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Gestures in the Making

Mathias Girel

- 1 More than a century ago, reviewing the raging controversy over pragmatism, Jean Bourdeau wrote that “Pragmatism is an Anglo-Saxon reaction against the intellectualism and rationalism of the Latin mind [...] It is a philosophy without words, a philosophy of gestures and of acts, which abandons what is general and holds only to what is particular” (Trans. William James, W:MT, 113).¹ Bourdeau certainly missed the point of the first pragmatist revolution, but it can also be argued that, ironically, he would have missed of good part of Giovanni Maddalena’s achievements to “complete” the pragmatist revolution: gestures (more than acts) are the main subject-matter of this book, but this leads by no means to “abandon what is general,” no more than it leads to do away with words, signs and meaning. Quite the contrary.
- 2 The title of Maddalena’s book should not mislead: if it addresses the very notion of gesture, in its ordinary sense, it is also an outstanding monograph on knowledge, reality, and philosophy, and it bears a very fundamental and bold claim with it. Maddalena argues that the pragmatists had a new approach to knowledge and reality in general, which many readers of this journal will take for granted, but that, in some important measure, pragmatism also remained an “unfinished business,” an “incomplete revolution.” It is certainly the case that we can think of countless instances where the pragmatists, starting with Peirce, call for a broader account of meaning, where gestures can be included. To take only one example, Dewey had already made clear that the logics-positivist treatment of meaning was too narrow, and, interestingly, he thought that gestures on the one hand, diagrams on the other hand, were left out of the scope of symbols and language:

A minor objection to the use of ‘sentences’ and ‘words’ to designate what have been called propositions and terms, is that unless carefully interpreted it narrows unduly the scope of symbols and language, since it is not customary to treat gestures and diagrams (maps, blueprints, etc.) as words or sentences. (LW 12: 284)²
- 3 In Maddalena’s reading, though, the Pragmatists never got fully aware of the way their views departed from the dominant Kantian picture of knowledge, they remained trapped in some of Kant’s dichotomies, and they never managed to make their own originality explicit. The Pragmatists, if we read them carefully, it is argued, not only opposed

Descartes but also Kantianism, on three major issues: nominalism, the weakness of the “I think” in unifying reality and finally a certain kind of solipsistic idealism. Maddalena shows that this reading applies to Peirce – sometimes against the letter of some of Peirce’s claims about Kant as well as against prominent contemporary readings – but also to Dewey and even to James and Mead, even if Peirce, understandably in view of Maddalena’s previous publications, is given the lion’s share:

This book aims to provide a pragmatist alternative to some crucial aspects of Kant’s philosophy. This alternative has not been explored yet within the contemporary philosophical landscape, not even by classic pragmatists who often involuntarily accept aspects of Kant’s legacy. (3)³

- 4 The proposed philosophy of gesture, which is meant both as a correction of the classical views and a contribution to contemporary philosophy, is an
attempt to foster pragmatist insight toward a closer unification of experience and methods of inquiry, toward a different definition of synthesis and analysis, and toward what [Maddalena] call[s] “a complete synthetic pattern.” (28)
- 5 Maddalena endorses thus a radical view, beautifully argued, stressing the role of synthetic patterns in reasoning and others realms, cosmological and moral. The most concise summary of Maddalena’s thesis might be the following: “any synthetic judgment coincides with the operation we have to perform in order to get at it” (46). Gestures are the core of philosophies as well as they are the core of our lives.
- 6 To fulfill this program, the book has to provide a new account of synthetic reasoning (“recognizing identity through change”), coming to grips with Kant’s challenge at a fundamental level, and – through a thorough redefinition of synthesis, analysis and vagueness – finds such a tool in the notion of “complete gestures” (“those in which new meanings are synthetically acquired,” 9), which provide the subject-matter of the crucial Ch. 4. They are first exemplified in Peirce’s graphs, then explored in different fields, in ethics, in writing, in creativity and education. The basic insight of the book stems thus from a different conception of continuity and change “as the developing pattern of reality” (134), and uses the notion of gesture as a kind of phenomenological and semiotic structure to provide an account of this synthetic reasoning.
- 7 Previously, Chauviré (2008) had stressed the importance of mathematical *practice* and Peirce’s ground-breaking position in that domain, in a book quoted by Maddalena. This view, shared by Wittgenstein, is also instrumental in the defense of Maddalena’s “a posteriori foundationalism” (“the foundation of mathematics comes through our doing mathematics,” 159). But, here, mathematics is understood as a kind of metaphysical laboratory:
Doing mathematics means already dealing with the reality of universals. There is no surprise that while we are doing mathematics we are constructing a broader metaphysical reality. (51)
- 8 It is quite striking that similar synthetic patterns, unexpectedly perhaps, are found in moral life and ethics:
we are not the independent masters of detached reality. Indeed, it is the other way around: we are part of a reality with which we cooperate, as much as we imitate its intention by learning to perform the complete gestures taught by others. (189)
- 9 One leaves the book with a different picture of knowledge, of continuity, but also of action in general, Maddalena’s notion of “gesture” replacing the more ordinary notion of “conduct” endorsed by the classical pragmatists.

- 10 Part of the success of the book will depend on its ability to meet two challenges in future discussions: 1) will the reader accept to see in the “complete gestures” of Ch. 4 a kind of paradigm for gestures in general? 2) Will s/he accept the amplification of this to others realms of reality? It is tempting to think that the book makes forcefully both points.
- 11 Such a comprehensive book of course raises further questions, and I wished to use the present occasion to push the conversation with Maddalena further, on two different but related points.
- 12 First, Maddalena offers a tantalizing picture of the Self and of subjectivity:

Our physical, moral, and ontological identity is not a pure, plain continuum; rather, it is continuity between complete gestures that have built, and continue to build, our identity so that we can recognize it. (117)

As a consequence, this seems to leave two ways for our (a posteriori) identity to be grasped: 1) from the perspective of others selves, who address us from the standpoint, and on the background, of the continuity and the publicity of these complete gestures, as they might perceive them. This would be the way our identity is recognized in our circles, in the same way as Ulysses is recognized at the end of the *Odyssey* (107); 2) from our own stance, so to speak, where we could either disown or endorse gestures that are attributed to us, and sometimes imposed on us. Our voice, here, seems to be implied in the way “we can” recognize this identity. This kind of conversation, or stance, and sometimes this dismissal of the conformist identities that can be forced on us by the present dispensation of society, have always been at the core of meliorism, from Emerson and Mill to James, Dewey and other non-pragmatist thinkers such as Cavell. But this also leads to ask where we can locate such an agency, between the cosmological and the epistemological, where things can be what they are without factoring in our own voice. This is for example a classical problem we face when we try to articulate the insights developed by James in “What Makes a Life Significant” and the basic tenets of his radical empiricism. Maddalena provides several clues at the end of the book about this problem when he deals with “rational instinct” and “heart”:

they work not only as negative alarms but also as acceptations or positive recognizing. Does this function hint at an ontological self? For now it is possible to answer, with all pragmatists, that I am describing a “function.” (149)

- 13 In spite of the understandable warnings of the author about the scope of the book, we wish to know more about this function, in the context of the synthetic patterns described here: what is the grammar involved when we do not recognize a gesture as truly “ours”? What is the status of these “unattained but attainable” states of our selves and of our society, described by the meliorists, within the economy of things that is presented here? Can they be accommodated?
- 14 The second question is related to the “social.” To make it short, in Dewey, and arguably in Mead, gestures are social from the outset, even before articulated language emerges and before we can master mental concepts. We have a full-blown account of the social, though, when we are able to endorse roles, when action can be not only public or collective but also distributed. Readers in the last century have felt that these philosophies provided important elements to make sense of an “autonomy” of the social, which is rooted in nature but cannot be reduced to a physicalist or biological account of life, which is rooted individuals but cannot be reduced to individual conventions or acts. In the last Chapter, which is crucial since it involves a reshaping of Kant’s practical reason (and of some of major Kantian distinctions, deeply rooted in his architectonics),

there is a short discussion of “roles” in Mead, and the long and substantial footnotes 4 (Ch. 4), and 17 (Ch. 8), can be read as evidence that future developments will follow in other writings, but specific accounts of the social realm are scarce in the book. Would Maddalena allow for a specific “locus” of the social, between the world where we are all “sub-creators,” and the practical judgment where we count as moral selves? Or is this something we can dispense with, when we have mastered the logical and semiotic foundation of complete gestures?

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NOTES

1. James 1975.
 2. Dewey (1969-1991), *The Later Works 1925-1953* [LW].
 3. All references, if not otherwise noted, will be to Maddalena 2015.
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