

# BOOK REVIEWS

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## Self-Expression

MITCHELL S. GREEN

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IT IS NO secret that the concept of expression has been continually investigated (although too rarely at book-length – for that one has I think to go back to Sircello and Tormey in the 1970s) within the tradition of analytical aesthetics, but the focus on *self*-expression is perhaps less common than it should be if we are to gain a comprehensive understanding of the multiform ways we humans manifest expressive content within our countless communicative interactions. In this eminently clear, forceful, well-argued, and much-needed contribution, Mitchell S. Green makes very significant advances toward such a comprehensive understanding, incorporating along the way relevant anthropological, ethnographic, and biological (broadly Darwinian) considerations. A particular virtue of the book is that Green sees clearly that there is a continuum of cases stretching from discrete acts of animate human expression on the one pole to inanimate artifacts that exhibit expressive qualities on the other – that is, he does not begin with, and then stay locked within, a rigid categorical separation of expressive human act from expressive material artefact. Green displays throughout an admirable awareness of the value of examples and of looking closely into the nuances and details of the subject at hand before proceeding to any (here admirably cautiously stated) generalizations, and his ability to extract philosophical significance, in distilled form, from the telling particularity is masterful. For example, we see here the minute but extremely important expressive distinctions between letting a tear run down one's cheek versus stopping it – a distinction that sounds simple enough on the surface but that in truth reveals considerably more than we initially expect about how we humans show

emotion and, in doing so, how we position others in a post-Gricean way to be influenced by that act of showing. The subtlety of his discussion prevents Green from too-quickly embracing overgeneral position formulations at any point (for example, he instructively avoids the global and thus nuance-blinding claim that all genuine facial expressivity is in essence involuntary), and he shows beautifully how, in determining the expressive significance of a given response to the object of a fear, one needs also to think in a circumspect way about the intended recipient of that particular expression of fear. And in a manner that for this reader at least was valuably reminiscent of Austin and Anscombe on pretending (where obtaining clarity on what it is to pretend to do a given thing can be richly significant for our fuller understanding of what it is actually to do that thing), Green uncovers instructive nuances of both success and of failure in acts of self-expression – where some failures to express are themselves expressive in a second-order way.

In forming a belief about little Johnny's whereabouts (extending a discussion from John McDowell and Ruth Millikan), Green observes that if we form that belief by seeing where he is, we gain significant perceptual knowledge that we do not obtain just by being told where Johnny is – in seeing where he is we see what he looks like, how he is standing, and so forth (Green is particularly good at incorporating too-often neglected or underplayed features that specify expressive content within utterances and actions, such as tone of voice, posture, gait, gesture, and the magnificently intricate details of facial expressivity). But here again rather than embracing a categorical generality (between perceptual and descriptive knowledge) that all too easily quickly suggests itself, he as quickly reminds us that in seeing the scratch marks of the now-absent tiger, we see in them (by their size) one aspect of how the tiger actually looks (in a way that does not

reduce wholly to descriptive knowledge). ‘Similarly’, Green observes, ‘expressive dimensions of communication can telegraph perceptual as well as affective knowledge: the look on your face, your tone of voice, and so on as you convey Johnny’s whereabouts might convey to me whether the situation you report is cause for fear, delight, or relief’ (p. 11). It is just this sensitivity to the occasion of the expressive act, remark, or gesture that allows Green to develop a typology of ‘signals’ we use in expressive behavior (for example, involuntary; allowed without being willed; willed; willed and overt; and so forth) without for a moment descending to a crude model of signs as individually attached outward or physical conveyers of predetermined expressive content. On this score Green is wisely cautious and philosophically exacting, and what he says is genuinely illuminating; he is fully aware of the problem involved in the generic distinction between mediated vs. unmediated expression (as analogous to the mediated vs. unmediated knowledge of Johnny’s whereabouts), and so here again rather than opting for one or the other as a polemically situated position, he develops a concept of translucent embodied expression that combines words, deeds, tone, posture, gait, the face, and all of the subtle movements that go to make up the fear, alarm, and response-suggestion contained (to continue the above example) in the gesturally embodied exclamation ‘Tiger!’. In such cases, he shows, one becomes at once aware of another’s state of mind and of what that state of mind represents for the person who experiences it, in such a way that one comes to know what the experience in question feels like for the other. And it is here, for Green, that human expressivity and artistic expressivity come together: self-expression is articulated as a process within which one’s thought, affect, or experience is successfully signalled (in Green’s cautious sense that reduces neither to behaviourism nor to oversimplified semiotics) to another, thus making that person’s point of view – itself an expressively significant fact about that person – comprehensible across what is and has traditionally been too easily construed as the ‘other-minds’ chasm. Artistic expression for Green shows point of view in the same way, and thus

art is revealed to be a communicative process deeply like the forms of personal expression where ‘we lay bare what is within, but often in order to show what is going on without, as well as what to do about it’ (p. 15), that is, where we show the content not just of our inner lives but of our inner lives in reaction to, and in complex relational interaction with, an external situation or circumstance. One might generically call this a kind of expressive and aesthetic content-externalism, but then here again that would be too quick and too schematic for Green’s subtle discussion; what he actually does – and this is significant well beyond artistic expression – is to work out a conception of self-expression (again, his helpful term is ‘translucent’) that in some ways preserves a place for what is interior or internal, but then it preserves that place in a way that situates that interior expressive content into a relationally configured circumstance where our comprehension of that internal content requires our simultaneous comprehension of the external context within which, and indeed by virtue of which, that internal content is constituted. (Someone wedded to the clarity of the internalism/externalism distinction would object that this is too much of a good thing and that one cannot have it both ways, but I think this points to just what is most impressive about an already deeply impressive book: Green’s thought is not constrained by any nuance-blinding prior subscription to entrenched philosophical dichotomies, and where they fail to fit the fine-grained details he investigates, he proceeds by taking what he needs, leaving the side-taking polemics behind.)

The rather extensive ground Green covers (which I can only hint at here) includes an extension of the saying/showing distinction as derived from Frege and Wittgenstein, in a way that articulates important distinctions between expressively significant types of showing, for example showing that  $x$  is the case, showing in a way that makes something newly perceptible, or showing how the experience of a mood or emotion feels. And it is in this context that he develops his account of how what we say, and – with an all-too-rare emphasis – the way in which we say it, shows what lies within (as we dangerously put it, a danger about

which Green is unerringly vigilant). But it is also precisely here that one could reasonably want more than Green gives us – and for reasons that make sense in terms of Green’s own comprehensive vision of expressive action. If the circumstances in which we say a particular expressive thing are part of what constitutes the content of that utterance (where the beliefs buttressing the emotion that is expressed, the object of the emotion, the speaker’s response to that object given those beliefs, and the speaker’s expectation of the listener’s response along with the speaker’s strategic employment of expressive nuance to influence the listener’s immediate reaction and subsequent action, are all in play as Green has so convincingly articulated the matter), one can end up in a number of cases wanting more detail concerning these circumstances of person and place than Green provides – indeed in order to understand most fully the case in question as an example of expressive action of the kind Green is elucidating. But then this is to ask really for a book of twice this book’s length – the excellent one Green has written, and another that would be contained within the present one, perhaps exploring literary cases in the kind of detail Green’s account calls for, and with the kind of precision Green’s account unfailingly provides.

Be that as it may, there is no ambiguity whatsoever about the fact that in this book as we have it we see in fine detail the elements that make up the actual contexts within which we express ourselves (including but not limited to the artistic ones). It is a rare philosophical achievement to first get in focus, and then (harder still) to keep in focus, the wondrously intricate and layered subtleties of action, speech, tone, gesture, facial expression, and (what we perhaps too easily think of as) the external conditions within which self-revelatory expressions assume the profound significance they have for our understanding of ourselves and each other. And with a fresh articulation of speaker-meaning and speech acts as they show state of mind, the conception of ‘translucent’ expressive action that goes beyond the dichotomy of ‘Theory Theory’ vs. ‘Simulation Theory’ in contemporary debates concerning our ability to recognize ‘other-mind’ content,

an extended conception of conversational implicature of a kind that conveys expressive significance, details from recent work in the psychology and evolutionary biology of facial expressivity, a rich and refreshingly realistic awareness of the personalized idiosyncrasies that can enter into the conventions that make expressive communication possible, empathy understood as understanding how an emotion feels (where that is shown, for example, in a work of art) rather than as necessarily sharing it, and a concern for the possibilities of communicating the qualitative dimension of experience where that communication is itself a form of expressive action, Green has produced a deep, rewarding, and absorbing book that is nothing short of the next major step on a subject central to human self-understanding.

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