

The Mind's Movement: An Essay on Expression

Dissertation Abstract

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I decided to work on expression when I realized that it is a concept (and phenomenon) of great importance for the philosophical questions that interest me the most. What it is to *know another person* (as opposed to knowing, say, how a mechanical clock works, or which clouds mean rain) is one such question. What it is to *be* a person, someone whose movements can count as a mischievous smile or a pained frown, is another—of course quite intimately connected. Given the importance of the concept, I was struck by how little was written about it (at least within a certain tradition) and how much of what was written seemed implausible or off-key. Having read around some more, it seemed to me possible both to discern a pattern in the way expression was talked about—and thereby say something general about what I found problematic in the current discourse—and to provide a family of concepts within which to situate expression that could work as a sort of antidote to the current situation. My dissertation is the result of the exploration of this possibility.

Imagine the following scenario. Tara opens the door to the refrigerator and finds a head of rotting lettuce that has been decomposing there for quite some time. Her face lights up in a big smile, and she says—in a tone of amusement—“It's alive!” Tara's delight at the sight of living processes active in the decomposition of organic matter is expressed in her face and in what she says. The movement of Tara's mind—the way in which the world struck her at the moment she opened the door to the fridge—was made visible in the way she acted.

Tara's expression of delight is, as we might put it, in a border territory between the passive and the active aspects of human existence. She is doing something; the change in her face and the exclamation she

makes come from *her* rather than being something that merely befall her (such as a sudden illness or being pushed to fall over). But her response was immediate and spontaneous, and she didn't—it seems—*intend to* smile in delight; she simply smiled. It is my conviction that the space an expression such as Tara's delighted smile occupies is not properly appreciated in contemporary philosophy, and thus that a category fundamental to human life needs re-examination.

The Standard Conception of Human Behavior

Here is a preliminary characterization of the source of my dissatisfaction: when contemporary philosophers in the analytic tradition talk about expression, they tend, with few exceptions, to think of it as either having the form of a fully rational and intentional manifestation of a mental state, or as phenomenon that stands *opposed to* action—a piece of mere behavior. This is true for philosophers who don't take it upon themselves to have an explicit account of expression, yet discuss it, as well as for most philosophers whose explicit aim is to analyze the phenomenon of expression. The picture of human behavior we get from contemporary analytic philosophy is one in which expressions have to be shoehorned into the category of intentional action or be content to be characterized as mere happenings.¹

The dichotomy of mere happening and intentional action is one feature of what I want to call the *standard conception of human behavior*, a conception I take to consist in the following three interrelated elements:

- 1) A focus exclusively on human beings as rational agents, where the primary concepts for

¹ My criticism is confined to the analytic tradition, primarily in its post-Davidsonian configuration. Not all of the philosophers I discuss are subject to my criticism, and not all to an equal degree. As we will see, Anscombe is one analytic philosopher (pre-Davidsonian) in whose writing I find resources to address the problem. A broader outlook, I suspect, would reveal that there also are plenty of philosophers from other traditions for whom the problem of expression doesn't arise, simply because their framing assumptions are different. Merleau-Ponty in his discussion of expression might be such a philosopher. See his *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. C. Smith, London and New York: Routledge, 1962, reprinted 2006, pp. 202–234.

understanding behavior are intentions and reasons.

- 2) A commitment to a dichotomy of mere behavior and intentional action.
- 3) A tendency to describe expression as either mere behavior or as done for the sake of manifesting one's mental states.²

There are two ways to understand 'mere behavior' as the phrase figures in these formulations. On one interpretation, the phrase expresses an indeterminate negation of the description 'intentional'. That is, it simply means 'nonintentional behavior.' When philosophers speak of 'mere happening' or 'mere behavior' this could, however, also be heard as a *determinate negation* of the description 'intentional action.' In this case we want the description to pick out a category unified by its own positive description, rather than being a rag-bag pile of left-overs. One candidate for what 'mere behavior' could mean, if it is used as a determinate characterization, could be 'behavior which the upshot of merely causal (as opposed to rational) mechanisms, and which is explained and understood by uncovering those causal mechanisms.' With those two possible understandings of 'mere behavior' on the table—the indeterminate and the determinate negation—I can express my worry about the dichotomy of mere behavior and intentional action as follows: if by characterizing expression as 'mere behavior' we mean only to indeterminately negate 'intentional,' we should not pretend to have said anything particularly informative. If, however, what we mean to say is that expressions are upshots of merely causal mechanisms (as opposed to rational processes) made intelligible by uncovering those merely causal mechanisms, we have said something *false* about expressions. How and why it is false is part of what I'd like to show.

I argue that a starting-point for providing a conceptual home for expression is that expressions—

² I call this a tendency rather than a thesis, because it often figures in the literature as an unargued for, and sometimes not even recognized, assumption.

even though they don't conform to the Davidsonian criterion for intentional action (having an intentional description) are subject to first-personal explanations. This thought is a clue, I think, to solving what, from within the perspective of the standard conception, is a problem with expression. The problem, which I will now go on to articulate, concerns how to appreciate the spontaneous nature of expressions, while not accepting that this means that they are mere behavior in the determinate sense of being the upshots of a merely causal mechanism.

The Problem of Expression

The problem of expression is elegantly articulated by Peter Goldie. He says,

Is it the case that, if expression of emotion really cannot be satisfactorily explained in terms of reasons from the personal point of view, then our explanations must be limited to mere causal explanations of the sort which is provided for bodily changes which are part of an emotion? [E.g. sweating, increase in heart-rate, and secretions of adrenaline.] If this were so, then we would have to accept that there are things which we do—as contrasted with things that happen to us—which cannot be made sense of from the personal point of view any more than we can make sense of the movements of the planets; expression of emotion would just be some sort of perturbation of rational action as such.³

In this passage, Goldie is supposing, first, that expressions of emotion (like smiling or frowning in puzzlement) are things we do rather than things that just happen to us. But in spite of being things we do they don't, he suggests, standardly conform to the traditional Davidsonian model of intentional action according to which an intentional action is done in the light of a reason for action. But it seems odd, Goldie thinks, to put smiling in joy or frowning in puzzlement on a par with mere bodily changes, such as an increase in heart-rate or a secretion of adrenaline.

Goldie presents us with a dilemma: either expression is rational action, or it's "something which

³ Peter Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000, p. 124.

can't be made sense of from the personal point of view.” It is “some sort of perturbation of rational action as such.” This dilemma, I think, can be related to the indeterminate and determinate senses of 'mere behavior' described above. Goldie appears, first, to be thinking that giving a reasons-explanation for an intentional action is to assume the person's point of view on the situation. Reasons for action, he seems (quite naturally) to think, are visible from the personal point of view. And, he suggests further, if an expression cannot be explained by reasons, then it might be that it cannot be made sense of from the personal point of view either. The only explanation we can give for such an expression, perhaps, is of the kind we use to understand the motions of the heavenly bodies. If we think along these lines, we are thinking that the denial that a piece of behavior is an intentional action implies something determinate, namely that its explanation will be “impersonal,” and lack a connection with rationality. The dilemma is shown to be spurious, I think, by arguing that there's no need to move so quickly from the innocuous, but quite uninformative, indeterminate negation: that the behavior is unintentional, to the problematic positive determination of expression as impersonal and as mere perturbation of rational action. Couldn't a piece of unintentional behavior be subject to an explanation from the person's point of view? And further, couldn't we see a piece of unintentional behavior as coming from a person considered as a rational creature?

On my view, the problem of expression is intimately connected to the standard conception of human behavior. Indeed, I don't think it can be solved if we don't allow ourselves a more nuanced conception of the space of possibilities than the blanket dualism of mere behavior and intentional action. Hence, the dichotomy which lies behind the dilemma Goldie describes in the cited passage needs to be abandoned.⁴

4 Goldie articulates the dilemma nicely but he, on my view, doesn't quite overcome it. Spontaneous unintentional expressions are not given much of an explanation in Goldie's treatment of expression, apart from the suggestion that they have evolved to communicate the emotion in question. And he gives actions expressive of emotions a modified Davidsonian belief-desire treatment. See Goldie, *The Emotions*, pp. 122–140. In chapter 4, I discuss Goldie's account in more detail.

The Aim of My Account

My aim in this dissertation is to show that the dilemma is present, as unresolved, in much of the philosophical discussion about expression, with the consequence that we find philosophers struggling to describe expressions or making implausible claims about them. I also articulate some of the interconnected features of expression that emerge when we free ourselves of the confining framework of the standard conception. This involves providing a conceptual elucidation of one central region of the concept of expression. I focus, in the first instance, on spontaneous non-verbal expressions in mature human beings, such as facial expressions, gestures, and bodily posture. What I say does not fit each instance of what we find it natural to call an expression equally well; for instance, it fits expressions of affective states—such as fear, joy, embarrassment, desire, and grief—better than expressions of, say, belief and complex intentions for the future. But I'm convinced that such differences and nuances come into proper view only once we have a better starting-point for the discussion than the one offered to us by the standard conception.

I argue that for a significant range of acts of expression—primarily non-verbal spontaneous expressions of affective states—it is exactly right to think that they are not intentional actions. But, we still need a way of accounting for their intuitive affinity with intentional actions and difference from other forms of unintentional bodily changes and movements. This is the challenge I take Goldie to have given us. My first step is to argue that an account of expression that doesn't overcome what I've called the problem of expression is unsatisfying. It is the burden of chapter 1 to argue for this claim by showing the shortcomings what I call an *epistemic approach* to expression, exemplified by some of the philosophers in the analytic tradition theorizing expression, such as Tormey, Green and Bar-On.

The epistemic approach, I argue in chapter 1, has difficulties answering two interrelated questions that arise from within the approach. The first question is why we should think that expressions (in the

relevant sense) are only of *mental* states of persons; why isn't *any* knowledge-enabling manifestation of a state or condition an *expression* of that state? The second question is why each person can express only *her own* mental states. Why should it matter who (or what) is enabling the knowledge? In response to these questions, I suggest that we should see expression as a form of self-conscious, or first-personal, activity. In chapter 1, I articulate the notion of self-conscious activity with the aid of Elizabeth Anscombe's notion of knowledge without observation. Anscombe, in her *Intention*, argues that intentional action is a subclass of things a person knows without observation or inference. Expression, my claim is, is another subclass.

The focus of chapter 2 is to clarify and vindicate this precise claim that spontaneous expressions are subject to a form of first-personal explanation. There's a distinction, this argument goes, between a bodily change which is a mere causal upshot of being in a mental state and spontaneous facial expression. I argue—by entering into a dialogue with Lycan and Shoemaker over whether self-blindness is possible—that we can make sense of this distinction by linking expression to a capacity for first-personal awareness. We can know *what* we are doing when we're, say, smiling or frowning, and we can also know *why*, in the characteristic non-inferential and non-observational manner identified with the first-person perspective.

This claim can be re-formulated in the following way. Non-verbal spontaneous expressions, such as smiles, frowns and bodily posture, are—even though they are not themselves articulate—intimately connected to a capacity for verbal articulation. The expressions are, we could say, apt to be articulated in verbal form. I also express this thought by saying that the verbal articulation is an articulation of the content of the non-verbal expression.

Reason-Giving Explanations and Expressive Explanations

Since argue that expression—at least in one of its forms—is distinct from, yet closely related to,

intentional action, I need to have a clear conception of the object of comparison. I discuss intentional action primarily in chapter 3. My arguments for distinguishing spontaneous expressions from intentional actions, ultimately, rely only on what I take to be an uncontroversial feature of intentional action—namely that it is agent-directed, purposive, activity. In acting intentionally, the agent is directing himself towards a desired end. In so doing, the agent is vulnerable to a certain kind of evaluation. Many philosophers (Davidson, at least in some of his writings, among them) think that a richer characterization of intentional action would involve the idea that intentional action is action for a reason, where 'reason' here means a consideration the agent takes to speak in favor of action. But the link between reasons in this sense and intentional actions is not universally accepted—and exactly what the link is supposed to be is not always made clear. In chapter 3, I discuss some aspects of this debate—not in order to settle it, but—in order to argue that we can distinguish spontaneous expressions from intentional actions without settling this debate.

Spontaneous expressions, thus, appear anomalous when we're confined to the framework of the standard conception of human behavior with its dichotomy of intentional action and mere behavior. In chapter 3, I am in a position to articulate in more detail (and link together) some of the features of expression that have emerged as important during the course of my arguments. In particular, I want to argue that the intimate connection I've established between a non-verbal spontaneous expression and a verbally articulate explanation of it is a reflection of the fact that expressions are embodiments of content. They embody the content of the mental states they express. We can ask someone why they are smiling, but also *what* they are smiling *at* or what their smile is *about*. Even though non-verbal expressions are not themselves articulate in the sense of having semantic content, they are nevertheless apt to be articulated. An expression is an embodiment of a mental state, and by virtue of being such it inherits the content of that mental state. Smiling isn't truth-evaluable, but it can express an emotion that has a particular content; it can embody the content that one is happy to see a friend, for instance.

An expression, even a non-verbal spontaneous one, can thus be explained through an articulation of its content. How can “I’m angry” provide an adequate answer to the question “Why are you frowning?” It is not an answer that provides, if I’m right, the reason or point of the facial expression. It doesn’t explain the frown by stating what I’m trying to accomplish by frowning. The frown, as an expression of anger, doesn’t—it appears—*need* a point. This means that the fact that one is in such a state, or is undergoing such a process, can be enough to explain its expression. Describing something a person does as an expression of a mental state is to give it a kind of minimal intelligibility. This, I think, suggests that we understand psychological phenomena to be such as to take expression. All psychological phenomena do not take expression in exactly the same way and with the same force, ease, or inevitability; there is a wide range of different cases here. With strong emotions—such as, for instance, rage—it is natural to think that they *demand* expression, where this means that quite an effort is required to temper oneself. But even in cases where the mental state doesn’t come with a strong demand for expression, no point or reason is needed for it to be intelligible that a person’s psychological state took expression. (Although we might want an explanation for the fact that the person did not *inhibit* the expression in a particular situation—why she, for instance, laughed so loudly and unrestrainedly in the movie theater even though it (you thought) so obviously disturbed the audience.) Describing a person’s frown, say, as an expression of anger is both to describe what she is doing as she is frowning: she is expressing anger; and it is also to introduce an explanation of her frowning: she is frowning because she is angry. Such an explanation I call an *expressive explanation*, to distinguish it from a reason-giving explanation.

Now, the most important point I want to have convinced the reader of by the end of chapter 3 is that spontaneous non-verbal expressions, such as facial expressions of emotions, need a different conceptual space than the one offered by the standard conception of human behavior. And I have also offered some concepts with which to begin creating such a space. In the remaining two chapters, I offer the suggestion that our understanding of the expressive potential of both actions and speech benefits from

being put in relation to the understanding of expression articulated in the previous chapters. In fact, having established some elements of a conception of spontaneous non-verbal expressions, I suggest, in chapters 4 and 5, that actions and utterances can be expressive *in the same sense* as a facial expression or other spontaneous expression. This means that such actions and utterances—affectionate strokes on the cheek, or angry utterances of “I wish you wouldn't stay up so late”—are expressive beyond the intentions with which they are done. An action or utterance can have an expressive aspect as one dimension of its full intelligibility. Thus, I want to create a space for a form of expressiveness which is paradigmatically represented by delighted smiles and puzzled frowns, but which can be present as an aspect of human behavior more generally.

The Mind's Movement

What I urge, first and foremost, in my discussion of different varieties of acts of expression is that acts of expression can be immediate—in the sense of unmediated by the agent's intentions—manifestations of a person's psychological state. Psychological phenomena can have a natural movement outwards; nothing more than the fact of being in a certain psychological state is needed to make intelligible the fact that it takes expression in the person's face, speech and action. But, unlike a mere triggered bodily reflex, an expression is a response the person is in a position to make intelligible to us, paradigmatically by articulating what she's doing and why. If we are puzzled by why Tara lighted up in a smile and exclaimed “It's alive” when she opened the refrigerator, we can ask her why she seems so delighted, and she can tell us she's happy to see the rotting lettuce. Expression, thus, is the outer face of an inner state.

Acts of spontaneous expression are not intentional actions done for reasons. It is one central aim of this dissertation to argue that what I call expressive explanations are not explanations in terms of the agent's reasons. We should, however, take this fact to imply that expressions are devoid of rationality. An

expressive explanation, such as Tara's "I'm delighted to see the rotting lettuce" given as an explanation for her smile, opens up for a further investigation into the perspective from which Tara's response emerged. Under what aspect does she see the rotting lettuce such that it gave rise to a delighted smile, rather than, say, a disgusted grimace? In answering this question, Tara will show us some of the conceptual connections that formed a part of her response to the lettuce. Perhaps it was the beautiful coloration that prompted the reaction, or the thought that decomposition is just another stage in the continuous process of biological life. Tracing out such connections helps to enrich our understanding of Tara's emotional response. And in so far as we think that making conceptual connections is a rational capacity—part of a capacity to reason—the understanding we get from letting her articulate those connections is a form of rational understanding.

This suggestion can be used to provide a more full solution to Goldie's problem. Goldie worries, in the passage I cited in "The Problem of Expression," whether the fact that expressions can't be given rationalizing explanations means that they can not be made sense of from the personal point of view, and that they, thereby, are mere perturbations of rational action. If we understand an expression as involving reason—not by being the upshot of reasoning about what end to pursue or the means to pursue it, but—by involving the person's understanding of the situation she's responding to, there is less room for Goldie's worry. Spontaneous expressions are not rational actions, but we should not move from this thought to the claim that they are mere disturbances of rational action. They are unintentional responses rich with reason.