

GESTURES AND EXPRESSIONS:

THE OVERFLOW OF IMMEDIATE QUALITIES

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ABSTRACT: The aim of the present study is to indicate the features of those gestures that can contribute to an immediate experience. If gestures share some sort of indexicality with signs, they do not seem to carry the kind of symbolic meaning required in formalized language. How can an immediate experience arise from an interaction between human gestures? How can we make sense of a gesture without interpreting it?

My first enquiry into the link between gestures and immediate experience makes use of Dewey's critique of Darwinian evolutionism. I then develop a pragmatist reading of the later Wittgenstein with whom Dewey shares a number of ideas. The result of these enquiries is the finding that the immediate quality of a gesture does not express itself directly, but it does so by an act that *over-flows* its organic mode of existence.

Keywords: gesture; meaning; expression; emotion; language; indexicality

A Scene as a (Non)Premise

Imagine yourself in a specific situation. You are at a train station, and because you arrived a little bit too early, you decide to sit at a table and order a coffee. You watch the people passing by. Two women in colourful clothes are carrying heavy baggage, two young men come running from the staircase searching anxiously for the departures board. A young couple seem to be quarrelling and a group of kids, all wearing the same red hat, are standing on the left corner, chatting. At a certain moment, you observe two young women who appear to be waiting for somebody to arrive at the end of platform 23. You imagine who that person could be: the girls look alike, could they be sisters? Maybe they are waiting for their parents? The train that they are waiting for gets into the station; a lot of people get off it and flow down into the hall.

The two girls wave in excitement towards a particular point into the crowd, they smile and talk to each other, they walk towards the crowd. You are very

curious to see whom they came to pick up. And here the person comes, an elderly woman with a silver suitcase. The girls hug her and greet her, she smiles back at them but seems to be worried about something, or maybe she's just tired, one of the girls takes her suitcase, the other one gives her a bottle of water; she immediately drinks from it. The three women appear to know each other well, but there does not seem to be any intimacy between them, you would not bet that the elderly lady was the girls' grand-mother, there is something friendly but rather too respectful, and even slightly formal, in the way they relate to her. Is she maybe somebody with whom they work? Now, the three of them turn back and walk towards the exit, you follow them with your gaze, they become more and more distant and disappear behind a family with a stroller. They are gone.

This rather ordinary event may have lasted from five to ten minutes. It's a scene. Something that you have witnessed as a spectator benefitting from anonymity, like a prince wandering in the streets in *incognito*, as Baudelaire says about the anonymous C.G., *The Painter of Modern Life*. Now, think about the fact that in order for you to imagine this scene from the lines that I have written above, you not only had to have had experienced similar scenes in similar situations, but you had to imagine in your mind a lot *more* than what is written in the above paragraph. You had imagined smiling mouths, frowning foreheads, hands moving, feet stepping on the floor, elbows bending, necks turning and shoulders turning. You had to imagine all of these gestures in a specific sequence in order to adapt them to the written text and, most of all, you must have given the imaginary movements a certain *quality* for them to adjust to the emotions and interactions that are described.

There appears to be a qualitative *overflow* that allows a body to express sympathy rather than love, anxiety rather than haste, respect rather than intimacy, concern rather than fatigue. That quality is seemingly *expressed* in an *immediate* way through the body. You can make sense of it without being able to hear what people are saying and without knowing them. This

immediate quality appears to exceed the body by expressing more than a simple physical input or movement. But how does it do this? How can a bodily quality become expressive and be immediately understood? How can we “make sense” of a specific situation without passing by a verifiable structure of references and premises? One answer could be: *past experience*. It is only because we already had similar encounters in the past that we can relate a specific emotion to a gesture. We construct an imaginary situation insofar as it sets the scene up as a perfect mirror of our daily lives, we invent it insofar as it corresponds to our own prior observations of people, gestures, faces, and human interactions. From this perspective, the interpretation of the present situation is not immediate but built upon multiple previous empirical experiences that serve as premises, and even as truth propositions. It is these experiences that are the source of the psychological and sociological coherency of the situations you have imagined.

Hence, the supposedly “immediacy” of the sense that we make of a situation could in reality be a mediated interpretation based on *habits* (See Dreon 2016). The immediate and the habitual are so entangled that we could conclude that it seems there is no space for direct experience in a world where language, signs and words shape the meaning of what we think. However, following the pragmatist path, one way to extrapolate and untangle habits from immediate experience is to go back and relate our present experience to the primary empirical situation which acts as the beginning and the first step from which all the rest results.

If pragmatists agree in the idea that knowledge is not the fundamental and primary way we experience the world, they do not limit this primary experience to a supposedly “given” world as an immovable set of sensory data. It is a qualitative background that does not function as habit nor as knowledge but rather as a pre-scientific and pre-semiotic sensory mode of acting and living. But the problem with this primary experience, as

the pragmatist method teaches us, is that it is too connected with the particular disposition and contexts in which it takes place and cannot be reduced to a purely first action with no links to the environment. In other words, it does not function as a premise.

That is why a pragmatist premise is a contradiction in terms insofar as, from a pragmatist point of view, sense and meaning are systematically to be found *in medias res*, in the middle of the action, at a train station, in a context that is neither primary nor given but rather secondary, as part of a sequence of living actions and reactions showing that the immediate experience could be direct without necessarily being generative. Making sense *of* a scene, or situation, implies making sense *from* a scene, because we are not dissociated from that scene, but we are part of it. We do not even need to interpret it. We are passengers, waiting at a train station, observing a reality that is not simply “around” us, but that includes us, a reality that is the world in which we are anchored (and this is where pragmatism and phenomenology, especially in its Merleau-Pontian version, can meet).

Inside this scene, which acts as a (non)premise, what counts above all are gestures: waving in a certain way, dragging a baggage or climbing up the stairs, smiling in a certain way, moving one’s shoulders, turning one’s head, in a certain way. Neither primary actions nor simple habits, these *ways* (or modes of behaviour) give the bodily movement a distinctive tint, a quality that comes across as natural, and that is often immediately understood. This is possible, mostly because gestures possess a feature of “mediality” (Agamben, 1996), they are always “in between”: between communication and production, between actions and reactions, between intention and interpretation, between words and real things. And it is because of their mediality that gestures can serve as research field for what we can name an “immediate experience”, that experience lying in between the biological and the sociological, the mechanical and the organic, the intentional and the spontaneous.

The aim of the present study is not to define and analyse the general concept of gesture, a task that would lead this enquiry into the fields of communication sciences, semiotics and linguistics, going beyond the limit of this text. The aim is to indicate the features of those gestures that can contribute to a supposedly immediate experience. How can an immediate experience arise from an interaction between human gestures? What kind of meaning does a gesture need to bear in order to provoke an effect of immediacy?

Gesture and immediate experience

The English word "gesture" derives from the Latin term *gestum* which is the noun derived from the verb *gero*, *gerere* which means to carry, to administer, to represent, to produce, to accomplish, to carry on, to continue and to behave. A gesture usually designates a particular bodily activity of a person and her habits, it indicates the specific aspect of this person, her way of moving in space, her way of using her hands when she speaks, her way of sitting. Following ordinary language, I am limiting the study to bodily gestures, excluding other possible types of gestures, like highly complex intellectual meditations or mathematical proofs. Usually, a gesture is interpreted as a somatic movement that on a physical level doubles a psychological experience, since it alone signifies a message, a feeling, a judgment. (Kendon 2004) The polysemy of the verb *gerere* shows the different facets of the noun *gestum*. On the one hand, a gesture is understood as management, on the other hand as attitude and behaviour. This Latin root is evident in the French word "gestion" or the Italian word "gestione", which mean administration or management. This aspect is important; in his essay "Notes on Gesture" Giorgio Agamben claims that gesture includes a supportive and managing structure which is precisely what secures its independency from production and action, thus opening up an ontological interval between the Aristotelian dualism of *poiesis* and *praxis* (Agamben 1996), highlighting the *medial* quality of the gesture.

The conceptual possibilities and disruptive qualities of the idea of "gesture" lie in the interstice between two supposedly distinctive fields such as creative production and political action, aesthetics and ethics, art and life, body and mind. But above all, the idea of gesture can help to reorganize, rethink and readjust the definitions, borders and principles of the relationship between knowledge and experience. Thereby the concepts and phenomena related to the idea of "gesture" are truly fecund and directly related to pragmatism, as Giovanni Maddalena's work has shown (Maddalena 2015 and 2016).

Maddalena suggests that a **gesture** "is any performed act with a beginning and an end that carries a meaning (from **gero** = I carry on)" (Maddalena 2015, 69-70). If I can agree with the idea of «performance» and the idea of «carrying», I have some reservations about the closed temporality (beginning and end) and with the idea of *meaning*. The analysis of the temporality that underlies the performance of a gesture would go beyond the purpose of this article¹, but I will address here the question of meaning: why would a gesture necessarily carry a meaning? And if it does, how would this meaning be carried and expressed? Finally, what definition could we give to the term "meaning"? If a meaning is necessarily something that has a relationship to knowledge and consciousness, then the attribution of meaning to gestures would entail a separation between habitual behaviour, unconscious acts on one side and intentional acts and willing responses on the other, recreating the same hierarchy between knowing and not knowing that pragmatism attempts to overcome. In this

¹ The studies that I have accomplished in this field, mainly by collaborating with performers and artists through the *Laboratoire du Geste* (www.laboratoiredugeste.com) at the Sorbonne University, have confirmed for me the idea that the temporality of a gesture is highly loose and cannot be extracted from a continuum of living as an action can be. This questions have been central for our two years seminar leading to a symposium in 2014 on Art, Time and Performance opening up the question of repetition and originality that are highly investigated in the field of performance studies.

separation there would be some gestures that are meaningful (and legitimate for analyses) and other activities that are not meaningful (and that can be disregarded).

However, one can find some definitions of meaning in pragmatism which cannot be reduced to such a mentalistic definition; pragmatism contests the primacy of consciousness and intentionality as in Mead's definition of meaning as the response prompted by a gesture. In Mead's perspective – even though this issue is the object of a longstanding discussion –, the idea that every gesture has a meaning entails that every gesture tends to prompt a response. The problem lies then in the interpretation: what if, as we will see later through Wittgenstein, we can respond to a meaning carried by a gesture not only without being able to explain this meaning but also to fully interpret it? This possibility, which is very recurrent in ordinary life, suggests that there is something that can be carried out by a gesture that is not yet meaning, even in the minimalistic definition of meaning proposed by pragmatism.

Reshaping Maddalena's definition, I would propose a more restricted, but at the same time more open and vague, definition of gesture as "*any performed act that carries a quality*". This definition can be understood not only from Wittgenstein (associating gestures to language games) but also from a Deweyan point of view: we "make sense" of a gesture when we can grasp its quality, the latter being a singular quality of the performed act that exists with no relationship to anything else than itself. It is, we may suggest, what Dewey calls an *immediate quality*. But what is difficult to grasp in this situation, is that the immediate quality is not always immediately perceived, as we will see in the next section on Wittgenstein.

In *Experience and Nature*, the expression "immediate experience" occurs only once, in the chapter "On Nature and Communication" where Dewey writes: "The part of wisdom is not to deny the causal fact because of the intrinsic value of the immediate experience. It is to make the immediately satisfactory

object the object which will also be most fertile." (Dewey 1929, 204). Dewey points out that an "immediate" experience cannot be closed in itself or univocal, it needs to give rise to other possibilities of meanings and values, it needs to be "fertile". But if the expression "immediate experience" is rare, the adjective "immediate" is used frequently by Dewey in *Experience and Nature*, often as a synonym of "direct" and many times in a link with "enjoyment" (Dewey 1929, 79 and sq; but also in Chapter 9 on art). Above all, Dewey uses the adjective "immediate" to designate a certain type of "quality": immediate qualities are empirical and non relational: "Quality is quality, direct, immediate and undefinable." (Dewey 1929, 110). And, in Chapter "Nature, Ends and Histories", he clearly defines immediacy as a non-relational quality:

In every event there is something obdurate, self-sufficient, wholly immediate, neither a relation nor an element in a relational whole, but terminal and exclusive. Here, as in so many other matters, materialists and idealists agree in an underlying metaphysics which ignores in behalf of relations and relational systems, those irreducible, infinitely plural, undefinable and indescribable qualities which a thing must *have* in order to be, and in order to be capable of becoming, the subject of relations and a theme of discourse. (Dewey 1929, 85)

Knowledge cannot be primary², "no knowledge is ever merely immediate." (Dewey 1929, 322), it is something that is added in a dialectical way to a situation that is necessarily vague, open and uncertain³. It is precisely

² "It is impossible to tell what immediate consciousness is – not because there is some mystery in or behind it, but for the same reason that we cannot tell just what sweet or red immediately is; it is something had, not communicated and known." (Dewey 1929, 307). This immediate relationship of natural things to a person, can exist as a form of "animism" and "its legitimate and constant form is poetry" (Dewey 1929, 181). This consciousness cannot be identified with knowledge because "the belief, assertion, cognitive reference is something additive, never merely immediate" (Dewey, 1929, 321).

³ "When philosophers have insisted upon the certainty of the immediately and focally present or 'given' and

because the immediate qualities of the supposedly “given” are vague that they are more fertile and open, because “‘This’, whatever *this* maybe, always implies a system of meanings focussed at a point of stress, uncertainty, and need of regulation” (Dewey 1929, 352). Hence, the immediate quality of a gesture, its *way of unfolding* in time and space, needs also to be unclear, open, and ambiguous so to liberate itself from a given meaning and a truthful and decisive interpretation because the openness and the uncertainty of the immediate allows the experience to become a process. This is similar to Dewey’s suggestion in Chapter 9 (“Experience, Nature and Art”), where he associates the intellectual journey of the mind with the process of a work of art:

To be conscious of meanings or to have an idea, marks a fruition, and enjoyed or suffered arrest of the flux of event. (...) It marks the conclusion of long continued endeavor; of patient and indefatigable search and test. The idea is, in short, art and a work of art. As a work of art, it directly liberates subsequent action and makes it more fruitful in a creation of more meanings and more perceptions. (Dewey 1929, 371)

Here the process of art making and the emergence of the aesthetic experience join the unfolding of a consciousness that is not yet knowledge but a premise, or rather a (non)premise of knowledge. This unfolding consciousness shows the continuity between art and life, between aesthetic qualities and empirical ones: “the origin of the art-process lay in emotional responses spontaneously called out by a situation occurring without any reference to art, and without “esthetic” quality save in the sense in which all immediate

have sought indubitable immediate existential data upon which to build, they have always unwittingly passed from the existential to the dialectical; they have substituted a general character for an immediate this. For the immediately given is always the dubious; it is always a matter of subsequent events to determine, or assign character to. It a cry for something not given, a request addressed to fortune, with the pathos of a plea or the imperiousness of a command.” (Dewey 1929, 349).

enjoyment and suffering is esthetic.” (Dewey 1929, 391).

On this subject, in *Art as Experience*, in Chapter 3 (“Having an Experience”), Dewey describes a scene of a job interview with a variety of details relating the meeting between two men, and he explains that as the interview continues, the primary or general emotion of the candidate is transformed by the secondary emotions providing an aesthetic quality to the meeting. Dewey writes:

(...) secondary emotions are evolved as variations of the primary underlying one. It is even possible for each attitude and gesture, each sentence, almost every word, to produce more than a fluctuation in the intensity of the basic emotion; to produce, that is, a change of shade and tint in its quality. (Dewey 1929, 43)

These gestures, tones of voice, ways of holding oneself, which can at first be considered secondary, in reality not only reveal a series of real emotions, but possess the power to change the overall quality of the primary or basic impression. In other words, the detail of the gesture surpasses and exceeds its small scale to the point of transforming the appearance of the subject herself in her singularity. This capacity “to produce a change of shade” and to give more than it seems to possess, makes the gesture something important though often neglected. This excess is why a gesture designates something more than a simple mechanical automatic act or a technique.

Unlike the Greek concept of *techne*, a gesture is not predictable. In a very pragmatist sense, the gesture is first of all a relationship, or even an interaction, it only emerges where it can potentially establish a response or a reaction. However, if we suppose this relationship to be a natural circumstance, a difficulty immediately emerges. If we think of gestures as natural, primitive, or animal-like bodily occurrences, it becomes difficult to envisage and conceptualize the possibility of an ordinary language rooted in the sociability of our shared habits. Naturalized gesture would lose the practical and acquired scope of our daily interactions. Hence, in

Dewey's analysis of the job interview, first of all the relationship between the interviewee and the employer is regulated by standard social behaviour and the conventional habits of the workplace. Then, for the interview to actually unfold, what is required is a whole series of secondary emotions which allow each participant's "presence and behavior...[to] either harmonize with [their] own attitudes and desires or to...conflict and jar" (Dewey 1929, 43).

More generally, the immediate or primary quality can come across as secondary, even if it is central to the meaning of the experience. The primary, singular, non-relational quality of a gesture is perceived as long as the experience evolves in the duration and temporal development of the experience as an interaction. The primary quality is perceived, paradoxically, as secondary mainly because of the length of the process of the experience and the unpredictability of it. Dewey does not hesitate to associate this encounter to drama and theater because the scene, as a theatrical stage upon which characters act, makes sense when the singular quality of a gesture is perceived and irradiates the whole scene. Dewey terms these emotions "secondary" because they are often hidden and felt in a second phase of the unfolding of the experience, and not because they are second in degree or in value. As the relation between the two people unfolds, the non-relational quality appears secondarily even if it is an immediate quality.

Pragmatism offers ways of overcoming the dualisms between nature and culture, immediate and mediated experience, art and science, spontaneity and intentionality, bodies and words. But, as far as our inquiry into gestures goes, the continuity between these dualisms reappears mutely, as we will see, in the separation between emotion and gesture, between a supposedly inner state or disposition and a manifestly sensitive externalization of it. In order to clarify this point we need to understand the process of expression that a gesture uses in order to manifest its immediate and singular quality. If a gesture carries a quality, how can this quality be perceptible?

Emotion and Expression: Dewey and Darwin

If a quality is immediate – in the sense of being non-relational and singular – does that necessarily imply that its method of expression is immediate too? Or does it need an interpretation, a filter, or at least a relation? And more specifically, how can a gesture express its immediate quality? Following Dewey, one would say that a gesture is not a vague expression but an "act of expression", to use the title of Chapter 4 of *Art as Experience*. But what does Dewey mean by "act" of expression, how does it unfold? Dewey starts his analysis from the etymology of the word "expression", and emphasizes the "act" that is already present in that etymology; the action of (ex-) extracting the usually liquid matter from a body by the application of pressure. An expression is an act of elimination or expulsion by compression. In a very pragmatist perspective, Dewey underlines in this act the need for an interaction with something outside the body (for example with "the wine press" for the grape, Dewey 1934, 64). This interaction produces a transformation within the material itself so that it passes from "raw" or "primitive material" to "product of art" (*ibidem*).

Dewey finds in the act of expression a type of transformation that echoes the continuity between immediate experience and knowledge, as far as knowledge also involves a kind of art process, as we saw in the section above where he identifies the formation of an idea with a work of art. The "work" is visible in the "act" of expression: just as primitive material is not enough to produce an expression and needs an external force to transform itself into an artistic or artificial product, so emotion alone is not enough: it needs an external environment that resists it and gives it the impulse to express itself. Thus the action of expressing, or expressing oneself, needs two competing forces that meet and interact to be able to make an emotion manifest, and these two forces cannot simply be placed one on the inner side, supposedly spiritual, and the other on the outer side, supposedly physical. The two

forces meet as they blend into a single ontological continuity.

Expression becomes self-expression and a form of language without there having been any rupture between the primary material and the expressed one. According to Dewey in each act of expression there is a transformation of matter from “raw” or “primitive” to “artificial”, and this transformation is accomplished via a continuity. This transformation is similar, we can argue, to the one that occurs between the immediate quality and its manifestation in a gesture. But how does something actually change while remaining the same? And how can this idea of a transformation of oneself avoid the risks of naturalism without incurring the opposite and equally dangerous trap of idealization by which transformation would require conforming to a model? There is a deeply pragmatist solution and it lies in the well-known continuity between the biological and the sociological; this continuity is the same that arises, in Dewey, between a primary experience and any kind of meaningful experience (principally ethical or aesthetic).

This continuity, which is not identification, could be explained by the fact that if Dewey does not limit the act of expression to an organic reaction, nor does he over-emphasize the importance of intention. Thus in *Art as Experience* he explains that crying and smiling are not true acts of expression because at an organic level, “emotional discharge is a necessary but not sufficient condition of expression” (Dewey 1934, 61). That is to say, a simple physical reaction alone is not an expression. But Dewey does not encourage, on the other hand, a cognitive or simply conscious definition of the act of expression, rather he defines expression as “the clarification of turbid emotion” (Dewey 1934, 77). This clarification is neither intentional nor theoretical and nor is it carried out externally; rather, it is a question of social interaction because, as Dewey says in the chapter entitled “The Expressive Object”, “expression, like construction, signifies both an action and its results” (Dewey 1934, 82). There is no true naturalness in

expression, since it is a social construction, but there is a continuity at the level of its existence: expression accomplishes the form of emotion and brings it to its fulfilment through the interaction with others.

Accordingly, in the chapter “The Natural History of Form” of *Art as Experience*, Dewey quotes Charles Darwin's book *Expression of Emotions* and clearly distinguishes between the natural expression as “discharge” and the pragmatist expression as “rhythm” (Dewey 1934, 155). The former would be immediate and would end in a loss of energy, while only the latter succeeds in creating a “tension, and thereby a periodic accumulation and release”. Darwin's book, according to Dewey, “is full of examples of what happens when an emotion is simply an organic state let loose on the environment in direct overt action” (Dewey 1934, 156). Contrary to this “pure” organic state, Dewey proposes a sort of rhythm in energy which is the condition of possibility of an aesthetic experience. Evolutionist theory is constantly seeking a residual form of natural qualities in the opposite of will, namely reflex reactions. Although this attempt is laudable and important to the extent that it opposes cognitivism, it does not offer the advantage of pragmatism, namely the attention paid to the practical function of gestures in their social context.

Instead of thinking of gestures as organic expressions or direct discharges of emotion, Dewey encourages us to see them as overflows of meaning that are used and shared within a community, where the immediacy of the experience is not merely “a direct and overt action”. As he says in *Experience and Nature*:

Gestures and cries are not primarily expressive and communicative. They are modes of organic behavior as much as are locomotion, seizing and crunching. Language, signs and significance, come into existence not by intent and mind but by *over-flow*, by-products, in gestures and sound. The story of language is the story of the *use* made of these occurrences; a use that is *eventual as well as eventful*. (Dewey 1934, 175. My italics)

We seem to have here a response to our question: the immediate quality (of a gesture) does not express itself immediately, but it does so by an act that *over-flows* its organic mode of existence. The difference with a simple naturalistic approach consists in the fact that during the achievement of language, there can be an overflow, a typically gestural *surplus* which gives *meaning* to the expressive act itself and may even contribute to a meaningful experience without limiting the gesture to an organic discharge and without transforming the gesture into a formalized and logical form. A gesture suggests a bridge and a link between two – or more – entities and by doing so it uses neither the power of cognitive clarification nor of bodily force. In this overflow of meaning lies the difference between evolutionism and pragmatism, between a purely physiological approach to expression and another approach that imbibes the biological with a social nuance.

A gesture is not merely biological but not yet intellectualized, and it possesses a sociological aspect. When emotion overflows its physical manifestation, then it finds an additional meaning to organic discharge, it finds a social, aesthetic, cultural meaning by freeing itself from the strictly physiological domain. In this overflowing, meaning does not end up dispersed, but it gives form to the history of language. Following Dewey, language is formed and developed according to the way in which this over-flow of gestures and sounds is used. In this manner, gestures and sounds are not by-products that end up lost, but rather they form the very foundation of language since it is in their excess of meaning that a possible (“eventual”) use can see the light of day, one that is also full of meaning (“eventful”).

There is therefore a certain amount of serendipity in the fabric of the meaning, since it is in the fortuitous use of an excess that the event of language takes place. Unlike Darwin who sees in the gesture a simple external expression of a pre-existing psychic state, Dewey sees in emotion the site of the production of a sense, of the transformation of an organic matter into a social material. Similarly to Peircean signs, gestures cannot be

reduced to a purely symbolic definition in so far as they are opposed to arbitrariness. However, if those gestures which carry an immediate quality share with signs some Peircean features, such as indexicality and firstness (as we will see in the next section), they seem to be dissociated from iconicity in so far as their forms do not always correspond to the meanings that they express by overflow.

Grasping the Gesture: a pragmatist reading of Wittgenstein’s philosophy

The first part of the title for this section begins from one of Giovanni Maddalena’s articles (Maddalena 2016). Maddalena inspires us to ask: how can we grasp the quality of a gesture? What type of intellectual process correspond to the grasping of its meaning⁴? In order to proceed, I can now render more complex the initial simplistic definition of gesture given at the beginning. If the simpler definition is: “a gesture is a performed act that carries a quality”, the more detailed definition could be now “a gesture is a performed act that carries an immediate quality that is expressed by overflow”. It is this overflow that needs to be grasped and, it is because of this overflow (or “by-product”, as Dewey says), that it is quite possible, and even very recurrent, to perfectly understand a gesture without being able to explain its meaning.

⁴ Cf. Vincent Colapietro: “Gestures are commonplace. In fact, they are ubiquitous. Not only are they commonplace, but our understanding of them is as well. For the most part, however, this understanding is tacit and situated, not explicit and abstract. Moreover, it is practical, not theoretical. There is nonetheless also such an understanding of gestures in general. That is, we *immediately grasp* the significance of someone extending a hand upon being introduced to us or the significance of a friend upon leaving turning around and waving an arm. But we also immediately *grasp* what such acts **in general** are. Quite apart from being able to define words or ideas in a formal, abstract manner, we often have an *effective* and, in many instances, a *nuanced* and *subtle comprehension* of their meaning” (Colapietro 2015, my italics).

Concerning this “grasping”, Maddalena rightly indicates, following the heart of his book *The Philosophy of Gesture*, that there “is the need for a rationale of a synthetic and a vague part of our reasoning” (Maddalena 2016, 7). The difference between a definition of gestures as “carrying a meaning” (as for Giovanni Maddalena) and my definition of gestures as “carrying a quality” implies that for the first case the meaning is proper to the gesture (and associates gestures with signs, in particular Peircean signs) but in the second case the meaning is indirectly expressed by the gesture as a surplus of a quality (and this dissociates gestures from signs). This has also to do with the “ordinary” nature of gestures (Formis 2010) and the immediate comprehension of them. We can “make sense” of a gesture without being able to explain fully its meaning.

This is the case, for example, of a Neapolitan gesture whose semantic value seems to have been at the origin of the philosophical rupture between the first part of Wittgenstein's work and the second. Wittgenstein came to know this gesture through his friend Piero Sraffa, an Italian Marxist economist exiled in Cambridge during the fascist period. The gesture consists in passing the top of the hand under the chin as if to indicate a state of boredom and disapproval. The supposedly illogical and at the same time understandable nature of the gesture provides Wittgenstein with the main argument for his abrupt transition from a linguistic and logical system to a social anthropology. The meaning of the gesture would thus have a deeply illogical foundation and a nature that cannot be modelled, which invites Wittgenstein to break with the logical philosophy and the idea of an ideal language. What appears obvious, as the later Wittgenstein will say, is that the gesture *is* the expression, just as the grimace *is* anger, since the whole meaning lies in the use, namely its capacity to be understood without having to go through a formalized interpretation.

The question would be: how can we grasp the meaning of a gesture without interpreting it? Gestures seem to suspend the conventional structure of language since they show without saying. There is an essential difference here between “show” and “say”, and Wittgenstein points out that in German these two verbs are close in sound: *zeigen* and *sagen*. The gesture (*Gebärde*⁵) is the element that reveals, shows (*zeigen*) the condition of possibility not only of the word and of saying (*sagen*), but more generally of the meaning as a relationship between the body and the sound of the voice. The ostensive character of language, presented by the German verb *zeigen*, gives primacy to gestures. The father who shows his daughter an apple by pointing his finger and saying the word “apple”, shows that the word is the sign of a reality, while the gesture acts as a vector, as an element of connection between this word and this same reality. Similarly to Dewey's idea of overflow, for the later Wittgenstein gestures are like links, or somatic arrows that associate a sound with an intention, a word whose meaning is often not understood with a tangible and visible reality. Similarly to *vagueness* which seems to belong to the Peircean phenomenological category of *firstness*, gestures need to remain open and unclear in order to provoke an immediate experience.

Moreover for Wittgenstein, similarly to pragmatism, especially that of Peirce, the ostensive or demonstrative quality of gestures must remain imprecise, embryonic and vague, otherwise they risk being constrained within a formalized proposition. Their indexicality needs to be non-referential and their meaning functions via secondary indices. Thus, in §71 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein insists, in a very Peircean tone, on the fundamentally “vague” aspect of the gesture, which retains its dimension of “approximately” and indeterminacy, since it is precisely in indeterminacy that its openness lies and its ability to designate, without expressing, “the common element” between different

⁵ For a detailed account of the occurrences of the term *Gebärde* (gesture) see Gorlée 2012, 285 et sq.

examples (§ 72). And the simplicity of the gesture is also summed up in its “spontaneity” (§ 75) which allows one to say “I am almost sure”, I can reconstruct my experience, while describing it in its simplicity and spontaneity.

The feature of mediality that appears in gestures has a specific sustainable form. In Wittgenstein as in Dewey there is a kind of encouraging and stammering quality of gesture, that is to say, a way in which gesture presses forward, we can *use* words through gestures. Gestures allow a simple carrying on (from *gero*). Wittgenstein notes that there is a sort of precedence of the gesture in taking shape: “The gesture tries to prefigure – we would like to say – but it cannot.” (§ 434) In German: *Die “Gebärde versucht vorzubilden - möchte man sagen - aber kann es nicht.”* The incise *möchte man sagen* “We would like to say” is not anecdotal, there is a desire of the language to say what the gesture cannot say, there is an attempt to visualize and show in the form of figure something that cannot be determined in a figure. *Versuchen* means to try, to attempt, while *vorzubilden* means to “perform” or “model”. The gesture is thus given in a stammering that shows the desire and the possibility of regulating understanding, that is to say, giving a place to meaning within reality and at the same time the real being understood as an elusive and unformed kind of meaning, a sort of possibility of meaning. So in its demonstrative and ostensive power the gesture does not say (*sagen*), but it shows, and it does so without becoming a sign (*Zeichen*) understood as a clear mark.

Unlike signs, which can still possess a referential indexicality, gestures represent nothing: they cannot be the representatives of something else and they are difficult to translate. It is through gestures that we can “carry on” into language, and maybe more generally into ordinary life: gestures are the ostensive characters of the meaning of reality insofar as they act as vectors placing and rearranging the meaning of words in reality. As Wittgenstein says in § 208, “the gesture of continuing so”, and “so on”, has an indexical function comparable to that of designating an object or a place. Thus, there is in the process of understanding a way of seeing that

Wittgenstein relates to a certain temporality, and an untimely discovery: one says “now it is right”.

This temporality requires an adjustment, “I see it that way”. There's the idea of going “together” between two examples, or between two different entities: “Now take these two things together!” or “Now these go together”. This “grasp” is to be understood as a phenomenon of understanding that could encompass several “organizational aspects”. This discovery concerns rather the arrangement of the visible, the audible and the exterior in such a way that one can say “now I see it like that”. It is the way of seeing that changes and not the vision *per se*. “Now I see it as...”, “Now I know how it fits together!” (p. 355). Now I can carry on, I can manage (in French, “je gère”, in Italian “gestisco” from Lat., *gero*).

In this reorganizational “grasping” Wittgenstein identifies something similar to what Dewey indicates in the “overflow” as an act of expression that goes beyond the rational form of knowledge. Gestures allow elements to be arranged and organized in such a way as to reflect a lived experience; they allow meaning without using logic nor symbolism and are fundamental elements of forms of life (*Lebensform*). But this faculty of “making sense” is not a simple physical capacity, a simple sensation of the body through which one somatically feels this “going together” of things. It is “a modified concept of sensation” (Wittgenstein 1953, Second Part, XI, 209) insofar as the demonstrative aspect of “grasping” requires imagination in order to allow a passage, a bridge, a surpassing that does not take place by “strong” means (intention, physiology, biological order): the passage takes place by a weak, or supposedly weak link (sociology, friendly relationship, cultural). If imagination is demonstration, it is because it has the ostensive power of the play of language, of the primitive stage of language which is profoundly demonstrative and ostensive. This imagination allows us to perfectly picture a situation like waiting at a train station, as we have seen at the beginning.

Following Wittgenstein, we may try to accept that words and meaningful exchanges between people are made possible by the demonstrative, gestural and imaginative nature of speaking because the processes linked to the experience of understanding are all ways of “discovering” the meaning of thought. It is not a question of identifying something that is “hidden”, inaudible or invisible, quite the contrary. It is precisely because the meaning is there before us, since it is indicated to us by the gesture of the hand, and accompanied by a sound of a voice, that this meaning is not to be discovered in the sense that we see it for the first time⁶. This discovery concerns rather the arrangement of real so to relate to the immediate quality of the gesture. In this “discovery” lies a sort of immediate experience by which understanding is also often a question of “guessing” organizational aspects, in a language game that Wittgenstein names “guessing thoughts” (Wittgenstein 1953, Second Part, XI, p. 225). The indexicality of gestures as they are used in ordinary language does not only need the impulse of habits but also the imagination of a mental composition or the capacity of “guessing thoughts”.

Wittgenstein, like Dewey, also poses himself against Darwin, allowing us to think the consistency of ordinary language beyond the illusion of a natural language or the creation of an ideal language such as that of metaphysical philosophy. It is on the basis of anthropological observation that Dewey and Wittgenstein agree and both depart from Darwin's biologism. In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey recalls that the act of expression is a construction, and that this construction is necessarily participatory and requires cooperation between at least two people. Similarly to Wittgenstein, Dewey's sense of gesture is also not external, nor antecedent to the very expression of this gesture, and its expression is nothing if it is not in agreement in a reciprocal activity with others. Meaning

is not given by a declarative force; meaning is not claimed, but it is given by consent and agreement between subjects within a shared activity.

Conclusion

Wittgenstein and Dewey, although from different backgrounds, have shown the way forward for an attempt to discredit metaphysics but not simply to replace it with the physical and the biological, but rather to hold together the biological and the sociological, the sensitive impression with the intellectual grasp, the confused with the reflected, the gesture with the word. From this aspect, this kind of immediate experience acts like a gesture, insofar as a gesture mostly links two things: for example, a reality and the sound of the word; the meaning of what I want to say and what is expressed by the tone of my voice; my physical attitude and my emotion. The gesture is what allows a correspondence, a “bridge” between two dimensions; but differently from iconicity, the correspondence produced by a gesture with an immediate quality is not definite and clear. It is not a real arrow, linear and clear, but rather a sketch, a draft whose meaning we discover almost immediately even if we find it difficult to describe. Wittgenstein and Dewey teach us that the primitive forms of language (especially gestures) can neither be reduced to words nor to concepts, yet they give consistency to our existence: they indicate our individuality and our particularity. Wittgenstein's famous formula: “meaning is use” is therefore entirely pragmatist. This form of language should be able to account not for *what* the gestures mean but rather *how* they mean, because what is essential is the “certain way” by which they express their immediate quality.

Here we see the possibility of a social behaviourism common to Wittgenstein, Dewey and of course to Mead, in which the rejection of intentionality makes it radically different from classical behaviourism: life forms are a way of acting, they put in place a premise and a context, an announcement and a beginning of action. They are

⁶ For this reading of the second Wittgenstein see Cavell 1969 and McDowell 1994.

activities, they are actions and meanings in which living beings find themselves in agreement. The activity thus becomes a manner, a way of doing things, a form of life, and a gestural overflow. It is a question of insisting on the overflowing capacity of the almost nothing, of those secondary gestures, aiming at condensing in a point, a *punctum*, a particular rhythm, the energy of a flow which can mark time, memory and produce an experience.

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