art and so on.
- In this lecture, we only focus on the explanation provided by the expression theory on **how emotions are communicated through artworks** and **a few objections** that challenge this explanation.

Expression Theory: A Common Version

- According to a common version of expression theory, we can feel emotions in the artworks because the artist makes an effort to arouse certain emotions in us by means of her creation of artworks. And the emotion we experience in our appreciation is exactly what has been experienced by the artist in her creation. That is to say, she externalizes her emotion through the creation of art in different artistic media to elicit in us the same emotion. And this explains both why artworks are expressive and how emotion is communicated from the artist to us.
- Let's see how Tolstoy characterizes this process:
- “To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced and having evoked it in oneself then by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit this feeling that others experience the same feeling – this is the activity of art. . . .”
- (Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, 1959, 123.)

Expression Theory: Three Key Constituents

- 1. The expression of emotion is an activity the artist does in the creation of artworks, that is, she externalizes her inner emotion through the process of creation.
- 2. What matters in the appreciation of art, according to the expression theory, is to feel the same emotion the artist intends to elicit in us through the artworks.
- 3. The expressiveness of artworks should be explained in terms of the emotion felt by the artist in the creation. Thus, the emotion we feel in the artwork is the same as what the artwork is expressive of.

Some Objections: Objection One

- Does the expression theory correctly characterize what an artist does in her creation of art? Does the artist really experience certain emotion during her creation of art? If so, how can we know that? If not, then the first constituents of the expression theory seems to be problematic.
- What an artist does may be different from what they are assumed to do in the expression theory.
- An artist can just keep calm and concentrate on how to produce a certain artistic effect or how to overcome a certain technical obstacle without any emotion involved in.

Some Objections: Objection Two

- Does the expression theory correctly characterize what matters in the appreciation of art? If not, then the second constituent of the expression theory seems to be problematic.
- If the only thing that matters in our appreciation of art is to experience the emotion transmitted to us by the artist which she felt before, then it seems that what is communicated and the way it is transmitted can be separated. Thus, the appreciation of artworks is no more than merely one of the approaches for us to feel the intended emotion. So, if we can achieve this purpose through different ways, we do not need artworks any more.
- Artworks, according to expression theory, is merely a transparent vehicle the value of which is purely instrumental. We do not need to pay attention to the artwork itself just as we do not need to care about the quality of a piece of tissue because it is nothing more than a tool designed to achieve our purposes such as wiping a baby's tears.

Some Objections: Objection Three

- Let's assume that, for every artwork that expresses an emotion, the artist felt that emotion at the time of the artwork's creation. Is this emotion necessarily the same as the one we experience when we appreciate the artwork? If not, there is a problem with the third constituent of the expression theory.
- There can be an asymmetry (a difference) between the emotion which the artwork is expressive of and the emotion it is likely to arouse in us. For example, we normally experience fear rather than anger in a work which is expressive of anger.