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# **Expressive Actions**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In a well-known paper, Rosalind Hursthouse argues that certain common, and not irrational, actions cannot be accommodated by the dominant philosophical model of the rational explanation of action. Although there is no rational explanation, she claims, there is a good explanation for such action: they are done out of emotion. In this paper I argue that we can reject Hursthouse's conclusion that explanation of action as the expression of emotion is *sui generis* if we have a sufficiently broad understanding of how features can count in favour of actions. What is distinctive about expressive acts, I will argue, is not that they are spontaneous products of the 'overflowing of powerful feeling,' requiring a form of explanation that is arational, but rather that they are done intentionally but for their own sake as a constitutive part of doing justice to one's sense of the gravity (or indeed levity) of a situation. The action is not arational, but can be assessed for its expressive adequacy. Furthermore, the expressive action, on this view, has a purpose – that of doing justice, or giving adequate external form to one's sense of the situation. If there are reasons sometimes simply to acknowledge or honour the gravity of a situation then we can reconcile expressive action with the standard picture of rational explanation of action.

**KEYWORDS: EXPRESSION; EMOTION; ACTION; INTENTION; PRACTICAL RATIONALITY; ROSALIND HURSTHOUSE; SYMBOLISM**

## 1. Introduction: Hursthouse's puzzle

In a well-known paper, Rosalind Hursthouse argues that certain common, and not irrational, actions cannot be accommodated by the dominant philosophical model of the rational explanation of action (Hursthouse 1991). Examples of the category Hursthouse has in mind would include: rumpling someone's hair (out of affection or tenderness); jumping in joy or excitement; destroying something connected with a particular person in anger; covering one's face (in the dark) from shame or fear; 'puffing oneself up' with pride; caressing the clothes of a loved one in grief.

Hursthouse's claim is that 1) these are examples of actions, since they are intentional rather than merely involuntary reflexes (the agent is in some way in rational control of the way she acts), 2) such behaviour is not irrational, but 3) they are not done "for a reason" in the sense that there is something that the agent takes as counting in favour of acting thus.<sup>1</sup> It is not the case that, in jumping for joy as the ball goes in the net, I am doing so because I believe that this will bring about a state of affairs towards which I have some pro-attitude.<sup>2</sup> On these grounds, she thinks, these actions cannot be accommodated by the dominant model of rational explanation of action, where actions are explained by reference to the purpose the agent had in so acting. She doesn't question the validity of that model, and therefore terms these actions 'arational.' But although there is no rational explanation, she claims, there is a good explanation for this action: it was done out of joy (and behaviour like that is within the normal range of behaviour to which joy

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<sup>1</sup> Drawing on a McDowellian formulation, Hursthouse says that there is no description of such action that will reveal the "favourable light in which the agent saw what he did" (on the assumption that, to explain action through reasons is precisely to reveal the good that the agent saw in the action).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Davidson: "R is a primary reason why an agent performed the action A under the description d only if R consists of a pro attitude of the agent towards actions with a certain property, and a belief of the agent that A, under the description d, has that property" (Davidson 1980: 5).

leads). She argues that the way we explain these actions, which the dominant model cannot accommodate, is by seeing them as expressions of emotion. Explaining action as the expression of emotion, however, is a quite different kind of explanation of action from what she takes to be the standard form of rational explanation in which we explain action by citing some feature that an agent took to count in favour of the action.

In this paper I argue that we can reject Hursthouse's conclusion that explanation of action as the expression of emotion is *sui generis* if we have a sufficiently broad understanding of how features can count in favour of actions. In what follows, I will not question her assumption that the standard form of rational explanation of action involves citing some feature counting in favour of the action to which the agent was responding in so acting. What is distinctive about expressive acts, I will argue, is not that they are spontaneous products of the 'overflowing of powerful feeling,' requiring a form of explanation that is arational, but rather that they are done intentionally but for their own sake as a constitutive part of doing justice to one's sense of the gravity (or indeed levity) of a situation. One ruffles the child's hair in order to give form, on this view, to one's sense of the affection-worthiness of the child (given, no doubt, one's relation to the child as well as the child's intrinsic features). The action is not arational, but can be assessed for its expressive adequacy. Furthermore, the expressive action, on this view, has a purpose – that of doing justice, or giving adequate external form to one's sense of the situation. But at the same time, the claim that these are actions done for their own sake – in the sense that nothing further is achieved by 'doing justice to' or 'capturing' or 'embodying in action' the gravity of the situation, that these actions are not done as a means to a further end – means that we can diagnose the tendency to see these actions as 'not done for a reason.' If one takes it that all

reasons are means-end reasons then it will indeed look as though there are no reasons for the kind of acts in question. But if there are reasons sometimes simply to acknowledge or honour the gravity of a situation then we can reconcile expressive action with the standard picture of rational explanation of action (for an alternative view, see Helm, this volume).

Of course, it will remain true that many manifestations of emotion remain immune to rational explanation. As Hursthouse notes, we can talk about various such manifestations, including the following: phenomena like blushing, sweating and so on, which may betray the presence of underlying emotional states and which seem beyond any voluntary or rational control; forms of behaviour like smiling, which often occur involuntarily, but which it is possible to stop or to suppress; and the apparently fully intentional actions that she is most centrally concerned with. How far rational explanation extends down this scale remains for further research to determine: it will depend on a more developed theory of the sensitivity of the human body and its behaviour to rational considerations than I have to offer here. However, many types of apparently instinctive behaviour can in fact be better understood as habitual, learned behaviour, so where the line is to be drawn would require careful investigation. Furthermore, as will become apparent further on in the paper, I don't think that the account I give here explains all behaviour out of emotion, or covers all the emotions. Rather, a guiding thought in this paper is that while some emotions and their manifestations have as their purpose the strategic role of preserving the organism and alerting it to threats or opportunities in its environment (which may be the best explanation of fear, for instance), others have the role of picking out significant events from the otherwise fleeting play of consciousness, and making them resonate in the individual's life, thus providing the agent with the sense of the inherent importance of these events (think rather of guilt and

shame). The role of some emotions, in other words, is that of marking or acknowledging, rather than protecting and promoting. If this is correct, then we would expect the resonance to go quite deep, to be felt and manifested bodily in ways that the individual cannot easily control. It is this category of the emotionally expressive – associated with resonance, which seems non-purposive, and which for that reason Hursthouse and others have found puzzling – that I am interested in here.

## **2. How could we see expressive actions as carried out for a reason?**

Hursthouse's argument has had its critics, not just because it seems to suggest that much of human behaviour lies outside the scope of rational explanation, but because it casts doubt on the assumption that intentional action is action that can be explained in terms of reasons.<sup>3</sup> As Betzler puts it:

“actions that are intentional but not done for a particular reason (and therefore not carried out because they have brought about something good or valuable) are a puzzle. They count as actions in one respect, but fail to do so in another. They are under the agent's control, yet not intelligible from the agent's point of view.” (Betzler 2009: 273)

To overcome Hursthouse's argument a) we could deny that this behaviour is more than reflex; or b) we could argue that it is simply irrational; or c) we could deny that there is no rational explanation for it (i.e. we could deny that there is no way of explaining it as done for a reason). Alternatively, d) one might try a “divide-and-rule” strategy, arguing that some of Hursthouse's examples (say those dealing with anger, joy and other “violent” emotions) fall into the reflex

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<sup>3</sup> See for example, Smith 1998; Raz 1999; Goldie 2000; Döring 2003; Betzler 2009.

category, while those that are more like, say, rumpling hair or caressing a dead one's clothes, are done for the sake of some expected good. I think it is fruitless to try to deny that the behaviour in question is action, since although much of it might be impulsive, it is not involuntary: while there may be some cases of expressive action in which questions may be raised about the extent of our control over our action (Raz 1999: 38-42), this is not the case e.g. with ruffling the child's hair out of affection. Furthermore, it seems plausible to think that much of this behaviour is not simply hard-wired but learned (and hence culturally variable: think of the different ways in which men and women learn to express joy: punching the air and yelling is pretty masculine: cf Raz 1999: 41). Could we argue that these actions are irrational? Some of them might be, as when a fit of temper makes one harm or destroy the thing one loves. However, there are many of these actions that, other things being equal, are not contrary to what one has reason to do (though they can be contrary to reason in certain circumstances, or when the expression takes a particular form). Hursthouse seems right to say that these actions are not simply irrational simply by virtue of being in the category she is interested in, that is, the category of expressive actions.

However, there might seem to be an obvious way of explaining how these actions could be supported by reason (Smith 1997: 22). After all, the agent clearly acts on certain desires – to jump in the air; to destroy everything in the room that belongs to that unspeakable --; to cover oneself up; to touch the loved one's clothes – and the action comes about because the agent believes that moving her body in certain ways will bring it about that she jumps in the air, destroys everything that belongs to him, etc.. Here we have identified something that the agent saw as counting in favour of the action: that, given her desire to X, moving her body in certain ways would count as X-ing. However, the problem with this response as a solution to the puzzle

is that this kind of explanation would not really explain anything: certainly it wouldn't be a good explanation of the sort that we want when, say, in holding someone to account, we explain human behaviour in terms of reasons.<sup>4</sup> The explanation does not bring an end to our questions, it simply makes us ask, why did she want to jump, destroy, etc.? Hursthouse's problem stems from the fact that this minimal response provides no good answer to that.

Another way in which one might try to show the rationality of these actions is by trying to find some more intelligible human purpose that could be served by expressive actions, something else that these actions are performed in order to bring about. We could do this by saying that one acts thus in order to express the emotion. This could be interpreted in two ways: a) that one acts in order to relieve or vent the emotion, to achieve a kind of satisfaction or psychological equilibrium; or b) that one acts in order to make one's mental state known to some other party or parties. However, neither of these ways of rationalising expressive behaviour seems right.

Expressive behaviour is engaged in in some sense for its own sake. It is not primarily a technique that we employ to restore psychological balance or to communicate with others (though of course, those things may be foreseen effects of the expressive action).<sup>5</sup>

However, from these failed solutions to Hursthouse's puzzle, we can begin to see room for an alternative solution. For it is not an entirely unfamiliar thought in normative ethics that some actions might indeed be inherently 'fitting' and good for their own sake: obviously being good

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<sup>4</sup> Smith himself notes that this explanation would be "distinctly unsatisfying" and claims that the Humean account underpinning it must – and legitimately can – be supplemented by reference to the emotion (Smith 1997: 22).

<sup>5</sup> The communicative view can be given a further twist if it is interpreted as the view that, although the communication is not carried out intentionally, the aim of communication nevertheless explains why we act as we do, for instance if we see expressive behavior as evolved signaling behavior which informs others of our attitudes (Green 2007). Green's view is a sophisticated version of a view I will consider below; however, it does not help to answer the question Hursthouse raises of how we can rationalize expressive action by citing some consideration that the agent took as counting in favour of so acting, which is what I am considering in this section.



for their own sake would be what counts in favour of those actions (cf. Cupit 1996; and the ‘expressive theory of practical rationality’ canvassed in Anderson 1995). Of course, this idea needs further explanation. But if there are such acts, we can then ask to what extent her examples of action out of emotion can be understood as responsive to such reasons, for instance, by seeing them as spontaneous and intuitive instances of acts done for their own sake. I will now start to explore a sense of expressive action that does point to there being such reasons: reasons that support our deliberations about how to give form to our sense of what is important in a situation.

### **3. Expressive action as ‘doing justice’**

At this point I will introduce an example the personal nature of which I hope will not serve as a distraction. During the preparations for my grandfather’s funeral, the funeral director raised the question whether my brothers and I would carry the coffin, or whether he should get some of his staff to do it. We thought it over and decided we would do it. Since that time, I have wondered what reasons guided our choice and whether we made the right decision. Let me run through some candidates and briefly comment, not just on the likelihood that those were the reasons on which we acted, but rather on their normative weight, and the extent to which they support our decision.

One thing that may have guided our decision is simply a sense that that is the done thing at these events, and that we did not want to be out of line with the done thing. We will come back to this sort of consideration below, but as specified these reasons are not very strong. Without some sense of why this is the done thing, or what is important about doing the done thing, this looks like mere conformity.

One way to flesh out the importance of doing the done thing would be to say something about the importance of tradition and ritual, particularly rituals that have remained as they are for hundreds of years. It might be said that there is some importance in the continuity achieved by carrying on in the way that people in one's culture act in these situations, and have acted, since in doing so one is connecting oneself to a community dispersed in time and space.

Another way to explain the importance of doing the done thing has a more local normative source, namely, in the desires and expectations of those attending the funeral, particularly my mother whose father it was; or in general wider social expectations. There is no doubt that this was a significant consideration weighing with us - and a good reason. However, although we may have done it in part for our mother's sake, there is still a question of what makes this a good reason. We did it, let us say, in part because we took it that her unspoken wish would have been that we did so. But why did she so wish? Was this wish reasonable? We certainly would have done a number of bizarre things for her - up to a point - on that day; but this wasn't one of them. For her to wish that we should carry the coffin seemed quite natural, not at all bizarre. We shared in her sense that this was the right and appropriate thing to do. Saying that we did it for my mother's sake doesn't explain the basis of this sense.

As well as these considerations, we might also have done it for two other reasons that have become familiar through the course of our discussion: either to achieve psychological harmony by letting some pent-up inner states express themselves; or in order to communicate some attitude to others.

Taking the second, which seems the more plausible, we could sketch the following sort of social psychological story. The reason we carry the coffin is because we want to communicate something to others and this is the conventional vehicle (the done thing) by which to do so. What is it that we want to communicate? And why is it important to us to communicate it? It might be said that we want to communicate either something about our grandfather, or, to delve more deeply into our psychology, something about our membership of a particular social group (that, to paraphrase Erving Goffman, we act so as to reassure people that we can be counted on to behave as we are expected to: Goffman 1971). Why is it important to us to communicate such a thing? On the view that we communicate something about our grandfather, we might do so with the intention of receiving support and confirmation from others. On the social psychological view, we might develop the story to include an account of how the reason for much social behaviour is the maintenance of relations of trust, and that this requires the constant affirmation and re-affirmation of one's commitment to play one's role in the group (and specifically, in some stories, to play one's role wholeheartedly even when one's interests might be better served by breaking key social rules).

However, it seems as though one reason that we might have had for deciding to carry the coffin isn't captured by any of these reasons. This is that doing so might be an important way to honour the departed. The interpretations of our action that we have just canvassed above all seek to identify some purpose we seek to achieve in carrying the coffin, some end to which this action is the contingently most effective means. This seems to leave out the thought that this act is one that appeared to us as intrinsically fitting to the situation. Now when a theorist claims that

something is “intrinsically fitting” the suspicion might be raised that they are simply refusing to engage in any further argument or justification of their position. However, I think justification can be given, but simply not justification that explains how the act was a contingently effective means to a further end. The main motivation, I am thinking, is the desire to do justice to the importance of our loss. The interpretations we have looked at above see the act as being addressed at, or done for the sake of, someone or something other than our grandfather. Of course there are many functions of, and interests to be served, in a social form as rich as that of the funeral. But surely one natural thought might be that the staging of the funeral and the various components one decides to include within the ceremony have as at least part of their focus the person who has died, and that the justification of these actions should have something to do with that person. That is what would be meant by seeing these acts as an expression of, or vehicle for, one’s grief for the loss of that person. One way of interpreting the decision to carry the coffin would therefore be this: that one weighty reason in favour of carrying it has to do with the suitability of that act as a way of capturing or reflecting something of what our grandfather had meant to us, and that as a consequence deciding not to do it might be something that we would regret.

In other words, one possibility is that we interpret the action as aimed at capturing or reflecting something about the situation we are in, namely, the loss of someone important to us, and this is not done as a means to a further end but for its own sake. Can we say something about what makes carrying the coffin an appropriate vehicle for grief? I think we can make some headway – and in doing so we are unpacking or articulating the normative connection (of fittingness) between our sense of the gravity of the situation on the one hand (the loss of an intimate), and the

expressive action that is selected as the vehicle of the emotion on the other (the carrying). Let us briefly point to some of the considerations that might bear on this question:

- One thing one might want to say is that the act of carrying the coffin exhibits a certain kind of tenderness and caring. Indeed, it is pretty much the last chance anyone will have to do anything for the departed person. Although of course the person is beyond registering anything about it, the act is a highly intimate one. I had never carried my grandfather before. I was aware of being in proximity to his body. It seemed important to get him safely to where he was going.
- There's also the fact of this being a certain journey, and also being, in a powerful metaphor, the end of the journey. The whole event revolves around saying farewell to what remains of the dead person: it is the last point at which he exists as the object he was. As the last thing to be done for him it felt in the end important that he should be carried by the family and not just by people who we were paying to run the service.
- There is also something about the importance of taking responsibility - shouldering responsibility - and being able to deal with this physically demanding task at a time of emotional strain. Self-mastery is required for the action, since a faltering step, or a loss of self-control, can lead to disaster. In shouldering the burden one takes on the all-important role of guiding the person to their final destination, and shows one can live up to it. The act of physically carrying someone in this desperate situation is an embodiment of taking responsibility, displaying one's own gravity and strength.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This feature is potentially troubling in its relation to conceptions of masculinity and femininity. It is no accident, of course, that, in the culture from which this example is drawn, only men carry the coffin. This is not because of physical strength. It is rather a matter of social role. It has to do with the aspects of self-control and strength, being able to keep one's emotions in check. And this makes the ritual problematic if one rejects those aspects of masculinity. Actions like that of carrying the coffin derive their meaning, and rely for their power, on a network of other meanings. In a society where conceptions of gender roles are problematic, it is likely to be particularly difficult to find expressive actions that have no connection with those roles. I don't think that this means we should abandon

I think that these are examples of the kind of considerations that might commonly go into deliberation on a question like the one I have posed. They are considerations of a type that intelligent moral agents in our culture do sometimes, perhaps often, deploy as elements of deliberation, and offer as aspects of justification. They are considerations that bear on the question of whether an action is an appropriate vehicle for an emotion. In asking whether the action is the appropriate vehicle for the emotion, we have to look at how things look to the person experiencing that emotion. I take it that an emotion has perceptual aspects, that it presents situations to an agent in a distinctive way, such that an agent attends to (or finds absorbing or compelling) certain features rather than others, that she sees those features under a certain characterisation, and that this characterisation brings the evaluative features picked out together according to a certain internal logic or narrative: we might call all this the intentional object of the emotion (the emotion is directed at the object under a certain characterisation: Cf. Rorty 1980; de Sousa 1980; Roberts 1988; Green, this volume, makes a similar claim in discussing metaphor). An emotion therefore brings with it a sense of the way in which the situation matters. What it means, on this account, for something to be an appropriate vehicle for an emotion is for it to in some way capture or reflect or do justice to our sense of what matters about the situation (or, those key things that are made compelling by the grip of the emotion) – for it to be fitting to the intentional content of the emotional state.

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expressive acts altogether. But it is likely that many such acts, and the attitudes associated with them, are deeply embedded in our sense of the appropriateness of forms of expression. We may seek to create new vehicles for expression that are more equitable. The problem with this is that such vehicles require depth and resonance, and it can be hard for us to see newly coined acts as capturing what it is they want to capture: they wear their arbitrariness on their face. Hence it may be important to attempt to adapt the older forms as particular elements come to lack the power they presumably once had. Perhaps the carrying of the coffin would be more powerful if it were done by male and female alike.

A question now arises about what it means to do justice to the intentional object of the emotion. The way I want to phrase this question is: ‘what is it for an action to have expressive power in relation to a certain situation?’ We can make some progress on this question by looking briefly at one contribution to the debate in aesthetics about expressive qualities of artworks. We might think that debates in aesthetics are an obvious place to look for an understanding of the notion of expression of emotion. However, aestheticians have long since learned to distinguish expressions of emotion, on the one hand, from expressive qualities on the other, and to point out, in criticism of the Romantic view of art as the expression of emotion, that artworks may possess the latter without consisting in the former (Hospers 1954-5). We might nevertheless think that expressive qualities and expressions of emotion are in some way linked. However, insofar as this idea is pursued, there is some tendency in the modern debate about expressive qualities to see such qualities as reflective of the ‘natural expressions’ of emotion (Kivy 1989; Davies 1980) – as though these latter were themselves self-explanatory. I think, therefore, that we need to look elsewhere if we want to know what it is for something to be an appropriate vehicle or ‘natural’ expression of an emotion in the first place. The view I am interested in is almost the opposite of this tendency: it will seek to explain the fact that some behaviour can intelligibly be the vehicle for the expression of an emotion through an explanation of that behaviour’s expressive power – where having ‘expressive power’ does not just mean that this is the behaviour we have an observable tendency to engage in when in these emotional states.

#### **4. Expressive acts, expressive power and symbolism**

‘Expression’ can mean a number of different things in philosophy. For instance, a sentence in English might be said to express a (timeless) proposition; utterances, even fact-stating ones,

might be said to express our attitudes; moral language might be said to express our convictions rather than stating facts; behaviour might be said to express emotion; music might be said to express emotion; a person might be said to be expressing himself through certain actions or creations; art, music and poetry might be said to have expressive power. There is clearly a question about whether all these uses have anything important in common (Green 2007: 21-2). But that is not my question in this paper.

I would like to concentrate at this point on the last of these senses of ‘expression’ – the sense of expressive power. I want to start with an intuition that we might have about some artworks: that they are a vehicle for which we might reach because we feel that they do justice to our sense of how things are in a way that more prosaic and literal media cannot. I would like to suggest that these are artworks that have expressive power by virtue of their success in capturing or doing justice to our sense of how things are (in some respect). If there is anything right about this thought about expressive artworks then we might say that they are created for their own sake in the sense that they seek to represent rather than to change the world: they have a world-to-mind rather than mind-to-world direction of fit. I further want to suggest that we might think of expressive actions in the same way: that they are actions that we reach for in order to do justice to the (perhaps in some way extraordinary) significance of a situation, but where there is no further purpose to be attained than reflecting how things are. In the case of both artwork and action, I will suggest, this reflecting or capturing or doing justice can only be carried out through the adequate symbolisation of the target.



One good starting point is a distinction between two meanings of ‘expression’ that is drawn by Richard Wollheim in *Art and Its Objects*.

‘In the first place, and perhaps most primitively, we think of a work of art as expressive in the sense in which a gesture or cry would be expressive: that is to say, we conceive it as coming so directly and immediately out of some particular emotional or mental state that it bears unmistakable marks of that state upon it ... Alongside this notion is another, which we apply when we think of an object as expressive of a certain condition because, when we are in that condition, it seems to us to match, or correspond with, what we experience inwardly: and perhaps when the condition passes, the object is also good for reminding us of it in some special poignant way, or for reviving it for us. For an object to be expressive in this sense, there is no requirement that it should originate in the condition that it expresses, not indeed is there any stipulation about its genesis: for these purposes it is simply a piece of the environment which we appropriate on account of the way it seems to reiterate something in us. Expression in this sense I shall (following a famous nineteenth-century usage) call “correspondence” (Wollheim 1970: 47).

One way to understand the difference between Wollheim’s two senses of expression is to distinguish as the symptoms of some mental state, such as crying or smiling, from those objects (and, I claim, actions) that possess expressive power because they seem to capture or reflect some mental state (or the content thereof). It is the latter in which I am particularly interested, since it raises issues of adequacy, appropriateness and inappropriateness that ground normative assessment of different forms of expression.

What Wollheim has in mind in the rather cryptic reference to a “famous nineteenth century usage of ‘correspondence’” (unexplained in his text) is the tradition of Symbolism in art and poetry that we can see as initiated by Baudelaire.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, Baudelaire’s poem “Correspondences” (Baudelaire 1857), which sets out the idea that there are resonant affinities between very different types of object, has been called “the preliminary manifesto of the French symbolist movement” (Dorra 1994: 10). In fact, this idea was highly influential in the Romantic and post-Romantic period, and not just amongst those who prized irrationalism. For instance, it is the basis of Mill’s distinction between poetry and eloquence:

‘Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or utterance of feeling. But if we may be excused the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is heard, poetry overheard. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry seems to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself to itself, in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols which are the nearest possible representation of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet’s mind. Eloquence is feeling pouring itself out to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavouring to influence their belief or move them to passion or to action’ (Mill 1973: 80).

And, as M. H. Abrams reminds us in his magisterial work on the changes that Romanticism brought about in thinking about the nature and value of art, it is also reflected in T. S. Eliot’s

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<sup>7</sup> For some discussion of these sources, see (Taylor 1989: Ch. 21).

thought that, insofar as a poem is an expression, it is because it serves as an ‘objective correlative’ of the state of mind of the artist (Abrams 1953: 25; Eliot 1997).

I think that we can usefully develop the idea that expressive action is symbolic in something like this sense. The idea here is that, in performing an expressive action, one seeks to create an external manifestation that corresponds to one’s inner state (or rather, the intentional content or object of that state, the way in which the state presents the situation to the subject), and that one does so simply in order to reflect, mark or acknowledge one’s sense of the, in some way extraordinary, nature of the situation. The act is a symbol of the situation – or rather, it is expressively powerful insofar as it succeeds as a symbol of the situation – and the symbol manages to capture something about the situation that couldn’t be captured otherwise. One acts intentionally in creating the symbol, but the creation of the symbol is its own end in two ways. Firstly, the symbol reflects the nature of the situation, and thus moulds itself to the way the world appears to be rather than attempting to mould or re-shape the world (world-to-mind rather than mind-to-world direction of fit); and secondly, in symbolic action simply to have marked or acknowledged the situation is regarded as sufficient goal in its own right. Symbolic action of this type succeeds when it reflects the world and does not need to be productive of further good.

It is something like this link between emotion and its expression that Sabine Döring seems to have in mind in her response to the debate initiated by Hursthouse. As she puts it:

‘Expressive actions are rational insofar as the agent has to distinguish appropriate expressions from inappropriate ones. This is particularly important in cases where the

action symbolises the representational content of the expressed emotion. Emotions can be symbolically expressed because they are representations, and they are often expressed in this way because they include the target's import for the subject. In the symbolic case, the rationality involved in expressive action consists in grasping the symbolic relations between emotional representations and their appropriate expressions.' (Döring 2003: 227)

And Döring continues in a vein conducive to my deployment of Wollheim:

'The most sophisticated way of symbolically expressing an emotion's representational content is achieved in art ... What is at stake here is ... the expression's appropriateness and quality as a symbol of the way the world appears to the agent in experiencing the emotion. As the exemplary case of artistic expression illustrates, the question whether an expression of emotion is rational is a question of mind-to-world fit rather than of world-to-mind direction of fit.' Döring 2003: 228)

A fuller exploration of what it is for action to be symbolic in this sense will have to wait for another occasion. However, we can make some initial observations. First of all, symbolic action has to be capable of referring to the situation it is about. It is understood thus by the agent, and also by third parties. Hence, despite the fact that expressive action is not performed with the aim of communicating, the medium of expressive action must have at least something in common with language,<sup>8</sup> and we might therefore say that it is apt for communication.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, while expressive actions tend to follow certain patterns, and often become stereotyped, there is clearly

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<sup>8</sup> This is a point stressed by Nelson Goodman in his discussion of expression (Goodman 1976: 45-50).

<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Catherine Abell for this way of putting it.

at least some room for creativity and imagination in coining new forms or developing old ones. For instance, towards the end of Wim Wenders's film, *Wings of Desire*, the two main protagonists finally meet in a bar, after a long build-up in which they had gradually become aware of each other's existence – and, somehow, fallen in love – but had not yet met; they turn to one another in a moment of strong attraction and fulfilment; one expects them (stereotypically) to kiss; but the female character instead looks at her lover and raises her wine glass in cupped hands, in a semi-sacred gesture that somehow captures much more of the tenderness of the situation than a kiss would have done. Thirdly, we might think of expressive actions as bearing something like a metaphorical relation to the situation they concern. This idea would capture the language-like nature of expressive action, as well as the creative and open-ended process of devising them. But this pregnant idea needs to be made more precise. For one thing, symbols seem to have a higher degree of fittingness and exclusivity to them than the free play of metaphors – for instance, it is at least understandable that I might have felt I had not properly paid my respects to my grandfather if I had decided not to engage in this particular symbolic action. So there might be something to the Romantic idea that symbols have to achieve a degree of organic unity, such that any alteration in a part would destroy the whole.<sup>10</sup> For another thing, the idea of action 'corresponding' to one's experience of a situation by acting as a metaphor for it doesn't in itself explain the specificity of the symbols that seem to compel our imagination. In the funeral case, for instance, we seem to find those actions symbolically important where we act

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. A. W. Schlegel: "In the fine arts too, as in nature, that greatest of artists, every genuine form is organic, i.e. determined by the work's content. In short, form is nothing other than a meaningful exterior, the articulate physiognomy of each object, undisturbed by accidental intrusions, and therefore giving faithful testimony to the object's hidden essence" (Furst 1980: 94) Two nice stories reflecting this theme are quoted by Aaron Ridley (Ridley 1995: 49) The first is Mendelssohn's claim: "A piece of music which I love expresses thoughts to me which not too imprecise to be framed in words, but too precise. So I find that attempts to express such thoughts in words may have some point to them, but they are also unsatisfying." And the second concerns Schumann's response to being asked what the piece of music he had just played expressed: "he sat back down at the piano and played the piece again, saying 'That!'".

as though we could still look after the departed. Appeal to metaphor does not explain why this particular metaphor is important. Why is just that the kind of thing we want to say about this situation? (Though we should also be aware that there might be little in the way of generalisation to say in answer to this question.)

On the assumption that what I have said so far has succeeded in making the line of thought to be pursued intelligible and at least somewhat attractive, I would like to now turn to how this account might be deployed in addressing the puzzle of expressive acts with which we started. First of all, I would like to point out that the line I have pursued here is not the only way of rationalising behaviour out of emotion – and I will situate it amongst some other strategies. Secondly, I will argue for my view by returning to some of Hursthouse's examples and showing how they can be seen as performed for the kind of reasons of expressive power that we have canvassed in this section.

## **5. Explaining action out of emotion**

First of all, I admit that, even if the story told here succeeds in its explanation of expressive action as rational action, guided by reasons, we should acknowledge that this is not the only way in which this action out of emotion might be revealed as rational. For instance, in Jean Hampton's remarkable analyses of resentment, malice and spite, she argues that action from emotion has at least the appearance of straightforward means-end rationality given the beliefs or perceptions that the person in the grip of the emotion is subject to (Hampton 1988). The spiteful person, on Hampton's understanding, sees himself as having been subjugated in some respect – lowered in the pecking order – and takes aim at those he sees as better off to bring them down to

his own level, thereby to assuage his own sense of inferiority by giving him company, as he sees it, at the bottom. Now Hampton's nuanced analysis is complicated by the fact that she argues, firstly, that this emotional strategy is in fact self-defeating, because it doesn't in fact help the person who takes himself to be at the bottom to have others at the bottom with him – since he is still at the bottom; and secondly, that the way of thinking that generates this strategy is fundamentally flawed because based on a competitive Hobbesian view of basic human worth rather than a non-competitive Kantian one. Nevertheless, we can see Hampton as presenting us with a way of seeing emotional behaviour as instrumentally rational given goals that make sense to the person thinking about things through the lens of a given emotion.

Alternatively, we might follow Sartre in seeing action out of emotion, not as straightforwardly strategic, but rather as strategic given some 'magical thinking' – so for instance the angry person lashes out because she thinks – though only 'magically' – that in doing so she can destroy that wealth of overwhelming demands that she cannot otherwise satisfy (Sartre 1962). One way of interpreting this is to take Peter Goldie's position, and to say that the magical thinking just means that the person acts as she wishes she was able to act in the situation – that the behaviour exhibits a wish or a desire that runs deep but which cannot be allowed to surface given the shackles of civilisation (Goldie 2000). On this type of view, behaviour out of emotion can be seen as means-end rational once we appreciate that the 'ends' in question are provided by certain suppressed desires that the strains of involvement bring to the surface.

Finally, we might take the view that emotional behaviour is prudential even though its prudence is not what motivates the agent, or need be transparent to the agent at all. This is the view that

behaviour out of emotion is adaptive – or at any rate was adaptive at that time in our evolutionary history when the basic hard-wiring of human psychology was being laid down (Prinz 2004). Taking the case of fear as a model, for instance, it might be said that this emotion is triggered by typical situations that may or may not themselves represent danger, and that the person who is afraid, in responding to the fearful, need not necessarily be aware of the fearful as dangerous; but that it is nevertheless in the agent's interests to have this short-cut mechanism of responding to the fearful, because in that way the agent is likely to be better kept away from danger.

These are at least some of the alternatives for explaining behaviour out of emotion as rational. In putting forward my own account of emotional behaviour as seeking to do justice by symbolising the sense of the situation, I need not thereby be claiming that it is incompatible with these alternatives. One possibility is that my account might be a good explanation of some types of behaviour out of emotion, while the alternatives better explain others – for instance, I find Hampton's account of spite pretty compelling; furthermore attempting to explain fear-behaviour in terms of 'doing justice' to the situation doesn't seem very plausible. What my account attempts to explain is a sub-set of behaviour out of emotion: that which is 'expressive' in the sense of being apparently not carried out for any further end, and which rather has as its end marking or acknowledging the significance of the situation in which the agent finds themselves. As the funeral example suggests, sometimes the best explanation of our action is that such action represents the fitting expressive vehicle, in this sense, for our charged sense of the situation. If some emotions, such as grief, pride, guilt, shame, joy, affection, admiration and respect, but unlike fear, are akin to 'judgements of value' in the sense that they are tied to an individual's



sense of what is important – specifically that they make some events in the individual’s life resonate through her consciousness rather than slipping away in the endless stream of one thing after another – we will distort our understanding of the behaviour to which they lead if we attempt to fit them in to the strategic model of fear.

The funeral case provides an example of an expressive action about which one might deliberate and regarding which one might end up with some sense of whether one had ‘got it right’ in acting as one did. The example was chosen precisely in order to display the kind of thinking that might go on about the appropriateness of the symbolic, expressive qualities of the action.

Hursthouse’s view is that expressions are actions but not done with a purpose. My point is that this overlooks an important way in which behaviour can relate to inner states. This relation is taken up when we talk of our giving expression to certain emotions. In giving expression to an emotion we select some form of expression rather than another as being in some way fitting or satisfying. So my response is that expressive acts are done with a purpose, and that that purpose is, as with the funeral case, to mark or acknowledge or do justice to some extraordinary turn of events, or some extraordinary feature of our situation. We do that by creating or ‘coining’ an action of expressive power. However, the act of acknowledging or marking is not done for some further purpose. And this, I claim, is what gives rise to the impression that expressive acts are a distinctive category – that they cannot be done as a means to a further end.

Nevertheless, it is natural to think that there is a gap between the funeral case and the spontaneous expressions of emotion Hursthouse mentions. In the latter case, there may be no prior deliberation or planning or selection; indeed, the actions may be done in the presence of

strong emotion that might make at least some types of clear thought difficult – though as Raz points out, sometimes strong emotion brings with it a high degree of self-control rather than a weakening: Raz 1999: 39). However, I doubt that this is a definitive reason to reject my account. Many actions are habitual and spontaneous but nevertheless reason-guided: many actions are intentional, or exhibit what Searle calls intention in action, without being preceded by any prior formation of an intention (Searle 1983); and intentions in action can be guided by an agent's sense of what counts in favour of the relevant actions. I don't have a full-blown account of habitual rational action to unveil in this paper. But I will now give a slightly more detailed defence of the application of the funeral model to spontaneous expression of emotion.

Recall that the guiding thought, on my account, is that this action is carried out to give form to, and do justice to, the person's sense of the situation, as it is presented by the emotion they are in the grip of. To make my account plausible, we would have to be able a) to see this action as a suitable vehicle to do justice to the way one sees one's situation in a fit of jealous rage, and b) to see the motivation of the expressive action as simply that of marking the person's urgent sense of the situation. Let's take a) first.

Take gouging out the eyes to start with. We should note first of all that the eyes are clearly not an arbitrary target. It is a picture, not just of any person, but of the rival in particular. The action taken is not simply that of crumpling the picture up, but rather is directed at the eyes. The eyes are not just the windows of the soul, but also, perhaps, something without which the rival could not have her beauty – so there is an element, not simply of maiming, but of disfiguring. Perhaps the rival is to be disfigured in order to make it more likely that the object of your affections will

choose you; or perhaps, that possibility already lost, it is in order to ensure that she is brought down to one's own miserable level. In his reading of this example, Peter Goldie suggests that we are acting out suppressed desires, desires transformed by their suppression on to the next most suitable object (Goldie 2000); but it seems unnecessary to ascribe to someone who engages in this action the genuine desire to do this to their rival. It would be enough if we could explain what makes the gouging of the eyes resonant and powerful for the person in the grip of jealousy as an externalisation of their complex emotional attitude: it would not follow that jealousy involved a genuine but suppressed desire to do it for real.

If we now turn to the case of ruffling the child's hair, we can see to start with that this is an action that one would only take to someone smaller, more junior, someone on whom one looks down – it is precisely the action of affectionately looking down. Placing the hand on the head in that way, caressing it, is a good way of capturing this attitude. It is also a well-meant invasion of personal space – ruffling the hair of an adult and stranger is a moderately serious breach of rules of personal distance and respect. So you only ruffle the hair of someone whose status doesn't preclude that kind of physical closeness. With these brief remarks we can perhaps start to see how the action might be intelligibly related to the complex intentional content of the emotion.

Finally, if we take the examples of jumping for joy, puffing oneself up with pride; and contrast them with the slumping behaviour we associated with grief or dejection. There is an important pattern of 'up' and 'down' here that seems to have resonance as a metaphor rather than a mere regularity in behaviour. 'Up' is the position of power and activity, of readiness, of open possibility; 'down' is its opposite, of resignation, passivity, inactivity. This is the symbolism that

we might see as underpinning our sense that such behaviour is, not just common, but appropriate. These are the reasons that might be seen as informing and guiding these expressive actions, actions through which we give form to the emotional state rather than merely manifesting it as a symptom.

In giving these examples, I am trying to show that expressive behaviour even in the spontaneous case is susceptible of a 'reading' that might show why it would be appropriate to select it as a fitting vehicle for that emotion if, as we were in the case of the funeral, one is in the business of deliberately selecting a vehicle for one's emotion.

If we turn to b) now, and ask whether it is plausible to think, in each of these cases, that the motivation for the action is not to bring about any further envisaged good beyond, as Wollheim says, the production of (in this case) an action in which one can recognise and see externalised the content of one's own attitude – what are we to say? The view I have developed here is plausible if the view of emotions on which it rests is plausible. Some emotions, I have claimed, are tied to our sense of the importance of things, making it the case that what has importance stands out, for its own sake. Marking our deep sense of things brings it about that these fleeting episodes resonate in our consciousness and take on a life more enduring than the mundane. The way the child strikes you at that moment, in its combination of sturdiness and fragility, makes you feel both lucky in the moment and already nostalgic for what will pass; the fact that things are going so exceptionally well gives you a sense of well-being and benevolent power such that all things seem possible; the constant nagging thought of the rival's supremacy and, in crucial respects, superiority. These emotions reflect, extend and animate our sense of what is important

in what goes on; the fact that the behaviour that expresses such emotions also has the role of marking that sense and making it resonate in the external is simply part of the same role.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this paper I have suggested a way to solve the apparent puzzle that Hursthouse sets about ‘arational actions.’ Hursthouse worries that there are actions that are intentional but not done for any reason, and which therefore have to be explained as having been done ‘out of emotion’ rather than for a purpose. My claim is that this conclusion relies on too narrow a view of the reasons for which actions can be performed. Many such actions, I claim, can be thought of as habitual and spontaneous versions of more deliberated actions such as that which I provide in my example of the funeral, acts that are carried out in some sense for their own sake, in order to honour or do justice to the gravity of the situation. More broadly, this response to Hursthouse raises questions about the relation between emotions and the action that expresses them. I have argued that the role of some emotions is to provide an individual with a sense of the extraordinary importance of certain events in their life, making those events stand out from the manifold, and that the behaviour that expresses those emotions can be seen as contributing to that role. I have claimed that behavioural expressions of such emotions require a dimension of expressive adequacy, even expressive power, and I suggest symbolism as a way of thinking about where such expressive power is to be found. The present investigation leaves many questions about this view unanswered. But I hope to have made a start on sketching the basis on which a neglected alternative in the literature on emotion and its expression could be defended.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This paper has been presented to audiences at Sheffield, Leeds and Tübingen, and to a workshop on emotion and expression organized by Catherine Abell and Joel Smith in Manchester. I would like to thank those who asked questions at these events. A number of people have also discussed the key ideas with me, and some have provided detailed comments on previous drafts. I am very grateful for their input. In particular I am grateful to Sabine Döring,

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