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Session Expression and Meaning

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Comments about "Expression: acts, products and meaning", by Dorit Bar-On

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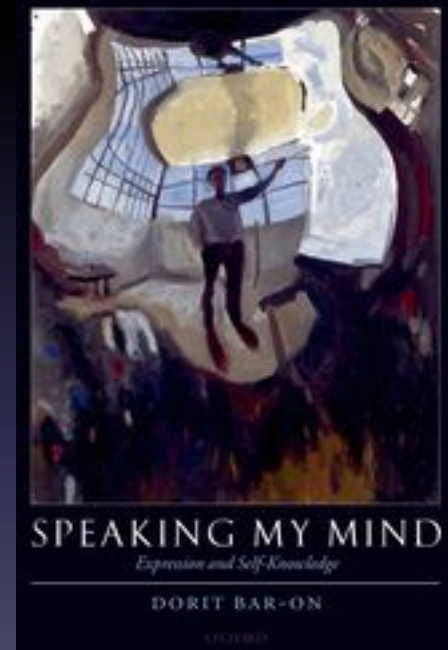
DBO's Neo-expressivism

A philosophical view initially aimed at accounting for avowals

- the special authority they enjoy in contrast with 1st person non-occurrent mental and non-mental and 3rd person mental ascriptions,
- their specific role in acquiring self-knowledge

Presently, DBO argues that the explanatory scope of Neo-Expressivism includes, in addition to First-person authority:

- the origins of meaning
- Motivational internalism



Outline

1. DBO's neo-expressivism: a summary
2. The dispositional and the agentic senses of 'act'
3. The evolution of meaning: non-conceptual content as meaning
4. DBO's case for an evolutionary continuity in communication
5. Concluding comments

DBO's neo-expressivism: a summary

Classical expressivism: emotivism

Championed by A.J. Ayer, is the view that judgments such as "I'm finding this disgusting" or "it's wrong" express a mental state of disgust or a moral evaluation in the very same way as "Yuk" or "boo" do: as a mere emotional, non-attributive response.

- **Problem 1:** lacking truth value, these expressions cannot be embedded, negated, or inserted in complex sentences ("Frege-Geach problem")

Classical expressivism: emotivism

- **Problem 2:** Dorit Bar-On's (2004) criticism is rather that
 - it entails that the mental terms that are used to express a mental state **cannot refer to objective mental or ethical properties,**
 - which in turn conflicts with the constraint that an expressive theory **should account for the semantic continuities between avowals and self-reports** (Bar-On, 2004, 236 sq).

DBO's proposal

Avowals both

- express the mental state that they apparently ascribe
- are truth-evaluable judgments.

Core idea based on of Sellars (1969)

Distinguish three senses of expression, as applied to

1. an act (a-expression: a person expresses her state by intentionally doing A)
2. an utterance (s-expression: a sentence expresses a proposition by being a conventional representation for it),
3. a causal link (c-expression: an utterance is caused by a mental state).

The proposed solution

- **As an act**, "an expression gives direct vent to the state that the sentence produced self-ascribes".
- **As a product**, the sentence s-expresses a truth-evaluable, propositional, self-ascription (truth, however, needs to be analyzed in a deflationary way).

The proposed solution

- A subject *uses* language to a-express a motivational attitude; the s-expressed sentence has a given truth value in virtue of its semantic structure.
- In particular, ethical claims can a-express motivational states, and s-express truth-evaluable propositions.

Question 1: The dispositional and the agentive
senses of 'act'

How is « act » to be understood?

- DBO uses the word “act” in the agentive sense, i.e. as synonymous with “action”.
- In the actualization sense, *act* is contrasted with *potentiality*.
 - In Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, *potentiality* refers to "a principle of change, movement, or rest" in oneself or other entities (Θ, 1049b 7).
 - An act refers to the *actual expression of this potentiality*. For example, a seeing is an act, while the disposition to see is the potentiality associated with it (Θ, 1049b21).

How is « act » to be understood?

- Mental acts, as actualizations, are "mental events", i.e. "what happens in a person's mind" (Geach, 1957, 1).
- In the agentive sense, mental acts consist in the intentional activation of a mental disposition in order to acquire a desired mental property.
- In Sellars' 1969 article, the term 'mental act' refers to the actualization of a mental disposition, not to a mental action.

How is « act » to be understood?

- The agentic sense of act seems difficult to reconcile with the claim that expression has immediacy, which confers a specific value to the corresponding products.
- Someone who expresses her pain by crying or behaving in any other pain-specific way does not do it intentionally in the agentic sense as usually understood.
- Searle's category of **intention-in-action**, or Hursthouse's notion of **arational action** seem to have struggled with the same difficulty: reconciling agency with the absence of any prior pondering about one's reasons to act, hence no prior intention.

Alternative option?

- One might want to say that expressive behavior is often something that happens to the subject: a spontaneous reaction to a represented situation.
- This event, even if uncontrolled, nevertheless actualizes the individuals' long-standing values and motivations, which seems to be why these actualizations are generally endorsed by the producers.

Alternative option

- An act as actualization is the manifestation of a person's disposition to express her current state of mind
- It can again contrast with an utterance s-expressing a meaning in virtue of linguistic conventions.
- The actualization sense of act seems more adequate to cover the case of silent speech, and of thought crossing one's mind, which are clearly non-agentive (Strawson, 2003).

Question 2 - Evolution of Meaning and Non-
Conceptual Content

Nonpropositional contents

The specific informational value of expressive behavior and speech is claimed to originate in a distinctive form of non-propositional content, a form that is said to "foreshadow the use of articulate, linguistic vehicles"(3.1).

This claim is a powerful argument in favor of the continuity between expressive-behavioral and linguistic communication

Nonpropositional contents

Several questions need to be raised:

1. Are **reference and objectivity** secured at this stage?
2. What are the **correctness conditions** applicable to such nonpropositional contents?
3. How exactly is **semantic continuity** secured? If it is claimed that the non-propositional content of an expression survives in humans' avowals, more needs be said about whether and how it is integrated to propositional thinking.

Are **reference and objectivity** secured at this stage?

- *Objectivity* is the ability to refer to stable and permanent objects, represented independently of their being currently attended to.
- As Peter Strawson (1959) emphasized, this principle is a precondition for forming and evaluating predictions about the world as being true or false.

Without objectivity, reference is deeply affected, contrary to claims made in 3.1. How is protoreference secured?

What are the **conditions of correction** applicable to such nonconceptual content?

- Conceptual contents have to be truth-evaluable
- Non-conceptual contents, even in the absence of conceptual correctness also need to have correctness conditions

Strawson (1959) developed the notion of a "feature-placing representational system": A feature, as opposed to a property, can be represented as presently exemplified or "incidental" with no sense of a contrast between a representing subject and a represented object. A standard example is

(1) Water (little/much, here, now)

→ **Incidentality** and **featural determination** might count as correctness conditions for a representation like (1)

What are the conditions of correction of a- expressed content?

- The expressive response of an organism might featurally represent a graded affordance, i.e. have a representational content structured by values on each of the following dimensions:

Affordance A (intensity I , valence V , direction D , in temporal interval dt , with control C)

→ A pang of anger, or a desire to obtain food would thus express a global subjectively relevant affordance, along with its specific aspects such as valence, comparative intensity and disposition to act.

How can semantic continuity be secured?

For example, a currently popular view in cognitive science is that there are two representational systems in the human mind:

- System 1 is supposed to involve non-conscious, effortless, automatic and inflexible processing.
- System 2 operates in a conscious, effortful, controlled and flexible way.

Adapting this idea to expression, it might be argued that System 1, largely inherited from distant phylogeny, processes stimuli expressively, on the basis of their emotional value and associated plans of action, while the second forms conceptual self-ascriptions and determines action on the basis of practical reasoning.

→ In the present version of the proposal, non-propositional contents fail to play a role in guaranteeing semantic continuity, and, worse, they threaten it.

Summary of point 2

- The text under discussion is quite correct in proposing that the expressive dimension in thought and communication permeates verbal communication .
- A possible way of accounting for semantic continuity is to
 - 1) step back from communication to the structured information that it exploits, and that is used by an agent to think and to vent her thoughts to herself, and by a receiver to grasp what is shown in others' expressive behavior.
 - 2) explain how, in spite of their different representational format, the two types of representations involved can be semantically united.

Question 3 - DBO's case for an evolutionary continuity in communication

DBO' s view about the role of expression in the evolution of communication

Classical views about the evolution of language explain human communication by invoking the constitutive role, in it, of **communicative intentions**.

According to Dorit Bar-On, her act-product model can explain

- 1) how non-humans and young children can both produce and receive communicated contents endowed with apparently semantic and pragmatic aspects
- 2) How human linguistic communication evolved from non-human signaling

without presupposing an inferential and a mindreading capacity

DBO's view about the role of expression in the evolution of communication

- How could the arational, communicatively nonintentional, semantically inarticulate, expressive behaviors of nonhuman animals give rise to rational, intentional, structured speech?

DBO' s view about the role of expression in the evolution of communication

- Response: « A wince, a growl, a cowering demeanor, a squeal of delight, a suddenly shifting gaze, doesn't simply provide information or give evidence about a state of mind; it exhibits or displays it. »

DBO's view about how expressive communication foreshadows linguistic communication

For DBO, communication is originally a matter of *showing how one feels*, with a social purpose of "moving the audience to an appropriate response to relevant objects" – a purpose that may be secured by design (section 3.2.).

DBO' s view about how expressive communication foreshadows linguistic communication

- « Despite the fact that (we may assume) expressive signals are not produced with elaborate communicative intentions, and their uptake is not dependent upon a rational inference or interpretive, metarepresentational mindreading, **they form part of an intricate web of minded, world-directed, social, and active interactions.** » (3.1)

DBO' s view about how expressive communication foreshadows linguistic communication

« Although expressive vehicles acquired through enculturation, linguistic exposure, and individual experience are not designed by nature for their expressive job, we can still think of them as having been designed to suit expressers' purposes through cultural, linguistic, or individual development and history. »

DBO' s view about how expressive communication foreshadows linguistic communication

In summary, on this view,

- the communicated content is rich enough to be non-inferentially graspable.
- Some kind of design secures "communicative effectiveness".

Problem 1: involuntary vs active expressive behavior

An utterance being made publicly, or an expressive behavior being produced, do not automatically qualify as instances of communication.

- Shame, pain, or derision, can be expressed in behavior in spite of the agent's intent of not letting others notice them: they are not in such cases communicated to others.

Problem 1: involuntary vs active expressive behavior

→ Therefore only a subclass of expressive behavior (or of showing) can qualify as a token of communication

- What is, then, the difference between an involuntary wincing and the "active but spontaneous" expression of an emotion?
- Does not the latter need involve a producer's intention to expressively communicate her pain and a receiver's understanding of this intention?

Problem 2: non-coded expressive behavior

When an expressive behavior is *not* ritualized, 2 constraints apply:

- it must be recognized as worth being attended to
- Its meaning must be **minimally worked out.**

Sniffing the air when leaving one's car in front of the sea

As analysed in Sperber & Wilson (1995)

- How is this expressive behavior understood by the receiver?

→ Inference? Unmediated perception?

Example of flexible expressive behavior

In order to make sense of this behavior non-inferentially, we need to suppose again that the producer and the receiver have a common salient featural representation of a given context:

<Sea-air affordance (plenty, pleasant, all around, now; action= to breathe deeply>,

→ Breathing deeply is the **action** automatically evoked by the featural representation in an associative, non-inferential way. Expressive behavior is understood through a corresponding shared representation of the sea-affordance.

Understanding needs to be based on a shared contextual representation

Analyzing communication in terms of the structured information that it exploits, here again, can justify the neo-expressivist claim that the producer and the consumer can **non-inferentially** converge on a content in flexible usages of EB.

You can only **immediately perceive** the meaning of an expressive behavior, however, if the underlying structured featural representation **is in your repertoire. Otherwise, you need to infer it.**

Concluding comments

What kind of continuity is secured between EB and linguistic communication ?

- « The task of theorizing about the emergence of meaningful speech is the task of explaining how less articulate expressive vehicles used by nonlinguistic creatures to a-express their states of mind become increasingly more articulate, and begin to take a semantic life of their own » (4)

What kind of continuity is secured between EB and linguistic communication ?

The idea that the evolution of language *progressively* emerges from expressive signalling **is not** compatible with the differences in semantic format, which are associated with differences in cognitive abilities

- An expressive behavior is directly grasped from **one of the distinctive cues of the underlying featural representation**
- Most linguistic utterances are based on complex and varied implicatures, which require inferential mechanisms (see Recanati, 2004)

- However, DBO is right in emphasizing that an account of the evolution of language should explain the persistent role of a-expression in linguistic communication.
- Her act-product model offers an important contribution to the System₁/System 2 puzzle, which is one of the keys to the question of the evolution of communication.

Thanks for your attention !

These comments are available on line:

<http://joelleproust.org/presentations>