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Grasping the Gesture

Replies to Colapietro, Girel, Guglielminetti, Pihlström and Santaella

Giovanni Maddalena

“Comprendre est en attraper le geste, et pouvoir
continuer”
(J. Cavailles)

“The general theory of signs fails essentially
if it does not encompass a philosophical account of
gesture”

(Colapietro 2016: 170)

- 1 Let me first thank Rosa M. Calcaterra and Roberto Frega, co-directors of the *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, who were so kind to organize this symposium. I also thank all contributors and Matteo Santarelli who edited the whole work. It is a great honor to me that such distinguished scholars dedicated some thoughts to my work. I am glad also to see such a wide range of comments. I will divide my short responses in three parts. The first focuses on the critique to Kant’s criticism. The second deals with the topic of complete gestures. The third, which includes paragraphs 3, 4, and 5, responds to some scattered questions on the paradigm that I propose. There is no room to answer appropriately to many interesting points raised by friends and distinguished colleagues, therefore my answers have to be taken more as notes for further useful dialogues with people committed to “the communal endeavor of deepening understanding of phenomena, at once, utterly commonplace and deeply significant” (Colapietro 2016: 159).

1. On Scholarship and Kant’s Project

- 2 Let us start with Kant’s project and let me answer first to Pihlstrom’s charge of not having being accurate as far as Kant/Peirce scholarship is concerned. Among many interesting notations, with which I will be dealing soon, Pihlstrom holds that I did not pay attention to literature about Kant and pinpoints Gava and Stern’s project as example of this literature about Kant and Peirce. I do not blame him. It is up to the author to take the

attention of his readers and, as Daniel Pennac says, it is the right of the reader to abandon a book.¹ So, I think I did not succeed in keeping Sami's attention beyond the introduction and the first Chapter, otherwise he would have noticed that I did pay attention exactly to Gava's work on Peirce and Kant, and more in general to Kant's scholarship.² Gava's work is quoted several times and my disagreement with Gava's reading of Peirce is stated in endnote 11 at page 167 and in endnote 8 at page 171. Moreover, Pihlstrom would have noticed that the rather vague sentences in the introduction have a very technical sequel in Chapter 2, completely dedicated to Hanna's reading of Kant, and in Chapter 8, as Girel notices in its accurate piece. I would have liked to discuss those technical passages with such a careful Kantian reader as Sami Pihlstrom. I must hope this will happen another time, if this reply moves any interest in him to complete the reading of the book.

- 3 More seriously, Sami Pihlstrom real objection goes hand in hand with some of Enrico Guglielminetti's and Vincent Colapietro's remarks on the risks of abandoning Kant's project as such. Here we should be clear about two different perspectives: the philological one and interpretative one.
- 4 As for philology, I think there is little doubt about the general anti-Kantism of classic pragmatists. I am glad to see that also Pihlstrom recognizes that pragmatists "did reject Kant's strict apriorism and the unknowability of the thing in itself, among many other Kantian ideas" (Pihlstrom 2016: 184). I reported that attitude in Chapter 1, and in doing so, I even omitted some of the harshest criticisms.³ In this respect, Peirce is certainly the more problematic author among pragmatists, since he took his first steps in philosophy from Kantism. However, I learnt many years ago from Vincent Colapietro and from deep studies on Peirce's late manuscripts, that Peirce did change his position and, as Vincent says in his article, it was a "truly a decisive shift, a fateful rupture" (Colapietro 2016: 162).
- 5 In my first Chapter, I really wanted to clarify that this anti-Kantism is philologically evident in the classic pragmatists. Sometimes, this obvious evidence is voluntary obscured by scholars because this anti-Kantism turns pragmatism into a radical alternative to the philosophies that the Western world proposed for the past two centuries. Classic pragmatists were men of science, friends of technological novelties, critical thinkers, but they were so in a deeply original way. They offered an alternative view of modernity, very far from nominalisms and dualisms that often affect contemporary philosophy. It is a way in which aesthetics and ethics have a real impact on logic, in which we have to "break out of the circle of words" (Colapietro 2016: 167), in which tradition and education have to be understood in a richer way.
- 6 In the internal debate of the pragmatist scholarship in the late years as well as in the broader philosophical landscape, I witnessed the growth of a poor realism, very similar to a simple naturalistic and scientific view. A reading of Peirce as ancestor and emendator of the analytic tradition is often allied to this neo-scientist view of reality and science. Of course, I do not want to deny any merit of both Kant and analytic philosophy. I think we owe both of them many decisive steps of our civilization, which is useless to list here. Nor have I thought to get rid of any fruit borne from this tradition of thought. I am only underlying that Kant, idealism, analytic philosophy helped only one part of our reasoning to grow: the analytic one; whereas, beyond any intention, they built up weak synthetic paradigms, often based on the analytic model. This is indeed the content of Chapter 2 in which I accept Hanna's thesis on the reliance of Kant's synthesis on the model of analysis. I would say that this model of analysis remains in the conception of reason of the majority of those who elaborated epistemologies during the last two centuries. That is

why, to give an answer to Vincent's question about Hegel, I would hold that also Hegel's profound and inspiring transformation falls under the same Kantian conception of reasoning, even though he pushes it very far into the direction I want to take.

- 7 In answering Guglielminetti's and Colapietro's worries about the abandonment of Kant's project, I reply that I do not want to fall into pre-modernity or anti-modernity (nor into irrationalism), but it is time to rethink an adequate view of reason in which synthesis is thought in a richer, original way. A different account of the paradigm of reasoning that presides over synthesis – along with a paradigm for vague reasoning – would complete the picture of our reasoning. Therefore, I do not want to abandon Kant's project as such but to consider it only as a part of our knowledge and, possibly, to smoothen its rigidity. Differently from Colapietro and Wittgenstein (but I will come back to this later on), I do not think it is sufficient to have a methodology of our use of reasoning. This strategy amounts still to accept a difference between theory and practice and to privilege the first over the latter, evacuating one the most important pragmatist insightful anti-dualisms, the one which denies the distinction theory-practice. In order to come up with a different synthetic pattern we also need a formal epistemic pattern and the heart of the book *The Philosophy of Gesture* is the need for a rationale of a synthetic and a vague part of our reasoning.
- 8 One can say with Pihlstrom – and with many other very interesting Kantian readers as Gava, Spinicci, Esposito, Baggio (all people with whom I discussed my project during the last years in different international conferences) – that the real Kant is not the Kant of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and that his project was not dualist at all. If the center of it all were the Third Critique, you would have a very different picture. Fair enough, but I would reply that, at least, classic pragmatists had in mind the dualist Kant that emerges from the First Critique and they forged pragmatism according to this reading of Kant. Second, if Kant really thought of a non-rationalist way of thinking... well, pragmatically speaking, many consequences of his thought do not agree with this reading.
- 9 As for the interpretative path, a good question by Sami Pihlstrom remains: can the project of the book work without this anti-Kantian part? No, it cannot. The project wants to say that we developed only the analytic part of our rationality and that the pragmatist call to the unity between theory and practice, reasoning and action was an appeal for a different paradigm of syntheticity and for a necessary paradigm of vagueness. This is why I conceive this book as an attempt to develop what they started. To lose the anti-Kantian attitude intrinsic to pragmatism means to lose a historical truth but, above all, the core of an alternative very different from those that we saw during the twentieth century. Certainly, as Colapietro points out, this alternative has a Hegelian tone, as classic pragmatists had, but it can elaborate on change and action with the richness of modern mathematical developments of continuity and sophisticated phenomenology and semiotics.⁴ All tools that somehow come from classic pragmatism in general and from Peirce's pragmatism in particular, and that should get this proposal out of the Hegelian spin.
- 10 Finally, in a substantial way, I agree with Lucia Santaella and Vincent Colapietro in indicating the goal of pragmatism in the growth of concrete reasonableness and humanity. Lucia Santaella ascribes that growth to the path of normative sciences as drawn by Peirce and well explained by Lucia in her piece. Vincent Colapietro ascribes to Peirce a methodological outcome that makes us historical, practical, dramatic developers of critical knowledge. I can understand their positions and I greatly admire their work

and attempts. Nonetheless, I think they miss, or they cannot share, the need for a new pattern of knowledge, of a new definition of the synthetic paradigm. This partial incomprehension explains why they focus on the proposal of gesture more than on the paradigm of which gestures want to be a tool. When Colapietro shortly comments on the need of a different paradigm of reasoning, he points out that he prefers

the adjective *synechistic* to *synthetic*, since it shifts the focus from a methodological activity (the acts, processes, and procedures by which syntheses are achieved) to (in the first instance) a phenomenological task, one that of describing with painstaking accuracy genuine continua and, for that matter, degenerate ones as well. (Colapietro 2016: 168)

- 11 I agree that this was also Peirce's attitude and there is no question about the fact that this was Peirce's aim. Colapietro is one of the greatest readers of Peirce because he understands this point in its deepest implications. But my project is not Peirce's. This is exactly the point in which our projects depart because he wants to give a precise theoretical description of our practices, while I underline that practices are a (synthetic) *theoresis*. That is why we can detect their inherent rationality and I think that Peirce, beyond his intentions, elaborated tools apt to this task. Lucia Santaella, instead, affirms that Peirce was already very close to this perspective and that the indication of *summum bonum* as concrete reasonableness shows this vicinity as well as the distance of Peirce's project from any form of rationalism. I am profoundly convinced of her conclusion about this latter point, at least as far as the project is concerned. I only hope to provide a better account in order to advance the first.

2. Gestures

- 12 As for the proposal of "complete and incomplete gestures" as tools of a new definition of a synthetic paradigm, comments and suggestions are really powerful and interesting.
- 13 Mathias Girel's question whether "complete gestures" can be accepted as paradigm for any kind of gestures and, more critically, Vincent Colapietro's remark of the Herculean task that gestures have in my account raise the fundamental topic of complete gestures as tools of synthetic knowledge. I think that the acceptance of this proposal largely depends on the semiotic study of mathematics that I presented in Chapter 3 and on the acceptance (at least) of the need for a different synthetic paradigm, which is the outcome of the work of Fernando Zalamea.⁵ In an endnote of the book I explain that French philosophers of mathematics as Cavailles and Châtelet used the same term "gesture" to indicate a new form of mathematical constructivism.⁶ Having had the chance to spend some time in Paris, the last year, in order to present the book at the École Normale Supérieure, I could deepen the reading of those interesting thinkers. The refusal of a-priorism, the underlying of the practical action that gesture implies in creating mathematics, the need of structural rules for these actions, the synthetic power of the outcome of gestures are already present in their work. Cavailles summarizes this description of mathematics with the wonderful expression: "*attraper le geste et pouvoir continuer*" (to grasp the gesture and to be able to go ahead). Certainly, as Mathias seems to hint at, most of them keep the gestures within the limit of mathematics while *The Philosophy of Gesture* wants to broaden gestures to regular experience. Somehow, it is what Châtelet foreshadowed in his work by addressing the border between regular experience and mathematical experience and invoking a broader notion of reality and a different paradigm of reasoning. Moreover,

Giuseppe Longo underlines the intertwining between the material conditions of possibility and the conceptual construction of mathematical gesture. Longo traces the history of this phenomenological and semiotic interplay back to the Lascaux caves, where primitive human beings invented the idea of border, a line that holds and limits, both material and conceptual. Longo explores the idea of the universal into the particular through Euclid's drawing of a line, which is without thickness, Lorenzetti's paintings, Galileo's principle of inertia, Riemann surfaces, Grothendieck's geometry. Mathematical constructions are rooted into a "practice of gesture" that goes far beyond any possible formalization and it is connected with human political and social living. The project of "complete gesture" stands or falls with this philosophical conception of mathematical constructivism.

- 14 One crucial objection to my project is one raised by Vincent Colapietro. Isn't it a paradox that I want to propose a synthetic tool and I describe it analytically? Indeed, it is an ironic paradox, but not an inconsistency. In the book, I ask myself the same question (142). I think that this paradox shows the necessity of analysis as well. Reasoning is a pendulum between different paradigms of reasoning: the analytic, the synthetic, and the vague. Analysis and synthesis are the extremities of the pendulum: we cannot explain synthesis with words except by way of analysis. Otherwise, we have to perform gestures. Performance is not only an illustration (as Colapietro points out) but also an embodiment of syntheticity. I think that Colapietro's comments help me to state better where I see the novelty of this proposal. For example, when he says that our understating of gestures "is practical, not theoretical" he seems to rely again on a practical/theoretical distinction. I can understand this attitude. Classic pragmatists showed the same cautiousness. And so did I. However, I saw that keeping this attitude implies eventually to accept the rationalist project and, even with many sophisticated adjustments – like Wittgenstein's and Colapietro's – it means to stay only within the rationalist, analytic track designed by Kant.
- 15 As for indefiniteness and incompleteness, a major criticism by Colapietro is the implied teleology of gestures and their possible completion. Colapietro is right in pointing out the importance of incompleteness and indefiniteness of semiosis. Gestures are actions that carry on a meaning, but meaning has not to be neither static nor unique. However, this plurality does not mean arbitrariness: gestures carry on a direction in which we have to look for the interpretative meaning. In this direction, we can find many similar meanings, all of them already implied in the gesture. When Sraffa performed his famous gesture, he wanted to indicate a problem in Wittgenstein's conception. He translated his gesture in a question: "how can you formalize this?" but there might have been several other translations ("I don't care at all about your formalization," for example), all of them gathered around the vague idea of a difference between what you can and cannot formalize. The consequences of the gesture and its interpretation could have been different as well. It determined a profound self-criticism but it could also provoke a simple reformulation of the previous theory. However, you could not interpret that gesture as "your theory was perfect" or "your theory perfectly explains what I have just done." Teleology does not imply the straitjacket of a univocal interpretation but a direction of meaning.
- 16 The gesture I elaborated works on the same continuity of change that Peirce elaborates when he describes a perfect sign (Ch. 3 and Colapietro 2016: 165-6, 171-2). The difference is that there are some ordinary conversations that are more important than others

because they let us know something new. Those are complete gestures, like Sraffa's conversation with Wittgenstein. I understand Vincent's fear of completion or perfection as a moral statement or as a static final state, but gestures are only conserving the implicit teleology that they receive from their symbolic part. Talking of complete gestures is not thinking about them as eternal. They are only powerful moments and they determine our changes in knowledge and habits but they are in any case passing moments of our lives. The philosophy of gestures explains why certain gestures are so powerful and significant to our knowledge (complete gestures) and others are only accompanying words or are helping us to make our meaning clear. Incomplete gestures have their own synthetic function and their own power. I did not elaborate too much on this, and I tried an elementary version of it playing with the three main kinds of signs (icons, indices, and symbols) whereas a full elaboration should involve all 59049 kinds of signs that Peirce counted on. I was more interested in the change of paradigm and in the main conception of the synthetic tool, but I hope some scholar will undertake such an immense semiotic work.

- 17 Besides, I am convinced that Colapietro's insight on incompleteness finds a more profound account in the need of a vague paradigm of reasoning and in the transition between this latter and the other two paradigms. Vague reasoning is possibly the richest one, the one from which any other reasoning and paradigm of reasoning stem. The incompleteness that we find there is really uberos, but – as I also say in the conclusions of the book – we need a profound research to get to vagueness through a vague tool just like we got to a synthetic paradigm through Existential Graphs and through mathematical gestures.

3. Continuity

- 18 Girel, Guglielminetti, and Colapietro ask some important questions on gestures and I will try to reply to them in the remainder of this rejoinder.
- 19 1. I return for a moment on Sraffa's gesture. What is the relationship between gesticulation, or the usual sense of "gesturing," and my sense of gesture? There is a difference but also a relation between accompanying the words by hands and my idea of gesture as "action that carries on a meaning." To be precise, gesticulating is an incomplete gesture that carries on meaning and makes us know something new in a very small amount. Gesticulating is an involuntary act that follows our words. However, the root of gesticulating is indeed in acts that try to vehicle a meaning. When I do not succeed in saying something, I try to perform it by hands, namely by iconizing and indicializing the symbolic function of words. As I explain at p. 78 of the book, the usual sense of "gesturing" is indeed an incomplete gesture that fosters information. Moreover, as Ong taught us, in gesturing we see what remains of an oral culture, which was probably closer to recognize the importance of a real synthetic paradigm based on meaningful actions. Writing greatly helped the development of analyticity, even though there is no symmetry between the two phenomena. We can detect syntheticity in writing as well as in orality, as I pointed out in Chapter 7.
- 20 2. Is discontinuity neglected and experience shadowed by my focusing on continuity? Enrico Guglielminetti, whose very interesting philosophy of "adding" has much to do with William James and pragmatism,⁷ suggests that in the rupture, in the breaking there is the chance of a real development (and event). This important question gives me the

chance to write some words on Peirce's attempts to formulate a theory of continuity, which would allow for discontinuities. This theory was the bedrock of pragmatism as it is the bedrock of the philosophy of gesture. In his late years, Peirce was trying to show how continuity can be thought of without falling into both idealism and analytic metric, namely how it can include discontinuity without deleting existential discontinuities and without considering Cantor's and Russell's paradoxes as ending points of inquiry. Peirce gave some characteristics of this perfect continuum, whose mathematical, topological demonstration has been given only recently by Francisco Vargas, from Zalamea's school of mathematics. Mathematical demonstration shows the embodiment of possibilities into actual points and accounts for this transition among modalities that I find crucial for synthesis. Continuity and transition among modalities are no straitjackets. Our comprehension moves among modalities, and a "necessary" meaning opens up new possibilities. Here, the articulation of synthesis relies on Peirce's and Scotus' interpretation of reality as a comprehensive modal development, of which actuality is only one realization. This does not mean to take out any value to the indeterministic sporting of actuality, which is a fruit of freedom and creativity as all our original gestures are (cf. Peirce's firstness and tychism).

4. Personality and Sociality

- 21 Mathias Girel asks two very interesting questions about the recognizing of identity during changes. Is that mechanical or we "can" decide somehow to endorse or not to endorse a "gesture"? So, what is the role of personality and sociality?
- 22 The book wants to underline the case in which complete gestures happen as ideal cases. When gestures are "complete" we are really knowing something new and there is no distance between interior and exterior, personal and social aspect. In the moment of assent to a proposed gesture author and interpreter find their unity (97). I consider this unity as a fulfilment of the pragmatist rejection of dualisms and an embodiment in regular life of Peirce's rich realism in which exteriority and interiority belong to a whole continuum of reality. However, these complete gestures are rare. More often, gestures are incomplete and in incompleteness the drama of personality as individuality emerges in a way that seems to be isolated. It arises when we perform incomplete gestures and it arises when we are about to perform a complete gesture, but we did not perform it yet. We would not be so satisfied when we perform a complete gesture, if it were not the achievement or the event that completes a long struggle. Now, Mathias Girel's question is whether during this struggle there is an ontological status of personality and sociality. I was cautious in the book and I am cautious now. Certainly, from an epistemic standpoint, our personality is a fruit of previous complete gestures and it is a struggle to achieve new ones. And, certainly, gestures are exterior as interior and, therefore, as I underlined in the book and Girel noticed in his careful reading, they provide a better but not contrastive theory for Mead's conversation of gestures. If I am not sure about the possibility of an a-posteriori metaphysics that would account for the ontological side of personality and sociality formed by complete gestures, I am sure that the entire philosophy of gesture confirms that reality is intrinsically communicative. The Self is an answer to an appeal of the social and not an isolated gem that can arbitrarily decide. Certainly, the mystery about the source of the assent, about the rational instinct or human heart remains. Peirce somehow answers by saying that all instincts are fruit of a

long evolution, but I think that as much as this answer is convincing for explaining the phylogenesis of our communicative Self, I am not sure it accounts for the ontogenesis completely. But this is certainly a good question for any further study on gestures.

5. Heaven

- 23 Would our gestures be eternal? Could we say that at least for complete gestures? Would JFK discourse remain in heaven? Guglielminetti correctly asks for a metaphysical and even theological dimension of gestures. I excluded those dimensions from this book not because they are not interesting but because I do not have tools for saying something that is more than a wishful will. Certainly, the entanglement between gestures and ontology or gestures and metaphysics is a task to undertake. For now, I underlined their epistemic value and I considered gestures as temporary tools of reasoning when reasoning wants to detect an identity through change, namely when it can grasp anything new. As I indicated in the conclusions of the book, I think that a complicated but intriguing a posteriori metaphysics was in the pragmatists' chords. However, I think I will postpone this study to after the more important research on vague reasoning. For now, heaven can wait.

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NOTES

1. Pennac 1992.

2. As Pihlstrom observes, Gava's & Stern's book (2016) was not published when I wrote the book, but I used as reference Gava 2014. Gava and I discussed the issue of Peirce's Kantism or anti-Kantism in a seminar at École Normale Supérieure in June 2015. In the book I briefly touch also upon Brandom, Hookway, and Misak as well. Cf. also the treatment of those readings in the introduction of Calcaterra, Maddalena, & Marchetti 2015.

3. As it is well known, Dewey even hinted to Kantism as a philosophical root of German imperialism (see Dewey 1915). Although he might have exaggerated, drawing political implications from more abstract philosophies remains a legitimate practice. Many harsh comments are also in Peirce's late manuscripts 1908-14 (cf. Maddalena 2003).

4. See Zalamea 2012a and 2012b.

5. See also Maddalena & Zalamea 2012.

6. It is important to recall, as Girel does, the important studies on the practice of mathematics in Chauviré 2008.

7. Guglielminetti 2016.

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