

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art
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Wollheim, "Criticism as Retrieval"

*'Criticism' is Wollheim's term for "the process of coming to understand a particular work of art", where there is not a purely evaluative term. (235)

--We see at the outset that Wollheim is an Intentionalist, in contrast with Beardsley:
"The task of criticism is the reconstruction of the creative process, where the creative process must in turn be thought of as something not stopping short of, but terminating on, the work of art itself. The creative process reconstructed, or retrieval complete, the work is then open to understanding." (235)

*One objection to this view is epistemological: We generally cannot know facts about the creative process in any detail. So, our criticism will be equally impoverished.

--At the bottom of p. 235, Wollheim concedes that perhaps criticism is difficult for this very reason.

--Wollheim warns against substituting *revision* for *retrieval*, as the appropriate method of criticism. His point is that if revision is the appropriate method in cases of ignorance, it should be the appropriate method in cases of knowledge (of the creative process) as well:
"If criticism is justifiably revision when we lack the necessary evidence for reconstructing the creative process, then it must also be revision when we have, if we ever do, adequate evidence for retrieval. We cannot as critics be entitled to make the work of art relate to us when we are in a state of ignorance about its history without our having an obligation to do so, and this obligation must continue to hold in the face of knowledge." (236)

Q: Can a work of art change *its* meaning (in contrast with what it means *to us*) over the course of history?

*The second objection is that scrutiny (in Beardsley's terms, exclusive reliance on internal evidence) is preferable, and retrieval simply gets things wrong.

--But, the method of scrutiny cannot distinguish between accidental and intended features of an artwork.
"Understanding is reached through description, but through profound description, or description profounder than scrutiny can provide, and such description may be expected to include such issues as how much of the character of the work is by design, how much has come about through changes of intention, and what were

the ambitions that went to its making but were not realized in the final product.” (238)

--What is found in the work, as the result of scrutiny, depends in large part on the cognitive states of the perceiver. (The longest paragraph on p. 238 has lots of good examples illustrating this point.)

Possibility to consider: “Retrieval is legitimate because, but only in so far as, through its findings it contributes to perception.” (239)

--The “perfect forgery” example.

Wollheim distinguishes two kinds of perception of a work: perceiving something in a work and how we perceive the work. (Is the latter *really* a kind of perception, though? Or is it supposed to refer to something more like a non-perceptual reaction?)

*Q: What relation is there between the creative process (which Wollheim has concerned himself with) and the artist’s intentions (as Beardsley framed the debate)?

--Wollheim sees the creative process as including more than just the artist’s intentions. See the bottom of p. 240, onto 241.

*A consequence of Wollheim’s view:

“The 30,000 years or so of Palaeolithic art must remain ultimately a mystery to us, short of a landslide victory for archaeology.” (241)