

# *THE EMOTIONS OF OTHERS*

## *Emotion, Expression, and Knowledge*

1. Philosophers have long puzzled over the so-called 'problem of other minds'. The problem can be stated in many ways. Here is one: in making a judgement about your thoughts, desires, and feelings, all I have to go on is your outward behaviour. I may see you reach for your glass and judge that you are thirsty. But this outward behaviour could, in principle, occur in the absence of such inner experience. That is, you could reach for your glass without really being thirsty. Since I only see behaviour which may, or may not, be the outer expression of an inner state, I can never really be sure of your inner experience, of how things are for you. And since the same can be said of all of your behaviour, I cannot be said to know anything about your inner life or even, more radically, that you have one. This is one way of seeing the force of the problem of other minds.

How should we respond to this? One initial thought is that we have moved too fast. Perhaps we have elided an important distinction here; the distinction, roughly, between those

aspects of our inner life that are, and those that are not, *expressed*. It may be that one reaches for one's glass because one is thirsty, but that reaching does not express one's thirst. Things are different, we might suppose, in the case of emotions. We don't just think of a smile as caused by joy, we think of it as *expressive* of joy. Expressions make emotion manifest. So the easy thought that, when facing another, all we see is the outer behaviour, has a less firm grip on our thinking here. And the same can be said for inner states such as pain that we also think of as made manifest in outwardly visible expressive behaviour. We can, perhaps, never see and so be certain of another's thoughts or desires, but we surely see, and so know, the joy in their smiles, the sadness in their downcast gaze, and the pain in their writhing limbs.

To this it may be responded that for any aspect of your behaviour that is the outer expression of an inner experience, there is a possible twin that expresses nothing. There is nothing in the behaviour itself that would allow an observer to distinguish the two. When you smile, then, it seems that I have no way to rule out the possibility that you are not really happy. But, surely, if I *know* that you are happy, I must be able to rule out the possibility that you are not. If one cannot rule out the possibility that something is false, surely one does not know it

to be true. In which case, in seeing your smile, *even if it is a genuine expression of joy*, I cannot be said to know that you are happy. And, as before, since this holds of all of your behaviour, I can know nothing of your inner life or, again, that you have one.

We do, however, have front row seats at the theatre of our own inner life. When I am filled with joy or grief I, at least ordinarily, know it. What's more, I know from my own case that when I am happy, I tend to smile; when angry, I scowl; and so on. Surely this gives me sufficient ground to suppose that, even if I cannot possess absolute certainty on the matter, it is a reasonable hypothesis that you are similarly happy when you smile, angry when you scowl, and so on. The 'possible twins' invoked above exist only in some far-flung corner of the philosophical imagination. Judgements about what we know in ordinary cases must not be beholden to such outlandish possibilities.

But are they really so far-fetched? Does one really need to travel beyond ordinary life to find some plausibility in the thought that a person's face can be a treacherous guide to their real feelings? The existence of everyday deception and guile suggests not. Again, we return to the thought that

knowledge requires us to rule out that the other is dissembling, and this is something that we seem constitutively unable to do.

2. Now that we are in the realm of empirical rather than philosophical possibilities the point is surely pertinent that there are visible differences between smiles that are faked and those that are genuinely expressive. The Duchenne smile is not possible, or at least is extremely difficult, to fake. Whilst it is true that we are often duped by others, the telltale signs of another's real emotional state are there to be seen if only we are sufficiently attentive and well versed in the relevant scientific knowledge of the emotions and their signature facial expressions. The most widely accepted scientific accounts of the emotions and their expressions identify a number of *basic* emotions—typically, sadness, joy, anger, fear, disgust, and surprise—each of which automatically triggers a universally recognised facial expression.

Of course, we don't all beam all the time when experiencing joy, and different cultures regulate their expressive behaviour in a rich variety of ways. But a universal core of automatic expression underpins this individual and cultural variation.

Certainly we can hide our joy from others, but something always escapes our attempt.

It seems, then, that given the admittedly contingent way in which human beings are built, there are many fewer knowledge-undermining possible explanations of another's facial behaviour than the sceptical philosophers would have believe.

3. A worry about this response to the sceptic arises though a consideration of artistic representations of expressions of emotion. Our opinion of the emotional state of some character in a painting or film is to a very large extent influenced by the context. The context in which we see someone, the people and objects with which we see them interacting, the place of their actions within the narrative, the genre of the piece, all help to make up our minds about the way they are feeling. The look on their face is, by comparison, insignificant. This is something often used to great effect in film where subtle emotional expression is often evoked through a careful use of cutting techniques and musical and other auditory cues.

It would be surprising to learn that real life social interaction is so different in this respect to artistic practice. Indeed, we do find a significant body of evidence supporting the claim that our everyday judgements of others' emotions are responsive to context in analogous ways. Of course, medium-specific techniques such as cutting and soundtrack cues play no role, but there is no doubt that our emotionally loaded interpretations of others depend a great deal on the perceived significance of the people and objects with which they interact. There is, perhaps, even something akin to genre in real life: in such 'set-piece' situations as courtrooms, lecture halls, and job interviews, a certain range of emotional responses is prescribed.

The worry is this: even if it is true that each of the basic emotions comes prepackaged with an automatic and visible signature facial expression, our *judgements* about others' emotion are responsive to a far broader range of factors than that. The question now is whether our judgements, contextually variable as they are, really do track the emotions of others. Perhaps knowledge of others' emotions is not impossible, but it may significantly more difficult to achieve than we ordinarily suppose.

4. It may be, however, that the sceptic is wrong to think that any significant analogy holds between real life expressions of emotion and their artistic representation. After all, artistic representations of emotion often rely on features that have no counterpart in ordinary expressions of emotion. For example, a film may convey a character's fear by means of non-diegetic music, and a picture may convey the happiness of one of the characters it depicts partly by using bright colours. Some such techniques may exploit resemblances to physiological features of emotion. For example, the music may express the character's fear because it resembles in pace the increased frequency of a frightened person's heartbeat. Others may rely on conventional correlations. For example, between bright colours and positive emotions, on the one hand, and dark colours and negative emotions, on the other.

Moreover, even when artworks represent emotional expressions solely by the manner in which they represent a character's face and body, the resultant representations often bear little resemblance to real life facial and bodily expressions of emotion, appearing grossly exaggerated in comparison to the latter. The techniques employed in the artistic representation of emotional expression may have been developed as a response to limitations to the representational

capacities of the various artistic media, and may not have any correlates in ordinary emotional expression.

5. Returning to non-artistic cases, even if one denies that non-emotional context plays a role in determining our responses to others' emotional expressions, there is evidence that non-emotional factors play a role in shaping ordinary emotional expressions. Our expressive behaviour is not simply the automatic outpouring of our inner emotional turmoil. Rather, facial expressions serve a communicative function. They are, if you like, non-verbal utterances. With our faces we express our opinion, invite someone to approach, warn another to back off. Far from the tight connection between emotion and expression sometimes suggested, and often naively assumed, expressions have evolved as a way of quickly communicating our intentions to those around us.

If this is correct, of course, then one might think that the observation of another's facial expressions can indeed give us knowledge of the contents of their mind, but it would be knowledge of their thoughts, desires, and intentions, rather than directly of their emotions. If someone smiles at me, I may come to know that they want me to approach. Further, it might seem plausible, as a hypothesis of commonsense, that



such states of mind will be correlated with emotional states themselves. For example, if a 'fear face' is in fact a request that others come to one's aid, it is surely not unreasonable to suppose that such a hope be correlated with, precisely, fear. In which case, a communicative account of facial expression may, after all, allow for knowledge of others' emotions, albeit *via* this indirect route.

6. The question of whether emotional expression, either in the flesh or via representational media, is a reliable route to knowledge of others minds is not a simple one. An answer will rest on a subtle interplay of philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic issues, surely lending support to Darwin's opinion that "[o]ur present subject is very obscure, but, from its importance, must be discussed at some length; and it is always advisable to perceive clearly our ignorance."

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