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Can Emotions Communicate?

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Followers of P. F. Strawson's "Freedom and Resentment" (1962) contend that the reactive attitudes—a class of moral emotions that includes indignation, resentment, and gratitude—are constitutive of praise and blame as such. Many Strawsonians also contend that the reactive attitudes are essentially *communicative*, in that they necessarily call for a response from the praised or blamed parties.¹ None has defended this latter claim explicitly, however, and the more closely one considers it, the more dubious it becomes. Granted, the outward *expression* of a reactive attitude may be considered a communicative act, but the idea that the *attitude* itself, independently of its expression, should be considered communicative is more than a little puzzling. Indeed, we may worry that this claim commits a category mistake, since outward displays, but not inward feelings, are the sorts of things that can appropriately be called "communicative" in the first place.

In "Reactive Attitudes as Communicative Entities" (2013b), Coleen Macnamara comes to the aid of Strawson's followers, offering an ingenious argument for why, intuitions of category mistakes notwithstanding, reactive attitudes are indeed essentially communicative entities. Her strategy is to isolate two essential features of communication—(1) that it consists of messages and (2) that the proper function of these messages is to elicit a response from recipients—and to argue that all reactive attitudes, even unexpressed ones, exhibit these two features. As a result, we are entitled to conclude that the reactive attitudes—and any other emotions that share these two properties²—are essentially communicative entities.

¹ In her review of the literature, Macnamara (2013b) names McGeer (2013), Watson (2008), Helm (2012), McKenna (2012), Smith (2013), and Darwall (2010).

² In an earlier draft of this paper, I mistakenly attributed to Macnamara the view that *all* emotions are essentially communicative entities. I would like to thank an anonymous referee

My aim in this short discussion piece is to demonstrate that Macnamara's argument, despite its commendable ingenuity, is ultimately unpersuasive. I am convinced that the claim in question does commit a category mistake—that emotions are not the sorts of entities that can be communicative. But, rather than offering counter-arguments on behalf of my conviction, I shall instead object to the two key premises of Macnamara's argument. I shall argue (1) that reactive attitudes are not messages, and (2) that reactive attitudes do not have the proper function of eliciting a response from recipients. In the end, we are left with no good reason to think that the reactive attitudes—or any other emotion for that matter—are essentially communicative entities. But, to begin, allow me to comment briefly on Macnamara's conception of communication.

There are numerous ways of conceiving communication, some of which are more conservative than others.³ According to more liberal models, communication is ubiquitous throughout the animal kingdom. Not only humans but also apes, monkeys, rats, birds, frogs, fish, and even insects engage in communication on a regular basis. The *signaling model of communication*, for instance, holds that behaviors count as communicative just in case they evolved to elicit a response from other creatures and those other creatures also evolved to respond to said behaviors.⁴ According to more conservative models, on the other hand, communication is an activity unique to human beings. The *inferential model of communication*, for instance, claims that communication requires speakers to form reflexive intentions, which presumably no non-human animal is capable of forming.⁵ Another conservative model, which I call the *commitment model of communication*, claims that communication requires speakers to be able to take responsibility for what they say, and, again, no non-human animal has presumably achieved this level of rational self-consciousness.⁶

When Macnamara claims to have isolated the essential features of communication, she has in mind a fairly liberal model of communication. As

for *Thought* for pointing out to me that Macnamara in fact argues only that “many” or “most” emotions are essentially communicative entities.

³ Macnamara (2013b) cites Green (2007) as her primary source on theories of communication, and thus I shall follow his way of charting the theoretical landscape here.

⁴ Maynard Smith & Harper (2007).

⁵ See Bach & Harnish (1979) and Sperber & Wilson (1995).

⁶ See Sellars (1969), Brandom (1994), and Kukla & Lance (2009).

we have seen, she claims that communication essentially involves two core components: (1) a message that (2) has the function of eliciting a response from a recipient. While these components may be sufficient for the signaling model of communication, they are far from sufficient for either the inferential or commitment models of communication. The arguments that she gives in support of the conclusion that the reactive attitudes are essentially communicative could be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to support the conclusion that ruffled bird feathers, for instance, are essentially communicative.⁷

The problem is that Macnamara's claims about how the reactive attitudes must function in order for them to be constitutive of praise and blame depend upon a far more conservative model of communication. She views the reactive attitudes as second-personal forms of address that call upon the praised or blamed parties to recognize that the speaker recognizes their actions as praiseworthy or blameworthy.⁸ These forms of address involve more than just successful signaling; they essentially shape the normative landscape in ways that are not illuminated by the signaling model of communication. Thus, we may reasonably worry whether Macnamara's stated argument can get her the conclusion she needs. Even if she has shown that the reactive attitudes communicate in the way that ruffled bird feathers communicate, she has not yet shown that emotions communicate in the way that richly textured speech acts, such as rebukes and commendations, communicate. Presumably, additional premises would be needed to close this gap.⁹

I am optimistic that the gap can be closed, however, and thus I am willing to grant that Macnamara has demonstrated her conclusion if she can demonstrate that the reactive attitudes count as communicative on the more permissive model. In what follows, I shall consider whether the reactive attitudes, independently of their expressions, do in fact exhibit the two core features of communication that Macnamara isolates. I shall argue that they do not.

⁷ In short, ruffled bird feathers evolved to signal a message to other birds, who likewise evolved to consume this message.

⁸ For her defense of this view, see Macnamara (2013a).

⁹ At the very least, we should expect her to show (1) that expressions of the reactive attitudes are *overt* in the way that speech acts must be overt, (2) that they admit of the same *felicity conditions* as do speech acts, and (3) that, in expressing a reactive attitude, an agent takes responsibility for the meaning and import of her action.

First, Macnamara must demonstrate that the reactive attitudes are essentially *messages*—that they are the sorts of entities that can, though need not in every case, be communicated from sender to receiver. To do so, she appeals to a widely-held view in the philosophy of emotion that emotions in general—and hence the reactive attitudes in particular—have representational content.¹⁰ Emotions are, on this view, affectively-tinged evaluations of the world. Fear appraises an approaching bear as dangerous, anger appraises the insults of another as offensive, disgust appraises the maggots in the pantry as revolting, and so on.¹¹

Of course, the fact that emotions have representational content is not sufficient to make them messages. Private thoughts, after all, plausibly have such content, yet are not plausibly construed as messages. Appealing again to a widely-held view in the philosophy of emotion, Macnamara points out that emotions are more than just affectively-tinged appraisals; they are also *action tendencies*.¹² Normally functioning emotions prime the impassioned creature to express these emotions outwardly in behaviors that other creatures recognize as emotional expressions. We routinely express fear with screams, anger with clenched fists, disgust with gagging, and so on. As Macnamara aptly puts it, we evolved to “wear our emotions on our faces” (2013b: 13). Our emotions may be regarded as messages, she suggests, because (a) they have representational content, which (b) can, though need not in every case, be communicated from sender to receiver, and which (c) naturally tend toward expression. Two brief comments are in order.

First, it is important to emphasize that condition (c) prevents Macnamara’s argument from proving too much. Absent this condition, her argument would support the false conclusion that private thoughts are also messages, since they too have representational content and can, though need not in every case, be communicated to others in speech. By adding that messages must tend naturally toward being sent, and by noting that emotions, but not private thoughts, essentially prime an expression, she keeps her

¹⁰ Macnamara (2013b: 11) cites de Sousa (2013).

¹¹ The claim that emotions are *appraisals* does not entail the stronger and more controversial claim that emotions are *judgments*. Indeed, many prominent non-cognitivist theories of emotion, including Jesse Prinz’ Neo-Jamesian theory (2004) and Peter Goldie’s feeling theory (2003), accept the weaker and less controversial claim that emotions are appraisals with representational content.

¹² This claim was famously defended by Frijda (1986).

argument from proving more than it should. This point will be important later.

Second, Macnamara is careful to state that emotions essentially “prime” an expression rather than “cause” it, because we can often inhibit the expressions of our emotions. We can be afraid, but stand our ground; we can be angry, but unclench our fists; and we can be disgusted, but maintain a perfect poker face. Yet in each case we feel an urge to express our emotions in these routine ways, and it often requires some effort to inhibit the expressions.

So far Macnamara has given us some reason to believe that expressed emotions serve as messages, but she has not yet explained why unexpressed emotions may likewise be conceived as messages. On this point, she offers the analogy of an email (2013b: 7, 9). Although an expressed emotion may be likened to a sent email, which shows up in another’s inbox, an unexpressed emotion may be likened to an unsent email, which remains only in my own draft box. The unsent email doesn’t *successfully* communicate, because it lacks a recipient, but there is still an intuitive sense in which the unsent email is an “essentially communicative” entity—it is a message, which is fit to be sent and received, and is the sort of thing that is normally sent. In much the same way, an unexpressed emotion contains a message that is essentially communicative, even if we inhibit its expression, and this message is never actually sent.

Unfortunately, the analogy of the unsent email breaks down, for reasons that undermine Macnamara’s argument. In the case of the email, the content of the unsent email is *identical* to the content of the sent email. Once you press “send,” the message found in the recipient’s inbox is the same as the message previously found only in your draft box. Our willingness to call the text in the recipient’s inbox a “message” gives us some reason to call the identical text in your draft box a “message” as well. But in the case of the emotion, the content of the unexpressed emotion is *completely different* from the content of the expressed emotion. Recall that, for Macnamara, the content of an unexpressed emotion is that emotion’s representational content. Unexpressed fear, for instance, has the content that “this approaching bear is dangerous to me.” But the content of an expression of fear is *not* the representational content of the emotion itself. A frightened gasp, for instance,

does not convey the message that “this approaching bear is dangerous to me”; rather, it conveys the message that “I am very afraid!”

A central question in the scientific study of emotional expression concerns which kinds of information can be encoded in particular expressions of emotion. Take facial expressions—smiles, frowns, smirks, etc.—which are paradigm modes of emotional expression.¹³ The consensus view among scientists is that facial expressions can encode only two pieces of information about a person’s emotion: they can encode information about (1) which emotion someone is feeling, and they can encode information about (2) the intensity of the emotion felt.¹⁴ A terrified face, for instance, encodes a high intensity of fear. Importantly, facial expressions can encode information neither about (1) the intentional object of the emotion—i.e. what it is about—nor about (2) how the emotion evaluates its object—as dangerous, offensive, revolting, etc. The terrified face conveys neither the fact that my fear is about a bear nor the fact that I evaluate the bear as dangerous. We might be able to infer that I am afraid of a bear because a bear is standing right in front of me, and we might be able to infer that I evaluate the bear as dangerous because I run in the opposite direction, but neither piece of information is properly encoded in the fear face itself, for the simple reason that the face lacks the physical resources to distinguish between all the objects of emotion and the evaluations that we make about those objects.

Let’s compare, then, the content of unexpressed fear with the content of a facial expression of fear. The content of the former is something along the lines of “the approaching bear is dangerous to me.” The content of the latter is something along the lines of “I am very afraid.” Since the content of the “sent” emotion is completely different from the content of the “unsent” emotion, the analogy with the email breaks down. Our willingness to say that the content of the expression (“I am very afraid”) counts as a message gives us no reason to say that the content of the unexpressed emotion (“the approaching bear is dangerous to me”) counts as a message too. Macnamara’s mistake is to assume that the content of an expressed emotion is just the content of the emotion itself, which, we have seen, it is not.¹⁵

¹³ Macnamara (2013b: 13) also takes them to be the paradigmatic form of emotional expression.

¹⁴ Ekman & Friesen (2003).

¹⁵ Macnamara makes this mistake, I hazard to guess, because she takes the relevant contrast class for an “unexpressed emotion” to be an “expressed emotion.” The emotion is indeed

Macnamara may respond by pointing out that while facial expressions cannot encode the content of an emotion, other modes of expression may be able to. Suppose that I accompany my frightened gasp with the words, “This approaching bear is dangerous to me!” Here, the content of the expression seems to be identical to the content of the emotion, and thus the analogy with the email is rescued. Since Macnamara needs to show only that the content of an emotion *can* be expressed, and since presumably the content of any emotion can be expressed verbally, this response would answer my objection in full. Unfortunately, the response is unsatisfactory, for the following reasons.

To begin, it is not obvious that my words “express” my fear in the same way that my gasp does. Following Wayne Davis (1988), we should be careful to distinguish between *natural expressions* of emotion and *speaker expressions* of emotion.¹⁶ The former are spontaneous, unintended manifestations of emotion, typically through facial expression and tones of voice. The latter are deliberate, intended displays of emotion, typically through speech acts and overt gestures.¹⁷ Gasping would be a natural expression of fear, while an utterance of “this approaching bear is dangerous to me” would be a speaker expression of fear. Both are “expressions,” but in subtly different senses of the term.

Now, although a speaker expression of emotion can indeed have the same content as the emotion expressed, Macnamara’s argument requires her to demonstrate that natural expressions can have the same content as the emotion expressed. I can speaker express my thought that p by asserting “p,” but it should not follow that an unexpressed thought that p is essentially a “message.” Earlier, we saw that Macnamara blocked this hasty inference by claiming that emotions differ from private thoughts in naturally tending toward expression—emotions intrinsically prime an expression, and thus the content of that emotion is meant to be made manifest. But the expressions primed by emotions are in every case natural expressions, not speaker expressions. We evolved to express fear by gasping and by widening our eyes, for instance; we didn’t evolve to express fear by uttering English

the same in both cases, but the relevant contrast class for the “unexpressed emotion” is rather the “expression” of that emotion.

¹⁶ For other articulations of this distinction, see, among others, Alston (1976), Sellars (1969) and Bar-On (2004).

¹⁷ Davis allows for speaker expressions to be performed spontaneously.

language sentences containing the words “bear” and “dangerous.” Emotions do not naturally tend toward speaker expression any more than private thoughts naturally tend toward speaker expression.¹⁸

Thus, appealing to speaker expressions of fear (e.g. an utterance of “That approaching bear is dangerous to me!”) cannot save Macnamara’s analogy, because this is a different kind of expression altogether, which is not a primed emotional response. To secure her conclusion that unexpressed emotions contain messages, she must demonstrate that the content of these emotions can be conveyed through natural expressions, which, I have argued, she will be unable to do.

I have so far shown that Macnamara’s argument for why even unexpressed emotions may be conceived as messages is unpersuasive. But, for the sake of argument, let’s suppose that she is right. Macnamara must also show that the proper function of a reactive attitude is to elicit a response from recipients. To make this point, she assumes (2013b: 8) that the etiological theory of functions is true: a trait has the proper function of φ-ing just in case part of the explanation for the current existence of the trait is that past tokens served the function of φ-ing.¹⁹ A heart, for instance, has the proper function of pumping blood because part of the reason for why we have hearts now is that the hearts of our ancestors successfully pumped their blood and allowed them to reproduce. Extended to signals, the claim is that a behavior has the proper function of eliciting a response from a recipient just in case this behavior occurs now because this behavior successfully elicited responses from recipients in the past, thereby benefiting the sender.

Having accepted this view of functions, Macnamara argues (2013b: 15-16) that we experience the reactive attitudes as we do today in part because our ancestors benefited by expressing these emotions to each other: “While gratitude and approval help bind us together, resentment and indignation help keep us together” (2013b: 16). Because outward acts of praise and blame

¹⁸ My claim is consistent with Wittgenstein’s (2006: §244; cf. Bar-On [2004: 241-242]) view that humans learn over time to replace natural expressions with speaker expressions: “how does a human being learn the meaning of the names of sensations?—of the word ‘pain’ for example. Here is one possibility; words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in its place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behavior. ‘So you are saying that the word ‘pain’ really means crying?’—On the contrary: the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it.”

¹⁹ Millikan (1984).

(via expressions of the reactive attitudes) in the past contributed to the existence of the reactive attitudes in the present, the proper function of these attitudes is to serve the communicative function of holding one another responsible for our social behavior.

The problem is that Macnamara is running two defensible arguments together to produce a third, indefensible argument. One defensible argument states that insofar as past *expressions* communicated, present *expressions* have the proper function of communicating. Another defensible argument states that insofar as past *emotions* promoted pro-social behavior, present *emotions* have the proper function of promoting pro-social behavior. The argument that Macnamara appears to be endorsing, however, states that insofar as past *expressions* communicated, present *emotions* have the proper function of communicating. But, here, the conclusion does not follow from the premise. The present and past traits are of different types, and hence the etiological theory of functions does not apply.

Macnamara might respond by arguing that insofar as emotions are action tendencies, which prime a communicative expression, we are entitled to view the emotion itself as communicative, too. But compare: part of the reason for why we feel fear today is that our ancestors ran away from dangerous animals when they feared them, thereby increasing their fitness. Certain expressions of fear, then, have the proper function of being locomotive—of getting our ancestors from point A to point B. Does it follow, then, that fear, even unexpressed fear, is essentially locomotive? Intuitively, it does not. While emotional expressions (e.g. running away) are the sorts of entities that could be locomotive, emotions themselves are not. What is true of an emotional expression is not necessarily true of an emotion, even if we conceive expressions as components of emotions, and while it may make sense to call an emotional expression essentially communicative, Macnamara has not persuaded us that it makes sense to call an emotion, independently of its expression, essentially communicative. Only perceptible entities that function as public displays are appropriately construed as communicative.

I have argued that Macnamara fails to demonstrate her conclusion that the reactive attitudes are essentially communicative entities. At the same time, I believe that Macnamara is onto something very important, which should not be ignored. Reactive attitudes theorists have tended to focus on two sorts of cases in the past: cases in which someone feels and expresses

resentment toward another (“overt blame”), and cases in which someone feels but does not express this resentment (“private blame”). However, there is also a third possibility: cases in which someone expresses but does not feel resentment (which we could tentatively call “performative blame”).²⁰ An experienced teacher, for instance, can stop a misbehaving student in his tracks by glaring angrily at him, thereby rebuking him, even if the teacher is not resentful in the least. If we allow such cases to count as instances of blame, and I submit that we should, then some kinds of blame are essentially communicative. And, arguably, these kinds of blame are essentially communicative in virtue of being expressive of the reactive attitudes.²¹ Macnamara’s work shows us, rightfully to my mind, that it’s not just the experience of the reactive attitudes that is constitutive of blame, but also, at times, the expression of them. Investigating the social pragmatics distinctive of such expressions, which swing independently of the pragmatic structure of the unexpressed reactive attitudes themselves, opens up new and interesting questions about the nature of praise and blame, which are ripe for philosophical inquiry.²²

²⁰ Here we would be talking about *speaker expressions* of the reactive attitudes.

²¹ At least in paradigm cases, rebukes are utterances that express negative reactive attitudes. Utterances as varied as “Screw you!”, “Are you kidding me?”, “You’re in big trouble now!”, “I am very upset with you!”, “Shame on you!”, and “What you did is wrong!” are united in expressing indignation, resentment, or anger about the behavior in question.

²² I would like to thank Rebecca Kukla, as well as two anonymous reviewers for *Thought*, for providing helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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