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<title>Art, expression and emotion

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Derek Matravers is Professor of Philosophy at the Open University in England. He is the author of *Art and Emotion* and many articles in aesthetics, ethics and the philosophy of mind. He is currently working on a book on narrative and fiction.

<text>The primary use of such terms as “sadness” and “joy” is to refer to the mental states of people. In such cases, the claim that someone is sad is equivalent to the claim that they feel sad. However, our use of emotion terms is broader than this; a funeral is a sad occasion, a wedding is a happy event. In such cases, a justification can be given for the use of the word. For example, it is part of what is meant by “sadness” that events such as funerals are an appropriate object for such emotions and the epithet is transferred. Sometimes in criticism (I shall follow practice and use this term broadly) a similar justification can be given; it explains, for example, why the death of Little Nell is sad. On other occasions such a justification is not available. A poem can express sadness without representing a sad state of affairs. More

obviously, to take a medium that is not representational, a piece of music can be sad. What we need is some way of making sense of these uses of the emotion terms.

<head1>Expression theories

<text>An obvious and appealing solution is to take the words to be referring to the mental state of the artist. The artist feels an emotion that he or she transmits to the audience by way of the work. This position, generally known as “the expression theory,” found a vigorous exponent in Tolstoy:

<extract>Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them.

<source>(Tolstoy 1969: 123)

<text>There are two separate claims that are part of this position:

- <list>(1) At the time of creation, the artist was in mental state F .
- (2) In virtue of possessing the property P , the work expresses F .

<text>The classic expression theory claims that the two are linked in virtue of the fact that the artist expresses F by causing the work to possess P . Opposition to the expression theory stems from the claim that for this to be true, P must be the vehicle for the artist's expression. How is this to be explained? It cannot be simply that the artist caused P when he was feeling F ; not everything we do when we are sad expresses sadness. It must be some fact about P . However, the account of how P itself can express the artist's emotion seems to be the account of the nature of expression; the causal account of how P came into existence is no longer relevant. It follows from the logical independence of cause and effect that it would be fallacious to infer the nature of P from the nature of its causes (the so-called "genetic fallacy").

In reply, expression theorists have attempted to claim that (1) and (2) stand not only in causal, but also in a logical relation. A consideration thought to favor this is that the relevant descriptions of a work of art also refer to the intentional actions that brought them into existence. Works *present* ideas, *view* scenes, *observe* events, for example. Guy Sircello has dubbed these "artistic acts" (Sircello 1987 [1972]: 406). He argues that

<extract>Precisely in virtue of their artistic acts and of the similarity they bear to common kinds of expressions, works of art may serve as expressions of those feelings, emotions, attitudes, moods and/or personal characteristics of their creators which are designated by the anthropomorphic predicates applicable to the art works themselves.

<source>(Sircello 1987 [1972]: 412)

<text>Sircello's view is that the manifestations of emotion are logically connected to the inner state that caused it. To see a smile is not to see an appearance and infer a happy state of mind, but to see the happy state of mind in the face itself. The "act" and the "thing" are inseparable (Sircello 1987 [1972]: 409).

It is plausible that there are logical connections between the nature of mental states and their outward manifestations. Is this enough to establish that, on any particular occasion in which there is an outward manifestation, there is a mental state being expressed? No, because expressive appearances do not necessarily have mental states for their causes. A sad face might be caused by slicing onions, in which case there is no relevant mental state to which the appearance is connected. Just as we can discuss what makes a face sad without being committed to the existence of a prior mental state, the appearance in art of emotion can be discussed and analyzed as an appearance, independently of the state (if any) which caused it. As Alan Tormey put

it, “the particular mistake{...}arises from assuming that the existence of expressive qualities in a work of art implies a prior act of expression” (Tormey 1987 [1971]: 425).

Can the actual artist be removed from the story without any loss to criticism, as Tormey’s view implies? In particular, are the intentions of the artist necessary to establish a standard of correctness? That they are is part of the account of expression put forward by Richard Wollheim. The account, devoid of some of its complexity, is as follows. Human beings have the capacity to “project” their internal states on to natural objects, a capacity that is rooted deep in our psychology. The objects on to which we project state *F* (for example) are those which “correspond” to *F*. A rocky landscape with a solitary tree, for instance, might correspond to melancholy. This projection results in the person viewing the object as being “of a piece” with their state; the projected properties are genuinely seen in the object. At a later stage of development, human beings are able to see objects as those on which “we might have or could have” projected the state (Wollheim 1991: 154). Expression in art is an extension of this. Here we see a marked surface as being “of a piece” with our mental state. The property of the work that enables us to do this is one that has been put there intentionally by the artist. Hence, in the case of art, “there is now imposed upon expressive perception a standard of correctness and incorrectness” (Wollheim 1987: 85).

Malcolm Budd has argued that Wollheim’s account inherits a problem similar to that which dogged Sircello’s account (Budd 2001). Is

projection part of the content of the perceived state or is it an element in the causation that leads to our being in that state? If projection were part of the state then not only would anyone familiar with expression be familiar with projection but the perception of expression would require, in each and every case, an instance of projection by the spectator. Neither of these claims seem plausible. If projection is only an element in the causation it is not constitutive of expression; it throws no light on the nature of the experience of expression. Wollheim suggested the problem could be solved by claiming that the experiences “intimate their own actual history,” although the nature of that intimation remains unclear (Wollheim 1991: 153).

<head1>The semantic theory

<text>Nelson Goodman’s *Languages of Art* is an attempt to explain the central features of art within a theory of symbols (Goodman 1976). A expresses *E*, according to Goodman, if one, *A* possesses *E* metaphorically, and two, *A* exemplifies *E* (Goodman 1976: 95). Goodman is a nominalist; he does not believe that explanations should invoke properties but rather the extension of terms (although he does use the term “property” as shorthand; something I will also do here). Hence, for *A* to possess *E* metaphorically is for *A* to fall within the extension of *E* used as a metaphor. For example, a picture may possess “square” literally, and “sad” metaphorically. An object exemplifies a

predicate or property if it refers to it. For example, a tailor's swatch possesses many properties; it has a color, size and absolute value. However, it only refers to the first of these; exemplification is possession plus reference (ibid.: 53). Hence, our picture not only is sad, it exemplifies sadness.

Both parts of Goodman's definition have been criticized (Davies 1994: 137-50; Matravers 1998: 104-8). What is it for *A* to fall within the extension of *E* used as a metaphor? Goodman says that "in metaphor{...}a term with an extension established by habit is applied elsewhere under the influence of that habit; there is both a departure from and deference to precedent" (Goodman 1976: 71). It is an open question whether metaphor can be defined in terms of the nature of the use of a term in a way that distinguishes a metaphorical use from other possibilities, such as a novel use or a slip of the tongue. What seems to be needed is an account in terms of the nature of the picture: what is it about the picture that justifies the application of "sad" to it, albeit metaphorically? Goodman shifts between two replies. The first is to reject resolutely the need for justification: "the predicate must apply to all the things it must apply to" (Goodman 1976: 78). This will be unsatisfactory to anyone but a convinced nominalist. The other is to take metaphorical possession of a property not as a linguistic fact, but as a *way* an object might possess a property. However, this is not only apparently incompatible with nominalism, but, without further explication, is wholly mysterious.

An air of mystery also surrounds the claim that *A* exemplifies *E*. The problem is to distinguish between those properties an object exemplifies, as opposed to those it merely possesses. Recalling the tailor's swatch, one might think it is best done by reference to those properties for which the object is a sample. However, this has no obvious place in an account of expression. This was not a problem to which Goodman had any satisfactory solution.

<head1>Contemporary theories

<text>I referred above to Alan Tormey's claim that expressive qualities are logically independent of acts of expression. That is, any account should respect the fact that expression is experienced as being a quality of the work itself (for classic accounts of this, see Bouwsma 1954; Beardsley 1981: 325-32). Such qualities can be analyzed independently of the state of mind of their creator and are not logically distinct from qualities such as grace, unity or balance. Expressive qualities, like those other qualities, are perceived as part of the form of works of art. I have, so far, considered accounts that are supposed to apply generally across the arts. However, contemporary accounts focus on the expressive qualities of music. I shall consider these, but it must not be assumed that these accounts generalize to the other art forms (Levinson 1996: 124).

The contemporary theories I shall consider fall under three broad headings: those that rely on the experience of resemblance, those that rely on an act of imagination, and those that rely on aroused feelings. I shall consider each in turn.

The starting point for theories of experienced resemblance is the listeners' experience of expression. This is because the aim is to provide a *constitutive* account of expression; and what such theorists take expression to consist in is for the listener to hear the music a certain way. The central claim is that to experience music as expressing emotion is to experience the music as resembling the experience of emotion. The music appears to us a certain way, and the way it appears is similar to the appearance worn by people expressing their emotion. Stephen Davies (the most prominent proponent of this theory) claims that there are certain type appearances which are linked to the emotions although not necessarily caused by a felt emotion. For example, some people have a sad face: that is, a face that looks as if it is expressing sadness, even if it is not. This type appearance can be tokened in places where talk of such inner states is not appropriate. For example, we can say of a St Bernard dog that it has "a sad face." Davies' claim is that this appearance can be tokened in certain pieces of music: when this happens, we have an instance of "sad music." We perceive this directly, as we do the sadness on the face of the St Bernard. Davies says, "the expressiveness of music depends mainly on a resemblance we perceive between the dynamic character of music and human movement, gait, bearing, or carriage" (Davies 1994: 229). This is also

one way of interpreting the view put forward by Peter Kivy (Kivy 1989). Also interesting is a weaker form of the theory that has also been put forward by Dominic Lopes with respect to expression in the visual arts (Lopes 2005: 49-90).

Clearly, there are many things (including pieces of music) that are candidates for being experienced as tokening this appearance. In any particular case, whether we actually do so experience it is a matter for psychology (Davies 1994: 228). There are two places, however, where Davies' theory looks vulnerable. The first is the extent to which explanation in terms of cross-modal type appearances is illuminating. There is a type of taste that is the taste of strawberries which can be tokened in other things I can taste (for example, milkshakes and ice cream), but there is nothing that is the sight or sound of the taste of strawberries. What sense can we attach to experiencing the sound of music as tokening a type, where that type is specified in terms of how something looks? Davies' reply to this is that there are certain properties particularly those of movement that can be tokened either in sight or in sound: both people and music can move slowly. However, such a reply faces an obvious problem: to be a literal case of movement, there must be a continuous existent that changes location over time. This is true in the case of people moving but false in the case of our experience of music. The property underpinning the resemblance claim is not the same in both cases: we are comparing literal movement to metaphorical movement. Davies replies by denying that the literal sense of "movement" is restricted to the physical

paradigm. He points out that movement vocabulary is not only universal in describing music, but also in many other nonmusical mundane scenarios: stock-exchange indices shift up and down, and political parties lurch to the right (Davies 1994: 230-38). The second problem is that the characterization of the appearance is too weak; we can experience objects as resembling the movement properties characteristic of expressive people, without experiencing those objects as expressive. In response to this, Davies has argued that we do not experience the music as resembling merely “bodily or mechanical movements,” but rather as resembling goal-directed human actions “because humanly presented emotion-characteristics, such as those revealed in a person’s gait or bearing without regard to how they feel, are more readily observed in actions than in mere movements” (Davies 1999: 283). A perceived resemblance to action would be experienced as expressive when a perceived resemblance to movement would not. Nonetheless, some remain skeptical. Jerrold Levinson argues that the change from merely experiencing a resemblance to experiencing the music as expressive is a marked change in phenomenology; a change, indeed, that can only be captured by Levinson’s own account (Levinson 2005: 197).

Levinson’s account falls under the second heading I shall consider: that is, Levinson believes that the experience of expression is some kind of imagined content. When we say “we experience the music as the expression of sadness” what we mean is something akin to “we experience the music as being the externalization of sadness by

someone.” That is, we experience the music as the expression of emotion. Clearly we cannot do this literally as we do not experience instrumental music as sounding anything like the sounds associated with the expression of human emotion. Although our experience of the music is not the experience of the expression of emotion, we can *imagine* of the music that it is the expression of emotion. That is, we imagine the music is the externalization of some inner psychological state by some indefinite fictional agent, whose only role is to be that of which we hear the music as an externalization (Levinson calls this agent “the persona”). More formally, Levinson’s account is as follows:

<extract>A passage of music P is expressive of an emotion E if and only if P, in context, is readily heard, by a listener experienced in the genre in question, as an expression of E{...}To hear music as such and such is, perhaps, to imagine *that* the music is such and such, and more specifically, to imagine *of* the music, *as* you are hearing it, that it is such and such.

<source>(Levinson 2005: 193{-}95)

<text>Levinson’s theory keeps musical expression “parallel or closely analogous to expression in its most literal sense,” even if in the musical case the entity doing the expressing is fictional (Levinson 1996: 91). In

this it differs from another account that relies on the imagination: that of Kendall Walton.

<extract>I propose that, although music does not in general call for imaginative hearing or imaginative perceiving, it often does call for imaginative *introspecting*. We mentioned the possibility that music is expressive by virtue of imitating behavioural expressions of feeling. Sometimes this is so, and sometimes a passage imitates or portrays vocal expressions of feelings. When it does, listeners probably imagine (not necessarily consciously and certainly not deliberately) themselves hearing someone's vocal expressions. But in other cases they may instead imagine themselves introspecting, being aware of, their own feelings.

<source>(Walton 1988: 359)

<text>In a later paper, he elucidates this:

<extract>Anguished or agitated or exuberant music not only induces one to imagine feeling anguished or agitated or exuberant, it also induces one to imagine of one's auditory experience that *it* is an experience of anguish or agitation or exuberance.

<source>(Walton 1994: 55)

<text>This imaginative endeavor is, for Walton, constitutive of the work sounding a certain way to us.

Levinson has criticized Walton's account as not being true to our experience of expression; as construing our attention as being directed inward on ourselves, rather than directed outward towards the music and its emotional significance (Levinson 1996: 95). While there certainly are differences between the two accounts, one might also have general worries about the use of the imagination in solving the problem. One worry is that it looks as if the accounts simply take the description of the experience we find problematic (we experience the music as the expression of emotion), put it within the scope of the imagination, and maintain it is not problematic. This suspicion is lent force by the fact that there is no robust background account of the imagination to which people such as Levinson and Walton can appeal that will give an independent grasp of its scope and explanatory power. However, they have a number of considerations on their side. First, we are not starting from nothing; we begin with an experience with which we are all familiar. If the description provided by an account of the experience of expressive music appears accurate to people familiar with the experience, that is a point in its favor. Second, considerations can be brought forward to mitigate the concerns that we do not fully

understand the content of the imagined state. Levinson says that musical expressing is music “heard as doing something like what humans do in manifesting emotions{...}ones analogous to human gesturing and vocalizing and expressive movement, in all its forms, including dancing, but going beyond them” (Levinson 1996: 115). Walton points to various similarities between sounds and our feelings, such as that we “reify or objectify sounds”; we think of them as having an existence in our experience rather than (like sights) existing “out there” (Walton 1994: 57). Such similarities make it easier for us to accept that we can imagine of our experience of one that it is an experience of another.

Worries remain, however. The accounts attempt to provide the content of an imagined state that captures precisely the phenomenology of expressive music. How, therefore, can we adjudicate which of any competing accounts of the content of the imagined state is correct? Each account will claim that what it is like to be in the state is precisely what it is like to experience expressive music. This leads to two problems. First, it is not clear that the additional argumentative resources marshaled in the above paragraph will be sufficient to enable us to distinguish between accounts. Second, is it not clear what reply can be given to the person who claims that what it is like for him or her to experience music as expressive is *not* captured by the proffered account. Despite the contributors to the debate being qualified and experienced listeners to music, there is no agreement as to the best description of the phenomenology.

The third group of accounts construe expression as a matter of an aroused feeling. That is, expressive properties are “response-dependent”: they depend for their nature and existence on the response of the audience. This has the obvious advantage of simplicity; it does not require elements such as experienced resemblance or the imagination that might require elaboration elsewhere. It also, as we shall see, has some drawbacks.

The so-called “arousal theory” can be stated in plausible and implausible versions. The claim that a work expresses an emotion if it arouses the full-blooded emotion in every member of the audience has little to recommend it. It is, however, plausible to claim that among the mental states caused by a work, is some noncognitive state that has a role to play in our experience of the work as expressive. Roger Scruton made this claim as part of a general aesthetic theory in his *Art and Imagination*: “the experience of hearing the sadness in the music is in some irreducible way analogous to hearing the expression of sadness {say, in another’s voice” (Scruton 1974: 127). Scruton’s postulation of an irreducible analogy rested on the claim that the thought content of an experience cannot be specified independently of the experience. Hence only the total experiences can be compared. The claim is not plausible, the content of an experience can be stated in propositional form, and Scruton has since revised his account (Budd 1985: 147; Scruton 1997: 140-70).

Further attempts to elucidate Scruton’s analogy leave us with something like this: *A* expresses *E* if, among the mental states caused

by A, is some noncognitive state which stands in the right kind of relation to the appropriate reaction to the expression of emotion in the central case (Matravers 1998). However, this account still faces a number of problems of which I will mention only three. First, the capacity to cause feelings or emotions is not distinctive to expression. Many things sadden me which are not thereby expressive of sadness. Second, “dry-eyed critics” (to use Bouwsma’s phrase) claim both to experience a piece of music as expressive and not to be in any feeling or emotional state. Finally, the expressive quality seems located in the wrong place; to hear music as sad is not to hear music and feel sad, it is to hear the sadness in the music. The first problem can be rebutted by adding further conditions. Not only must the noncognitive mental state be aroused by the music, it must be present in the listener’s consciousness along with the music and its existence and nature immediately causally dependent on the music. Attempts to defend the theory from the second and third problems run the risk of playing down the significance of the aroused noncognitive state. This might rebut the problems, but at the cost of losing what is distinctive about the position.

Although the arousal theory is widely thought to have failed as a theory of expression, elements of arousal feature in a number of recent theories of expression. Jenefer Robinson has written extensively on the effects music has on listeners. Her view on the experience of expression is akin to that of Levinson, although she also allows that the experience might take other forms. In particular, we can hear the music as “a

psychological as well as a musical structure” (Robinson 2011: 209; see also Robinson 2005). Similar thoughts have recently been advanced by Charles O. Nussbaum (Nussbaum 2007). Nussbaum sees music as a complicated mode of representation with which we engage by listening. One of these representations is a form of mental model {-} in particular, a model that embodies analogues of Gibsonian “affordances.” Such affordances are environmental invariants that present themselves to perceiving organisms as affording possibilities of action; that is, they stimulate a range of possible relevant motor responses. In recovering this representation from the musical surface, we “specify motor hierarchies and action plans, which, in turn, *put the listener’s body into off-line motor states that specify virtual movements through a virtual terrain or a scenario possessing certain features*” (Nussbaum 2007: 47). Put another way, “music puts the listener’s body into states that would fit with or be appropriate to interacting with and simulating scenarios and terrains with certain features and with varying emotional valence” (Nussbaum 2007: 82). I stress that these theories involve only elements of arousal; neither Robinson nor Nussbaum would describe themselves as “arousal theorists.”

I have, so far, outlined three accounts of the relation between music and the emotions: as involving the perception of resemblance, some kind of imagined state, and of aroused feeling. I have suggested that their range of application might be limited, but have not found decisive arguments to dismiss any of them. However, if one reflects on the range of experiences we have of expressive music, this might not

seem surprising. It is not obvious, for example, that Satie's *Gymnopedie No. 1* provides the same kind of experience of expression as Beethoven's *Fifth*. Malcolm Budd has argued that a full account of expression will need to draw on a range of different accounts. What he describes as "the basic and minimal account" is a version of a resemblance theory:

<extract>when you hear music as being expressive of emotion E {-} when you hear E in the music {-} you hear the music as sounding like the way E feels; the music is expressive of E if it is correct to hear it in this fashion or a full appreciation of the music requires the listener to hear it in this way. So the sense in which you hear the emotion in the music {-} the sense in which it is an audible property of the music {-} is that you perceive a likeness between the music and the experience of the emotion.

<source>(Budd 1995: 137)

<text>Budd gives an extensive list of the resources in virtue of which music is able to mirror those aspects of feeling available to it. These include tension and relaxation, difference in upwards or downwards direction, magnitude, speed and rhythm of felt movement, and levels of felt energy. These points of resemblance lie either above or below

the levels of consciousness (Budd 1995: 142). If they are part of our conscious experience, we can defend particular judgments with respect to them. If they are not, then (I assume) we are left with an experience of similarity but, to defend our judgement, we shall have to appeal to “a community of response” (ibid.).

The claim that music is expressive if it sounds the way our emotion feels is difficult to interpret further. The claim is not that music actually resembles our emotions; it is difficult to see how we could specify the relation in a way in which the claim would make sense. It is rather that music sounding the way our emotions feel is the most perspicuous description of our experience of expressive music; it captures what the experience is like in an enlightening way. Even if one granted the first part of this (it does seem to capture what our experience is like) one might have doubts about the second (how enlightening is the claim?) It is not clear we have a sufficiently robust grasp of the way the properties apparently common to both are manifested in either to make the resemblance claim very enlightening. However, as a phenomenological description, it might be the best that is available to us.

As well as this “basic and minimal” account “there are other conceptions of expressive perception and the musical expression of emotion [which] exploit the accretions that the mere perception of likeness between music and feeling is liable to attract” (Budd 1995: 147). The three main “accretions” Budd lists correspond roughly to the arousal theory, to Walton’s theory, and Levinson’s theory (although

there are important differences in nuance in all of the accounts). Finally, Budd allows that our conception of expressiveness can be broadened “by dropping the demand that the imagining must be done in virtue of a perceived similarity between the music and the feeling imagined and allowing that the imagining can legitimately be controlled by the music in other ways” (Budd 1995: 152).

Budd’s generous pluralism is justified, if at all, by reflecting on our experience of music and on the nature of our judgments on music. If one or both of those cannot fit under a single account, then we have reason to allow accounts that do seem descriptively accurate to take their place alongside each other (it is noteworthy that Budd claimed that an adequate theory of music would not be “monolithic” in his first published work on the subject; Budd 1985: 176). Although few are explicit as Budd, other theorists (including Levinson and Walton) allow that there are conceptions of expression apart from those illuminated by the accounts they put forward.

<commentary>See also Expressivism (Chapter 11), Goodman (Chapter 18), Wollheim (Chapter 20), Imagination and make-believe (Chapter 31), Metaphor (Chapter 34), Tragedy (Chapter 40), Music (Chapter 61).

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