How Does Art Express Emotion?

I.

From each of the traditional theories of art something useful can be learned, even if any attempt to determine the "essence" of art must fail. Romantic theorists taught us to notice and value the expressiveness of (at least some) works of art. They did have a rather narrow view about what works of art were expressive of and frequently spoke as though it were only emotions, moods, and feelings which got expressed in art. However, as Roger Scruton says, works of art can be said to express "thought, attitude, character, in fact, anything that can be expressed at all. For example, Watteau's Embarkation a Cythère can be said to express the transience of human joys, Shakespeare's Measure for Measure to express the essence of Christian charity."

In this article I am going to limit my discussion to emotions or qualities which describe what we feel. If people can feel vigorous, merciless, sad, joyful, gentle, quiet, or tender, and if these are properties that can be attributed to works of art, then these are the properties in which I am interested.

The giving of lists when one is introducing and talking about these properties can give rise to the impression that they are as easily detected and named as in a child's drawing of a face with drooping mouth, downcast eyes, and tears sliding down the cheeks. But, of course, this impression would be very misleading. It might be as difficult to name and describe the emotions expressed in Dostoyevsky's The Brothers Karamazov or Henri Rousseau's The Sleeping Gypsy as it would be to describe how one feels about a broken marriage. This might be because the emotions are complex, ambiguous, confused, or with a peculiar quality of their own which is only revealed by attending to the object itself and which resists description in other words or in words at all. In particular it might be impossible to sum up the emotions with neat labels—happy, sad or angry. When we are unable to describe the emotion expressed in a work of art in (other) words we tend to use the short phrase "expressive."

I said that romantic theories of art were to be commended because they drew attention to expressiveness in art. However, they are not to be commended for the account they gave of this aesthetic feature. How works of art can be expressive of emotion and thus sad, happy, or melancholy must pose itself as a problem for anyone who believes both that works of art are not conscious entities and that only conscious entities can have feelings and emotions. This means that the way in which a painting is sad cannot be exactly the same as the way in which a person is sad, but it cannot be exactly different either. One could not understand what it means to call a painting sad or how to recognize the sadness in the painting if one did not first know what it meant to say that a person is sad and how to recognize her sadness.

There are two parts to any complete account of how works of art can be expressive of emotions. The first part consists in giving an analysis of the meaning of such sentence schemata as

(1) "This artwork is E"
(2) "This artwork is expressive of E-ness"
(3) "This artwork expresses E-ness"
(4) "This artwork is an expression of E-ness"

where "E-ness" stands for the name or description of some emotion or feeling (sadness) and

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“E” for the adjective derived from this name or description (sad).

The second part of the complete account is to explain the relation which holds between artworks and emotions when one of the former is expressive of one of the latter. For example, it has been suggested that artworks “symbolize,” “resemble,” “imitate,” “refer to,” or “represent” emotions.

Some of the ways of dealing with the meaning of the sentence schemata will place constraints upon the second enterprise and may even completely determine it. I am inclined to believe that explaining the various relations which hold between works of art and emotions is a critical and psychological activity and not properly philosophical at all. At least it is not a task which can be conducted a priori. Individual works will have to be examined for the features upon which their expressiveness depends and I doubt how far this enterprise can be generalized. For this reason the account which I give of the meaning of the sentence schemata will be independent of this second part.

I believe that the aesthetic use of emotion words as exemplified in the sentence schemata (1-4) above, is a paronymous or extended use of the words. I understand paronymy along the same lines as Austin’s version of Aristotle.

A very simple case indeed is often mentioned by Aristotle: the adjective “healthy”: when I talk of a healthy body and again of a healthy complexion, of healthy exercise: the word is not being used just equivocally. Aristotle would say that it is being used “paronymously”. In this case there is what we might call a primary nuclear sense of “healthy”: the sense in which “healthy” is used of a healthy body: I call this nuclear because it is “contained as a part” in the other two senses which may be set out as “productive of healthy bodies” and “resulting from a healthy body”.2

There are three other paronymous explanations of the aesthetic use of emotion terms with which I will deal before I present my own. The first is the romantic view; that is, sentences which are instances of schemata (1-4) are to be explained as meaning “This artwork is a product of behavior whereby the artist expressed her E-ness.” A product of behavior is not just something caused by the behavior. It is that, in the creation of which, the artist was realizing her intentions to express her emotion. Romantic theorists would not allow that unintentional or spontaneous expression of emotion were expressions at all. They were merely “spewings forth” or ways of “giving vent to” the emotion in question.3

This account makes the expressive properties of the artwork dependent upon the emotional state and intentions of its creator, with the well known unpalatable consequence that any claim about the sadness, joyfulness, or melancholy of a work of art can be falsified by the discovery that its creator was not sad, joyful, or melancholy and did not intend to express these emotions in producing the work. A song cannot be sad unless its composer was sad and intended to express that sadness in her composition.

It would be only cosmetic to complicate the account by allowing, as Wordsworth does, that the poet may not have to be in the emotional state when he creates but merely be recollecting it in tranquillity,4 or as Tolstoy says in What is Art?

and it is also art if a man feels, or imagines to himself feelings of delight, gladness, sorrow, despair, courage or despondency, and the transition from one to another of these feelings and expresses them.5

A group of counter examples should be enough to show that the possession of expressive qualities cannot be made logically dependent upon the creator’s intentions to express herself. Landscapes and seascapes are (usually) not intentionally produced by any human agent at all and birds are animals which are only doubtfully capable of having intentions. Moreover, some works of art may acquire their expressive properties through accidents which happen long after the artist is done with them. For example, suppose an artist paints a picture of a child in a summer garden. The paint which she uses is not of a very high quality and the blues, greens, and yellows fade. The painting when first produced was joyful but afterwards the joy is tinged with a wistful melancholy. If an object may possess expressive properties which are not logically, or even causally, tied to its being a product of expression, then it seems that this account cannot be correct.

There are two simple alternatives to invoking the artist, to invoke the audience, or to say that the expressive properties are entirely dependent upon other properties, none of which involve
any essential reference to audience or artist.  
On the first view the suggestion is that instances of sentence schemata (1) and (2) above mean “This artwork has a tendency to arouse E-ness in an attentive audience.” Thus, to say that a movie is sad is to say that the movie is saddening. However, it does not seem that a claim that Arshile Gorky’s painting Agony is expressive of anguish would be challenged by the discovery that nobody who had attended to it and recognized the anguish in it had ever been inclined to feel anguish as a result. Its ability or inability to evoke emotional responses does not seem to be part of the meaning of “This artwork is expressive of E-ness.” However, this is not to say that every tendency to affect the minds of an audience is irrelevant. Any artwork which is expressive of an emotion has a tendency to evoke that emotion in the imagination of an attentive audience, but this evoking need not be emotionally loaded.6

Some ascriptions of emotion words to inanimate objects do fit this account. If I describe a bathroom or a wet garden as sad I may well mean that it makes me feel sad and there are some emotional adjectives for which this seems to be the only reading. The most obvious examples are “boring” and “annoying”. If I describe some object (whether a work of art or not) as boring then I am almost certainly describing it as something which has a tendency to make audiences feel bored. However, it seems equally clear that some attributions of emotions to inanimate objects are not attributions of this sort of dispositional property. Moreover if an inanimate object is described as “expressive of boredom” this is perfectly compatible with its being far from boring. Thus I conclude this account will not do for sentence schemata (2-4) and for some uses of (1).

The third and last account which I will consider before my own is one which takes sentence schemata (1-3) to mean “This artwork is analogous to an expression of E-ness.” The expressive properties of art are supervenient upon resemblances which hold between characteristics of the art work and characteristics of the natural behavioral expressions of emotion. This is an account which does not make any essential reference to either audience or artist. The relevant characteristics of both behavior and art work will be formal intrinsic properties, e.g., pitch, timbre, or rhythm. This is the theory which is put forward, by Alan Tormey in The Concept of Expression7 and it seems to be the historical successor of such views as those of Aristotle and Susanne Langer. It is no accident that all these theorists take music to be their prime example. It may just be possible to see an analogy between the formal characteristics of music and the formal characteristics of behavioral expressions of emotion, but it is difficult to find any way for this analogy to be generalized to cover the expressive power of color or of words.

II.

In this second section I shall explain what I take to be the correct paronymous account of the meaning of sentence schemata (1-4), but before I do so it would be prudent to explain the nuclear primary sense of emotion words first. This is the sense they have when they are applied to conscious entities, and above all, to people. It is people who are sad, anguished, and melancholy. Very closely tied to this primary use is the application of emotion words to the behavior of sad, anguished, and melancholy people, that is, to the behavior which expresses the sadness, anguish, or melancholy. To describe behavior as sad, anguished, or melancholy just is to identify it as an expression of one of these. “Sad behavior” means “Behavior which expresses sadness.”

For behavior to express an emotion in the nuclear sense of “express,” the behavior must be of a type which is a “normal,” “characteristic,” or “typical” effect of the emotion in question. It is this intuition which has given use to the view that the behavior must be conceptually connected with the emotion in question.

If one accepts the account which David Lewis gives for the meaning of psychological terms,8 then typical causes and effects play a central role. The meaning of terms like “anger,” “sadness,” and “despair” is provided by a cluster of commonsense platitudes about the causal relations in which emotions (as they occur in combination with other mental states) stand to other mental states and to behavior. The bracketed clause is crucial since, for example, we know that people’s beliefs about how they can or should behave will affect what behavior an emotion is likely to cause.
Emotion words will be defined in terms of the role emotions play within commonsense psychology. The defining platiitudes need not be confined to a set of statements about the emotion. They may, and perhaps must, include demonstrations: it will be analytically true of a certain emotion that there is a range of kinds of behavior which it is believed to cause, but it need not be the case that these kinds be exactly specifiable in words. We can recognize a range of facial and verbal expressions, gestures of limbs and movements of the whole body which we believe to be (typically) caused by anger, but, we may have no capacity to describe these behaviors in words. For example, tasing facial muscles, avowals of rage, shouting, and shaking fists are all characteristic consequences of anger. I have included avowals since I do not wish to suggest that it is only spontaneous expressions which lie within the analytic range. To tell someone intentionally and deliberately that it is both inconsiderate and ill-mannered to keep people waiting is a "normal" effect of indignation about unpunctuality.

How does this relate to the question of whether behavior expresses emotion in the nuclear sense of "express"? I am maintaining that this sense requires the behavior to be a typical or characteristic effect and this can only be sustained within some theory of what causes what. Unless there is widespread error the analytic range of behavior (i.e., those which in common sense psychology feature as the characteristic range) and the range attributed to it by some more self-conscious scientific theory will largely coincide. They will probably not coincide exactly and this is why we can discover new "expressions" of old and familiar emotions. It is also possible for the theories of individuals to deviate from the norm set by the analytic range and if an individual is gifted she can get others to share her opinions. This may well be one of the characteristic skills of a novelist or playwright.

If something like this account is correct then, for an item of behavior to be an expression of E-ness, it must be
a) caused by E-ness, and
b) occupy a role within a theory which shows it to be of a kind which is characteristically caused by E-ness (given the right psychological and social context).

There are two obvious consequences of this view. Firstly, not all the behavioral effects of an emotion will count as expressions of that emotion. It might be the case that almost any kind of behavior can be caused by an emotion given a suitable psychological and social context, but which of these will count as expressions will depend upon the theory invoked. Atypical and bizarre behavioral effects of an emotion count as expressions only if a story can be told which shows them to belong to a type which is normal. Secondly, whenever an item of behavior is an expression of emotion in this primary sense of "expression," the person performing the behavior has the emotion in question. For example, if his waving arms and distorted face are expressions of Peter's anxiety about his spoiled dessert then Peter must feel anxious about his dessert's spoiling. This is what Hospers calls "the biographical commitment."

It is not a consequence of this view that a type of behavior be the normal effect of only one emotion. Crying might be of a kind which is a normal effect of joy, sadness, and despair.

When "express" is being used in its nuclear sense of behavior all these sentence schemata are more or less synonymous:
(5) "This behavior is E"
(6) "This behavior is expressive of E-ness"
(7) "This behavior expresses E-ness"
(8) "This behavior is an expression of E-ness"

Even though I have given only a sketchy outline of the primary sense it should be easy to see a connection with what is often called another sense of "express," where it means "reveal." Behavior which expresses sadness in the primary sense is behavior which reveals sadness. At the very least the fact that the performer is sad should be revealed whenever someone's behavior is identified as sad. Very often more than that will be revealed.

Hospers notices this "reveal" sense of "express" but only to dismiss it. He and Dewey think that it is appropriately used in a judgment upon a spontaneous expression (a mere "spewing forth" as Dewey would say) and what is revealed is no more than the performer's emotional state.

We may say of the person who is raging that he is expressing rage. In Dewey's sense . . . this is false,
since he is merely giving vent to rage, not expressing it; but to us as observers his actions may be expressive of rage in the sense we are now considering; namely that they reveal it.\(^{10}\)

Hospers then remarks briefly “Whether this ‘reveal’ sense of ‘express’ is much used of art is doubtful.”

I will argue that this ‘reveal’ sense of ‘express’ is one which provides a stepping stone to an understanding of the extended aesthetic sense. I will explain this use as it applies to behavior before I show how it applies to works of art and also to objects which are not human artifacts.

There are times when we describe behavior as sad and we are not identifying it as an expression of sadness. Rather we are asserting that the behavior in question is well suited to be an expression of sadness. We may not have any particular person’s sadness in mind, but we are assessing the gesture or the remark in terms of some standard(s) which we think expressions of emotion should meet. That there should be any standards at all may be surprising to some, but we say that some people are better at expressing their emotions than others and we need not just mean that some people are more uninhibited about doing so than others. For example, we can assess the way people express their emotions according to how easily it enables others to understand how the person feels, that is, how easily it reveals sadness. This is not the only standard we might use to judge some expressions as ‘more expressive’ than others, but it is one we can and do use. I shall use this standard in the discussion which follows—the assessment of a behavior in terms of its suitability to be an expression of an emotion will be made relative to the goal of getting an audience to recognize and understand how one feels.

An example might be provided by a woman who habitually expresses her anger by weeding her garden. She works vigorously and energetically, tackling intransigent weeds with determination and allowing nothing to disturb her as she uproots them. Because it is difficult to see the anger in her behavior, it would be difficult for someone else to identify the behavior as an expression of anger, and this would be a reason to say that her behavior is not expressive in this extended sense. To take some further examples, a smile which is in fact an expression of secret delight might be better suited to express polite skepticism. The same tight little smile is analytically connected to both secret delight and polite skepticism and in some context it would be taken to express the latter. It would be appropriate to advise someone of this—“Don’t smile like that, unless you want her to think that you don’t believe what she says!” The gruff manner in which an old man talks to a child may be the only way in which he can express his tenderness for the child, but it may mask rather than reveal the tenderness. He may be tender, his behavior may be an expression (in the primary sense) of tenderness, but it is not tender (in the extended sense).

Sometimes when the adjective “expressive” is being used on its own the behavior is being assessed in just the way I am describing, that is, for its suitability to get an audience to understand an emotion. For example, I may ask someone how he felt about an exam and in reply he may make an “expressive” gesture. The gesture is expressive because it is one well suited to getting an audience to understand just how he felt about the exam.

It should be clear now that I am claiming that sentence schemata (5-8) are sometimes used to mean

“This behavior is well suited to be an expression of E-ness’’

One of the most important characteristics of any statement made using the sentence schema with this sense is that there is no biographical commitment. In the examples I have discussed so far this is not clear, because they have all been examples of behavior which is expressing its performer’s emotion, so when they are being assessed for their suitability to reveal emotion it is natural to suppose that it is the performer’s we have in mind. However, a gesture can be assessed for its suitability to reveal despair and even produced as an instance of a type suitable for revealing despair without its being the case that the person who gestures is in despair. This is very important for understanding how this aesthetic use can apply to works of art and landscapes.

We can say of a face that it has a very sad expression or it is a sad face and there need be
no implication that its owner is sad. We can assess the face and its expression as being suited to reveal sadness independently of whether we think it is revealing its owner's sadness. Once we have noticed the sadness in the face and thus its suitability to express sadness it is open to us to use the face for our own expressive purposes. This point will be crucial when we are considering art. Here it is sufficient to notice that if I am asked how I feel and I feel sad I can point to the sad face and say "That expresses how I feel!" I can do this with a face in a painting just as easily as with a real face. My face may not be able to assume just that expression, or I may not want it to, so I avail myself of this other in order to get my audience to understand how I feel.

All that is needed to understand this extended use as applied to works of art is the reintroduction of the idea of a product of expression. A product of expression is that in the creation of which somebody was intentionally expressing an emotion. A product of expression may be nothing over and above the behavior itself (a dance, a mime, or an impassioned speech) or it may be something which can exist independently of the behavior (a novel or a painting). We saw that behavior can be judged suitable to express independently of whether it is actually an expression of anyone's sadness. Similarly, if something is assessed as well suited to be a product of expression then this assessment can be made independently of whether or not we believe that it was a product of expression. For example, I may describe some deep slashes in the wall of a house as "angry marks" and mean thereby that they are well suited to be the products of angry behavior, although I may know that they were caused by moving furniture. Deep slashes of this kind could easily have been produced to reveal to an audience how angry I feel about something and they would have revealed the intensity of my rage. In exactly the same way I may describe a play as angry.

I am suggesting that the sentence schemata (1-4) are to be understood as equivalent to the following schema:

"This artwork is well suited to be a product of an expression of E-ness"

We noticed earlier that once I had recognized

the expressive qualities of faces, facial expressions, or gestures, I was able to make use of them for my own expressive purposes. This is exactly what is done with works of art and is probably one reason why expressiveness in art is considered to be a value. It allows us to extend the range of our expressive powers beyond those which we find within our own resources. If I want to express a feeling which defies my powers of description but which is sombre, serene, and mystical, I might find that Mark Rothko's huge abstracts in the Tate Gallery perfectly capture that feeling.

So far most of the ways I have discussed for works of art or behavior to be suited to reveal emotion have been ways based upon ease and simplicity in identifying the emotion in question. But this is perhaps the least important standard for art. I said in the beginning of this article that emotions can be confused, complex, ambiguous, or have phenomenal qualities which are intimately bound up with the nature of their intentional objects. Anything which could be well suited to adequately reveal a state of this kind would have to be expressive of the confusion, complexity, ambiguity, and uniqueness. This would undoubtedly militate against ease of identification. This explains why we so often content ourselves with describing a work of art as "expressive." We do not know how to identify what it is expressive of and neither do we think it important to do so.

On the other hand, I do not think that this amounts to an argument for the essential intransitiveness of the term "expressive" when used of artworks. It reflects a limitation in our powers of expression, not a new meaning of "expressive."

2 John Austin, "The Meaning of a Word" in Philosophical Papers, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 71. Scruton also notices this quote from Austin, but dismisses the suggestion that the aesthetic use of emotion words is a paronymous use. He discusses various unsatisfactory accounts but nothing like the one I give in this article. I claim that my account explains all the "facts" about the aesthetic use of emotion words and the terms "expression" and "expressive" which he gives in chapters 14 and 15 of Art and Imagination.
3 I do not mean to imply that for the romantic theorist the artists' intentions are formed in anything but a very vague way prior to engaging in the artistic activity.
How Does Art Express Emotion?

Collingwood would be an example of this sort of theorist and it is plain that for him the prior artistic intention may be merely to express whatever-I-feel (about y). It is in the deliberate realizing of this vague intention that the exact nature of the feeling is revealed.

The characteristic mark of expression proper is lucidity or intelligibility; a person who expresses something thereby becomes conscious of what he is expressing; and enables others to become conscious of it in himself and in them. Turning pale and stammering is a natural accompaniment of fear. A person who in addition to being afraid also turns pale and stammers does not thereby become conscious of the precise quality of his emotion.


6 I am not sure that anyone now would be inclined to hold the simple affective theory that I have described. But historically, such a view was held by many theorists as disparate as the eighteenth century Japanese philosopher, Norinaga, and the empathy theorist, Vernon Lee.


10 Hospers, p. 230.