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Seeing the anger in someone's face

Abstract

Starting from the assumption that one can literally perceive someone's anger in their face, I argue that this would not be possible if what is perceived is a static facial signature of their anger. There is a product/process distinction in talk of facial expression, and I argue that one can see anger in someone's facial expression only if this is understood to be a process rather than a product.

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Seeing the anger in someone's face

My goal is to make sense of direct realism about other minds. It is a position exemplified in the following quotation from John McDowell:¹

We should not jib at, or interpret away, the commonsense thought that ... one can literally perceive, in another person's facial expression or his behaviour, that he is in pain, and not just infer that he is in pain from what one perceives. (McDowell, 1978, 136)

McDowell argues elsewhere that if we take that which is available to our experience of other minds to be 'something compatible with the person's not being in the "inner" state at all', then we cannot know they are in that state. It is 'straightforwardly incoherent', he says, to suppose that 'knowing that someone is in some "inner" state can be constituted by being in a position in which, for all one knows, the person may not be in that "inner" state.' (1998, 371) So McDowell accepts the Cartesian principle that you do not know something if, *given what is available to your experience*, you could be mistaken about it. But he denies the other Cartesian principle that features of the world around you about which you could be mistaken are not available to your experience. So you can know about other minds, but only because your experience goes all the way out to include them.

In this paper I want to explore how we must construe facial expressions and behaviour so as to make room for the possibility that one can see mental states in them. In particular I will argue that they must be constituted as causal processes rather than as the upshots of such processes. My chosen example here will be that of seeing anger in someone's facial expression or behaviour, but perhaps what works for anger will work for pain and many other states of mind too.

Recently, Mitchell Green has argued too that in expressing ourselves 'we literally make our states of mind perceptible: you can see the anger in someone's face, hear the trepidation in their voice, or feel the exuberance in their handshake.' (2007, 18-19) He suggests two possible models for this idea of seeing states of mind in facial expressions and behaviour, the second of which he endorses. The first is exemplified by the case of seeing a horse in a mirror, a telescope or a photograph (2007, 87). While I am not sure that these three should be lumped together in this way, seeing anger in a face is certainly not like any of them. The mirror, telescope and photograph do not express the horse. Instead his preferred model for how one sees someone's state of mind in the way they express themselves is that of part-whole perception.

Someone who presents to me the surface of an apple from one angle has thereby shown me the apple even if I do not inspect its interior or its other side. The reason is that a sufficiently large portion of a side of an apple is, for normal human observers, not only itself perceptible but also a characteristic component of that apple. This amounts to the fact that under normal conditions, perception of part of an apple's surface is enough to justify me in inferring (if only unconsciously) the existence of the entire apple. (2007, 86)

And he goes on to define the notion of a *characteristic component* as follows:

¹ Another nice example is Austin 1946, who contrasts behaviour or facial expressions that is a symptom or sign of someone's anger with 'an expression or manifestation or display of anger' (1946, 179).

Let α be an object, event, or process that is perceptible. Then we may say that relative to an organism O and ecological situation E, a *characteristic component of α* is a part of α that, when perceived in E without any other part of α being perceived, enables O to perceive α . (2007, 87)

An emotion like anger is taken by Green to have components, some of which are perceptible by others and some of which are not. A ‘facial signature’ of anger counts in certain circumstances as a characteristic component. This means for Green that under normal conditions, perception of that facial signature is enough to justify me in inferring (if only unconsciously) the existence of the emotion. And it means further that perceiving the facial signature enables me to perceive the emotion of anger without needing to perceive any other components of the anger. I perceive someone’s anger by perceiving that facial signature.

Green is not claiming that just by perceiving part of something one can perceive the whole of it, where this means perceiving all of its parts. I cannot see all the parts of something by seeing some of the parts of something. If I go into someone’s house and see a few of its rooms, but perhaps not the attic, I haven’t yet seen the whole house, but I have seen the house. The attic is not an essential and independent part of the house. In this case the part that I have seen, while not being the whole house could not be perceived except as part of a house.

Here there is no difficulty in saying that I see the house when I see part of the house. But it would be misleading to say that I see the house *by* seeing part of the house or that seeing part of it *enables* me to see the house, as though I see something less than the house and then get a free licence in virtue of this part being classed as ‘characteristic’ to say that I’ve seen the house. For, what I identify from the start when I look at this part of the house is the house. On Green’s account there is supposed to be a transition, albeit perhaps an unconscious one, from seeing part of something to seeing the thing itself. But in the case of the house no such transition occurs. In seeing the house in its first two floors, the identification of the house does not *follow* the identification of its first two floors.

But there are other cases of part-whole perception where the part is not essentially part of the thing it is part of, but has an independent existence, and where seeing that part does not essentially involve seeing the thing of which it is a part. Perhaps facing surfaces of apples for example can exist independently of the apples. This may be a moot point, but for the sake of Green’s example let us suppose that the facing surface of an apple with all its perceivable properties could exist as an empty shell with no apple present. The facing surface is described by Green as a characteristic component of an apple, which, when perceived from a certain standpoint, without any other part of the apple being perceived, enables the viewer to perceive the apple.

It is worth noting that it is very unnatural to say that we see an apple *in* its facing surface. So perhaps we should start off being suspicious of this as a model for seeing someone’s anger in their face. But the real problem is that if the facing surface along with its observable properties can exist independently of the apple then seeing the facing surface by itself does not amount to seeing the apple. It amounts to seeing something that falls short of the circumstance itself, to use McDowell’s phrase,²

² McDowell, 1998, 371

whereas what we were after was a way of understanding how we can see right through to the anger in someone's face.

Green does talk of 'normal conditions' and also of the 'ecological situation E' of the observer in seeing one thing by seeing another. And this might suggest that some further condition about the observer's situation is what transforms seeing what is merely a component of something into seeing that thing itself. So, perhaps the idea is that seeing a facing surface can constitute seeing an apple when it is combined with some environmental condition, E. But if that is the view then it faces a nasty dilemma. Either E is something the perceiver must be aware of or it is not. If it is then we have lost the idea that you perceive the apple just by perceiving the facing surface. It seems that you perceive it by perceiving the facing surface and also by being aware of some further condition.

So much for the first horn of the dilemma. But if the environmental condition E can mean that consciousness of a facing surface is consciousness of an apple without itself being something that the observer is conscious of, then in the case of being conscious of an apple all that the observer need be conscious of is the facing surface. This means that as far as the observer's consciousness is concerned there is no difference between their being aware of the apple and their being aware of the facing surface. But this contradicts the idea that the apple is not essentially present in its facing surface along with all the perceivable properties of that surface. Of course, consciousness of one thing can *become* consciousness of something else as a result of certain environmental conditions being in play. But what seems 'straightforwardly incoherent' is to suppose that consciousness of one thing can *count as* consciousness of something else in virtue of certain environmental conditions outside of conscious awareness being in play.

For Green as I read him, in certain favourable circumstances being aware of someone's facial expression gives you awareness of their state of anger even though that facial expression could exist without being part of a state of anger. But if that is right then these favourable conditions, which one may not be conscious of, mean that consciousness of one thing is consciousness of something different. And that is what I cannot make sense of.

So let us consider a different and simpler model of what it is to see one thing in another. This is that the first thing is contained in the perceived features of the second. This means that in being fully aware of the second thing, one is aware of the first. So on this model, if I see someone's anger in their facial expression then the perceived features of their facial expression include that they are angry. In the same way I might see the diamond pattern in some wallpaper if in perceiving the wallpaper I perceive that it has a diamond pattern; the perceivable features of the wallpaper include its diamond pattern. Or I might see the quality in a piece of writing if in perceiving the piece of writing I perceive that it has this feature.

This model seems to be the best bet for a direct realist about other people's anger. But there still remains the puzzle of how someone's state of mind can be a perceivable feature of their facial expression and behaviour. The puzzle can be expressed by pressing the analogy with the relationship between the apple's facing surface and the apple. Isn't someone's facial expression (or behaviour) something that can exist along with all its perceivable properties independently of the existence of the person's anger?

One move that does not work I think is to claim that behaviour and expression are things – like sun burn – whose causes are essential to their being the *kinds of* things they are. A skin condition only counts as sunburn if it is caused by exposure to

the sun or other source of UV radiation. Likewise we might try to say that someone's facial expression only counts as agonised if it is caused by their being in a psychological state of pain; their behaviour only counts as angry if it is caused by their being angry.

This move does not work for at least two reasons. First, it just isn't the case that we take the actual cause of an angry or agonised facial expression to be essential to its being that particular sort of expression. Second, the cause of some expression, behaviour or skin condition once it has been caused is not present to the perceiver when they see that thing. You cannot see the sun exposure in the sunburnt skin, although you can infer that it happened. What the direct realist about anger requires is that what is actually present to the perceiver when they see someone expressing that anger is something that involves the person being angry. In general a cause is not actually present in an effect even if the effect only counts as that kind of thing in virtue of its having that kind of cause.

Mitchell Green's use of the phrase 'facial signature' to pick out a facial expression characteristic of one type of emotion or another is interesting given this. The classic psychological and ethnological experiments on the relationship between facial expressions and emotions have worked with photographs of expressions associated with different emotional states, although there have been some experiments with moving pictures too. So Paul Ekman and his colleagues over the years have shown subjects pictures of people's faces and asked them to describe the emotion.³ Certain patterns of response to these pictures transcend cultural differences, giving some support to the view that there is a biological basis for emotion recognition.

But it is important to distinguish the ability to associate certain types of emotional state with certain facial patterns from the ability to know what someone's emotional state is by seeing such a facial pattern. The observers succeed in recognising the emotional type in a facial pattern whether the picture is of a real emotion or a faked emotion. But the question at issue is whether one can actually see someone's real emotional state in their facial expression.

Someone's signature is a piece of writing representing their name which is actually written by them. It would not be a signature if the pattern of writing were accidental or forged. A forged signature is not a signature at all. But just by looking at a signature one cannot see that it genuinely is a signature. One may infer that it is from its various features. But its being genuinely a signature is not present to the viewer. In the same way a facial expression arrived at by a mimic may not actually be an expression of pain or anger even though it is indistinguishable from one. So what the viewer of the picture sees might happen to be a genuine emotional expression. But they cannot see that in the picture.

Of course the knowledge someone has who looks at a picture of a facial signature representing anger that it does indeed represent anger may well be non-inferential knowledge. But it is not knowledge that the subject of the emotion is angry – only that their face has an expression associated with anger. In the same way I may see and therefore know without the use of inference what name is represented in someone's signature but not know non-inferentially that someone of that name has signed it.

A witness to a signature is not a witness of the piece of writing existing on the page. The witness must see the signature being produced. So there is a product/process distinction in this talk of signatures. What you witness in witnessing a

³ See for example Ekman and Friesen (1975).

signature is a process; to avoid ambiguity we could call it a signing. What you look at when you look back at the document is a product of that process. The product counts as a signature in virtue of the process satisfying certain conditions. It is like sunburn in this respect. One can be aware of the product of a signing but not as such. One is just aware of it as a certain pattern of ink. But on the face of it, one can be aware of the signing as a signing. That is what one is aware of when one witnesses a signature.

This suggests the possibility that, although one cannot be aware of someone's state of mind in their facial signature – i.e. in the pattern that one might discern looking at a picture of them – yet one might be aware of their state of mind in the process that results in that pattern. The possibility to consider here is that one can witness someone's expressing their emotional state in the development of their facial pattern even though one may not be able to witness their state just by examining that facial pattern. One can see their anger as it plays out on their face.

A process of expressing anger essentially involves that anger. Going through the motions, even highly convincingly is a different process. And unlike witnessing the product of that process, it seems that in witnessing the process of expressing anger you are aware of the anger itself. So the question is if and how one can really witness such processes. Even more clearly than for the word 'signature' there is a process/product distinction associated with the word 'expression'. An expression is what ensues when someone expresses, and this may be taken either to be an *expressing* or the result of an expressing. In the first sense an expression may for instance be called sustained. In the second sense an expression may be the sort of thing that is recognised in a picture.

The issue here does not concern fallibility or infallibility. One can be wrong in one's judgement that someone is expressing anger in the process of their facial expression or behaviour. In the same way one can witness someone's signature without there being anything infallible about one's judgement. Indeed one might be no more reliable in reading off emotional states from processes of emotional expression than from static patterns of expression (though I strongly suspect we are more reliable). The issue is not whether such judgments might simply be mistaken but whether such judgements might be mistaken *given* what is available to the experience of the person making them. Is there something present to your experience when you see someone signing their name or expressing their pain or anger that means that these are genuine expressions or signings?

When we recognize the emotion of anger associated with a facial pattern, we can call the face an angry face. We can identify an angry expression (where the experience is taken to be a product). And we can do these things without anger actually being present. You can ask an actor to give you an angry face, and if they are good enough they can comply without having to become angry in the process. It seems clear that what is identified in a picture of a genuinely angry person is the same angry face that is identified in a picture of a good actor. In this sense genuine anger cannot be seen in a facial pattern.

But note a crucial change here if we switch from the adjective to the adverb. While angry faces need not be manifestations of anger, angrily staring, sneering, shouting, etc must be manifestations of real anger. Things cannot be done *angrily*, *in* anger or *out of* anger without real anger being present. If you ask an actor to scowl at you angrily and they just pretend to scowl at you angrily they have not complied with the request. The only way they can really comply is by generating some anger and then using that to generate the scowl.

The point of the switch from adjective to adverb is that what is being qualified has switched from the product to the ongoing process. What is in the process of being done in an expression of anger is done angrily. The product of that process is something that might be qualified by the word 'angry' but not in a way that implies that any real anger must be involved.

So there is at least a prima facie case for thinking that the direct realist who claims that it is possible to see in someone's facial expression and their behaviour that they are angry should take the facial expression and the behaviour to be processes of expressing anger rather than the products of such processes. This might seem more obvious for behaviour than it is for facial expression. But the point still needs to be made there since there is a widespread philosophical tendency to treat even behaviour as the upshot of a process of behaving rather than as the process itself. When you bang your fist angrily against a table the positions of the fist realize an arc of a certain shape and certain vibrations occur in the table. In being aware of these things one is not aware of the anger. Only if one can be aware of the process of banging the fist down in anger can one be aware of the anger itself in that process.

To complete the picture we would need a philosophical explanation of the nature of processes and of how they can be perceived, which I won't try to provide here.⁴ But I will finish by trying instead to make some response to the Humean sceptic who argues that we are never aware of processes, but only ever aware of individual stages of processes. According to this sceptic, one can perceive the characteristic stages of a process – someone's fist being at one position at one time, at another position at another time and at intervening positions at intervening times – but not the motion of the fist through these positions. One can see a billiard ball first in one place and then touching another billiard ball and then the other billiard ball being further on, but one cannot see the momentum of the first billiard ball either generating its own motion or being transferred by an impact to the other ball.

Given this scepticism about the possibility of perceiving processes, my suggestion that we might be able to see someone's anger in their facial expression in virtue of seeing it in the process of their expressing such anger would fail. The Humean does not allow that anything else is perceivable except the succession of patterns of facial expression following some initial situation. And there is nothing in any of this succession of stages however characteristic they are of anger that means the subject is actually angry.

The Humean might either simply be a sceptic about processes or they might have a reductive view that identifies a process with the sequence of stages characteristic of that type of process. For example Russell (1903, section 442) identified motion as 'the occupation by one entity of a continuous series of places at a continuous series of times'. So, for Russell, processes are not completely invisible; at any one time one stage of the process is visible. But the process as such is not visible. Moreover there is no space at all in this account for the possibility of seeing as present the *moving*, the *causing*, the *changing* - the flux.

Russell's conception of a process is of something that is not a continuant, but of something extended in time and with temporal parts. The occupation by an entity of a continuous series of places at a continuous series of times can be broken into its occupation of that series of places and times up to a certain point and its occupation of the series of places and times after that point. Each occupation of a place at a time is one of an infinite series of parts of the overall process. On this view a process does

⁴ I do try to do this elsewhere; see for example Stout (1996, 46-62).

not literally continue through time – one and the same thing at different times. At any one time all that is strictly present is a part of the process.

This idea that all that is ever identifiably present at a particular moment is a momentary stage of a process can be derived from an empiricist conception of experience. For Hume, all that is present to experience are a series of impressions – snapshots of the sensible world. Each of these snapshots is self-contained and has no implications for the way things are at other times. According to this conception of what can be present to experience, we cannot experience whatever it is that drives the world from one snapshot to the next. We cannot experience the *continuing* or the *changing*; but just the starting point and end point, and all points in between.

But on the face of it processes are things that continue through time. What is happening at one moment can be kept track of and identified at another moment just as physical objects can. And as with physical objects there is room for a type-token distinction concerning the question of whether something is the same process as before. You may ask a DIY fanatic hard at work with bricks and mortar whether they are still building their garden wall or whether this is a new process of wall building that they are embarked on. Is it just the same type of process or is it the same token process? Or you may ask the person expressing anger in their face whether this is the same manifestation of anger that you witnessed a few minutes ago or is it a new one. Sometimes the answer to this sort of question might not be completely clear, in the same sort of way that it might not be clear whether someone's broom that has had thirteen new brushes and ten new handles is really the same broom. But this does not undermine the commonsense thought that processes, like physical objects, are continuants – things that can be kept track of as they change through time.

One metaphysical story that might support this is Aristotle's model of a process as the actualization of a potentiality (*Physics*, 201a10-11). Or we might similarly think of a process as the realization of a disposition, the working of a mechanism, the exercise of a capacity, and so on. The momentum of the billiard ball when it is fully realized just is the process of its motion. And in the same way the realization of an emotional state just is the process of that state becoming manifest. A realization of a disposition is something that might be kept track of over time, and identified as a token not just a type.

What we want instead of the Humean/Russellian model then is a model that includes the possibility of feeling the strength of a man in his handshake or seeing the fragility of the glass in the way it shatters at the slightest impact with the side of the sink. In these cases of seeing A in B, B is not a part of A nor is it a separate entity which acts as a sort of conduit for seeing A. B is or includes a manifestation or realization or actualisation of the potentiality that is A. In the same way I can see the anger in someone's facial expression because I see the realization of the disposition of their anger as it manifests itself in their facial expressions. And in being aware of the realization of this disposition I am aware of something that continues - one and the same thing – across the duration of the expression of the emotion.

When we identify the expression of an emotion as a process rather than a state we identify it in a way that involves the emotion. So, for example, bursting into tears out of frustration is quite distinct from other processes of tears flowing out of one's eyes. Blushing in embarrassment is a distinct process from flushing red due to the effects of alcohol on one's blood vessels. Twisting up one's face in grief and despair is distinct from twisting up one's face in mock grief and despair and distinct again from one's face twisting up to exactly the same position in a series of muscle spasms.

To see a disposition in action it helps if you are not too passive. The empiricist model of perception in which qualities in a thing are imprinted on the perceiver's senses and then imprinted on their ideas does not allow for the perception of powers, as Hume quite rightly observed. An active experimental conception of perception, like that associated with J. J. Gibson (1966) in which the perceiver orientates their sense organs in a way that interrogates their environment and establishes sensitivity to the presence of something by engaging with that thing is required here.⁵ I become consciously aware of the man's strength not by seeing the dumb bells held above his head but by testing out his strength, perhaps by arm wrestling with him.

The same goes for emotional expression. Emotional expression is a process of a dynamic unfolding of changes in the face and other aspects of behaviour; and it is a process that involves interaction with the world around and responsiveness to feedback from that world. Richard Wollheim (1999, 223-4) brings out this dynamic interactive nature of emotional expression as follows:

A desire forms. We are thereby sensitized to the world. The world satisfies or frustrates our desire: we experience the impact of the world. We respond to this impact by forming an attitude. But this attitude, we must recognize, anticipates a reaction from the world. And to this reaction, we have in turn some idea of how we would expect ourselves to respond. And so on. ... In these narratives, conscious or unconscious, like the identities of emotions.

For example, in expressing anger, one might signal one's response to someone's behaviour in one's facial expression, raise one's voice and impose one's physical presence on them in some way that demands a response from them. That response might be an apology or capitulation of some other sort, after which the anger may abate. But if the response is to face up to the anger then further more violent expression may follow and the emotional interplay escalate.

This description makes emotional expression seem like making moves in a game. But of course the process is much smoother than this – more like dancing or boxing with someone than playing chess with them. Eye contact, pitch of voice and other aspects of so-called 'body language' keep the process co-ordinated.

If I engage with your anger by being a party to this sort of process I can sensitively establish the shape of your emotional state. I resonate with it. I feel the extent of its borders with my own part of the process – probing and testing. Our eyes meet and as they do your face contracts into a scowl and you hold my eyes for a second longer than is standard in non-emotional situations. I look away and move slightly back; you continue to stare and move slightly forwards with a menacing clenching of your fists. I look back with ironic enquiry; you look away in disgust. I know what you are feeling; I am not doing it through inference.

Vasudevi Reddy (2008) describes a number of ways of perceiving the emotional and other mental states of others employed by even very young infants. The key thing is that these babies engage actively and emotionally with their parents in the process of learning about their parents' mental states. And to begin with this can be part of simple playful interaction. For example the baby might tease the parent and disrupt the parent's expectations of the baby's behaviour in order to *tease out* the parent's intentions (Reddy, 2008, 172). And their development of the skills of

⁵ This idea, perhaps more familiar in the phenomenological tradition than in the analytic tradition of philosophy, finds a classic representation in the psychological literature in the work of J. J. Gibson (1966).

emotional engagement in playing emotionally with their parents does not come *after* their learning how to recognize their parents' emotional states, but is part of the same learning process.

Lynne Murray's experiments with two month old babies are interesting here.⁶ To test whether the babies were really engaging in a kind of emotional dialogue with their mothers, she established mother-baby communication through closed circuit TV, involving all the usual eye contact, smiles, laughs, vocalisations and movements. When the baby starts to get pre-recorded footage rather than live broadcast of their mother's behaviour, the baby becomes confused, smiles less and looks away more despite there being the same amount of smiles, vocalisations, etc from the mother in the pre-recorded footage the baby is being exposed to. The implication is that the two-month old baby is genuinely eliciting responses from the mother in interactions with her and not just responding to the mother's moves. And because this happens so early it does not seem plausible to suppose it is based on some other way of knowing what feelings the parent is expressing.

If you are expressing to me your anger with someone *else* then the interaction is different and perhaps not so straightforward, but my part in it may still be emotional, even if I am at the same time trying to calm you down for example. I might either share your anger, or not share it but see where you are coming from, or perhaps be affronted by it and react against it. But in each case I am resonating with your emotional state by interacting with the process of its expression.

This interactive perceptual process need not involve an empathetic adoption of the other person's feelings. I do not have to become angry to see that you are angry, and indeed by becoming angry myself I have removed the focus of attention from your anger. For anything I have said so far, it need not even involve a sympathetic emotional response. However there is a certain kind of very unsympathetic response to an emotional expression which is designed to block that expression, and of course that would fail to resonate sensitively to the contours of the other person's emotional state.

By focusing on this model of perceiving someone's anger by interacting with it I am not ruling out the possibility of being non-inferentially aware of someone's emotional state by observing the process of their expressing their anger – perhaps towards someone else. Indeed I am pretty sure we can see someone's anger in their face even when their expression is not directed at us. It is just that the possibility of observing someone's anger directly is much clearer in those cases where one *is* interacting with it oneself by engaging emotionally with that person.

What is present to one's awareness when someone else is angry is a disposition in realization – an emotion in display. One is sensitive to this fully realized disposition not in virtue of seeing one after the other the upshots of this disposition, but by observing this dispositional state as it manifests itself in the face of the subject. And the most basic way of observing this is by interacting and engaging with it.

⁶ See Murray (1980), described in Reddy (2008, 75).

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