How and Why to Express the Emotions: A Taxonomy with Historical Illustrations

ABSTRACT

Recent writing on the expression of emotion has explored the idea that there is a symbolic dimension to many 'expressive actions.' In this paper, I aim to situate and better understand the 'symbolic expression' account by exploring its position in a framework of views from the history of philosophy about the place of emotion and action out of emotion in the good human life. I discuss a number of competing views that can be found in this tradition, ranging from irrationalism, through irenicism, self-externalization and cognitivism, through to the symbolist tradition itself. In looking specifically at the roots of symbolism, I depart from the common view that Aristotelianism is the central tradition, for us, of thinking about philosophy of the emotions. I believe that we can get a better grip on the source of these ideas by looking rather at how thinkers in the post-Kantian and Romantic tradition wrestled with the question of the freedom and rationality of behaviour out of emotion.

1. Introduction

Recently a number of philosophers writing about the expression of emotion have argued that there is a symbolic dimension to many 'expressive actions.' For instance, Peter Goldie has argued that:

> 'There is often some symbolic match or correspondence between the object of the emotion and the object towards which the expression of that emotion is directed … A relation of representation is an obvious one: the photo, the wax effigy, the cushion. I think we can also make use of an analogy with the tropes of synecdoche and metonymy to appreciate

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further possible relations. In synecdoche, the substitution is of part for whole or of whole for part …' (Goldie 2000, 30)

Discussing a case in which Jane gouges out the eyes from a picture of her rival, Joan, Goldie argues that we can see such actions as the symbolic function of a wish that Jane may have, even though she would not desire to act on it:

> 'The civilizing restraints on what an angry, hating person can do— ethical restraints perhaps, or knowledge of the force of the law—are just what makes Jane perfectly aware that she ought not to do bodily harm to Joan, thus leading her, on this occasion, to resort to an expressive action. The symbolic nature of the expression takes place as it does partly because the *literal* action, as it were, is not a realistic option.' (Goldie 2000, 29)

In a paper responding to Goldie's view, Sabine Döring has also argued for the symbolic nature of some expressions of emotion. She does so in order to claim that we can discriminate between appropriate and inappropriate expressions of emotion, and to explain what the basis of such discrimination is:

> 'Expressive actions are rational in so far as the agent has to distinguish appropriate expressions from inappropriate ones. This is particularly important in cases where the action symbolizes 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 the representation includes the target's import for the

subject. In the symbolic case, the rationality involved in expressive action consists of grasping the symbolic relations between emotional representations and their appropriate expressions.' (Döring 2003, 227)

Döring also deals with the Jane/Joan example, and argues that Goldie's view misses the fact the even the 'wish' literally to scratch out Joan's eyes is directed at an action that is already symbolic:

'Scratching out the eyes of a hated person is part of a certain culturally established construction of femininity. Though the literal action of scratching out the eyes of a hated person is not a realistic option in our culture, it is this action that actually symbolizes the representational content of Jane's hatred. It follows that if Jane had scratched out the eyes of the real Joan, what she did would still have been a symbol of her hatred, and as such hardly the action of a brute beast. Contrary to Goldie's view, both scratching out the eyes in a photo of the hated person and scratching out the eyes of the real person one hates are culturally established symbols of hatred.' (Döring 2003, 228)

In previous work, I have taken up the idea of a symbolic match or correspondence, elaborating Döring's view that fitting expressions of emotion symbolize the representational content of an emotion. I have argued that the performance of symbolic action out of emotion might be its own end by virtue of the fact that it honours or does justice to the situation to which it is directed:

'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.' (Bennett 2016, 85)

As Döring suggests, the 'symbolic expression' position shows how it might be possible to see expressive action as rational and appropriate.[1] As such it represents an alternative to two influential positions that would deny that action out of emotion can be rational as such: on the one hand, a psychological determinism that sees expressive behaviour as a more or less automatic hard-wired response making the organism action-ready in ways that tend to be of benefit to it; and on the other hand, a social constructionism on which expressive behaviour is a set of learned 'scripts' the content of which is arbitrary from a rational point of view.

In this paper I aim to situate and better understand the 'symbolic expression' account by exploring its position in a framework of views from the history of philosophy about the place of emotion and action out of emotion in the good human life. In thus exploring the roots of the 'symbolic expression'

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[1] For a further argument along these lines, see Bennett 2021.

approach, however, I depart from the common view that Aristotelianism is the central tradition, for contemporary philosophy, of thinking about rationalism in respect to the emotions. I believe that we can get a better grip on the source of these ideas by looking rather at how thinkers in the post-Kantian and Romantic tradition wrestled with the question of the freedom and rationality of behaviour out of emotion. I do not deny the relevance of Aristotle altogether, of course – this would be a mistake, in part because a number of the thinkers that I will looking at self-consciously took the Greeks as a model in their attempts to overcome the dichotomy of reason and emotion. Although the Aristotelian tradition is clearly an important source for anyone interested in the emotions, I believe that we often read that tradition through the lens of more recent debates, and in particular post-Kantian debates about the value of Enlightenment reason, and the possibility of freedom as a property, not simply of noumenal selves but of fully embodied, emotional beings. The turn towards neo-Aristotelianism associated with contemporary virtue ethics, with its protest against formalisms in consequentialism and deontology, has clear roots in Romanticism and post-Kantianism; and key thinkers involved in this turn, such as John McDowell, Iris Murdoch, Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre and Bernard Williams, are influenced by themes in post-Kantian philosophy – whether through the influence of the existentialists or Hegel – and can be thought of as seeking to forge a form of rationalism that gives the emotions a proper place. It is the roots of protest against 'a rationalistic conception of rationality,' as filtered down to the proponents of the 'symbolic expression' view, that we are interested in exploring here.

2. Why express the emotions?

In a lecture given in 1943, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, who had been one of the key figures in the Weimar Bauhaus, ventured a distinctive opinion on the value of expressing emotion in the course of a critical assessment of the state of modern society.

'People are taught that the best way of living is to buy other people's energy, to use other people's skill. In other words, a dangerous metropolitan dogma [has] developed that the different subject matters are best handled by experts and no one should violate the borders of his specialized work or profession.' (Moholy-Nagy 1970, 20)

However, Moholy-Nagy's critique was not based on a naïve rejection of the progress achieved by modern society. On the topic of industrialization, he says in the same lecture, 'I am not speaking against the machine or the machine age. The machine is a splendid invention and will form the new basis for a more developed human society.' This positive attitude towards modern techniques and materials is borne out in his enthusiastic adoption, as an artist (and like many of the other Bauhaus artists who sought to reconcile the Arts and Crafts program with enthusiasm for industrialization), of new techniques such as photography, and new artistic forms that take industrial processes as their inspiration. Furthermore, it does not seem to be the division of labour as such that concerns Moholy-Nagy, but rather our willingness to allow specialization to extend into what we might call our expressive life:

'Through the division of labour and the mechanized methods not only the production of daily necessities and goods has passed into the hands of specialists but almost every outlet for the emotional life as well. Today the artist-specialists have to provide for emotions . . . The sad consequence is that the biological interest in everything within the spheres of human existence becomes suffocated by the tinsel of a seemingly easy-going life. Man, who has biologically the ability to comprehend the world with the entirety of his abilities, to conceive and express himself through different media, the word, tone, colour, etc., agrees voluntarily to the amputation of these most valuable potentialities.' (Moholy-Nagy 1970, 20-1)

As a political philosophy, the position expressed here shows an interesting mixture of influences. On the one hand there is an almost Nietzschean complaint about the mediocrity of much of modern life. On the other hand, this is combined with an egalitarian belief in the potential of each person to 'comprehend the world with the entirety of their abilities' if only they could cast off their present shackles. Hence Moholy-Nagy's view seems to be a kind of perfectionism without elitism: his political project gives pride of place to the fulfilment of the human good, but there is no sign that the attainment of such perfection in some could compensate for the impoverishment of others. His is a manifesto for the universalization and democratization of the production of art, or what I would rather call expressive activity generally; overcoming this division of labour holds out the progressive promise of the liberation of these currently thwarted faculties in a new form of society. As he concludes:

'*Feeling and thinking and their expression in any media belong to the normal living standard of man*; to live without them means starvation of the intellectual and emotional side of life as missing food means starvation of the body. The non-verbalized expression of feeling is what we may call art, but not art on a pedestal. *Art is a community matter transcending the limitations of specialization*. It is the most intimate language of the senses, indispensable for the individual in society.'
(Moholy-Nagy 1970, 21)

I take it that the view Moholy-Nagy advocates is prima facie an attractive one, and that it has had, and continues to have, influential advocates. On Moholy-Nagy's view, the expression of emotion is a conscious, purposive and perhaps sustained process, in which we do not merely unintentionally betray but intentionally *give expression to* our emotions.

Two initial points are important to observe about his position. First of all, Moholy-Nagy appears to connect engagement in expressive activity with achieving full understanding – understanding with the integrated entirety of one's cognitive faculties. Voluntarily undergoing the amputation of one's potential for expressive activity leads to an impoverished ability to comprehend the world. And secondly, he takes it that expressive activity involves producing something with a determinate form in a particular medium. The reason for drawing attention to these two points is that they in turn raise three questions that we will deal with as we go on. Firstly, there is a question about the range of faculties that is involved in 'full' understanding, and why such understanding should be considered more adequate than an understanding that does not

involve expression. This question becomes sharper if we take emotion to be part of the range of faculties involved in cognition and expression: why is understanding that involves the emotions more adequate than that which does not? Secondly, we have a question about the nature of the relation between what is to be expressed – the cognition – and its expression in a given medium. Is there some relation of fittingness or appropriateness that holds between the former and the latter, such that expressive activity can succeed or fail, that it can be a craft or an activity that must be learned and refined? Such seems to be Moholy-Nagy's supposition at any rate. Thirdly, why does human life go better when human beings are able to engage in expressive activity? The answer to this third question seems to have something to do with the distinctive sort of cognitive activity that is involved in expressive activity. But why does understanding the world better and expressing that understanding in some medium make a person better off?

I draw attention to Moholy-Nagy's view because it appears to be a version of rationalism about expression that has some clear affinities with the 'symbolic expression' account advocated by Goldie, Döring and myself. Having his view in mind helps put some flesh on the bare bones of this position as we presented it above. It also makes it clear that what goes for art might go for expressive activity generally.[2] Moholy-Nagy would not be sympathetic to the idea that there is a difference in kind between art and other forms of expression: for him, the two are continuous; and we could see that which we designate formally as art as

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[2] Indeed, Döring and I both argue explicitly for a commonality between art and emotional expression. For Döring, '[t]he most sophisticated way of symbolically expressing an emotion's representational content is achieved in art' (Döring 2003, 228).

growing out of the latter. Having sketched his view as a target that we wish to understand in better situating the 'symbolic expression' view, the next section seeks to locate it within a taxonomy of strands in post-Kantian thought about emotion and expression.

3. Expressive needs: a conceptual map with historical illustrations

We now turn to a range of views according to which we might have expressive needs. To anticipate, the traditions we will be looking at are as follows:

- The view that the expression of emotion is valuable precisely because it allows for irrationality (irrationalism)

- The view that the expression of emotion is valuable because it is in action from emotion that we achieve a certain psychological harmony (irenicism)

- The view that the expression of emotion is valuable because it is essential to the process by which one becomes fully a self (self-externalization)

- The view that the expression of emotion is valuable because it is part of the process by which emotions provide us with access to knowledge we would not otherwise have had (cognitivism)

- The view that the expression of emotion is valuable because it involves the creation of symbolic forms of those emotions (symbolism)

This paper is of course not the place to make a full evaluation of these different traditions. However, we can make a few quick points before we look at

them in more detail. These traditions involve differing understandings, not just of the role of emotion in the good human life, but also of the nature of emotion itself, and its relation to reason and the will. We can usefully draw attention to the following axes of differentiation:

Conception of emotion – What is the conception of emotion to be expressed? Is it essentially separate from reason? Or is it possible that emotion might be at least in part shaped by reason? Does it see action out of emotion as an interruption of our agency or continuous with it?

Expression and self-control – Are the actions one undertakes in expressing one's emotions under our rational control, or is the expression of emotion necessarily characterized by a loss of self-control?

Giving external form to emotion – What does the relation of expression consist in? Does it consist in freely exercising intelligence to give external form to an inner state, or merely letting oneself go to something whose form is already determined – e.g. by nature?

Expression and purpose – Are the actions one undertakes in giving expression to the emotions deliberately chosen with that end in mind? Or with some other purpose?

First of all, we can see that, as Döring suggests, a symbolic theory of expressive action is going to be hampered if it assumes an entirely non-cognitive

conception of the emotions, and an entirely non-cognitive link between emotion and expression. Although there are reactions and affects that we term 'expressions of emotion,' and which are automatic and not subject to reasoning and cognitive states, the higher emotions – those that are products of culture and not just biology – seem to be partly constituted by cognitive states, and their expression is more of a complex matter than a simple reflex. This in turn requires a conception on which the distinction between reason and emotion is not unbridgeable.

Secondly, the symbolic view needs to rule out views that require us to accept that expressive behaviour necessarily involves some loss of self-control. If artistic activity can be expressive of emotion, it is clear that this involves long-term goals and planning in order to carry out the expressive goal. But the same goes for many smaller-scale expressive actions. It may be unclear just why I kick the car when it has broken down and I need to get to the train station, but, given that I have the aim of kicking it, I carry that aim out in a controlled and accurate, albeit emotional, fashion.[3] It is true, however, that expressive action is such that it can often seem entirely spontaneous: as though something has taken over one's capacity for reflective thought and one responds to one's situation instantaneously and without deliberation. However, not all expressive activity is like this: sometimes we do deliberate about how to express what we feel, or indeed how to feel. Furthermore, we do not have to posit a loss of self-control in order to explain the phenomenon of non-deliberated action. Such action can come about, for instance, in episodes of what psychologists call 'flow,' for

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[3] Cf. the discussion of control in expressive action in Hursthouse 1991 and Raz 1999.

instance in highly skilled activity, or in responding to urgent situations (Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

Thirdly, we should also reject views of expressive behaviour that see emotions as states of feeling or strong psychological forces that tend to force their way out into behaviour, and where the only role reason has to play is at the level of will-power. But if that is correct then perhaps we have no reason to assume that the form of expressive action is solely determined by natural biological tendencies, rather than being open for determination by free, creative intelligence. As Döring suggests, we should look at cultural and individual variation in expressive action. Expressive action is one place in which cultures and individuals show – and constitute – their character. This suggests that expressive action is at least partly influenced by beliefs or perceptions about appropriate forms of expression, and that inculcation into a culture provides us with broad types or narratives regarding such forms that we adapt and vary in the light of individual circumstance, temperament and style.

If this is accepted then we should conclude that, at least from the point of view of the 'symbolic expression' view, there is likely to be much in the value of expressive behaviour that the tradition represented by irrationalism does not capture. It is for this reason, and by way of beginning the search for an alternative, that we looked at Moholy-Nagy's view. This is not a definitive rejection of the irrationalist tradition, since it is not a definitive rejection of the non-cognitive view of emotion that this tradition assumes. It is rather to say that, at least for many and perhaps the most phenomenologically interesting of the emotions, the irrationalist tradition is unlikely to be the whole story. With these

brief remarks in mind, we can now turn to a more detailed look at the various traditions listed above.

(i) *Irrationalism*

We have already given some reasons for wariness about the *irrationalist* tradition, but there is no doubt that it is an important part of the reaction against Enlightenment models of reason. This tradition takes it that emotions are essentially non-rational, but holds that there is value in the expression of emotion because there is value in this freedom from the constraints of reason. Here the idea is that the expression of emotion consists in letting oneself go and revelling in the release from rational constraint. This view sees the self as made up of essentially separate and non-communicating faculties of reason and emotion, and where reason seeks to control the tendencies of the emotional, thus attempting to ensure that behaviour conforms to norms and constraints. It sees the value of emotional expression as an escape from that controlling rational self into a realm free from rules and constraints. On this irrationalist conception, the emotions are purely non-rational, but are valuable nevertheless, since rational activities are emphatically not what life is all about. Irrationalist accounts might emphasize the Dionysian (Nietzsche 1999), or the unconscious – the Romantic preoccupation with nightmares, darkness (Novalis 1800), and its particular understanding of the Gothic, are in focus here; surrealism could also be seen as an off-shoot of this tradition (Löwy and R. Sayre 2001, Ch. 6). Furthermore, in developments of this tradition in which reason comes to be identified with the disciplinary structures of normalizing forms of modern society, the emotions, as a source of freedom from reason, might be viewed as the sole remaining source

of human authenticity.[4] However, I take it that, if the view taken by Moholy-Nagy is influenced by Romanticism and post-Kantianism, it is not by this irrationalist strand. Moholy's rationalism is not a formalism, but it is a rationalism nonetheless: for him expressive activity is connected with 'comprehension' of the world and not simply escape from it.

(ii) *Irenicism*

The *irenic* tradition is again premised on some view of emotion and reason as separate faculties, and hence sees emotions as non-rational states. However, this view regards the two faculties as having to come to some accommodation. It therefore sees the value of emotional expression as lying in the restoration or achievement of psychological balance or harmony. I want to distinguish two importantly different versions of this view. First of all, there is the *catharsis* view that the (controlled) expression of emotion is important because it allows for the release of pent-up psychological forces that would otherwise come out in more damaging ways. The idea of emotional expression as *venting* is central to this tradition. Psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, insofar as they conceive of repressed emotions that emerge in otherwise inexplicable behavioural symptoms, involve this conception.[5] This view rests on what we might, adapting from John McDowell, call a 'hydraulic' conception of emotion (McDowell 1999).[6] That is, it sees the emotions as psychological forces residing under the surface of norm-governed behaviour, threatening to spill over, and whose effect on behaviour we can only seek to mitigate. The harmony that this

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[4] See for instance the early work of Michel Foucault (Foucault 1965).
[5] See e.g. the discussion of the case of Anna O in (Freud 1961).
[6] See also (Solomon 2003).

view seeks is perhaps best construed as either freedom from emotional distress (i.e. the distress of unsatisfied emotions) or long-term rational control (since if emotions are not given an overt outlet they may come out in underhand ways). Again, however, this does not seem to be the view that underpins Moholy-Nagy's position. Although a harmony of a sort is suggested by the idea of comprehending the world 'with the whole range of one's faculties' and thereby producing a coherent product, he does not seem to envisage that product as being comparable to letting off steam, so to speak.

A more promising avenue for understanding this kind of harmony is to be found in the quite different instantiation of this irenic tradition provided by Schiller. Schiller also accepts a dualism of reason and emotion (or sensibility), but his argument is that these two faculties must achieve a genuine marriage of equals. On Schiller's view, the harmony we seek by expressing the emotions is freedom – where freedom consists in allowing the different parts of our nature coordinated free play where neither restricts or interferes with the other (Schiller 2005). Schiller accepts what he takes to be the Kantian view that true freedom cannot be achieved if reason is hampered in its operations by conflicting desire and emotion; but he adds that where reason merely imposes itself on feeling there is equally well a loss in freedom. In both cases, one of one's faculties is acting under constraint rather than following its own nature. The ideal case of freedom, on this Schillerian view, is therefore that in which both reason and sensibility obey their own laws, but where the behaviour that this requires is the same for both, and hence the two faculties can be satisfied. This is the state that Schiller suggestively calls the 'play-drive' [Spieltrieb] and the

'aesthetic condition' (Schiller 1982).[7] On this view, harmony is not, as with the cathartic view, a normal state which has to be maintained in the face of disruptions, and where the expression of emotion is a means to that end; rather it is a personal and perhaps cultural achievement. Applied to the expression of emotion, this view suggests that it is in the free play of the expression of emotion, where we spontaneously act in ways that we both believe and feel to be appropriate, that we are most free and most ourselves.

(iii) *Self-externalization*

The third tradition is what we might call the *self-externalization* tradition. Schiller provides a bridge to this tradition since, at least on one of its branches, it is concerned with the achievement of genuine freedom and selfhood. However, the hallmark of this tradition is not a concern with internal harmony as it was with Schiller, but rather with external recognition. The first branch of this tradition I would like to characterize as a concern with *authentic self-disclosure*. We can see this, perhaps, in Rousseau's concern in the *Confessions* to present an unvarnished picture of himself as he really is.[8] The question for this tradition is why it is important to reveal oneself to others. It is not enough simply to be oneself and to know oneself, but also to reveal oneself. The answer presumably has something to do with the way in which one's revelation will be perceived. Thus, the idea seems to have something to do with realizing oneself as sincere or authentic, rather than repressing one's true nature for the sake of the social

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[7] For some discussion, see (Beiser 2005).
[8] Cf. the famous opening of the Confessions: 'I am resolved on an undertaking that has not model and will have no imitator. I want to show my fellow-men a man in all the truth of nature; and this man is to be myself' (Rousseau 2000).

conventions and manners and appearances that Rousseau had criticized in the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (Rousseau 1997).

The first branch of this tradition holds that, if one has to appear to others, one ought to do so authentically: the honest expression of emotion is an important part of that. This gives a conditional value to the authentic expression of the self in the world – if one has to appear, appear truthfully. However, if we are seeking to understand what underpins Moholy-Nagy's view, it seems that the idea of authentic self-disclosure is not quite it. This is because Moholy-Nagy takes it that the self is impoverished or starved if it is deprived of opportunities for self-externalization, and this seems to suggest that the value of finding an external form for one's attitudes is not merely conditional. To capture this aspect of Moholy's view, we need to turn to a second branch of this tradition. According to this second branch self-externalization has unconditional value because it involves the achievement or creation of a state of affairs in which the self can recognize itself in the world. The point of externalizing the inner, on this view, is to create at least part of the world that resembles or is otherwise connected to those inner states, and in which the possessor of those inner states can therefore feel 'at home.' Only in these conditions is the self really free – or, perhaps, really a self. Hence we express our emotions in order to create something lasting in the world in which we can recognize, affirm and be reminded of that mental state.

As may already be obvious, the main representative of this second branch of the self-externalization tradition that I have in mind is Hegel. Allen Wood claims that the starting point of Hegel's ethical thought is 'the conception of a certain self to be exercised and actualized, to be embodied and expressed in action' (Wood 1990, 31). On Wood's reading, Hegel thinks that true freedom or

self-externalization is to be achieved, not by insulating one's rational self from external sources of determination, but rather by assimilating it: 'True independence in relation to an other is achieved rather by struggling with otherness, overcoming it, and making it our own' (Wood 1990, 45). Hence the supreme importance to Hegel's practical philosophy of the notion of freedom as 'Beisichselbstsein in einem Anderen' ('being with oneself in the other'). However, a further aspect to this self-actualization is not simply that the self thereby 'strip[s] the external world of its inflexible foreignness, and … enjoy[s] in the shape of things only an externalization of himself' (Hegel 1975, 31).[9] It is also that through the process of externalization and expression the self thereby defines and clarifies its own nature to itself. A passage in Hegel's *Aesthetics* makes this clear:

> 'The universal need for expression in art, that is to say, is man's rational impulse to lift the inner and outer world into his spiritual consciousness, as an object in which he recognizes again his own self. The need for this spiritual freedom he satisfies, on the one hand, by making what is within him explicit to himself, but correspondingly by giving outward reality to this his explicit self, and thus in this duplication of himself, by bringing what is in him into sight and knowledge for himself and others. This is the free rationality of man in which all acting and knowing, as well as art too, have their basis and necessary origin.' (Hegel 1974, 31-2)

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[9] This is also an important part of what, according to Hegel, consciousness learns from the master/slave dialectic. See the remarks on the value of work in (Hegel 1997, §§195-6). For the claim that this is the source of the Hegelian doctrine of recognition, see (Kojeve 1969).

The idea of self-externalization therefore has a number of sides, and hence can presumably be engaged in for a number of reasons: to overcome the otherness of the external world; to affirm or recognize one's inner states, and to allow others to recognize them; to clarify or to understand those states. These give us a range of further reasons for engaging in the expression of those states and attitudes.

Now the Hegelian view of expression is not in the first instance a view about the importance of the expression of emotion in particular; it concerns inner states or attitudes or conceptions more generally. I think it can be adapted to give a plausible answer to our question 'Why express emotion?' – namely that in doing so one adapts the world in such a way as to externalize the way one feels – but in doing so we would be seeing expression of emotion as a sub-set of a wider class of expressive actions. The key thing, on this reading, would be to explain what it is for an action to have *expressive power* in virtue of being a telling externalization of some attitude; an apt embodiment of that attitude in the medium of action or behaviour; a gesture – or series of gestures – that seems to capture and sum up the way we feel. Once we have some grasp on that idea we will be able to explain how it might be satisfying to use that expressive vehicle when in the grip of an emotional state: to adapt that vehicle for the purposes of self-expression. However, this raises a general question about this idea of expression as self-externalization. We have talked about expressive 'vehicle' being a 'telling' – or, as we might say, fitting – externalization of some attitude. In the sense in which I mean it, this notion of 'fitting vehicle' is not an arbitrary one. It might be hard to say what they are, but presumably when a vehicle 'feels right' or *is* right, it is because it obeys *some* norms or standards in virtue of which this

particular vehicle is fitting (whereas with slight variations it would have been inadequate to its expressive role). Presumably self-externalization is subject to some similar criterion of adequacy. What it is for some object or state of affairs to represent an externalization of an attitude, such that it can recognize itself in it and feel at home with it, cannot be an arbitrary matter. It is essential to Hegel's idea that there is something here that consists in eventually getting it right. But how should we conceive of rightness or fittingness in this sense – what are the criteria of adequate self-externalization? This might be a matter of evolving understanding, of course, as we attempt to externalize our attitudes, fail, improve, and therefore gain a deeper understanding of what kind of thing it is that we are looking for. But from the vantage point that we have reached thus far, can we say anything about what kind of principles or standards the process of self-externalization obeys? We return to this theme below when we discuss the idea of symbolism.

(iv) *Cognitivism*

Having distinguished these alternatives, we can now turn to the *cognitivist* tradition regarding the expression of emotion. Moholy-Nagy clearly appeals to this tradition to the extent that he makes comprehension of the world central to expressive activity, and claims that this is lost or amputated in the modern world. The key idea on this tradition is that it is through the emotions and expressive activity that we gain epistemic access to something we would not otherwise have had – so that it is through emotion and expressive activity that

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we gain a distinctive kind of knowledge.[10] Again, however, we must make some distinctions. One strand of the cognitivist tradition combines with *irrationalism* to give us *mysticism*: that is, the view that there is a mode of epistemic access to underlying reality that is genuinely non-rational and which can only come about through emotion (for instance, in sexual love; or emotional communion with God; or in the heights of bacchanalian passion or narcotic-fuelled frenzy). On mysticism, the knowing must somehow be non-rational (non-inferential, non-propositional, for instance): this view is not to be confused with something more amenable to rational cognitivism, which is that passion can quicken the senses and the imagination.

Another strand of the cognitivist tradition combines with *self-externalization* to give us the Hegelian view that expression is essential for self-knowledge. If this view is restricted to the expression of emotion, we get a claim that is distinctive of Collingwood's theory of art: that the point of the expressing our emotions (which is what, on Collingwood's view, art consists in) is that it is only thereby that we find out which emotions we are actually experiencing (Collingwood 1958). On the other hand, if one takes it that, for Collingwood, emotions are intentional states, and that they can have a cognitive component, then, in discovering what emotion one is experiencing, one is really discovering what one thinks about the situation that the emotion is about – and this discovery can be harder to separate into self-knowledge and knowledge of the situation itself.

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[10] For recent discussions of such claims, see (Teroni and Deonna 2011) and (Tappolet 2017).

The strand of the cognitivist tradition that Moholy-Nagy seems to occupy sees emotions and expressive activity as essential aspects of a human being's fully understanding her situation – 'comprehend[ing] the world with the entirety of his abilities.' On this view emotion and expressive activity is in some way part of reason rather than standing opposed to it: it complements and in some way extends the more formal, purely intellectual modes of understanding.[11] It might be thought that this cognitivist view is under-represented in literature and art of the Romantic and expressionist period. But we can see at least a germ of it in what Wordsworth has to say about the proper state of mind of the poet:

'The ability to observe with accuracy things as they are in themselves, and with fidelity to describe them, unmodified by any passion or feeling existing in the mind of the describer … though indispensable to a Poet, is one which he employs only in submission to necessity, and never for a continuance of time: as its exercise supposes all the higher qualities of the mind to be passive, and in a state of subjection to external objects.'[12]

On this view, cognition of things merely as they are in themselves is all very well, but it is in the end inadequate because it fails to bring the 'higher qualities of mind' to bear on objects and events in the way that poetry can. What Wordsworth means here all depends on what he has in mind by 'the higher qualities of the mind', and whether receptiveness by those qualities distorts or extends 'accurate' knowledge of things as they are in themselves. But on the face

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[11] A source for this view, which sees expression as the culmination, not of self-knowledge, but of a different, intuitive (non-propositional) form of knowledge about the world, is (Croce 1992).
[12] Wordsworth, quoted from the Preface of his *Poems* (1815) in (Abrams 1953, 53).

of it his view seems to be that a grasp of the world that stems from a synthesis of various faculties, including the 'higher' ones, will be more adequate epistemically than one that is based on mere empiricism. I take it that his view sounds very much like that which underlies Moholy-Nagy's complaint that human beings have the capacity to comprehend the world with the full range of their faculties, but impoverish themselves by leaving emotional understanding and expression to artist-specialists. This suggestion – which echoes the Romantic protest against the Enlightenment that the model and language of the natural sciences is not appropriate for all types of inquiry, and that there are some things that will simply not be discoverable by the empirical method – raises the question of what is to be gained in using the whole range of faculties to comprehend the world.

One answer to this question takes us back to the themes we have just been discussing in the section on self-externalization. The idea we came across there was that there are determinate ways in which to externalize attitudes, such that we can see objects or actions embodying those attitudes in various media. If such a thing is possible then one thing that the expression of the emotion might bring us to see is what *this* particular emotion looks like in *this* particular medium. Or more generally, it might be argued that it is through expressive activity that we come to see how our inner states may, as Goldie suggests *correspond* to features of the external world, and to see the external world as echoing those features – perhaps even to see those attitudes *in* features of the external world (Wollheim 1970, 47; see also Bennett 2016). Expressive activity creates such correspondences, then, but it also sensitizes us to them. In doing so it reveals aspects of reality that we would have missed had we amputated our capacity for such activity.

This line of thought suggests an interesting answer to the question of why, on this cognitivist view, we *express* our emotions. Unlike the hydraulic view, the cognitive view of the emotions does not see emotions as psychological forces that come ready-formed with regard to their influence on our behaviour. The process of expression, on this view, is the externalization of a cognitive state. But we might think it is not obvious why that cognitive state has to be externalized – as Moholy-Nagy seems to assume in arguing that we impoverish our lives if we don't express our emotions. If emotions are belief-like to the extent that they are cognitive, we might ask why they should have an expressive influence on behaviour at all. Of course, beliefs do influence behaviour – for instance, by *informing* it. But whatever is meant by the *expression* of cognitive-emotional states in action, it is something more direct than merely informing. So it might seem that the most obvious way in which the cognitivist tradition sees the expression of emotion is in line with the way in which thought is expressed in language – expression can help us define and articulate the nature our emotions; or it can help us communicate them (e.g. Tolstoy 1995). However, if we were to combine the insights of the cognitivist and the self-externalization traditions, as suggested above, we might think that the reason to express the emotions can be more than simply communication or clarification: it can also in part be to create meaningful connections between one's attitudes and features of the world, in order thereby to affirm the importance of one's attitudes; and hence to create a kind of permanence, or at least enduring quality, for certain of one's attitudes that lifts them out of the buzzing multiplicity of one's mental life and marks them out as special in some way. As Wollheim puts it:

'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)

This interweaving of cognitivism also has the benefit of adding something important to the self-externalization tradition. As we have talked about it so far, self-externalization has been understood as the process of externalizing one's attitudes, emotions, feelings; and it might have seemed as though we do this because we are moved by the importance of those states. However, this thought can be understood in two different ways. On the one hand, one might be moved by the importance of *the state itself* (or *the fact that one has that state*); or on the other hand one might be moved by the importance of *the object of that state*. The interweaving of cognitivism with self-externalization suggests the latter. It is the importance of the objects of our cognitive states that we attempt to embody in our expressive activity: as Moholy-Nagy says, it is *the world* that we attempt to comprehend with the entirety of our faculties by creating objects of expressive power that externalize the content of our intentionally directed attitudes.

(v) *Symbolism*

We have been looking for a way of understanding expressions of emotion that could be an alternative to the non-cognitivist idea that expressive behaviour is simply an automatic reflex that betrays the presence of some mental state, or a socially constructed 'script,' and which could therefore point us in the direction of the 'symbolic expression' account. In our search for this alternative, we have been following up on some remarks of Moholy-Nagy's, and this has taken us into a brief examination of some themes in Romantic and post-Kantian understandings of emotion and its expression. Three themes have been particularly important: first, the idea that we derived from irenicism that the expression of emotion can be valuable because it involves an integrated sense of self, or can coherently and simultaneously appear satisfying to a range of faculties; secondly, the idea that the expression of emotion can embody or externalize mental states, or perhaps a range of states; and thirdly, that emotion and its expression can help us to grasp aspects of the world that would elude our understanding if we lacked emotional capacities. We found that these themes could be integrated to give us the idea that expressions of the emotions can help to enrich our experience of the world, and to deepen, communicate and affirm our understanding of it by externalizing it in external objects.

However, if this has given us the beginnings of an answer to the question of why life is impoverished if one is denied the chance to express one's emotions, we do not yet have a grasp on the kinds of rational considerations by which we might be guided in expressing our emotions. If our aim were solely to communicate the content of our emotions then perhaps the answer to our

question is simply instrumental: that we should do whatever is most likely, given the audience we have in mind, to get them to understand. However, if we also want expressions of emotions to have an affirmative role – to celebrate or deprecate those events of life that stand out as being particularly salient – this suggests that we need such expressions to have a language of their own, a language that is not purely conventional, or at least not purely instrumental. Expressions are not wholly and self-consciously shaped by the expresser's understanding of the expectations of their audience: thus we must come to some understanding of what it would mean for them to be shaped by *the matter they are about*. The form an expression takes is not wholly dictated by its audience's expectations, and rather depends on some criteria of 'fittingness' or 'expressive adequacy'. Furthermore, the purpose we have in expressing our emotions is often other than an attempt to communicate. Nevertheless, it is true that expressions of emotions – particularly those that are more than automatic symptoms of strong underlying feelings – have some sort of reference, and are *about* something. We have already deployed a key notion here in our discussion above: the idea of 'correspondences' between the expression and the object of the attitude being expressed. When Wollheim above talks about the famous nineteenth-century usage of 'correspondences' he has in mind the symbolist tradition of which Baudelaire's poem, 'Correspondences' is part. This poem deals with the synaesthetic idea of correspondences between sensory appearances in different sensory modalities. In the concluding stanza, Baudelaire states that we travel as if through a 'forest of symbols' that call to one another. In other words, as I understand this idea, objects and actions can resonate with perceptions, and therefore we can see those objects and actions as symbolising or embodying the

sense of those perceptions; thus when some of our experiences stand out as particularly salient, and we seek to affirm (celebrate or deprecate) the importance of those events, we can draw on these resonances in order to capture our perceptions in an external, publicly available form. In order to gain some better grasp of this idea of correspondences, it is to this symbolist tradition that we now turn.

A nice statement of the symbolist view is given by Mill in his essay, 'What Is Poetry?' The crucial point for our purposes comes out as he is distinguishing poetry from 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, 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)

Mill's distinction between poetry on the one hand (for which we can read 'symbolic expression,' in the sense in which we are interested in it here) and eloquence on the other shows the limitations of the view that we express emotion in order to communicate our inner states. If there is a 'symbolic'

element to the expression of emotion, this is not because it is aimed at an audience with the purpose of arousing their feeling and action in the way that eloquence is. However, it is not that Mill's view leaves the expression of emotion without any purpose. It is rather that the purpose that he ascribes to expressive behaviour – translating emotion into symbolic representations of those emotions in behaviour – sees the expression of emotion as in some sense its own end rather than a means to a further end in the way eloquence is.

Nevertheless, the symbolist view as stated by Mill doesn't yet give a good answer to our question of the basis of expressive needs. If we ask why we find it important to express our emotions, and we are told that expression is, in Mill's Wordsworthian phrase, 'feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude,' we might still ask why we find it important to engage in that activity. Why is the creation of symbols of inner states a final end? One suspicion might be that Mill is implicitly assuming what Moholy-Nagy calls the conception of 'art on a pedestal' – art for disinterested contemplation rather than art that is an ongoing responsiveness to the meaning of the events around us. Because such contemplation is an end in itself, on the pedestal conception, there is no reason to posit any further end for it. However, it is not clear that, if Moholy-Nagy is on to something, he can rely on that assumption. Fortunately, our previous discussion has given us the resources to explain why the expression of emotion, or the creation of symbols of our inner life might be a valuable thing in one's life: for instance, to communicate, or learn about the world, or create the world in our image, or to learn about oneself and one's inner states. Furthermore, there can be value in creating embodied representations of attitudes or situations in order

to lift them out of the buzzing multiplicity of ongoing events, and thereby to give them a special place in our mental life.

For the moment, it is worth noting that Mill's remarks do help to provide an answer to the question of what actions and objects have to be like in order to allow us to correspond to events: they have to be adequate as *symbols* of our feelings towards those events. However, Mill does not tell us what 'symbolization' involves, or help us to specify any of the criteria of adequacy for symbols. In order to develop an answer to such questions, we have to turn to a view of poetry that we know Mill found very influential (Mill 1987), which is that of Coleridge:

> 'What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind. The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone, and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination.' (Coleridge 2000, 319)

The first thing to say about this passage is that for Coleridge the expression of emotion in poetry has something like the effect that Schiller attributes to the play drive, that of bringing it about that the whole range of

human powers acts in unison. This is a point also made by Moholy-Nagy.

Secondly, Coleridge introduces the imagination as one of the distinctive faculties or powers that must be active in order for expression to work. And Coleridge has a particular view of how the imagination works, or what it is capable of, to which he alludes in this passage. He thinks of the imagination as having a power to find unity in diversity, to dissolve apparent opposites. For this reason, the imagination is one of those faculties that has a 'higher' degree of dignity and worth – it is particularly important, as we saw Wordsworth remarking earlier, how we experience the world when we experience it via the power of imagination and other faculties. It seems important for Coleridge that imagination is not a purely arbitrary power of combination or association of ideas – the kind of thing he associates with mere 'fancy.' Rather – and this is the third point – the imagination seems to operate according to determinate principles or laws, even though these may be hard to discern and state clearly.[13] As Coleridge puts it of his own learning about poetry:

> 'poetry, even that of the loftiest, and, seemingly, that of the wildest odes, had a logic of its own, as severe as that of science; and more difficult, because more subtle, and dependent on more, and more fugitive, causes. In the truly great poets … there is a reason assignable, not only for every word, but for the position of every word …' (Coleridge 2000, 159).

And he gives the following dictum: 'that whatever lines can be translated into other words of the same language, without diminution of their significance,

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[13]

either in sense, or association, or in any worthy feeling, are so far vicious in their diction' (Coleridge 2000, 167). These three points – that is, the unifying of the whole range of important human powers in the expression of emotion, the special role of the imagination amongst that range of powers, and the determinate laws that imagination must follow – can all be illustrated in the nature of the special thing that Coleridge thinks that the expression of emotion in poetry produces: the symbol.

Coleridge's account of the symbol seems to be best illustrated in a passage in his 'Lay Sermons.' In this passage he is arguing for the superiority of biblical stories over 'scientific' or academic history. His complaint that the latter is marred by 'the hollowness of abstractions' is contrasted his evident approval of the image- and story-rich Scriptural narrative as a vehicle of faith. The biblical stories, he says,

> 'are the living educts of the imagination; of that reconciliatory and
> mediatory power, which incorporating the reason in images of the sense,
> and organizing (as it were) the flux of the senses by the permanence and
> self-circling energies of the reason, gives birth to a system of symbols,
> harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths of which
> they are the conductors … It is among the miseries of the present age that
> it recognizes no medium between *literal* and *metaphorical*. Faith is either
> to be buried in the dead letter, or its name and honour usurped by a
> counterfeit product of the mechanical understanding, which in the
> blindness of self-complacency confounds symbols with allegories. Now an
> allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language

which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses; the

principal being even more worthless than its proxy, both alike

unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot. On the other hand a

symbol ... is characterized by a translucence of the special in the

individual or of the general in the especial or of the universal in the

general. Above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the

temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible;

and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that

unity of which it is the representative.' (Coleridge 2000, 660-1)

I don't think that we should be put off by Coleridge's Hegelianisms or his

talk of the eternal appearing in the temporal: it remains to be seen what this

view of expression is committed to, but it is not hard to imagine more

deflationary and less metaphysically ambitious ways of understanding his main

claims.[14] And we also don't need to be put off by his reference to Scripture: if

there is an interesting view of expressive adequacy here then it will be available

equally to believers and non-believers. For our purposes, I think we can draw

three points out of this account of a symbol. First of all, the symbol has a

distinctive formal structure. It is perhaps too easy to talk about this in terms of

an organic unity, as if that idea were clearer – but the idea is that elements of the

symbol are a meaningful whole, and have a particular reference as a result of

their specific arrangement. They thus have to be arranged in such a way that

each is necessary to its place; each is there for a reason to do with the effect of

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[14] For instance, as in Nelson Goodman's view, briefly considered below.

the whole, such that the effect of the whole could not be achieved except with precisely that arrangement; and that, furthermore, each element has an individual value by virtue of its place. Secondly, the symbol of course refers to something beyond itself: it symbolizes something. However, thirdly, it refers in a different way from that in which literal language or denotation refers. Denotation refers by virtue of a purely conventional scheme of reference that dictates which symbols line up with which referents. Symbols on the other hand have a more intimate relation to the referent – what Coleridge describes as symbols being 'consubstantial' with the truths to which they refer, or 'partaking in their reality' at the same time as 'rendering them intelligible.' This point chimes with what we said above about the non-instrumental and perhaps non-conventional way in which expressions of emotion refer: they do so, as Wollheim puts it, as *icons* rather than as conventional signs (Wollheim 1970, 48). In Peirce's semiotics, iconicity is a form of reference in which the signifier signifies by virtue of sharing some characteristics of the thing signified (Peirce 1998). In Goodman's theory, one thing refers to another either by denotation (in which case a conventional schema of reference is necessary) or by expression, and if the latter it does so by *metaphorically exemplifying* the thing in question (Goodman 1968).

If expressions of emotions were symbols, to summarize, they would have to be actions or objects that were in some way complete in themselves, or at any rate that exhibit a certain formal structure or unity involving a necessary relation between the parts; they would have to refer or symbolize something – not so much the emotion expressed, but rather to the object that the emotion is *about*; and they would have to refer not just conventionally but by in some way

participating in or embodying or metaphorically exemplifying the situation referred to. A vehicle for expression that meets these conditions could play a role in honouring or doing justice to the events it refers to because, by virtue of its economy, its imaginative connection to those events, and its capacity to highlight aspects of those events that are particularly important (in the way that metaphors highlight aspects of their objects) it is the kind of thing we can experience as *expressively powerful*.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have sought to better situate the view, put forward recently by a number of philosophers, that much action out of emotion has a symbolic form. In order to situate this view, we have looked at how it relates to a debate, in the post-Kantian and Romantic tradition, about the place of emotion and action out of emotion in the good human life. We have distinguished a number of traditions, ranging from irrationalism, through irenicism, self-externalization and cognitivism, through to the symbolist tradition. In bringing this framework together, the shape of a satisfactory account of action out of emotion as symbolic expression has started to emerge. We have seen that one role for the emotions has been thought to be in part their role in allowing us to catch on to ways in which the events of the world are important, and that the role of expressing the emotions can be to communicate, clarify, but also simply to mark the importance of events by symbolizing them in external form.

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