Maddalena, Giovanni. *The Philosophy of Gesture: Completing Pragmatists’ Incomplete Revolution*. Ontario: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015. xii + 195 pp. Cloth, CAD$34.95—Western Philosophy’s modern period has been very much shaped by a representationalism according to which “concepts” (earlier: “ideas”) assembled into “propositions” constitute the fundamental unit of *meaning*, *thought*, *belief*— and even, in the hands of 20th century philosophers such as G.E.M. Anscombe and Jaegwon Kim— *action*, conceived as performed under a description. What exactly a proposition consists in ontologically is not easy to explain in a manner consonant with prevailing scientific naturalism. But it is clearly a disembodied entity, some kind of abstract object.

For over 150 years the fledgling pragmatist movement has strenuously critiqued this approach. Thus John Dewey explicitly rejected the so-called “spectator theory of knowledge,” urging us instead to model epistemology as a series of existential encounters with situations that are actually experienced as problematic, and may be resolved through real adjustments between experiencer and experienced. Likewise Charles Peirce, in his early pragmatist manifesto “The Fixation of Belief,” defined belief as *habit*—a settled state whereby an organism knows how to *act* in a given respect. (For instance, my belief that my car is parked outside my house consists in nothing but my disposition to walk there when I wish to drive.) More recently, Richard Rorty has railed against representationalism as the source of numerous philosophical ills, such as epistemic hubris deriving from fantasies of asserting propositions from a God’s eye view. Overall, then, pragmatism can be understood as a shift in our understanding of meaning from ‘(mere) saying’ to ‘doing’. But (as was also noted by later Wittgenstein) this shift has vast philosophical consequences, and these are arguably still being plumbed. This volume dives exceptionally deeply into these new waters, bringing up new treasures for us all to ponder. Take Peirce’s definition of belief in terms of habit. Here of key importance becomes what we might call the *shape* of the habit. Under the old representationalism, a proposition is essentially the same whoever utters it. But in human behaviour, much depends on not just *what* is done but *how* it is done (and this ‘how’ will possess a beginning, middle, and end denied to abstract objects). The ‘how’ may be understood as *gesture*, and Maddalena’s book takes a first pass across how a philosophy that takes this, rather than disembodied meanings, as its foundation might organise itself. The result is a fascinating wealth of germinal ideas, not all of which I have space to discuss here.

The book begins with Kant (Chapters 1 and 2). Although many scholars have fruitfully analysed Peirce’s thought as a continuation of Kantian projects, Maddalena suggests that we have underestimated his departure from the Prussian sage. He diagnoses Kant’s phenomenon-noumenon distinction as one of the most inevitable yet ultimately unsatisfying end-points of modernity, and suggests that Peirce’s semiotics (theory of signs) is designed to bypass the problem through its “extreme” scholastic realism according to which patterns in reality (from the modern perspective: ‘outside the head’) and our understanding of them (‘inside the head’) are literally the same. For both form part of a continuous world of signs, and insofar as we ourselves are part of this world we can trust our common-sense far more than Cartesianism would have us believe. Maddalena boldly suggests that this semiotic framework enabled Peirce to seek “a completely new pattern of reasoning” which is entirely synthetic, replacing Kant’s categorical-analytic “necessity of content” with a completely general (pragmatist) “necessity of method” for investigating a world as yet unglimpsed by our conceptual schemes.

Chapter 3 further develops this claim through a three-way distinction which resonates through the book. Maddalena proposes that *analytic reasoning* is characterised by losing identity through changes (as entities are decomposed) and *synthetic reasoning* by recognising identity through changes (as entities combine to form greater wholes). But these two are insufficient; we must also posit *vague reasoning*, which is “blind to identity through changes.” As I understand it, such blindness is required for the formation of new and creative thoughts. Maddalena crucially believes that all synthetic judgment is creative, insofar as it consists in a movement from an initially vague experience to an identified singular experience which can then be generalized in a habit of action. For example, imagine that I am outside and experiencing the usual plethora of human feelings. I choose to organise a significant subset of them into an object— “the weather”— and I assert the singular observation, “The weather is very hot today!” This statement then enters the general space of reasons where it can be shared, disputed, inferred from, and so on. As any sign-use may be understood to consist in synthetic judgement thus broadly conceived, this account captures the heart of Peirce’s semiotics. The representationalist’s supposedly univocal ‘proposition describing reality’ is thereby revealed as a spuriously static stage abstracted from living thought that is continuous and in flux. Maddalena claims that these insights deepen “three celebrated pragmatist affirmations”: i) research is always tied to problem-solving (this represents, in effect, the new embodiedness of meaning), ii) belief serves as a resting-place for inquiry in action, but at the same time, iii) fallibilism makes that resting-place always only provisional.

Through the rest of Chapter 3, Maddalena further explicates thought’s continuity using tools from mathematics, following the lead of Peirce who famously appreciated Cantor’s controversial discovery of transfinite numbers, attempting to engage the brilliant schoolteacher in argument about the greatest infinity. This section is not an easy read for the uninitiated, but by drawing on Peirce’s cherished diagrammatic logic, the Existential Graphs, which Peirce deliberately scribed on a continuous sheet of assertion (so continuous that he eventually envisaged it as multidimensional), Maddalena does some intriguing metaphysical work. He urges us to accept that in this overarching perspective whereby the universe is “perfused with signs”, *identity fundamentally coincides with the activity* (gesture) *of recognising it*. In line with Peirce’s breathtakingly cosmological semiotics, this move ambitiously generalises the basic movement of synthetic judgment to all becoming. It shifts discussion of identity from both its current understanding in analytic philosophy as permanence of attributes *and* its current understanding in Continental philosophy through Hegelian dialectic between opposites. Rather, Maddalena understands identity as a dynamic, teleological “development of experience.” To my mind just this move potentially lays the groundwork for a highly original pragmatist metaphysics (which, despite popular opinion, is not a contradiction in terms).

All this scene-setting enables Maddalena in Chapter 4 to define a vital concept: *complete gestures*. These may be understood as particularly effective semiosis; clarifying what exactly ‘effective’ means here requires thinking hard about semiosis itself. Maddalena first attempts a formal analysis: the gesture must be simultaneously iconic, indexical, and symbolic, thereby expressing the three modalities of possibility, specific actuality, and general law, respectively. The first example given is explicitly gestural: Italian mountaineers require someone who makes a stone roll to carry it as a reminder of the danger of inattention. This ongoing tradition is iconic in its metaphor of the ‘weight’ of wrongdoing, indexical in being triggered by particular instances of carelessness, and symbolic as a general rule adopted within a given community. A second example shows how the concept of complete gesture transcends ‘quaint’ cultural eccentricities: Rutherford’s brilliant idea to fire alpha particles through gold foil, reasoning that if the gold atoms possessed nuclei they would deflect a certain proportion of the particles. This did indeed occur, with enormous ongoing ramifications for physics.

In Chapter 5 Maddalena adds a more functional analysis of complete gestures, as maximally *creative* within a given meaning-system. This leads to interesting meditations on creativity itself as necessarily involving awareness, and not occurring *ex nihilo* (as per Romantic fantasy) but as “accepting what reality permits.” A further important point is that as complete gestures have a direction and aim, they possess an ethical dimension insofar as they successfully develop (or not) potential latent in earlier stages. Thus “[m]orality becomes an intrinsic value…rather than an external discipline.” In this Aristotelian-pragmatist aspect of Maddalena’s work I see significant implications for finally making progress with the apparently baffling ‘puzzle’ of grounding normativity— a recurring yet largely impotent preoccupation of much mainstream philosophy.

The book’s final chapters explicate various aspects of human life fruitfully analyzable as “development of experience.” Chapter 6 discusses the memory theory of personal identity, distinguishing from the more usual “narrative” identity a “figural” identity (drawing on Auerbach) whose prophetic overtones may be echoed in the temporal development of a gesture, and thus a life. Chapter 7 considers literature, offering a moving discussion of Grassman’s bleak Holocaust novel *Life and Fate*, as a gesture which “becomes an independent reality, a common property of author and reader in the assent they have to give.” Chapter 8 turns to morality and education, returning to Kant and seeking to dismantle his “chasm” between theoretical and practical reason, and thus knowledge and freedom, through the ever-growing development of intelligent right action. The book concludes with the following stirring antirepresentationalist manifesto:

The perspective of knowledge is now turned upside-down. We are not the independent masters of detached reality . . . we are part of a reality with which we cooperate inasmuch as we imitate its intention by learning to perform the complete gestures performed by others.

This is a slim and provisional volume, and might be criticised for lacking more explicit engagement with philosophers who have previously explored some of its themes, such as Aristotle and Merleau-Ponty (to name just two). A work in pragmatism might also be justly criticised for not including more examples. Overall, though, if you would like to step for a time out of the deep premise-lined grooves in which run many debates in mainstream philosophy, and consider with fresh eyes a raft of foundational questions, I warmly commend this book.—Catherine Legg, Deakin University.