

GESTURE AND LITURGICAL GESTURE

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Abstract

The usual interpretations of gestuality presuppose that a gesture accompanies the expressive action, whereby it itself almost disappears, in order to make way for what the person gesturing wants to show as appertaining to his or her interiority. The intention of the present paper is to demonstrate how a gesture cannot be considered as something extraneous to thought, but belongs to the human posture in its being-in-the-world, and thus seamlessly gives rise to the manifestation of the self in the

symbolic framework of reference to a common meaningful horizon. The gestuality of liturgy serves as a particularly noteworthy example of such a phenomenological-hermeneutic interpretation of gesture.

Keywords: gesture, liturgy, Romano Guardini, play, symbolic field.

Gesta in liturgična gesta

Povzetek

Utečene interpretacije gestualnosti predpostavljajo, da gesta spremlja ekspresivno dejanje, pri čemer sama skoraj izgine, s tem ko osebi, ki jo izvršuje, omogoči, da to, kar predstavlja, pokaže kot pripadajoče njeni lastni notranjosti. Namen pričujočega prispevka je razgrniti, kako geste ne smemo dojeti kot nečesa zunanjega glede na misel, temveč ona sama spada k človekovi svetni pozicioniranosti, k njegovi biti-v-svetu, in potemtakem na samolasten način manifestira sebstvo znotraj simbolnega referenčnega okvira skupnega pomenskega horizonta. Gestualnost liturgije pri tem služi kot posebno tehten primer takšne fenomenološko-hermenevtične interpretacije geste.

126

Ključne besede: gesta, liturgija, Romano Guardini, igra, simbolno polje.

The intention of the little book *Gesture* (Cesarone and Bojanić 2023) was to interrogate gesture and gestuality, not by trying to describe purely its typologies, but to try to investigate and show the formal structure, and thus find an ontology of this phenomenon, of the gesture. I can say that I came, together with the colleague Petar Bojanić, to deal with this phenomenon within the horizon of an investigation of social acts starting with Adolf Reinach. As is well known, for Reinach, social acts are first and foremost linguistic acts, through which two people enter into a relationship marked by a promise, a command, a question, and even a prayer (Reinach 1989, 357). I believe that Reinach was surely influenced by the phenomenological meaning of “act” developed by his mentor, Edmund Husserl. However, for him, who was an expert in Roman law, the determinant “influence” had the significance of *actio* in the Latin language, where in the earliest Roman procedure this word was used in the expression *legis actio*, action of law, which indicated the manner of acting in court in accordance with the determined forms conforming to the law, characterized by strict oral and gestural formalism. The first question we tried to answer with the book is the following: in what way does the gesture have a relationship with the linguistic act, given that it is directed towards someone else?

127

The most usual interpretation of gesture is that it accompanies the expressive action, almost disappearing, in order to make way for what the person gesturing wants to show as appertaining to his or her interiority. The intention of our work went in the opposite direction, namely, we wanted to show how a gesture cannot be considered as something extraneous to thought, but belongs to the human posture in its being-in-the-world, and thus seamlessly gives rise to the manifestation of the self in the symbolic framework of reference to a common meaningful horizon. I will try to give an example of this phenomenological-hermeneutic interpretation through a reference to the gestuality of liturgy.

In *Der Geist der Liturgie* (1918), Romano Guardini, while dealing with the issue of “liturgical symbolism,” wonders how a believer could possibly find the gestures and movements—which constitute the holy liturgy—as significative in the relation between soul and God. Especially, if we consider that the Christian God is a spirit, whereas the spatial and temporal distribution of liturgy insists on a material allocation. Could one be surrendering to the bodily dimension, which would nevertheless betray, at least in part, the invitation to worship

God “in spirit and in truth”? Guardini’s answer to such a fatal question seeks the spiritualizing mitigation. It is necessary to reflect upon the modality, in which the self experiences the relation between soul and body. Indeed, there are those who believe that the self is determined by the spirit itself, which acts together, in a parallel form concerning the bodily sphere, but for which the two fields—the spiritual and the bodily—do not collaborate with each other. For sure, the spirit needs the body, yet only contingently, and the latter turns out to be not only uncollaborative, but, moreover, a hindrance and actually a contamination.

The soul strives to attain its goal—that is to say, truth, the moral impulse, God, and the divine—by purely spiritual means. [...] To them the physical is an alloy, an innate imperfection, of which they endeavor to rid themselves. (Guardini 1935, 32.)

128 Man, therefore, considers liturgical gestures and movements as inadequate expressions, allegories, sensitive forms when compared to the expressive richness of words or moral acts. If, instead, believers start from the assumption that the body is the external manifestation of what the soul experiences, every external action becomes something spiritual in itself. However, spirituality concerns not only the body of the believer, but also the “external” reality itself. Not only gestures and movements, but also clothing, social institutions, all that concerns reality. In truth, Guardini finds some slight defects in both attitudes when it comes to fully understanding liturgies, which, when carried out in a symbolic manner, require the taking into account of not only external influences, but also of differentiation and distance.

Indeed, both the symbolic act as well as its correct interpretation play a key role in liturgy. The essential connection is the one established between the internal spiritual dimension and the external expression, which does not become an arbitrary vehicle of meaning, but the essential embodiment of what one wants to express. Furthermore, the significance of the symbol needs to be universally accessible, and not the object of an exclusively individual understanding of an act. According to Guardini, the power of symbols is exerted, above all, in the various forms of touch, which express the inner world

of each of us at the moment when one's own life happens socially, exhibiting respect or courtesy. Within this group, one should also place religious gestures, which are combined with the gestures of the others within a community who experience the symbolism within them: kneeling, the joining of hands, bowing one's head, spreading one's arms, beating one's chest. These single gestures can be exchanged with other people; for instance, shaking hands as a sign of peace or of receiving a blessing. Basically, ritual actions are nothing other than a chain of symbolic gestures, whose meaning is not conveyed as a goal due to its innate sense, because, for Guardini, liturgy is playfulness. The rigid liturgical regulations, with their vestments, gestures, and movements, produce nothing but a form of playing in front of God, through which the believer expresses the life of his/her own soul in the presence of his/her Creator. Liturgy, like a work of art, only expresses itself; therefore, its task is to display the work of art that each believer represents:

The practice of the liturgy means that by the help of grace, under the guidance of the Church, we grow into living works of art before God, with no other aim or purpose than that of living and existing in His sight. (Guardini 1935, 71.)

129

In order to fully grasp the semantic range of "play," it is useful to mention the rich meaning of the German noun *Spiel* and of the verb *spielen*. The Grimm brothers' dictionary lists a series of meanings for the verb, among which only the first is connected to the Latin *ludere*, "playing," but which entails also spending time idling around or moving energetically, yet without a goal. A *Spieler* was, however, also the medieval juggler, hence the verb conveys a recreational activity, imitating human activity, and the instrumental representation of a musical piece to give pleasure to an audience.

These intuitions were gathered once more by Guardini in a small book, published a few years later, in which the catholic philosopher and theologian attempts to briefly investigate the Sacred Signs in the liturgical practice. Guardini's aim is to tackle the issue concerning the loss of impact in being with regards to contemporary man, who has come to lose contact with real life. Words and practices have lost their sense, that is to say, the essential

relation to the surrounding reality. This also happens within our religious life, in which words, such as “God,” “Christ,” and “Grace,” have no real hold on people’s souls anymore, like some actions also, such as bending one’s knees and opening the palms of one’s hands. Change needs to be encouraged through rekindled understanding, starting from the revival of the words we utter and the gestures we perform. However, we do not want to linger too long on purely liturgical elements—the sign of the cross, the beating of one’s chest, kneeling—, but would, rather, go back to what Guardini writes about hands. While the face is considered to be the mirror of the soul, can the same be said of hands? The movement of one’s hands often appears more expressive than any word spoken, coming second only to the face in terms of spirituality. Palms are opened as the beginning of an invocation, closed in contrition, or put together in a meditating prayer. All these gestures display what the soul means (cf. Guardini 1933, 13–16).

130 However, if monks wish to spend their own lives in one entire and incessant liturgy, can we interpret life according to the rule, that is, the entire life of a monk, as one single continuous gesture? Giorgio Agamben underlines how cenobitic life is to be understood from the viewpoint of its temporal articulation, following St. Paul’s recommendation (1 Cor. 10: 31), as a sequence in the divine office of prayer, understood not only in the liturgical sense, but also as work (cf. Agamben 2013, 40–41). Already St. Benedict of Nursia invited the cellarer, the administrative officer of the abbey, to take care of work tools as he would of the objects on the altar: “Let him regard all the utensils of the monastery and its whole property as if they were the sacred vessels of the altar.” (*St. Benedict’s Rule*.) Needless to say, Agamben’s contrasting of the cenobitic form of life and the sacramental office of the Church cannot be discussed here. However, life according to the monastic rule, with its set of liturgical and non-liturgical gestures, should be seen as the very form shaping the monks’ lives. The gestures they perform daily not only express an internal spirituality, as Guardini made clear, but also design the *habitus*, which is what makes someone a monk. “As *meditatio* renders *lectio* potentially uninterrupted, so every gesture of the monk, all the humblest manual activities become a spiritual work and acquire the liturgical status of an *opus Dei*.” (Agamben 2013, 43.) It should be emphasized that *meditatio* does not stand for modern meditation as we

understand it today, but rather for the internal repetition of what has been enunciated by *lectio*, that is, what has been read out loud. The difference is clear, when we compare this with what Guardini specified in his descriptions, which start from a distinction between ordinary life and the sacramental office of the Church. The cenobitic life, aimed at transforming life into liturgy and liturgy into life, pursues the wholeness of monastic life, which renders each gesture a moment in the uninterrupted liturgy. However, referring to Guardini, nonetheless enriches our investigation with a new perspective on the meaning of signs in primitive populations: sacred signs as liturgical gestures should be understood as part of playing, which involves the participants in the ritual that has no aim other than playing itself. With these considerations in mind, we move on to the final part of our investigation.

Gestures, as previously suggested, cannot be understood as the external expression of interiority, which experiences the meaning of thinking always in the fullness of its presence. Instead, a gesture is something that visibly connects thinking to the finite body of those who are thinking, in a way that thinking occurs with the hand and thanks to the hand. Thinking, that is, *lógos*, is, therefore, not something abstract, but is given as a gesture, as an action: “In the beginning was the Deed!” (Goethe 1909, 903.) An action, which is carried out, however, within a symbolic and *spielerisch* framework, where the *Spiel* has nothing to do with the recreational. On some of the important pages, worth mentioning here, Johan Huizinga showed to what extent the religious symbolic play is at the source of culture and thought. Although upholding the characterization of human beings as separate from the genus shared with animals—an aspect that this inquiry has implicitly tried to refute—, Huizinga starts from the key statement: play does not wait for culture; on the contrary, as pertaining to the inter-human context, it is the field of all cultural creation (cf. Huizinga 1949, 4). Translated into the context of the present inquiry, one could say that gestures should not be experienced and interpreted as the expression of an inter-human meaning within cultural paradigms, inasmuch as they are the field itself, upon which culture is structured.

The merit of Heidegger’s investigation of signs, as carried out in *Sein und Zeit*, consists of showing how signs should be understood within the context of the world-meaning, in which they arise. Accordingly, it is not possible to

consider in the same way the flashing light of a car's indicator and the shamanic gestures within a ritual. If a formalization is desired, then it should not pursue a neutralization based on subjectivist categories, but should rather be informed by what he himself used to call, in the period devoted to the phenomenology of religious life, *Sachlogik*, namely, the form of logic internal to the questioning, aimed at preserving the specificity of the phenomenon. Is there a *Logik*, though, that can be said to be the source of this *Sachlogik*? Is it possible to identify an integral logos, to which all the manifold gestural givenness can be referred?

132 This is the point where original playing can be designated as a field, and no longer as an action. I prefer to use the word *field*, because “field”—*campo* in Italian—is connected to the Latin word *cāpere*, and is, hence, to be understood as the place, which is able to contain in great abundance (harvest and animals). This meaning should become clearer in what follows, but I have to, first and foremost, declare the important influence of a great contribution to the topic of symbols, namely, the work of Carlo Sini and what he called *grafema*, mainly in reference to Peirce's pragmatism (cf. Sini 1991, 185). To some extent what is pursued here is a hermeneutic logic of life, showing how the source of all empirical gestures, be it the cave wall paintings in the Ardèche or the referee's red card for a football player, is a preliminary field, making a particular action possible that can be different and distinct according to divergent cultural contexts. This field is that of symbolic gestures, where, by gestures, one should understand not the precise and empirical movement, but the gestural comportment, the attitude, the posture of hands and thinking together, in short, the posture of the living body when faced with the varied and complex manifestation of the world. What can be here only hinted at, but would certainly desire a thorough investigation in potential subsequent contributions, is the understanding of gestures as original being-here of the human in the world. Gestures, then, should be seen as integral and non-deducible, fluid and responsive, but, most of all, as symbolic forms of comportment.

The integrality of gestures is determined by their “physical and spiritual” operativity, that is to say, by the lack of separation between the act and the decision, between the execution of an act and its planning. Through original gestures and the opening of this field of possibility, exhibited from time to time in each empirical gesture, human beings become as such, transforming

themselves into the gesture through its protean metamorphosis. Gestures are non-deducible, because they establish the very identity of human beings by virtue of their occurrence, which in turn triggers further events. Furthermore, their non-deducibility could be seen as the inability of thinking, understood in the integral sense, to recognize its own origin, as was hinted at by Heidegger in a section of *Das Ereignis*:

The questioning of the history of beyng opens to the human being the open realm of the resonating consonance of the conjuncture of the event. This questioning follows the seams of the conjuncture; questioning, by speaking out, fits into the junction. But why do we speak here of questioning? Because thinking, in its essential relation to the truth of beyng, constantly remains in ignorance of the beginning inasmuch as thinking is never displaced into the beginning, although at the same time it indeed knows the beginning and only the beginning, since thinking follows into the event the junction (appropriated out of the beginning) of the twisting free of beyng. This knowing and yet non-knowing, which can provide no information because otherwise it would abandon the twisting free of beyng, must remain in the experience of the event. This experience maintains the relation to the dignity (inceptuality) of beyng, a dignity which has for thinking the basic character of questionability. (Heidegger 2013, §271, 215.)¹

133

Original gestures happen in a fluid manner, whereby fluidity is understood as the need to come to “terms” with what the world lets emerge from time to time in its phenomenal givenness, which appears and hides according to the era. Said fluidity is, therefore, typical of the very historicity of the occurrence of gestures, which can only be formally identified, while we try to avoid all universalizing and presentifying fixity. Furthermore, gestures always occur as being responsive, namely in subordination.

¹ Cf. also the German original: Heidegger 2009, 249. A remarkable description of this non-deductibility, which unfortunately we cannot make explicit here, is also found in the concept of inscrutability, *Unergründlichkeit*, of the existential situation as outlined by Hans Lipps (cf. Lipps 1978, 24).

Establishing a field can be given in response to what the world presents from time to time, from the absolutism of reality, as mentioned by Blumenberg, to the relation between sovereignty and exception, as stated by Schmitt. Of course, the cabinetmaker needs to know the peculiarities of each type of wood, in order to make a good chest; however, it is the collocation of the chest, which accounts for the answer triggered by its creation. Yet, there is another element, which reunites these four definitions and brings them together: gestures are established within a symbolic field. Clearly, the adjective “symbolic” here does not refer to the field of aesthetic experience, but rather recalls the meaning of the Greek verb *symballein*, which in its active form means “throwing together,” “putting together,” the movement “symbolized” by the *tessera hospitalis*. Original gestures are, then, the opening of the field, where the element of the giving-itself of the world is joined together with the human response. The Greek verb also refers to the confluence of two rivers, and this is another figurative sense, which can account for what this inquiry tries to suggest.

134 In conclusion, we can say that the original symbolic gesture is what puts the body to work at the moment, in which its presence is reunited with what it experiences of the world. In this sense, the cave wall paintings as well as the linguistic gestures are distinct elements of one unitary gesture that the properly living body brings into being in its being-in-the-world.

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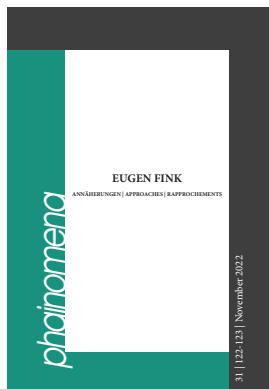
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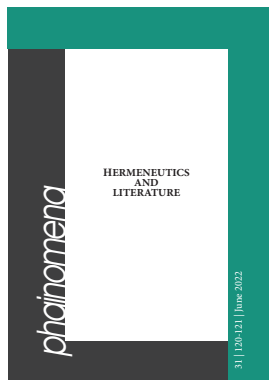
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