



Duchenne smiles are actions not mere happenings: lessons from the debate on expressive action

*(La sonrisa de Duchenne es una acción no un mero suceso:
lecciones del debate sobre las acciones expresivas)*

Marta CABRERA*
Universitat de València

ABSTRACT: In this paper, I will argue that, contrary to what is generally assumed in the debate on expressive action, we do not have good reasons to exclude facial and bodily expressions of emotion such as smiling or frowning from the category of actions. For this purpose, I will compare facial and bodily expressions of emotion with simple expressive actions, such as jumping for joy or covering one's face in shame. I will try to show that simple expressive actions cannot be presented as actions while excluding facial and bodily expressions of emotion from this condition. My contention will then be that either both sorts of behaviour are to be identified as actions or neither is. The latter sounds rather implausible, though, as we would have to assimilate jumping for joy or covering one's face in shame to spasms, which conflicts with the way we relate to such behaviours. My conclusion will then be that both simple expressive actions and facial and bodily expressions of emotion should be included within the category of actions, at least on the basis of the main assumptions in the current debate on expressive action.

KEYWORDS: rationality; instrumentality; voluntariness; responsiveness; evaluative perspective.

RESUMEN: En este artículo argumentaré que, a diferencia de lo que suele asumirse en el debate sobre las acciones expresivas, no tenemos buenas razones para excluir a las expresiones faciales y corporales de las emociones, como sonreír o fruncir el ceño, de la categoría de acciones. Para ello, compararé las expresiones faciales y corporales de las emociones con acciones expresivas simples como, por ejemplo, saltar de alegría o cubrirse avergonzado la cara. Intentaré mostrar que no puede presentarse a las acciones expresivas simples como acciones y excluir, al mismo tiempo, a las expresiones faciales y corporales de las emociones de esta categoría. Sostendré, por tanto, que, o bien ambos tipos de comportamiento son acciones, o bien ninguno lo es. Esto último, no obstante, resulta bastante problemático, ya que tendríamos que asimilar el saltar de alegría o el cubrirse avergonzado la cara a meros espasmos, lo cual entra en conflicto con la manera en la que nos relacionamos con este tipo de comportamientos. Mi conclusión será entonces que tanto las acciones expresivas simples como las expresiones faciales y corporales de las emociones han de ser incluidas en la categoría de acciones, al menos, dados los presupuestos principales del debate actual sobre acciones expresivas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: racionalidad; instrumentalidad; voluntariedad; capacidad de respuesta; perspectiva evaluativa.

* **Correspondence to:** Marta Cabrera. Department of Philosophy, Universitat de València. Avd. Blasco Ibáñez, 30 (46010 València-Spain) – Marta.Cabrera@uv.es – <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6702-3707>

How to cite: Cabrera, Marta (2022). «Duchenne smiles are actions not mere happenings: lessons from the debate on expressive action»; *Theoria. An International Journal for Theory, History and Foundations of Science*, 37(2), 163-179. (<https://doi.org/10.1387/theoria.22572>).

Received: 2021-03-05; Final version: 2022-04-25.

ISSN 0495-4548 - eISSN 2171-679X / © 2022 UPV/EHU



This work is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

In this paper, I will argue that, contrary to what is generally assumed in the debate on expressive action, we do not have good reasons to exclude facial and bodily expressions of emotion such as smiling, frowning, crying, clenching one's fists or hanging one's head from the category of actions.¹ For this purpose, I will compare facial and bodily expressions of emotion with simple expressive actions, such as jumping for joy, covering one's face in shame, scratching one's head in frustration or punching the air in delight. I will try to show that simple expressive actions cannot be presented as actions while excluding facial and bodily expressions of emotion from this condition. My contention will then be that either both sorts of behaviour are to be identified as actions or neither is. The latter sounds rather implausible, though, as we would have to assimilate jumping for joy or covering one's face in shame to spasms, which conflicts with the way we relate to such behaviours. My conclusion will then be that both simple expressive actions and facial and bodily expressions of emotion should be included within the category of actions, at least on the basis of the main assumptions in the current debate on expressive action.

In section 1, I introduce the category of facial and bodily expressions of emotion, together with the reasons why participants in the debate have tended to exclude such behaviours from the category of actions. In section 2, I present the category of simple expressive actions and briefly examine the way such behaviours have been accounted for in the literature. In section 3, I compare simple expressive actions with facial and bodily expressions of emotion and argue that, on the basis of the main assumptions in this debate, either both kinds of expressive behaviour are to be identified as actions or neither is. Since the latter sounds rather implausible —given the way we approach behaviours such as jumping for joy or covering our faces in shame— I conclude that both simple expressive actions and facial and bodily expressions of emotion should be included within the category of actions.

1. *Facial and bodily expressions of emotion*

Within the debate on expressive action, there is a wide consensus with respect to the idea that *facial and bodily expressions of emotion* such as smiling or frowning are not actions of an agent (Hursthouse, 1991; Goldie, 2000; Betzler, 2007; Helm, 2016; Bennett, 2016; Müller & Wong, forthcoming).² The introduction of such category stems from the need to clarify which kinds of expressive behaviour are actions and which are mere happenings an agent

¹ By “debate on expressive action” I refer to the debate initiated by Hursthouse with her paper *Arational actions* (1991). This debate has been variously referred to in the literature as the debate on arational actions, emotional behaviour, actions by emotion, emotional expression or expressive action (Goldie, 2000; Döring, 2003; Betzler, 2007, 2009; Helm, 2016; Bennett, 2016, 2021; Müller & Wong, forthcoming). Following Betzler and Bennett, I will talk about the debate on expressive action when I speak of such debate.

² In Hursthouse's terms, facial and bodily expressions of emotion are not *intentional* actions. Throughout this debate, participants have indistinctly talked about “actions” and “intentional actions”, and have distinguished them from what merely happens to an agent (Goldie, 2000; Betzler, 2007; Müller & Wong, forthcoming), mere evincings (Helm, 2001, 2016), reflexes (Bennett, 2016) or reactions (Bennett, 2021). In this paper, rather than the contrast between intentional and non-intentional action, I will follow the contrast between *actions and happenings* that appears to underly all such proposals.

undergoes. As it is evident, whether or not some piece of behaviour is an expression of our agency is not a trivial issue: it is one of the most important distinctions in philosophy and everyday life, for it is clear that we relate very differently to actions than to mere happenings.

The clearest statement of the idea that behaviours such as smiling or frowning cannot be seen as actions may be found in Goldie's description of the category of facial and bodily expressions of emotion:³

I turn now to those expressions of emotion *which are not in any sense actions*. I have in mind not only facial expressions of emotion (the smile and the frown, the contortion of the face in fear, the opening wide of the eyes in surprise), but also laughter, the flow of tears and the tremor of fear in the voice. They too, like bodily changes, can be *causally explained*, but they are not actions, in spite of the fact that we think of them as expressions of emotion, rather than as part of the emotion itself. In this category I am mainly interested in those involuntary bodily movements which are involved in expressing some emotions. I emphasize *involuntary* in order to contrast them with what we can, and sometimes do, directly try to do. We can smile in order to give the impression we are glad when we are not; we can smile when we are glad in order to show that we are; and we can smile because smiling gives us pleasure. But all these ways of smiling are to be contrasted with the *genuine* or "Duchenne" smile, which involves distinct muscles which we cannot directly try to move (...) we need not feel pushed towards postulation of a motive for his smiling, or of a *means-end belief-desire explanation* of it. A smile would be an action, explicable like this, only if it were of the sort discussed at the end of the preceding paragraph [when we smile in order to give the impression we are glad when we are not]. (Goldie, 2000, p. 34-5, emphasis added)

The idea here is that facial and bodily expressions of emotion are not always performed in view of some particular end – they often simply express or reveal the emotion that someone is feeling, in which case, and for the reasons emphasised above, they cannot be regarded as actions of an agent. When speaking of this kind of behaviour then, we have in mind *genuine* facial and bodily expressions, and not crocodile tears or the smiles that we perform "in order to give the impression we are glad when we are not" (Goldie, 2000, p. 34)

Goldie adds that we should distinguish such kind of expressive behaviour from what he calls "bodily changes", that is, those alterations that take place when we experience emotions and that can never be regarded as actions: "autonomic nervous system responses and hormonal changes such as sweating, change of heart-rate, secretion of adrenalin and so forth, and muscular reactions such as trembling, flinching. (...) These changes just happen to us; they are not things which we do or can directly try to do" (2000, p. 26). According to him, then, both bodily changes and facial and bodily expressions of emotion are *involuntary reactions* (and not responses) *that have to be causally explained*. The only difference between these two categories seems to be that facial and bodily expressions of emotion are *expressions* of the emotion while bodily changes are *part of the emotion itself*. Goldie does not explain, however, how we are to understand such a contrast.⁴

³ Although Goldie does not give a name to this category, "facial and bodily expressions of emotion" seems to be a convenient label given the kind of behaviour included in such category.

⁴ The distinction between facial and bodily expressions of emotion, on the one hand, and bodily changes, on the other, together with the idea that none of these kinds of behaviour are actions is fairly widespread within the debate on expressive action. Müller and Wong, for instance, distinguish between "basic bodily expressions" —smiling, frowning or dropping one's voice— and "reflex-like

Since our focus in this paper is on facial and bodily expressions of emotion, we will leave bodily changes out of our discussion. We may summarise the reasons for the exclusion of facial and bodily expressions of emotion from the category of actions by reference to Goldie's first quote (2000, p. 34-5):

- C1. They cannot be explained by a *means-end belief-desire explanation* or, in other words, they are not instrumental.
- C2. They are *causally explained*, that is, they are alien to rationality.
- C3. They are *involuntary*.

In light of these criteria, we may conclude that, from this view, smiling, frowning, crying, laughing, opening one's eyes, hanging one's head, clenching or pounding one's fists, etc. are analogous, in a relevant sense, to *spasms and reflexes*: they are mere happenings or symptoms disconnected from our agency.⁵ That is, they are not *things we do*, but rather *things that happen to us*.

This view, however, seems to raise an important dilemma within the debate on expressive action. As I will try to show, the claim that facial and bodily expressions of emotion *are not actions*—following C1-C3—conflicts with the claim that simple expressive actions, such as jumping for joy or covering one's face in shame, *are actions*.⁶ As I will argue, C1-

emotional reactions”—recoiling in shock or disgustedly spitting out an insect—and claim that none of these kinds of behaviour are actions because they are *not instrumental nor rational nor voluntary* (forthcoming). Similarly, and following Hursthouse, Bennett distinguishes between “phenomena like blushing, sweating” and “forms of behaviour like smiling”. He claims that none of these kinds of behaviour are actions and that the difference between them is that the latter “often occur involuntarily but (...) it is possible to stop or to suppress [them]” (2016, p. 75), unlike in the case of blushing or sweating. This is precisely Hursthouse's idea: she says that we often clench our fists, smile or frown without being aware of such movements—in which case they are not actions of ours—while, on some other occasions, we become aware of them while we are already performing them (1991, p. 65). In such case, she says, the thing *we do* is simply *refraining from stopping*. From this view, then, genuine smiles can never be regarded as actions – they are mere “manifestations of emotion [that] remain immune to rational explanation” (Bennett, 2016, p. 75). This is why Bennett claims that we should “distinguish the *symptoms* of some mental state, such as crying or smiling, from those objects (and, I claim, actions) that possess expressive power because they seem to capture or reflect some mental state (or the content thereof)” (2016, p. 84). By contrast, Helm seems to conflate facial and bodily of expressions of emotion and bodily changes in a single category, which he labels “*evinings*”. Within such category, we find “bits of behaviour that are simply caused by the emotion, behaviours such as changes in respiration or pulse rate or certain facial or other gestures, such as a wince or fist pounding” (2016, p. 97) as well as behaviours such as gritting one's teeth or hanging one's head in shame (Helm, 2001, p. 75). This kind of behaviour should be contrasted with what Helm calls “expressions of emotion”, that is, “actions that are rationally motivated by the evaluative content of the emotion”, such as jumping for joy or rumpling someone's hair out of love (2016, p. 97).

⁵ My claim is not that participants in this debate hold that facial and bodily expressions of emotion are *identical* to spasms and reflexes, but, rather, that they grant them *the same status as mere happenings*.

⁶ Someone might wonder whether C1-C3 are necessary or sufficient conditions for a behaviour to count as an action, or whether they are separate conditions at all. I myself have no clear answer to this question, however, whether C1-C2 are necessary or sufficient conditions for agency does not affect my argument, since my claim is that bodily and facial expressions of emotion and simple expressive actions *satisfy the same criteria* and, therefore, should be included within the same category, regardless of whether such criteria impose necessary or sufficient conditions.

C3 cannot justify our classifying these two kinds of expressive behaviour differently, for it seems that:

- Neither can be instrumentally explained.
- Both can be rationally explained.
- Both can involve muscles we cannot directly control.

If the arguments that I will present in favour of such view are sound, it seems that participants in the debate on expressive action are faced with an important dilemma: *either both sorts of behaviour are to be identified as actions or neither is.*

As I will argue in coming sections, the latter sounds rather problematic, as we would have to assimilate simple expressive actions, such as jumping for joy or covering one's face in shame, to spasms, which conflicts with the way we relate to such behaviours. I will conclude, then, that —on the basis of the main assumptions in the current debate— both simple expressive actions and facial and bodily expressions of emotion *should be included within the category of actions*. Insistence on the idea that facial and bodily expressions of emotion cannot be regarded as actions, would seem to require that new reasons should be provided to help differentiate such pieces of behaviour from simple expressive actions.

However, before we can compare facial and bodily expressions of emotion with simple expressive actions and argue for the idea that they should both be included within the category of actions, we must examine in some detail what simple expressive actions are and the way they have been accounted for in the debate on expressive action.

2. Simple expressive actions

At first sight, jumping for joy seems like one of the simplest things we can do. Compared to actions such as cooking a meal, writing a novel or building a bridge, happily jumping up and down when receiving good news seems to be an action that does not require from us a too complex analysis. The same goes for something apparently as simple as covering one's face in shame —when remembering, for instance, a particularly shameful moment— or scratching one's head in frustration.⁷

Such behaviours, however, as Hursthouse (1991) famously noted, cannot be regarded as actions by the lights of the standard account of agency. According to such account, (1) a behaviour counts as an action if it can be rationalised, and (2) to rationalise an action is to present it as something instrumentally valuable from the perspective of attaining some end. That is, if A is an action performed by subject S, we should be able to explain A by offering a desire-belief pair (D-B) such that satisfying desire D is the aim of S and S has the belief B according to which A allows her to satisfy D.⁸ Running away from a predator in fear, for instance, clearly admits of a rationalisation of this kind and, consequently, can be considered an action: the subject has the desire to protect herself and the belief that running away

⁷ We are considering cases in which an agent *genuinely* jumps for joy, covers her face in shame or scratches her head in frustration. In such cases, the agent does not perform such behaviours in view of some end – she does not jump, for instance, in order to communicate her happiness; she just joyfully jumps at some good news she has received, for instance.

⁸ See Davidson (1963).

is the best means of satisfying such desire. If we take this view, therefore, we cannot regard jumping for joy or covering our faces in shame as actions: when we jump for joy, we are not trying to instrumentally satisfy an end through our jumping. Likewise, when we cover our faces in shame, we are not trying to instrumentally satisfy an end through our covering our faces. According to this, and against our initial intuition, then, it does not look like there is *something we do* in such cases – such behaviours are mere happenings we undergo.

The standard account of agency, though, was put into question by Hursthouse, who defended the idea that there is a class of actions —*arational* actions— which are *clearly* actions despite not being instrumentally rationalisable.⁹ This would be the case of jumping for joy, covering one's face in shame, rumpling the hair of a loved one out of affection, rolling in grief in the clothes of a loved one who has died, destroying things in a fit of rage, gouging out the eyes of a rival in a picture out of hatred, etc. In all these cases, we are unable to explain what the agent does by reference to a belief-desire pair that shows her action as something instrumentally valuable. According to Hursthouse, these actions can only be explained by saying that “in the grip of the emotion, the agent just felt like doing them” (1991, p. 61). From this view then, we can admit that some of the things we do are disconnected from instrumental rationality —and are, hence, arational— but are still actions of ours. If this is correct, it seems that the standard account of agency is in trouble and that our intuition that jumping for joy and covering one's face in shame are *actions* can be preserved.

Many have tried, nonetheless, to show that the standard account is immune to Hursthouse's attack because the class of actions that she presents —or, at least, most of the actions she presents— *can* be rationalised after all (Smith, 1998; Goldie, 2000; Helm, 2001, 2016; Betzler, 2007, 2009; Döring, 2003; Scarantino & Nielsen, 2015; Bennett, 2016, 2021; Müller & Wong, forthcoming). The shared thought here seems to be that, if some piece of behaviour can be regarded as an action, then such behaviour *must be* connected to rationality in some sense. From this point of view, then, the idea that there is something like *arational* actions cannot be correct.

Before examining the way in which some such views have accounted for the behaviours we are interested in —jumping for joy, covering our faces in shame, etc.— we should briefly sketch two crucial features of how the debate has evolved since Hursthouse's seminal paper. Firstly, the current debate has produced a number of distinctions within the class of so-called arational actions. Although not everyone explicitly agrees in this respect, the common assumption is that not all cases in Hursthouse's list belong to the same kind (Goldie, 2000; Betzler, 2007, 2009; Scarantino & Nielsen, 2015; Pineda, 2019; Müller & Wong, forthcoming) and should be divided into three types: symbolically displaced actions, radically displaced actions and simple expressive actions.¹⁰ The cases we are inter-

⁹ In Hursthouse terms, such actions are clearly *intentional* actions.

¹⁰ Symbolically and radically displaced actions are actions in which the object of an emotion is displaced to a different object that emerges as the explicit object of the action. In the case of *symbolically displaced actions*, “there is some relation between object of emotion and object of expressive action onto which the agent's mind might latch” (Goldie, 2000, p. 31). This is what happens when one rolls in grief in the clothes of a loved one who has died or when gouging out the eyes of a rival in a picture out of hatred. Since the object of the agent's emotion is not available for her to act on it —in the first case, because the loved one has passed away and, in the second, because there are social conventions discour-

ested in —jumping for joy, covering one’s face in shame, punching the air in delight or scratching one’s head in frustration— belong to the latter type. Secondly, attempts to rebut Hursthouse’s case against the standard account have mainly focused on symbolically displaced actions.¹¹ As a result of this, simple expressive actions and radically displaced actions have gone under-explored. In fact, simple expressive actions tend to be presented as *residual, problematic or even borderline cases* (Goldie, 2000; Betzler, 2007, 2009; Bennett, 2016). The usual strategy has been to show that symbolically displaced actions *do have a purpose* and, therefore, that we can easily rationalise them in instrumental terms.¹² Hence, such kind of behaviours are not *arational* actions – they are actions perfectly explained by the standard account. Furthermore, some of the participants in the debate seem to be convinced that this line of reasoning not only applies to symbolically displaced actions, but to all actions included in Hursthouse’s list and, therefore, that her case against the standard account of agency fails.

This last strategy, however, seems to have devastating consequences for simple expressive actions, since instrumental explanations of behaviours such as jumping for joy or covering one’s face in shame clearly *over-intellectualise* them. Bennett argues, for instance, that so-called arational actions do have “a *purpose* —that of doing justice, or giving adequate external form to one’s sense of the situation” (2016, p. 74, emphasis added)— which means that they can be instrumentally rationalised – and that even the “spontaneous case [jumping for joy] is susceptible of a ‘reading’ that might show why it would be appropriate to select [such expressive behaviour] as a fitting vehicle for that emotion if (...) one is in the business of deliberately selecting a vehicle for one’s emotion” (2016, p. 91-2). The problem is that it does not look like we deliberately select a vehicle for our joy when we jump for joy.

Smith (1998), on the other hand, does not mention examples of simple expressive actions but assumes that his proposal can explain away all cases presented by Hursthouse.

aging us from gouging people’s eyes out— her action takes a different object that bears some symbolic relation with the object of her emotion. There is also a displacement of the object of one’s emotion in *radically displaced actions* but such displacement involves no symbolic identification. The connection between the object of one’s emotion and the object of the expressive action is arbitrary, as when one destroys an object in a fit of rage or kicks a chair out of anger. In such cases, it seems that any other object at hand —a table, a bag, etc.— could have just as well been the object of one’s action. Finally, *simple expressive actions* are those actions where neither the object of one’s emotion is displaced nor a symbolic identification is at issue. These are cases such as jumping for joy or hiding one’s face out of fear or in shame. I have borrowed the terminology “symbolically displaced action” and “radically displaced action” from Scarantino and Nielsen (2015) and “simple expressive action” from Pineda (2019).

¹¹ Gouging out the eyes of a rival in a picture out of hatred (Hursthouse, 1991; Goldie, 2000; Döring, 2003), rolling in grief in the clothes of a loved one who has died (Smith, 1998) and carrying one’s grandfather’s coffin during his funeral out of love (Bennett, 2016), for instance. An exception to the general tendency can be found in Helm (2001, 2016) and Müller and Wong (forthcoming).

¹² Not everyone agrees that the mental states that rationalise the agent’s behaviour are beliefs and desires. Döring (2003) and Scarantino and Nielsen (2015), for instance, argue that the end of the agent’s action is provided by the emotion she experiences and not by a desire that she may have. It will be enough for our discussion, though, that all of them defend that symbolically displaced actions have a *means-end structure* in virtue of which such actions can be rationalised and adequately accounted for *as actions* by the standard account. See Bennett (2021) for an exception to this tendency.

According to him, when a man rolls in grief in the clothes of his dead wife “the man is doing what he is doing because he desires to roll around in his dead wife’s clothes and believes that he can do so by doing just what he is doing: that is, by rolling around in those particular clothes that he is rolling around in” (1998, p. 22). Smith adds that in order to understand the desire of the agent, we must make reference to his emotion, but that the belief-desire pair suffices to rationalise his action. If we turn to the case of jumping for joy, however, it does not seem that one jumps for joy when receiving good news because one desires to jump and believes that one can do so by just doing what one is doing, that is, jumping. Such an explanation does not look like a good description of what goes on in this case.¹³

Given these difficulties, Goldie (2000) and Betzler (2007, 2009) have speculated that, contrary to our intuitions, simple expressive actions might not be actions at all. Goldie says that “jumping for joy, scratching your head in frustration, and punching the air in delight (...) [are] things which one does [that] are unlike the genuine smile in that the latter involves a movement of certain muscles which one cannot directly try to move. But still, surely a genuine spontaneous jump for joy [...] no more involves a belief than does the genuine spontaneous smile” (2000, p. 36). In a similar line, and after concluding her alternative account of so-called arational actions, Betzler wonders whether her ideas could be extended to simpler kinds of behaviour:

In contrast, hiding one’s face from fear, blushing in shame, jumping for joy, or posturing in front of adversaries are cases that might be thought to be intelligible without assuming any particular point of view of the respective agent. Some of these expressive actions may be in the vicinity of *mere bodily movements*. Others can be explained simply by referring to the instinct of survival that all agents share as members of a species. A concession in such cases, however, is compatible with the rationalization applying in many other cases. (Betzler, 2009, p. 284-5, emphasis added)

These ideas, as I noted, are merely speculative and stem from the view that what we have been calling simple expressive actions are residual and problematic cases. Assimilating such behaviours to mere happenings, though, seems to have some rather implausible consequences that should be properly addressed by anyone who wants to defend this view. In particular, if jumping for joy or covering one’s face in shame were nothing more than mere happenings—or, in Betzler’s terms, mere bodily movements—we would need an explanation of the way in which we usually approach such behaviours. When we see that someone who has just received some news starts jumping up and down, we immediately understand that the news she has received is *good*—or, at least, that it is good *from the agent’s point of view*. This means that we approach her behaviour as a response to something that she evaluates as worth celebrating. Her response, moreover, can be assessed as appropriate or inappropriate, or as proportional or disproportional. In fact, if jumping were, for whatever reasons, inappropriate in the given circumstances, the subject could be *blamed* for not having waited for a more convenient time to express her happiness. As we can see, though, this is not the way we relate to mere happenings—which are disconnected from our agency—

¹³ Smith’s proposal has, in fact, been widely rejected as a solution to Hursthouse’s problem since it does not seem to provide a good rationalisation of any of the cases presented in her list (Goldie, 2000; Döring, 2003; Betzler, 2007; Bennett, 2016; Pineda, 2019; Müller & Wong, forthcoming).

and therefore Goldie's and Betzler's suggestions do not seem to provide, in principle, a good explanation of these cases.

To recapitulate, we started by saying that —compared to actions such as cooking a meal, writing a novel or building a bridge— jumping for joy, covering one's face in shame, punching the air in delight or scratching one's head in frustration seem to be among the simplest actions we can perform. This intuition, however, seems to be questioned by the standard account of agency, according to which, behaviour that cannot be instrumentally rationalised cannot be regarded as the actions of an agent. Hursthouse's critique of the standard account, however, allows us to regard such cases as actions, in particular as actions that are disconnected from rationality and that can only be explained by saying that "in the grip of the emotion, the agent just felt like doing them" (1991, p. 61).

This last idea is nonetheless rejected by many participants in the debate who try to show that the cases presented by Hursthouse can be rationalised and thus be considered actions by the lights of the standard account. As we have seen, however, instrumental explanations of simple expressive actions tend to over-intellectualise them, therefore explanations of this kind do not succeed in showing that jumping for joy or covering one's face in shame are not *arational* actions. Alternatively, a defendant of instrumental rationality can question whether such behaviours are actions at all —since they do not involve any means-end belief-desire pair— but this leads us to a very difficult position: jumping for joy or covering one's face in shame are assimilated to spasms and reflexes, which conflicts with the way we deal with such behaviours.

It appears, then, that simple expressive actions are still problematic cases for the standard account: we have the intuition that they are actions but they seem to be disconnected from rationality – or, at least, *from the kind of rationality presupposed in the discussion so far*. As Helm (2001, 2016) and Müller and Wong (forthcoming) have convincingly argued, all previous views assume that rational action is necessarily *instrumentally* rational action. However, they claim, an alternative conception of rationality is needed if we are to explain the sense in which some expressive behaviours are not a matter of mere accident:¹⁴

We should not think that all intentional action is instrumental, done for the sake of achieving some end, for *all that's needed for an action to be rationally explicable is that it has a point the explanation reveals to be worthwhile* (...) the point of jumping for joy is that it is a celebration, and in feeling joy one feels its target to be a good worthy of celebration (...) kissing someone or rumpling his hair or, depending on the circumstances, holding him or even just sitting quietly with him all have a point in that they are all ways of being solicitous, and in feeling occurrent love one feels someone as worthy of solicitude. And tearing one's hair or clothes has a point insofar as these are all ways of mourning, and to feel grief is to feel a loss to be worthy of mourning. In each of these cases, the emotional expressions are *not means* undertaken to achieve the end of celebration, solicitude or mourning; *they are the celebration, solicitude and mourning*. (Helm, 2016, p. 98, emphasis added)

The rejection of instrumentality as a criterion for agency, then, allows us to see a way in which simple expressive actions might be connected to rationality – and are, therefore, *not*

¹⁴ See also Bennett (2021) for a non-instrumental explanation of expressive action. In said paper, however, he exclusively focuses on cases of symbolic action, such as Achilles' dragging Hector's body around the walls of Troy or the kneeling of the believer in church.

arational actions: “[e]xplanations of this kind articulate a further aspect of our ordinary conception of action: in contrast to mere behaviour, an action is rational in this reason-responsive sense” (Müller & Wong, forthcoming). From this view, Hursthouse’s account of behaviours such as jumping for joy or covering our faces in shame should be rejected on the basis of the following assumption:

Non-instrumental Rationality Assumption: Jumping for joy —as well as the rest of our simple expressive actions— can be regarded as an action because it has a point that shows that the agent is responding to reasons when she performs such movements.

This seems to be the reason why it is so hard to view simple expressive actions as analogous to spasms and reflexes. In the latter cases, the agent is clearly not responding to reasons — spasms and reflexes do not have a point—, that is, there is nothing that, from the agent’s point of view, counts in favour of her movements. Although this might not be the only kind of non-instrumental rationality that could explain the sense in which behaviours such as jumping for joy or covering one’s face in shame are actions, the proposals of Helm and Müller and Wong seem to have correctly identified that instrumentality is an obstacle for our understanding of an important part of our expressive behaviour.

Once we have made room in the debate for simple expressive actions, I will argue that, on the basis of C1-C3, simple expressive actions and facial and bodily expressions of emotion cannot be classified differently, that is, with the former as actions and the latter as mere happenings. As we have seen, participants in this debate differ with respect to their understanding of simple expressive actions, however, *both critics and supporters of the instrumental model of rationality seem to agree that facial and bodily expressions of emotion are different from simple expressive actions and cannot be regarded as actions.*¹⁵ In what remains of the paper, we will examine the reasons provided in favour of this view.

3. Facial and bodily expressions of emotion versus simple expressive actions

As we saw in section 1, participants in the debate on expressive action tend to exclude facial and bodily expressions of emotion from the category of actions on the basis of the following criteria:

- C1. They are not instrumental.
- C2. They are alien to rationality.
- C3. They are involuntary.

I will now provide three arguments (A1-A3) in favour of the idea that, according to C1-C3, either *both* simple expressive actions and facial and bodily expressions of emotion *are to be identified as actions or neither is*. Since the latter sounds rather implausible, given the way we approach simple expressive actions, I will conclude that both simple expressive actions

¹⁵ As we have seen, however, Goldie and Betzler raise the possibility that simple expressive actions might be like facial and bodily expressions of emotion qua happenings, but, as we have already argued, this consequence is hard to accept.

and facial and bodily expressions of emotion should be included within the category of actions. In order to simplify the following discussion, I will mainly compare the case of smiling with the case of jumping for joy.

- (A1) *If a piece of behaviour must be instrumentally rational in order to count as an action, then facial and bodily expressions of emotion are not actions but neither are they simple expressive actions.*

According to the first criterion, facial and bodily expressions of emotion cannot be regarded as actions because there are no belief-desire combinations that could instrumentally explain why the agent performs them. As we saw, the distinctive feature of *genuine* smiles is, precisely, that the subject does not smile in view of some end. However, if we accept that smiles are not actions because in order to count as an action a piece of behaviour must be instrumentally rational, then simple expressive actions must also be excluded from the category of actions: as it is assumed in the debate, it does not look like we are trying to instrumentally satisfy an end through our jumping when we jump for joy.

According to the *Non-instrumental Rationality Assumption*, though, we should resist the idea that jumping for joy or covering our faces in shame are analogous to spasms and reflexes qua mere happenings we undergo, *even though we are unable to explain them in instrumental terms*. As Helm's and Müller and Wong's non-instrumental conception of rationality shows, we seem to have alternative ways of approaching such behaviours as actions. If, following this view, we accept that jumping for joy is an action *regardless* of its lacking a means-end structure, then we should not exclude smiling from the category of actions just *because* it lacks a means-end structure.¹⁶

- (A2) *If an expressive action can be rational just because it has a point, without being instrumentally rational, as in the case of simple expressive actions, then facial and bodily expressions of emotion should not, in principle, be excluded from the category of actions*

As we saw before, according to the *Non-instrumental Rationality Assumption*, simple expressive actions “can have a *point* which makes them intelligible as reason-responsive, even if we cannot make sense of them as instrumental” (Müller & Wong, forthcoming) and “inasmuch as the performance of certain movements has a point for the agent, it seems not to be a matter of mere accident” (Müller & Wong, forthcoming). Such proposal allows us, then, to regard such behaviours as actions and to rationally explain them.

According to Müller and Wong and Helm, however, this is an explanation that *does not apply to facial and bodily expressions of emotion*: such behaviours are alien to rationality and, therefore, must be *causally explained* (see also Goldie, 2000). Regarding smiles and frowns, Müller and Wong hold that there are not “any cognized aspects of [the] situation

¹⁶ As it is evident, this conclusion is conditional on the correctness of the *Non-instrumental Rationality Assumption*. Although such assumption is not fully defended in this paper, it appears to be plausible given our previous discussion on simple expressive actions. As will be developed in the following, my main claim is that, on the basis of the *Non-instrumental Rationality Assumption*, reflection on the place that facial and bodily expressions of emotion have in our lives shows that they too should be regarded as actions. I thank an anonymous referee for encouraging me to stress this more clearly.

that intelligibly motivate them. Rather, they are simply triggered by those circumstances” (forthcoming). Similarly, Helm claims that

although you can tremble from fear or hang your head in shame at otherwise inopportune moments, there is nothing that would count as trembling or hanging one’s head *correctly or incorrectly*. Because such behaviors are without a point, there is nothing in the content of the emotion that makes them intelligible by saying something in favor of behaving in these ways [...] such behaviors are *disconnected from rationality*.¹⁷ (Helm, 2001, p. 75, emphasis added)

This seems to be Bennett’s view too, in particular, when he says that we should “distinguish the *symptoms* of some mental state, such as crying or smiling, from those objects (and, I claim, actions) that possess expressive power because they seem to capture or reflect some mental state (or the content thereof)” (2016, p. 84) and that only the latter raise “issues of adequacy, appropriateness and inappropriateness that ground normative assessment of different forms of expression” (2016, p. 84).

These proposals seem to be based on the idea that examples of behaviour that are mere happenings we undergo, such as spasms or reflexes, are not subject to rational standards. That is, such behaviours *cannot be evaluated as good or bad responses to the situation in which a subject finds herself*. This seems to be clearly correct in the case of spasms: we can see how the subject’s bodily movements have nothing to do with her evaluative perspective on the situation – consequently, her movements cannot be intelligibly evaluated as a good or bad response to her situation. Think of someone who is pathologically laughing all the time or someone who, due to a paralysis of some facial muscles, has a permanent smile on her face. Such movements just happen, indiscriminately – they are not responsive to anything and, thus, neither proportional or disproportional, appropriate or inappropriate. This is the reason why such behaviour can only be *causally* explained.

The question we may ask ourselves now is whether facial and bodily expressions of emotion *are analogous to spasms in this respect*, as suggested by the previous authors. For this purpose, let us introduce an example about smiles. Imagine a child who is playing with her toys, supervised perhaps by some family member, when her mother walks into the room after returning from work. Imagine the way the child turns to her mother with a beaming smile on her face and how the mother smiles with joy and love at the sight of her child. This smile is the kind of smile that the child, as she grows older, will continue to seek from her mother.

What can we say about the smiles in this example? According to the view we are examining, smiles are mere happenings we undergo, so the way we approach smiles —as well as the rest of our facial and bodily expressions of emotion—¹⁸ should not be very different

¹⁷ Such an idea contrasts with the fact that Helm regards crying out of sadness as an expressive action and describes its point as ‘mourning’ (2001, p. 77).

¹⁸ Although we are using an example about smiles in order to illustrate the idea that we relate to facial and bodily expressions of emotion differently than to spasms, we could easily examine similar examples in which the emotion and the facial and bodily expressions are different. “My eyes moved from child to mother as the girl shifted from barely audible whispers to choked admissions to hoarse gasping sobs. I noted that the mother’s face functioned as a vague mirror of her child’s. When Alice spoke softly, Ellen leaned forward, her eyes intent as her lips registered every insult with tiny movements. When Alice

from the way we approach spasms.¹⁹ This, however, does not seem to be the case, for (a) we relate to facial and bodily expressions of emotion as *responses* to something. This is the reason why we ask questions like “what makes you so happy?” or “why are you smiling?”. These questions presuppose an internal connection —a connection of intelligibility— between a smile and a situation, and not a connection of causal trigger. That is, we expect answers to these questions that mention aspects of a situation that merit a certain response or recognition by part of the subject and not just physiological or adaptive considerations. Indeed, it seems that we cannot merely view the smiles of the mother and the child as brute effects of their circumstances: such behaviour *makes sense* or is intelligible *given their situation* – it makes sense in a way in which banging one’s fist three times against the wall at the sight of one’s daughter, for instance, does not.²⁰

Moreover, and connected to the previous point, (b) we regard facial and bodily expressions of emotion as *revealing of the subject’s evaluative perspective* on the situation.²¹ When we see the child’s smile, it is clear for us that she apprehends her mother’s smiling arrival as a happy event (the happiest of the day, perhaps) and vice versa, the sight of her child smiling at her is apprehended by the mother as a joyful and moving scene. The idea here is that, in someone’s smile, we seem to *see or anticipate the person*, that is, we see who she is and what she values. In this respect, smiles seem to differ from reflexes or spasms: the latter appear to be “disconnected” in an important sense from the person experiencing them, since, as we said, there seems to be no evaluation of the situation on the part of the subject in such cases.

Relatedly, there seem to be (c) *moral considerations* that regulate our smiles. When we say things like “your smile was quite insensitive” or “why don’t you smile? Don’t you see how important this is to her?” we seem to be blaming the subject in a different way in which we would blame someone for having a spasm or a reflex. The most we could say to someone who has undergone a spasm in a very inappropriate moment —imagine that this person suffers from a nervous disorder— is that she should not have put herself in a situation in which this was likely to happen. Smiles, however, seem to be subject to a different kind of considerations: if the mother in our example had not smiled at the smile of her child —if, stressed and exhausted from work, she had turned away from her— it seems like the child would have had a claim on her, that is, a claim to be seen and acknowledged by her as someone worthy of love and attention. It is from this last point of view, moreover, that we can understand the sense in which the child may continue to seek her mother’s smile through the years. Furthermore, (d) smiles seem to be open to *education*: we are educated at what to smile and how we smile.

cried, Ellen’s eyes grew smaller, a wrinkle appeared between her brows, and her mouth tensed into a thin straight line, but she did not weep. Maternal listening is of a special kind” (Hustvedt, 2011).

¹⁹ If the view we are examining were correct, a close look at our practices should reveal that we deal with or respond to spasms and smiles analogously. See Strawson (1962).

²⁰ In order to make sense of such strange behaviour we would need *a story* that explains the sense in which banging one’s fist three times against the wall is a way of acknowledging and rejoicing at the presence of one’s daughter (Berlin, 1958; Corbí, 2012).

²¹ I have borrowed the expression “revealing of the subject’s evaluative perspective on the situation” from Bennett (2021, p. 11), although he is referring to a much more complex kind of expressive behaviour (Achilles’ dragging Hector’s body around the walls of Troy).

This way of approaching smiles, however, seems to be at odds with the idea that they are mere happenings that are disconnected from rationality.²² The four interconnected features that we have just described suggest that facial and bodily expressions of emotion *clearly raise issues of adequacy, appropriateness and inappropriateness*: if there were not correct and incorrect ways —or proportional and disproportional ways— of smiling, frowning, crying, hanging one’s head, pounding one’s fist, etc., it is hard to see how we could make sense of our usual way of approaching such behaviour. If the view defended by the aforementioned authors were correct, though, it would seem that when we say things like “this is such good news, why are you not smiling?” or “your smile was quite insensitive”, we are mistaken in approaching our smiles as behaviours that can be corrected – or, at least, we are mistaken in thinking that we are regulating our smiles through this way of speaking. Assuming that we are mistaken in this respect, however, would involve a radical revision of our experience; to put it in Williams’ terms, it “would involve a much vaster reconstruction of our sentiments and our view of ourselves than may be supposed” (1981, p. 22).²³

The idea that facial and bodily expressions of emotion are responses to a situation that a subject apprehends from a certain evaluative perspective and that can be assessed as appropriate or inappropriate, proportional or disproportional, casts doubt on the claim that such behaviours are disconnected from rationality. In fact, without committing ourselves to the proposals of Helm and Müller and Wong, we can ask ourselves whether the explanation they provide of simple expressive actions could also be applied to facial and bodily expressions of emotion. And, intuitively, it seems that we can say that such behaviours also *have a point*: smiling out of joy can be seen as *celebrating* or *rejoicing* (which is rational because joy apprehends its object as worth celebrating), frowning in disappointment can be seen as *disapproving* (which is rational because disappointment apprehends its object as worthy of disapproval), hanging one’s head in dejection can be seen as *surrendering* (which is rational because dejection apprehends its object as worth surrendering to), crying out of sadness can be seen as *mourning* (which is rational because sadness apprehends its object as worthy of grieving), laughing out of amusement can be seen as *rejoicing* or *enjoying* (which is rational because amusement apprehends its object as worthy of amusement), etc.

If this is plausible, then, it does not seem like there is a relevant difference between jumping for joy and smiling with respect to rationality: in both cases, we seem to be dealing with non-instrumental behaviours that are, nonetheless, rational responses to a situation given the way in which the emotion of the subject apprehends such a situation. Therefore, it does not seem that facial and bodily expressions of emotion can be excluded from the category of actions just *because* they are disconnected from rationality. If simple expressive ac-

²² This seems to be, in fact, a view that Scruton (1986) has defended within a different debate: “Smiling must be understood as a response to another person, to a thought or perception of his presence, and it has its own intentionality. To smile is to smile at something or someone, and hence when we see someone smiling in the street we think of him as ‘smiling to himself’, meaning that there is some hidden object of his present thought and feeling. The smile of love is a kind of intimate recognition and acceptance of the other’s presence - an involuntary acknowledgement that his existence gives you pleasure” (1986, p. 64).

²³ This is a remark that Williams offers regarding the debate on moral luck (1981).

tions are regarded as actions by virtue of their being rational responses, then so should facial and bodily expressions of emotion.

- (A3) *If actions must be voluntary, then facial and bodily expressions of emotion are not actions, but then neither are many examples of instrumental behaviour that, according to the standard account, should be classified as actions*

As we saw in previous sections, the claim that simple expressive actions are actions and facial and bodily expressions of emotion are mere happenings also appears to be grounded in a difference in the control that an agent may have over her bodily movements. The assumption underlying this claim is that, when performing an action, we have control over the muscles involved, that is, we are capable of moving our bodies in the way we do and to do so directly. Goldie's example of the Duchenne smile—which, according to him, is not in any sense an action—is aimed at showing precisely this (2000, p. 35). When our smile is genuine, the muscles we employ are different from those we use when we move our faces on purpose to form a smile. So, the divide between an action and a mere happening is thus defined by our capacity to have a direct control over the musculature in virtue of which a certain bodily change takes place.

However, consider now the action of running away in fear, full of adrenaline. Imagine that you are walking through a forest and that a bear suddenly appears. You are scared, want to protect yourself and believe that running through the space between two trees further to your right is the best way to escape, since the bear will not fit between them. So, this is what you do and your action is properly rationalised by the desires and beliefs described in the previous sentence. Now, as you perform this action, you run faster and jump higher than you are able to in normal circumstances, since you are full of adrenaline. You might even use muscles that you are unable to employ when, for instance, going for a jog. In fact, if asked later to replicate your running away at will, your body would not move in the same way – you would not be in a state in which, due to the adrenaline in your system, you are able to move your body in the way you did when running away in fear. This fact, however, does not prevent us from considering that your running away in fear was an action of yours. Hence, it seems that the inability to directly control all the muscles involved in our movements does not suffice to discard that facial and bodily expressions of emotion could count as actions.

According to A1-A3, then, C1-C3 do not justify classifying facial and bodily expressions of emotion and simple expressive actions differently, for:

- Neither can be instrumentally explained.
- Both can be rationally explained.
- Both can involve muscles we cannot directly control.

Consequently, either both sorts of behaviour are to be identified as actions or neither is. The latter, as we saw, seems rather implausible given the way we relate to behaviours such as jumping for joy or covering our faces in shame. Therefore, we may conclude that *both facial and bodily expressions of emotion and simple expressive actions should be included within the category of actions*. As previously stated, if someone wants to insist on the idea that facial and bodily expressions of emotion are not actions, she should provide new reasons that could help differentiate such behaviours from simple expressive actions.

4. Conclusions

I started by introducing the category of facial and bodily expressions of emotion, as well as the reasons that several philosophers have provided in favour of their exclusion from the category of actions. As we have seen, in the current debate on expressive action, behaviours such as smiling, frowning or crying are regarded as mere happenings we undergo because they are thought to be neither instrumental nor rational nor voluntary. I then presented the category of simple expressive actions and the various ways in which they have been accounted for in the literature. The main claim I have argued for —through A1-A3— is that simple expressive actions cannot be presented as actions while excluding facial and bodily expressions of emotion from this condition: neither of these two kinds of expressive behaviour can be instrumentally explained, both can be rationally explained and both can involve muscles we cannot directly control.

As a result, I have concluded that, on the basis of the main assumptions in the current debate on expressive actions, simple expressive actions and facial and bodily expressions of emotion cannot be classified differently: either both sorts of behaviour are to be identified as actions or neither is. Classifying behaviours such as jumping for joy or covering one's face in shame as happenings, however, conflicts with the way we relate to such behaviours. Therefore, I have concluded that both simple expressive actions and facial and bodily expressions of emotion should be included within the category of actions.

Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to Josep Corbí, Jordi Valor, Christopher Bennett, Jonathan Mitchell, Pia Campeggiani, Carlos Moya and two anonymous referees for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this paper. I am also indebted to the audiences in the *Valencia Colloquium in Philosophy* and the *2nd VLC Philosophy Workshop: Sharing Reasons*.

This work has been supported by the research projects PID2019-106420GA-I00 and PID2020-119588GB-I00 and by the grant BES-2017-081537 funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and “ESF Investing in your future”.

REFERENCES

- Bennett, C. (2016). Expressive actions. In C. Abell & J. Smith (Eds.). *Emotional expression: philosophical, psychological and legal perspectives* (pp. 73-94). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bennett, C. (2021). The problem of expressive action. *Philosophy*, 96(2), 277-300.
- Berlin, I. (1958). *The crooked timber of humanity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Betzler, M. (2007). Making sense of actions expressing emotions. *Dialectica*, 61(3), 447-466.
- Betzler, M. (2009). Expressive actions. *Inquiry*, 52(3), 272-292.
- Corbí, J. E. (2012). *Morality, self-knowledge and human suffering: an essay on the loss of confidence in the world*. New York: Routledge.
- Davidson, D. (1963). Actions, reasons and causes. *Journal of Philosophy*, 60(23), 685-700.
- Döring, S. (2003). Explaining action by emotion. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 53(211), 214-230.
- Goldie, P. (2000). Explaining expressions of emotion. *Mind*, 109, 25-38.

- Helm, B. (2001). *Emotional reason: deliberation, motivation and the nature of value*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Helm, B. (2016). Emotional expression, commitment and joint value. In C. Abell & J. Smith (Eds.). *Emotional expression: philosophical, psychological and legal perspectives* (pp. 95-114). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hursthouse, R. (1991). Arational actions. *Journal of Philosophy*, 88, 57-68.
- Hustvedt, S. (2011). *The summer without men*. London: Picador.
- Müller, M. J. & Wong, H. Y. (forthcoming). Which emotional behaviors are actions?. In A. Scarantino (Ed.). *Routledge handbook of emotion theory*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Pineda, D. (2019). *Sobre las emociones*. Madrid: Cátedra.
- Scarantino, A. & Nielsen, M. (2015). Voodoo dolls and angry lions: how emotions explain arational actions. *Philosophical Studies*, 172, 2975-2998.
- Scruton, R. (1986). *Sexual desire: a philosophical investigation*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.
- Smith, M. (1998). The possibility of philosophy of action. In J. Bransen (Ed.). *Human action, deliberation and causation* (pp. 17-41). Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Strawson, P. F. (1962). Freedom and resentment. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 48, 187-211.
- Williams, B. (1981). *Moral luck*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MARTA CABRERA is a PhD candidate at the Universitat de València. Her main areas of interest are philosophy of emotions, philosophy of mind and action theory.

ADDRESS: Department of Philosophy, Universitat de València. Avd. Blasco Ibáñez, 30 (46010 València-Spain). Email: Marta.Cabrera@uv.es. ORCID: 0000-0001-6702-3707

