# Second Person Light on First Person Problems

Michael Bavidge

## Contents

In his book, *Authority and Self-Knowledge*, Richard Moran argues that: *'A proper philosophical account of self-knowledge should tell us how it is that a person can speak about his own mind without appealing to evidence about himself'* [i]

The suggestion that we are examining is that self-knowledge is rooted in self-expression rather than on some special evidence that a person has about their own inner states. So we could respond to Moran's challenge by saying that a proper philosophical account of self-knowledge should *first* tell us how it is that a person can speak *out of* his own experience and then how speaking *out of* explains the particular characteristics of speaking *about*.

What is it about expression that enables self-knowledge without evidence? And we could add to that question another closely related query: what is it about expression that enables knowledge of others without inference and analogy?

To answer these questions I want to examine the idea of expression more closely. In particular I want to consider what I am calling the dynamics of expression rather than its content, because even those writers who put a lot of weight on expression don't, to my mind, focus enough on the sheer interactivity of expressive behaviour and expressive language.

## The dynamics of expression

Expressing something to somebody has a different dynamic from telling somebody about something. Idiomatically we use the word 'expression' to cover all sorts of utterances, including expressions of opinion or belief; but we need a distinctive notion of expression when we talk of "expressions of feeling", or of "expressing oneself" or of "self-expression".

If we take an example of fully-fledged expressive language we find that there is a complex dynamic. The shape of this structure can be detected by putting a series of questions to an instance of expression: who? with what? expressed what? about what? to whom? and in what context? The example we used to the Excellent Book was: Norm expresses to Norma his nostalgia for Tyneside by singing The Blaydon Races in the bar at the Free Trade Inn.

There are at least five different elements involved in this example:
- Norma does something: he expresses his feelings
- to someone, the long-suffering Norma,
- in some medium - here by singing,

- communicating something about something, the nostalgia he feels for Tyneside
- and all this in a particular social and cultural context[ii].

Expression is a type of **action**. When Finkelstein says that *a pain and its expression hang together in the logical space of animate life*[iii] he gives the impression there are two items which are separately identifiable though logically related. I like his phrase because it echoes the phrase 'the space of reasons' and opens up the possibility of accommodating the minds of non-human animals. But he leaves out the one who both suffers the pain and expresses it. The connection (call it 'logical' if you like) between pain and its expression goes through the one who experiences it.

An expression is **dialogical**. There is much more going on in dialogues than we might think if our only model of personal communication is the storing and transmission of information. There is a complex two-way structure even to the most everyday exchanges. Overlooking or downplaying the dialogical aspect of language has been quite damaging in philosophy. The Mind-Body problem is often formulated in terms of the tension between our subjective experience and objective accounts of human beings: our subjective experience is expressed in the First Person; objective accounts are rendered in the Third Person. First and Third Person accounts are irreducible and both are necessary. Both have earned the right to contribute to the metaphysical picture we have of ourselves. Yet they seem irreconcilable. But why is the Second Person left out of the picture? Why is it not allowed to contribute to our picture of ourselves and our minds? The First Person has often to apologise for itself because it is not objective or scientific; but the Second Person seems permanently disenfranchised. It is bizarre that the constant interpersonal communication that makes up the fabric of human life plays such a small part in the formulation of the theory of mind and the problem of other minds. Our metaphysics and epistemology draw on soliloquy and observational reports, but not on conversation. They are comfortable with the nominative, accusative, dative and ablative cases; but have no room for the vocative.

An expression is **directed towards** someone. A linguistic expression has a content, but its content is not first information which is then projected at someone; it is from the start an intervention. Dialogue not monologue is the normal mode of language: we speak in response or as a reaction or we are called upon to say something or the situation demands it. This is particularly true of infants: think of the way infants are introduced into the linguistic community questioning, stimulating, reinforcing and correcting. When I ran the AE programme occasionally unhappy colleagues would come to me and formally announce that they were angry: 'I am very angry' they would say sitting calmly

in my office. Then they would warn me that they were going to let the person who had angered them know about it. I always felt that this was more an exercise in information management than an expression of anger.

An expression is a **disclosure**, it reveals something about oneself or it is a means of sharing one's experience, of putting yourself on the line, of putting yourself about a bit, which a report of even one's subjective experience does not do. Wittgenstein famously compared the Cartesian idea of inner experience to having a beetle in a box. Imagine you have a real box and in it there is, or is not, a real beetle: you can disclose to me what is in the box, in the sense that you can tell me something that you already know and that I don't. But expression is not like that. It relates to other forms of disclosure like confession, apology and declarations of love or regret. It is a way of making our presence felt, a way of keeping company.

Expressions are **modulated**. Self-disclosure is not a matter of letting it all hang out. Dorit Bar-On is fond of using the word 'venting' in relation to expression but it is not a good word. Expression has an immediacy about it; but the immediacy of expression is not causal necessity: the fox screaming in a gin-trap is not expressing itself. We have accounts of people in dreadful pain saying afterwards that they heard themselves scream and realised it was them. Even non-linguistic expressive behaviour acquires its communicative content in part through being at one point rather than another in a range of possible modulations. This is not true of those manifestations of feelings which are not expressions. *"The depth of [a] blush is perhaps an indication, evidence, of the depth of ... embarrassment. But we cannot use the gradation of blush as a means of communicating how embarrassed we are".*[iv]

Expressions have a **mood**: we express ourselves enthusiastically or reluctantly or shamefully. I am not talk about what we feel about the content of the expression. I mean the mood in which the expression is made. Confession can only be made with difficulty. Expressions of love require sincerity. Wittgemstein gives a nice example: *'In this way I should like to say the words "Oh let him come!" are charged with my desire, And words can be wrung from us, - like a cry. Words can be **hard** to say: such, for example, as are used to effect a renunciation, or to confess a weakness. (Words are also deeds).'*[v]

There is an interesting comparison between the expression of moral attitudes and self-expression. Morality requires more than conformity to rules. Moral integrity requires an alignment of personal commitment and moral values over and above conformity: *But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart* (Matthew, 5:29). What you feel and how you think matters as well as what you

do, you must engage with your actions in particular way – we might call it an integrity requirement[vi].

Likewise when we express and talk about our feelings, there is an integrity requirement; you cannot voice these things and withhold yourself in some way. Well you can, but if you do, you subvert what you say in a way different from, but parallel to, the way lying subverts reporting: self-expression requires that we present ourselves in our words.

## The Semantics of Expression

Wittgenstein has a series of thoughts about expressing emotion in the second part of PI. He considers someone who says "I must tell you: I am frightened ... it makes me shiver". He claims that '*Even when he says it as a piece of information he does not learn it from his sensations*'. That way of connecting the expressive words with the fearful man are too remote: the words are part of the emotion: "*The words 'it makes me shiver' are such a shuddering reaction.*'" And then Wittgenstein asks '*Now why should the wordless shudder be the* **ground** *for the verbal one?*'[vii]

A few sections further on he concludes: '*A cry is not a description. But there are transitions. And the words "I am afraid" may approximate more, or less, to being a cry. They may come quite close to this and also be far removed from it*'[viii]. This is not a psychological observation. It comes at the end of a series of reflections about how language works, or rather, about how it couldn't work: *We ask "What does 'I am frightened' really mean, what am I referring to when I say it?" And of course we find no answer, or one that is inadequate. ... I can find no answer if I try to settle the question "What am I referring to?" "What am I thinking when I say it?" by repeating the expression of fear and at the same time attending to myself, as it were observing my soul out of the corner of my eye. In a concrete case I can indeed ask "Why did I say that, what did I mean by it?"— and I might answer the question too; but not on the ground of observing what accompanied the speaking. And my answer would supplement, paraphrase, the earlier utterance.*
    *What is fear? What does "being afraid" mean? If I wanted to define it at a single showing—I should play-act fear.*

That last sentence shows Wittgenstein at his most sensitive to the way in which philosophy tricks us into adopting weird points of view and coming to think of them as natural and deep. We are convinced the word 'fear' must be the name of something so we try to catch sight of it. I think I have to observe 'my soul out of the corner of my eye' because I think that I cannot talk out of my fear, before

I talk about it. Here we can remind ourselves of Wittgenstein's question: *"...how can I go so far as to try to use language to get between pain and its expression?"[ix]* The idea that observation and description get between pain and its expression is encouraged by thinking that conceptualising has to be a sort of structuring of data, a cataloguing of items.

## The Expressive Community: Self-knowledge

To summarize: expressions are actions, they are dialogical; they are directed at others; they are disclosures; they are modulated; they have moods. The point of all that is to show the complexity of expression. When Wittgenstein says the meaning of a word is its use, we are inclined I think, to hear that in a pared-down, functional sense. But expression is rich, layered, personally compromising. It makes use of our habitation in the space of animate life, the space of the expressive community and the space of reasons.

I know my own thoughts, feelings and intentions in so far as I am competent to give expression to them and reflect on that expression. The expressive community is formed by those who acknowledge others from the base of their own experience, exercising their own and recognising the others' right to voice their view of the world and their unique entitlement to express their reactions to it.

It is because we are members of an expressive community that we acquire self-knowledge and personal knowledge of others. Self-knowledge is not a matter of having a particularly good vantage point for which to observe and report inner goings on; it is a matter of having the authoritative competence to speak up for oneself and, on the basis of that, to reflect on the nature of one's involvement in the expressive community. *To use a word without a justification does not mean to use it without right.*[x]

## Appendix I: Knowledge of Others

We know other people's minds first before we know our own. The infant forms its idea of itself in interaction with other already paid up members of the expressive club. But as a philosopher I cannot rely on child development psychology. There is a theoretical reason.

So far I have talked about expression from the point of view of the expresser. But we cannot understand expression without understanding the idea of a

response, any more than we can understand batting without understanding bowling. Whether we talk about tables and chairs or toothaches and anxieties, the only assurance we have that what we say makes sense, that we occupy a shared world and are acting intelligently in it, is the actual endorsement of other people. They include the array of interactive responses we make to each other, the approvals, encouragements, the challenges that constitutes the social lives of intelligent animals like us. In my first talk I asked: what is it about being socially embedded that goes beyond being surrounded by others? Well, all that.

These assurances are not arguments or statements of opinion; they are interactive processes. They cannot be transposed into a premise of an anti-sceptical argument. They do not provide the basis for an inference to the minds of others, let alone a theory of other minds. They provide a lived confidence as robust or as fragile as our social lives. I can know what you think and feel because we inhabit the logical space of the expressive community.

The Problem of Other Minds arose because epistemic problems convinced us that we had to find a way of arguing ourselves into the expressive community – as fatuous a task as trying to argue oneself into the chess playing or the moral community.

If we have to argue ourselves into the expressive community, knowledge

---

[i] Moran, *Authority and Estrangement*, Princeton, 2001, p. 135

[ii] Bavidge & Ground, *Can We Understand Animal Minds*, p. 239

[iii] Finkelstein, *Expression and the Inner*, Harvard, p. 135

[iv] Bavidge & Ground, p. 274

[v] Ludwig, Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1958, §546

[vi] It is interesting that the adultery advice comes shortly before the injunction: 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect', Matthew 5:48

[vii] Wittgenstein, I, II, i

[viii] Wittgenstein, II, 1x

[ix] Wittgenstein, §245

[x] Wittgenstein, §289