



Habits and the Internal Normativity of Complete Gestures

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Abstract

The concept of habit of action plays a decisive role in classic pragmatism. In Charles S. Peirce's philosophy, habit covers both an original mode of being and an original mode of thought. This conception is part of a broader aim to overtake the theory-practice divide. However, they did not see that this leaning toward practice and their extensive use of the notion of habit, whether mental or physical, pointed to a radical, different view of reasoning. In particular, they did not see how their innovative conception of practice and habit of action hinted at a definition of synthesis and analysis different from Kant's. To understand this different picture of the whole of reasoning, this paper intends to explore (1) Peirce's chronological development of the conception of habit of action; (2) a contemporary view of the topic under the name of "gesture" and its logical rationale; and (3) the normative implications that this new "gestural" perspective allows.

Keywords Habit · Gesture · Pragmatism · Synthesis · Peirce

1 Introduction

The concept of habit of action plays a decisive role in pragmatism, and other philosophical traditions also explored it during the twentieth century¹. Gadamer (1960) and Wittgenstein (1953), Ricoeur (1983–85) and MacIntyre (1981), and Piaget (1936) and Bourdieu (1972) tackled the topic differently. However, habits were often understood neither as original modes of being nor as original ways of thought. Instead, both characteristics are central to Peirce's take on habits, foundational to classic and contemporary pragmatism. This perspective severs pragmatism from all contemporary styles and traditions of thought. Moreover, it is possibly why many cognitive studies are turning to pragmatism to enrich their views (Barandiaran and Di Paolo 2014; Caruana and Testa 2020; Paolucci 2021; Gallagher 2022; Legg and Reynolds 2022; Valore 2024; Baggio 2025). However, while some Peirce scholars have inquired about the ontological aspect of habit (Bernardi della Rosa 2025),

only a few have considered the method of reasoning that habit implies. If we take seriously what habit means from an epistemic point of view, we face a different driver of the reasoning that all pragmatists have alluded to. Classic pragmatism can be legitimately considered a turning point in this process of recognising the role of habit, which is part of the pragmatists' revision of the theory/practice divide. They reversed their judgment concerning practice, turning it into a real form of knowledge. The pragmatic maxim, which is at the very center of the common pragmatist project (Calcaterra 2024), is a way to make practice a fundamental part of our theoretical judgment. A correct understanding of the pragmatists requires taking this statement very seriously. In fact, the pragmatists did not mean to say that we verify our thoughts through some particular process of verification, nor through any finite number of verifications. They thought that experiments, diagrams, and practical verifications were reasonings in themselves and, inevitably, habits of reasoning. They saw the ancient dualism between thought and practice as a prejudice to overcome. This explains the odd expressions and theoretical inventions, including existential graphs, scientific metaphysics, radical empiricism, the educational problem-solving method, conversation by gestures, etc. The very names of these logical or philosophical ideas implied a different view of the relationship between theory and practice. The more one reads the pragmatists, the more evident it becomes that they worked with new epistemic

¹ For the antecedent story of the term "habit", see Dunham and Romdenh-Romluc 2023; Piazza 2018; Sparrow and Hutchinson 2013.

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tools that blended by design the two ways of producing meaningful insights.

Peirce inserted into his classic explanation of abduction (1903) the “surprising phenomenon”, which is bound to be a non-theoretical element (Peirce 1998, p. 231). Peirce himself described existential graphs as his “chef d’oeuvre” (Peirce 1931–1935, p. 1) because they represented the pragmatic maxim in action, giving us a “moving picture” of our reasoning by literally displaying a succession of evolving logical forms. William James went even further by identifying truth with what is apt to be used in action (James 1907). John Dewey included material objects and tools as part of our logic (Dewey 1938). Mead held a totally externalist view of mind so that the mind is really the fruit of action (Mead 1934). All classic pragmatists considered “habit” a good term to indicate the joint use of practice and theory (Piazza 2018, 199–209).

However, they did not see that this leaning toward practice and their extensive use of the notion of habit, whether mental or physical, pointed to a radical, different view of reasoning. In particular, they did not see how their innovative conception of practice and habit of action hinted at a definition of synthesis and analysis different from Kant’s.

To understand this different picture of the whole of reasoning, this paper intends to explore (1) Peirce’s chronological development of the conception of habit of action; (2) a contemporary view of the topic under the name of “gesture” and its logical rationale; and (3) the normative implications that this new “gestural” perspective allows.

2 The Development of Peirce’s Awareness of Habits of Action

Peirce’s conception of habit saw increasingly sophisticated development during his later years. Even so, he had established the importance of habit of action as part of logic already in his early writings (Peirce 1981–2010, vol.1, p. 491; Peirce 1981–2010, vol.2, pp. 232–233) and then in 1878, when he described the pragmatic maxim in “How to make our ideas clear” (Peirce 1981–2010, vol.3, pp. 257–275). Peirce clearly states that the highest logical level is no longer internal to logic. Pragmatic clarity is not a concept or a definition, but a habit of action that can be actual or possible (Peirce 1998, p. 412).

Beginning in the 1880s, Peirce undertook studies of a mathematical continuum and elaborated his phenomenology. Both types of research also influenced his way of conceiving of habits of action. To make a long story short, Peirce understood continuity as an anti-metric, anti-analytic

conception by pushing Cantor’s antinomy to the extreme². Peirce’s continuum description relies upon four characteristics: reflexivity, plasticity, modality, and generality. Habits of actions will involve and embody this continuity. They are continuous actions within the broader continuity of reality. Peirce will exemplify what he meant by saying that his existential graphs, his invented iconic logic based on diagrams, represented that kind of continuity.

If habits rely mathematically on continuity, we must understand their phenomenological and semiotic constitution in phenomenology and semiotics (especially in relation to symbols), as Peirce did (Peirce 1998, p. 9; pp. 460–61; Peirce 1931–1935, 4.447; 4.464). During the mature part of his career, Peirce clarified that semiotics relies upon a phenomenological substratum that is real³. He defined his three categories in various ways, often mixing up psychological and logical characteristics. Firstness is the springing up of novelty, chance, possibility, and pure feeling. Secondness is actuality, resistance, existence, and attention or will. Thirdness is a generality, law, and habit of action. During the 1890s, Peirce recognized the metaphysical reality of those phenomenological categories⁴. Habits are thus a thirdness⁵, namely, a category of continuous mediation and binding among different realities (Peirce 1931–1935, 1.23; 5.538)⁶.

By the beginning of the new century, the conception of habit of action as a continuous and interrelated general law was established: “For every habit has, or is, a general law” (Peirce 1931–1935, 2.148). Peirce needed a further semiotic clarification, which he gave in 1907 (Peirce 1998, pp. 398–433). He defined the structure of sign as a threefold relationship between object, representamen, and interpretant. Then, he divided objects according to their ever-changing reality and their reference function. He divided all kinds of representamen, listing 56,049 of them, around the main distinction between icons, indices, and symbols. Finally, he divided interpretants into the categories of immediate,

² The antinomy says that the set of all subsets is greater and smaller than the set of departure if the set of departure is the set of all sets. Peirce discovered this antinomy in an independently and in 1900 wrote a letter about it to Cantor, who had discovered the same antinomy in 1897 but did not publish his discovery. For a complete story of Peirce’s theory of continuum, see Havenel 2008; Maddalena 2009, pp. 193–224, Zalamea 2012; Vargas-Moore 2020.

³ In his mature view, *real* may be defined as everything that leads to change. For crucial interpretation on the point, see Fisch 1986; but also Atkins 2018.

⁴ See, again, Fisch 1986; De Tienne 1986, Atkins 2018.

⁵ “According to my view, there are three categories of being: ideas of feelings, acts of reaction, and habits” (Peirce 1931–1935, 4.157).

⁶ In his radical empiricism William James stressed the fact that a radical empiricist believes that relations, conjunctions, and disjunctions are as real as hard facts (secondness) and feelings (firstness). He did not use Peirce’s categorization but clarified it, confirming, incidentally, that the pragmatists’ project was a common project.

dynamic, logical (with the crucial further specification of the ultimate-logical interpretant). While immediate interpretants signal that we are facing something that must be interpreted, and dynamic interpretants invoke either a reaction or a definition, logical or final interpretants are a habit of action. With this definition, Peirce reaches a final step in comprehending habit, which is no longer conceptual.

Finally, during the same years, Peirce developed another semiotic description called stehiology (the doctrine of elements). According to this description, a habit of action is general; namely, indeterminate because the interpreter must decide to what (where, and when) she wants to apply it. In this classification, generality is a third in respect to vagueness (indeterminacy by the utterer) and to the determination of actuality. The last description is Peirce's basis for arriving at a logical level, where he divides logical modalities into the categories of possibility, actuality, and necessity. In Peirce's definition, possibility is the ontological and logical state in which the principle of contradiction does not hold, necessity is the state in which the principle of an excluded third does not hold, and actuality or existence is the state in which both principles hold. Habits of action fall into the category of necessity (Peirce 1931–1935, 6.342–43). In Peirce's complex treatment of necessity (Lane 2017; Legg and Misak 2016), habits provide a single path of action. Therefore, they do not imply alternatives, which would be the condition for excluding a third option. This characteristic does not imply that there is only one possible use or interpretation of the habit. On the contrary, necessity is a generality that the interpreter or the interpretant, the name Peirce preferred for logical and etymological precision, might apply to different conditions, objects, and situations at different times.

A chronological study of Peirce's work leaves us with these powerful analytic descriptions of habits: they are interpretants that display generality, non-conceptuality, continuity, phenomenological thirdness, semiotic symbolicity, and logical necessity. Peirce offered some examples; above all, with his existential graphs and a description of experiments (Girel 2021). However, he never realized how much this conception challenged Kant's logical pattern by offering a different understanding of synthetic reasoning. Kant's model of syntheticity, the way in which we grasp something new, is still grounded on analyticity, as Robert Hanna explained in his book (2001). On the contrary, the characteristics of Peirce's habits of action open a new road for developing a different conception of synthesis.

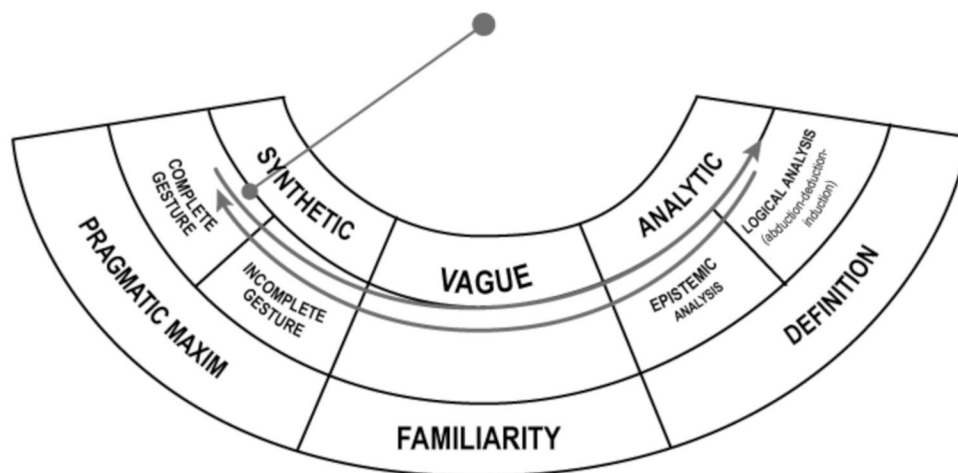
3 Gestures

In the book *The Philosophy of Gesture* (2015), I advocated for a way to read all of these characteristics of habits of action together. I call "complete gestures" those habits of action with a beginning and an end that carry on a meaning, namely, that synthesize our experience, bringing something new to our knowledge and awareness. They are the core and the beginning of any meaningful, human habit of action. "Complete gestures" have a phenomenological and semiotic structure in which all categories (firstness, secondness, and thirdness) and kinds of signs (icons, indices, and symbols) are involved in a dense way. This is Peirce's description of the existential graphs applied to any meaningful habit of action. In brief, sometimes we understand something new by making clear an initially vague experience by doing something. We measure, we draw, we touch, we talk. In other words, we experiment with meaningful actions. When these actions are built up and ordered to carry on a meaning, we can clarify the first vague experience, transforming it into a determinate set of actions to reach a general, replicable, meaningful conclusion.

For example, in a public oath, a scientific experiment, or an artwork, a vague idea becomes clear, and gains a generally recognizable meaning by performing a particular series of actions according to a specific law. The oath of the President of the US allows us to recognize in one "complete gesture" the meaning of otherwise vague ideas related to tradition, power, responsibility, etc. It is a formal set of actions that transform all those vague ideas into the conclusion that some person is in power at the moment and he/she brings all those values under his/her power. In the same way, we need a scientific experiment in order to reach a law. Think of the Rutherford gold foil experiment to assess the structure of atoms. Again, the experiment is a complete gesture. A painting or an artwork is another example in which we physically model a certain element in order to arrive at a meaning (obviously, the lack of meaning is a meaning as well). Our life is full of those synthetic habits of action, and the history of evolution describes human beings as having this capacity for understanding by doing, which encompasses the Paleolithic drawings in the Chauvet and Lascaux caves all the way up to our applications for smartphones.

The epistemic principles that are at work in these gestures are those that Peirce discovered: a capacity to operate in continuity, the continuous transition among logical modalities, the clarification of the vague, the passage to interpretants of signs, the dense blending of all types of signs and phenomena. When a habit of action has all of those characteristics, we are talking about a complete gesture. Of course, sometimes gestures are simply reactions, or projections, or modeling. I offered a long list of incomplete

Fig. 1 Three realms of reasoning



gestures that serve to understand what a completed one is but the main concept is that completion means “fully able to synthesize,” while in incomplete gestures, we have less power of synthesis⁷.

The definition of synthesis that follows this description is that synthesis is not the reverse of analysis, reasoning that can compose what we have decomposed. Synthesis is more original than analysis;⁸ it happens within a changing and continuous reality. Synthetic reasoning is part of this moving reality and develops a portion of this reality throughout its practical-theoretical happening. Understood in this way, we can comprehend the traditional methods of reasoning in another way. Synthesis is a reasoning that recognizes identity through changes. Analysis is a reasoning that loses identity through changes. When we synthesize, we build up a new reality, which is, at the same time, the representation and the object we represent. On the contrary, when we analyze, we divide representation and the represented object. The pattern of methodology so understood also leaves room for another method: vague reasoning. In this case, we either recognize or do not recognize identity through changes. We are simply blind to it.

The bottom curve of the illustration above regarding the clarity of ideas calls for one more explanation. Peirce himself described the three degrees of clarity of ideas in one of his early papers (Peirce 1992, pp. 124–141). He saw that traditional logic relied on analyticity and definition, and that this created a shortsightedness that failed to bring our ways of knowing into full view. Or, rather, it did so, but only in a

partial respect that related to the clarity of definitions, which is sufficient for some kinds of reasoning but much too limited the moment inquiry enters undefined territory. Peirce saw the pragmatic maxim, namely, the requisite for converting ideas into habits of action, as the higher standard to aim at. As we said earlier, it is unfortunate that he could not see that this higher level called for an entirely different kind of reasoning which needed a distinct description of its *rationale*. Today, at last, we can amend Peirce’s insight: the pragmatic maxim calls for a gesture that brings a higher level of clarity because it recognizes an identity through changes.

In conclusion, I want to point out that the new paradigm of reasoning describes our reasoning as a swinging pendulum. It means that we need all three of its parts to reason and that this is what we usually do in our experience, even if we have not classified it in this way thus far. We need synthetic gestures and analytic pauses. William James used to call them transitive and substantive states of mind, but our understanding goes beyond the metaphorical definition of the great American psychologist. Moreover, we know that we also need vague states, for example, when we are passing from analytic to synthetic reasoning and vice versa.

Gestures understood as specific habits of action thus have a pivotal role in this epistemic completion and development of classic pragmatism. In the next paragraph, we will see the kind of gnoseological ethics that they imply.

4 Internal Normativity

This description of habits of action in a synthetic movement also has a normative side that is very different from the rationalist pattern of morality that we have become used to. Here, I want to stress this side, which is important for my reading of habits as gestures and other possible readings of the phenomenon of habit.

⁷ Gestures are incomplete when one of the categories or one of the kinds of signs is absent or weak. Phenomenologically, incomplete gestures include ideation, exhibition, reaction, schematization, abstraction, and projection. Semiotically, we have imagination, information, indication, repetition, conceptualization, and modeling (Maddalena 2015, pp. 74–81).

⁸ Peirce himself noticed that the usual recognition of the identity of analysis, $A=A$, is but a degenerate case of the “more primitive”, synthetic $A=B$ (Peirce 1976, pp. 325–328).

The complete gesture shows a very important change in the conception of morality because it perceives morality within the pattern of the creation of the habit of action itself. Morality becomes an intrinsic value of knowledge instead of an external discipline. We know that the complete gesture, understood as a phenomenological and semiotic plexus, is an epistemic tool that unites practice and theory, knowledge and communication. When we perform a gesture, we do not apply some previous concept, but instead we comprehend something more or something new in the action of gesture itself. In the complete gesture, the complexity of ideas becomes actual and possibly necessary, but this “becoming” cannot happen without complete gestures. As is true in the entire pragmatist tradition, Kant’s distinction between practical and speculative realms does not apply here. Practice is how we know synthetically, a posteriori and not a priori.

When we perform a complete gesture, we judge that one possibility out of many is worth being actualized, to the point that we make it an aim expressed in a habit of action. In the oath of the President of the US, in an artistic performance, and in Rutherford’s gold foil experiment, according to different modes *an* experience has to be read according to a possibility that becomes actual and then a habit of action. In all of these examples, gestures grasp a vague idea that they want to represent and foster: the idea of power, harmony or disharmony, the structure of atoms. Among an infinite number of possibilities, complete gestures select one actualization⁹. Why do they select that particular form of representation? Why does power have to become an oath, the idea of harmony have to become a colorful painting, and a hypothesized structure of atoms take the form of an experiment? The form of representation is selected according to the criterion of better fitting the general order of signs in a way that could be replicable for other signs with different interpretations.

As pointed out by James and Mead, ethics is called for in this part of the action – selection – while the acquaintance with the general order of signs can be analytically fitted under the discipline of aesthetics¹⁰. This general order must coincide with our final goal. In gestures, the aim is included within the gesture itself, thanks to the symbolic thirdness that it must include. In this way, in my reading of Peirce’s division of the normative sciences in light of the theory of gesture I have proposed, aesthetics is understood as acquaintance with the general order of signs, ethics as a selection of signs and phenomena, and logic as a development of signs from the same tool, which is useful to comprehend, judge, communicate, and admire. In a word, gestures embody normative sciences.

We understand the power of this model when we realize that the complete gesture as a whole, by means of internal ethical judgment, displays the conception we want to represent. Morality becomes “the relationship between the gesture and the conception of the totality implied in the gesture”¹¹. This reflexivity, which comes from ontological continuity, is essential to the paradigm and casts light upon its richness and power. The point is that any action can be more or less moral according to the degree to which it becomes a complete gesture. A complete gesture is a moral gesture insofar as it is a complete realization of the vague idea and general ideal it wants to express. This approach also means that any activity can be moral if it realizes its own ideal. Any action, a bad action included, can be moral insofar as it embodies its vague initial idea and its general final ideal. In this sense, you can have a “good” theft or a “good” fistfight.

Here, a question arises about *summum bonum* – the highest ideal to which any ideal can aspire, a subject that falls beyond the scope of this paper. However, from the perspective of complete gestures, we can derive a little hint of the direction that studies on *summum bonum* will have to take¹². The broader the horizon of the signs embraced by the vague idea and the general ideal, the more the gesture can synthesize in its singularity that which gives birth to the new habit of action. The broader the horizon, the denser the complete gesture will be that embodies it. This is probably the best sense we can make of Peirce’s idea of concrete reasonableness as ideal and of the general order of signs that serves as a criterion of choice. The more any aesthetic understanding considers a plurality of complete gestures (tradition and evolution), the more it will fit the order, the more effective it will be. Reasonableness is the most comprehensive horizon of knowledge the human mind can think of, and complete gestures prefigure it (Peirce 1998, p. 255).

In this model, ethical rationalism is avoided as much as ethical empiricism, or, in more contemporary terms, ethical dogmatism is avoided as much as ethical relativism. Complete gestures do not imply any “dogma” because they do not apply an a priori pattern or set of rules; they are an embodiment of a vague background and tradition¹³. Moreover, any performance of a complete gesture differs because of its secondness and indexicality, so any mere application is impossible. Since any performance of a complete gesture

⁹ In a very Jamesian attitude.

¹⁰ Marchetti 2015; Bella 2024, Baggio 2025.

¹¹ For this view in other fields, see also Giussani 2001, p. 99.

¹² For studies on Peirce’s conception of *summum bonum* see Potter 1997; Nubiola 2009.

¹³ Obviously, this use of the term “dogma” does not refer to the original meaning of the term in the Catholic Church, where it indicates precisely some affirmation (dogma) that comes to be certain after a long experiential history.

is a new comprehension, it is impossible to pre-determine the outcome.

On the other hand, the outcome is not open to just any solution. Initial vagueness, ethically judged and physically performed, obliges the outcome to follow certain interpretative paths: not simply any path is allowed. Certain boundaries of interpretative freedom are permitted by the singularity of any performance and by the symbolicity, generality, and plasticity that any gesture implies. Meaning is increased and modified by complete gestures. Still, there is a general direction that is determined by the initial vague comprehension of experience and by the general aim we wish to attain.

Complete gestures also move between tradition and reconstruction. They positively assume and critically change the values of tradition. They represent a goal that they help to provide as a modification of tradition. Let us take, for example, gay marriage. The issue does not consist only of rights desired by a specific part of society; otherwise, those rights would easily be granted. The two parties that debate this issue are correctly focusing on that one gesture, which, if performed or not performed, would concretize and synthesize their ideals. So, this debate is part of the transition between tradition and reconstruction. As logical tools, complete gestures do not say what is morally right or wrong, but they tell us what we have in common and what is at stake.

Finally, complete gestures tell us that morality is not a priori and cannot be merely formal. They are the opposite of Kant's pattern of morality, severed from theoretical knowledge and highly a priori and abstract. Gestures are specific habits of action that stem from human beings committed to their reality. They certainly refer also to vague ideas and general ideals that are not immediately perceived within the existential experience. However, they are not outside reality broadly conceived. Nor are they definable by laws and rules because vague and general mean precisely "indeterminate". Morality grows with our gestures, and we can develop and amplify it as well as stop and shrink it.

5 Conclusion

Many philosophers have elaborated on habit as the "second nature" of human beings. It is a long tradition, which is incorrectly attributed to Aristotle, who was much vaguer about it in his essay on memory. However, classic pragmatists' conceptions and their development in a philosophy of gesture allow us to precisely describe this tradition in three ways that I have articulated in this paper.

First, habit is a "third nature" of human beings. Peirce's categorization illuminates the phenomenological, semiotic, and logical structure of habit. Habit is always a third. We could say that human beings' first nature is their belonging

to reality broadly understood, which includes possibilities other than actual existence and necessary developments. The second nature is the existential one. The third one is the habit.

Second, with the notion of gesture, we can understand a peculiarly human characteristic of habit: the capacity to carry on meaning. This ability exists at the inception of any habit and is at the core of the human capacity to change, transform, and innovate habits. In this perspective, gesture is a habit that involves all the phenomenological and semiotic characteristics that we listed. It usually emerges more in critical, or "fateful" moments (Goffman 1961) in which we need a change of habit.

Third, since it emerges in fateful cases, gesture has a normative dimension. The study of gesture shows that normativity is intrinsic to it and establishes different degrees of the relationship between the continuum of reality and the gesture itself. Only in this perspective does the discourse of *summum bonum* become meaningful from a pragmatist perspective.

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