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Chapter 4

Transcendental Gestures

Abstract: In this chapter, I introduce the notion of *transcendental gesture* by relying on the recent studies on the logic and epistemology of *gestures* proposed by Giovanni Maddalena read in the broader context of the “dramatic” ontology of *truth* developed by some Catholic philosophers and theologians in the *Communio* school. Maddalena has recently elaborated an original and persuasive doctrine of “gesture” understood as the paradigm of synthetic reasoning. All the formal aspects of gestures discussed in Maddalena’s work echo the concerns present in the “dramatic” doctrine of truth elaborated by the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Keywords: logic and epistemology of gestures, transcendental gestures, Balthasar, Hans Urs von, gift, mother’s smile

“To my mind, we ought to love life more than anything.”

“Love life rather than the meaning of life?”

“Yes. Love it before finding reasons why; without logic,
as you said; that’s the only way to get at its meaning.”

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

Begin to greet thy mother with a smile,

O baby-boy! Ten months of weariness

For thee she bore: O baby-boy, begin!

For him, on whom his parents have not smiled,

Gods deem not worthy of their board or bed.

Virgil, *Eclogue IV*

It says: “In the Beginning was the Word.”

Already I am stopped. It seems absurd.

The Word does not deserve the highest prize, I must translate

It otherwise

If I am well inspired and not blind.

It says: “In the beginning was the Mind.”

Ponder that first line, wait and see,

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Lest you should write too hastily.
 Is mind the all-creating source? It ought to say: In the
 Beginning there was Force.
 Yet something warns me as I grasp the pen,
 That my translation must be changed again.
 The spirit helps me. Now it is exact.
 I write: "In the beginning was the Act."
 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, I, 3

1 Introduction

In this chapter, I introduce the notion of *transcendental gesture* by relying on the recent studies on the logic and epistemology of *gestures* proposed by Giovanni Maddalena read in the broader context of the “dramatic” ontology of *truth* developed by some Catholic philosophers and theologians in the *Communio* school.

Maddalena has recently elaborated an original and persuasive doctrine of “gesture” understood as the paradigm of synthetic reasoning (Maddalena 2015 and 2021). According to him, gestures, in their multifaceted varieties, are the fundamental synthetic modality of our knowledge of reality. They represent a radical alternative to any view that sees human knowledge as depending on the priority of analyticity and the inevitability of *a priori* structures—from Kant to the most typical developments in analytic philosophy. All the formal aspects of gestures discussed in Maddalena’s work—especially the fact that they are deeds, their synthetic nature, their capacity to grasp identity through change, the crucial role of vagueness and *Gestalt* played in them, and in general the possibility that they open for a genuine encounter with the meaning of reality that is not predetermined in any way by *a priori* structures—echo the concerns present in the “dramatic” doctrine of truth elaborated by the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Balthasar and one of his most insightful and original contemporary followers, the American philosopher David C. Schindler, have presented a theory of the dramatic structuring of human knowledge according to which the spirit’s structural openness to reality in its dimension of truth can be enabled and activated only thanks to some fundamental gestures in which the possibility of the meaningful-

ness of reality as such is first conveyed, as it were, *as a gift*.¹ Balthasar's most famous exemplification of these gestures is the mother's smile to the child, in and through which the child is introduced to the intelligibility of reality.² What is conveyed in such gesture is not only *a* meaning but the possibility of *meaningfulness as such*. The dramatic encounter between the mother and the child in their mutual smiling—"dramatic" because free, unexpected, and surprising, and yet fully corresponding to the most profound aspirations of our reason—reveals the meaningfulness of reality as such in one single dramatic deed that has all the features individuated by Maddalena as formal aspects of gestures. One can hardly think of something more synthetic than a gesture that communicates, precisely in virtue of its utter vagueness, the meaningfulness of reality as such. Balthasar and Schindler suggest that the mother's smile is precisely such gesture.³

According to the Medieval Scholastic tradition that reaches its summation with St. Thomas Aquinas, the human spirit is always already open to receiving reality in its meaning.⁴ There is then, in a qualified sense, an *a priori* structuring of the encounter between spirit and world. Such structuring, however, should not

1 "The entire paradise of reality that unfolds around the "I" stands there as an incomprehensible miracle: it is not thanks to the gracious favor of the "I" that space and world exist, but thanks to the gracious favor of the "Thou." And if the "I" is permitted to walk upon this ground of reality and to cross the distances to reach the other, this is due to an original favor bestowed on him, something for which, *a priori*, the "I" will never find the sufficient reason in himself" (Balthasar 1993, 46). See also Schindler (2004).

2 Balthasar even mentions the centrality of the smile of the mother to the child for the overall architecture of his theological work in his "A Resumé of My Thought" (1988, 470–471). Balthasar and Schindler explicitly appeal to the notion of "gesture," for instance in the following passages: "the body, with its attitudes and gestures, offers the human spirit an inconceivably sensitive and versatile set of instruments to make itself thoroughly comprehensible even without the spoken word" (Balthasar 2004, 252); "When the mother smiles at her child, she is in fact presenting him with a Gestalt in which she makes her person accessible to him as a loving gift. The gesture is not simply an opaque picture, which can adequately be read as it were 'off the surface.' Instead, the whole has a meaning because of 'something' that is both not any particular part of what she shows him and at the same time transparently present everywhere within it, namely, herself, i.e., her freedom" (Schindler 2013, 48–49). In the pragmatist tradition, Rossella Fabbrichesi has discussed the smile of the mother, see Fabbrichesi (2019, 339–358).

3 See the difference between this view of motherhood and the view presented at times by Richard Dawkins: "I am treating a mother as a machine programmed to do everything in its power to propagate copies of the genes which ride inside it," for "[w]e are survival machines—robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes" (1989, 123). For Balthasar and Schindler, the mother with her smile is the "sacrament" for the child of the love-being of God and His creation (see *Glory of the Lord*, 5); for Dawkins, the mother is the unwitting vehicle of genes.

4 See *De veritate*, Q. 1., A. 1.

be understood along the lines of innate ideas or *a priori* principles and categories, as it is for some modern thinkers, but according to what the tradition calls the *transcendentals*—especially being, truth, goodness, beauty. Balthasar and Schindler interpret the mother's smiling to the child in continuity with the Thomistic understanding of truth as transcendental. For them, the mother's smile is a gesture that *brings into itself the transcendental intelligibility* that has always already characterized the union of spirit and being. In fact, such transcendental intelligibility of being, although not simply potential in the child's spirit, remains weak and inoperative without its being liberated to itself by the mother's gesture. I call this and similar gestures *transcendental* insofar as such gestures are closer than any other to the transcendental conditions of human life and bring such conditions into themselves by enabling and activating them.

Thus, it is by recovering the traditional, Scholastic notion of the transcendental in light of the contemporary doctrine of gestures—in short, by discovering the heuristic force of transcendental gestures—that one can rediscover the virtuous circularity between the transcendental (not reduced to Kantian *a prioris*) and the experiential (rescued from its fragmentation into experiential atoms, no matter how “synthesized” each one of these atoms is). In this way, while the contemporary developments in the philosophy of gesture bring logical clarity to the connection between transcendental gestures and truth, the non-Kantian, Scholastic understanding of the transcendental can put that same philosophy of gesture on safer metaphysical ground.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will articulate some of these considerations in greater detail. I will make six points plus a brief conclusion.

2 Beyond the Kantian Transcendental

The “synthetic” logic and epistemology of gestures developed by Maddalena is an attempt to overthrow the primacy and exclusivity of a model of knowledge based on the concept of a priority and analyticity, made classical by Kant but present throughout the history of Western philosophy, arguably from Plato's privileging of *theoria* to the recent developments in analytic philosophy. Maddalena's proposal is also a way to overcome, if not overturn, the dichotomies between theory and practice, mind and body, contemplation and action, understanding and communication, explication of knowledge by analysis and extension of knowledge by synthesis, and what has often been the primacy of the former over the latter. The philosophy of gesture inscribes itself in the tradition of pragmatist philosophy and aspires to bring to completion the pragmatist incomplete revolution.

Maddalena's take on pragmatism is strongly shaped by a constant attempt to distance itself from any form of *a priori* and transcendental structures, which are seen by him as inevitable variations of the Kantian model. Contrary to the Kantian view, which restricts meaningfulness (at least, the meaningfulness of scientific, universal and necessary knowledge) to the application of categories and principles to a field delimited *a priori* by the forms of sensibilities, i.e., space and time, for the pragmatist, according to Maddalena's version of it, the horizon of meaning is essentially that of *a posteriori*, experience-based, growing habits of interpretation (Maddalena 2021, 45–46).

One might ask, however—is it the case that the *a priori* and the transcendental are inevitably Kantian? Is it possible to find a version of the *a priori* and the transcendental that, while preserving the idea of an original conformity or correspondence between reality and mind, is nevertheless not only open to but, more strongly, constituted by experience? And even more deeply, is it possible to find a model according to which this constituting experience is identified with a *gesture*? As I have anticipated, one finds precisely this model in the “dramatic” understanding of truth proposed by Balthasar and developed by Schindler. That is why I talk about transcendental gestures, that is, gestures that work precisely at the level of the transcendental conditions of our experience.

3 The Gesture as Co-Essential to the Transcendental

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, “truth” is a transcendental, not in the Kantian sense, but in the sense of being a trans-categorical feature of *esse*: all being is essentially “true,” namely, intelligible. There is no mind that is not originally and structurally “open” to the intelligibility of being, just like there is no being that is in principle closed to mind. These points are also recognized by Peirce, when he says that there is complete synonymy between “being” and “cognizability,” and when he talks about the “rational instinct” of the human being.

Despite the difference with the Kantian model, Thomas' view still carries the idea that such fundamental conformity or correspondence between being and mind is an *a priori* condition of judgment and reasoning: we would not be able to judge and reason if we were not always already somehow “in the truth.”⁵

5 For a historical reconstruction and critical assessment of the vicissitudes of the notion of transcendental, see Jan A. Aertsen (2012).

Balthasar and Schindler inherit this Thomistic view but develop it in a “dramatic” sense through a reflection on the *historical and experiential conditions* that such a *a priori* structure requires *for being what it is*. Being in its transcendental intelligibility first emerges to the consciousness of the child in the free, and in this sense dramatic, I-Thou relationship with the mother, and more precisely through a specific gesture, to which Balthasar devotes many pages of his work, namely, *the mother’s smile*.⁶ In this relationship, the event of the “dawning of being” takes place; “being as a whole lights up” in this gesture (Balthasar 2004, 255). While the *a priori* conditions for apprehending being as intelligible are in a sense already given, in another and deeper sense, they cannot be presupposed because they are *gifted to the child* in and through the gift of the mother’s smile.⁷

One can individuate here the virtuous circularity between two meanings of givenness: *a priori* conditions are “given” in the sense of being presupposed to any experience, but they are also “given” in the sense of being instituted by a certain fundamental experience, i.e., a gift that is a gesture. The virtuous circularity here means that while the conditions could not be instituted and made operative

6 “The little child awakens to self-consciousness through being addressed by the love of his mother. This descent of the intellect to conscious self-possession is an act of simple fullness that can only in abstracto be analyzed into various aspects and phases. It is not in the least possible to make it comprehensible on the basis of the formal “structure” of the intellect: sensuous “impressions” that bring into play a categorical ordering constitution that in its turn would be a function of a dynamic capacity to affirm “Being in absolute terms” and to objectify the determinate and finite existing object that is present here. The interpretation of the mother’s smiling and of her whole gift of self is the answer, awakened by her, of love to love, when the “I” is addressed by the “Thou”; and precisely because it is understood in the very origin that the “Thou” of the mother is not the “I” of the child, but both centers move in the same ellipse of love, and because it is understood likewise in the very origin that this love is the highest good and is absolutely sufficient and that, *a priori*, nothing higher can be awaited beyond this, so that the fullness of reality is in principle enclosed in this “I-“Thou” (as in paradise) and that everything that may be experienced later as disappointment, deficiency and yearning longing is only descended from this: for this reason, everything—“I” and “Thou” and the world—is lit up from this lightning flash of the origin with a ray so brilliant and whole that it also includes a disclosure of God. In the beginning was the word with which a loving “Thou” summons forth the “I”: in the act of hearing lies directly, antecedent to all reflection, the fact that one has been given the gift of the reply” (Balthasar 1993, 15).

7 See the profound claim that “*a priori*, the *cogito/sum* includes shared humanity” (Balthasar 1990, 271). In a sense, then, ontology must stress the primacy of relation (see Piero Coda, Pierpaolo Donati, Antonio López, Giulio Maspero, and David L. Schindler). One is also reminded of Aristotle’s statement (*Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 1112 b 25), discussed by St. Thomas (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 5, A. 5, ad. 1) and Robert Spaemann (2010, 1–24), that “what we do by means of our friends is done, in a sense, by ourselves.” One could unpack this point by saying that what belongs to the core of what we are (our “reason”) requires our “friends” to “become what it is.”

by the gesture if they were not somehow already presupposed, at the same time, what is presupposed, without the instituting gesture, would not be much more than a mere unfulfilled promise of the actual possibility of encountering reality as intelligible and meaningful.⁸

4 The Mother's Smile According to Balthasar

Balthasar discusses the mother's smile in connection to many crucial points of his philosophy and theology. In *Glory of the Lord*, in particular, the treatment of the smile of the mother comes after a philosophical and theological reflection on the fundamentality of gestures for understanding, inspired by a reading of Ortega y Gasset but ultimately based on Jesus' way to communicate his reality as described in the gospels. The event of the smile of the mother to the child is connected with some of the most crucial aspects of Christian metaphysics (as Balthasar develops it) and falls under the treatment of what he calls the "natural language of the flesh."⁹

Let me sum up some of these results in a somewhat schematic way. First, while the child's mind is already structured to receive reality as intelligible, it is precisely the smile of the mother that announces to the child *in concreto* the intelligibility of reality and therefore institutes such capacity for the child, in an event that is "simultaneously personal and ontological, historical/phenomenologi-

8 "The view of consciousness implied in this exchange differs fundamentally from Kant's insofar as it affirms that the soul's condition of possibility are not fixed prior to and thus independent of the (receptive) encounter with what is other than consciousness, but instead *occurs* in the encounter. The conditions of possibility arise, as it were, not wholly from below, but as a gift from above, which precisely because of its generosity, creates the space for the 'from below' capacity to receive it" (Schindler 2013, 45); "the child possesses certain capacities that prepare him, not specifically for the smile, but for the surprise that he cannot simply anticipate. The child receives the a priori condition of the possibility of reception" (Schindler 2013, 51).

9 "Jesus, too, speaks the language of the flesh. It is the language of corporeal-spiritual man [. . .]. In no sense is his language a purely spiritual, angelic affair, even though man, by means of artificial abstractions, also produces such a bodily and soundless discourse, which he is pleased to term 'scientific' and which he reflects in countless treatises of 'linguistic analysis.' [. . .]. No one will ever discover how to make the full wealth of the 'language of the flesh' resound in a self-proclaimed 'scientific' theology. Jesus enclosed what he had to announce to men about God not in the confines of such a theology, but in the fullness of the fleshly language that is within every man's grasp" (Balthasar 2004, 248); see also Balthasar (2004, 251): "in the language of the flesh [. . .] the spiritual word expresses itself with perfect precision in bodily form [Gestalt]."

cal and metaphysical” (Schindler 2013, 46).¹⁰ Second, the child’s consciousness, his I, which is instituted as a capacity for truth in this being addressed by a Thou, receives everything as a gift: being itself, its intelligibility, and its own consciousness are experientially received as a gift, and such experience is the foundation for the very structuring of the child’s personality, for which being itself is perceived as a gift, namely, as self-giving, as love. Third, in receiving the entirety of being and its intelligibility in and through the smile of the mother, the child is initiated to the most radical sense of being, that of the ontological difference. Accordingly, his apprehension of being will grow soon into the realization that nothing (not the mother, no one and nothing else) can in fact exhaust its infinite horizon, even though every thing must participate in being in order to be.

5 The Smile of the Mother as Complete Gesture

The smile of the mother to the child can be studied as a chief example of what Maddalena calls “complete gestures.” In fact, the smile of the mother “bears” a fundamental understanding and communication of meaning for both the mother and the child. More precisely, it bears *not a particular meaning*, but the meaning that coincides with the *fundamental meaningfulness, or intelligibility, of reality as such*. The smile of the mother presents all the Peircean phenomenological (firstness, secondness, and thirdness) and semeiotic features (icon, index, and symbol) that, according to Maddalena, must accompany a gesture in order for such gesture to be complete. It also exemplifies the heart or generative experience of the normative dimension of life, which, once articulated and systematized, becomes the subject-matter of the so-called normative sciences (aesthetics, ethics, and logic).

Let us try to unpack the meaning of the gesture with respect to the phenomenological and semeiotic features of the complete gesture. The smile is a gesture which is unitary insofar as it is a *Gestalt* perceived as such by the child (cf. Schindler 2013, 47–49). The smile of the mother appears to the child (firstness) and is received in the form of a feeling, or rather as a concrete image of the luminous intelligibility of being in its totality and of the love that shines through it

¹⁰ See also Schindler (2013, 47): “from the beginning [. . .] being has a personal face, and the personal always has ontological depth.”

(icon).¹¹ The mother's smile is apprehended in its indwelling and overarching beauty, and the child both rests in it and at the same time is attracted to it as towards an inexhaustible source of beauty (aesthetics).¹² The *Gestalt* of the smile, in its dynamic unfolding through time, sets itself apart from the rest of the perceivable environment and is interjected by the child's attention with delighted surprise (secondness), while at the same time such smile already points beyond itself, to the mother herself, of which the smile is a physical modification, but also to the rest of reality, which, as we have said, is significantly introduced to the child in and through the smile of the mother (index). In the smile's "pointing" beyond itself, the child finds a direction for his movement, for his attention, for the summoning of his energies (ethics). The smile, which is born out of a free gesture of the mother, who in and through the smile gives herself to the child and makes him the gift of the intelligibility of reality, represents at the same time a call for the child, a call for a recognition and a response. The response to this call is the child's smile to the mother, which is itself the dawn of his own understanding-communication of the intelligibility of reality, as well as the beginning of the acquisition of a habit of interpretation (symbol)—a general habit of wonder and "play" for the received intelligibility of the real (thirdness), the onto-logical womb within which all further knowledge, both analytic and synthetic, will necessarily take place (logic).¹³ It is thanks to the I-Thou relationship, chiefly realized in the reciprocal smile, that the appearances to which the child is exposed are first manifested and interpreted as what they truly are, meaningful signs of an appearing

11 "The mother's smile is not a spoken word, as it is understood as one because it is an expression of spirit. It is 'word' as image, which, received within the child's heart, is engraved on the imagination" (Balthasar 2004, 256).

12 See Schindler (2013, 45): "Balthasar [. . .] roots the soul's contact with the world [intentionality, transcendentality of truth] in a more fundamental 'contact,' one that gives everything else a particular coloring: namely, the mother's smile. As deceptively simple as it seems, this principle is arguably the foundation of Balthasar's epistemology, and fits essentially the primacy of beauty." Note that also for Peirce, "aesthetics" is the primary normative science insofar as it is beauty that grounds teleologically "goodness" (ethics) and "truth" (logic).

13 "It gives itself to play because the experience of being admitted is the very first thing which it knows in the realm of Being. It is, in so far as it is allowed to take part as an object of love. Existence is both glorious and a matter of course. Everything, without exception, which is to follow later and will inevitably be added to this experience must remain an unfolding of it. There is no 'gravity of life' which would fundamentally surpass this beginning. There is no 'taking over control' of existence which might go further than this first experience of miracle and play" (Balthasar 1991, 616–617).

ground, of an object that gives itself to be known (institution of the semiotic triadic relationship, for which the smile of the mother is an “index”).¹⁴

As in the examples of Ulysses and Jesus discussed by Maddalena (2015, Chapter 6), also in the case of the I-Thou relation between the mother and the child, it is in a gesture—in this case, in the smile—that all the features of the characters are synthesized and communicated. In this case, what is synthesized and communicated is not simply the loving personality of the mother, but through her, and originally without distinction from her, the intelligibility of reality and even the loving presence of God in and through His creation.

6 Vagueness and Syntheticity of the Meaning of the Smile

The smile of the mother and the smile of the child thus understood and described represent an understanding-communication that presents *a maximum of vagueness and a maximum of syntheticity* precisely because what the mother and child understand and communicate is not the truth of a determinate thing, but the sense of the meaningfulness and intelligibility of reality as such. What could be vaguer than the transcendental idea of truth, given that when we say “truth” we are simply talking about the trans-categorical intelligibility of being and not of the determined truth of a judgment? And at the same time, what could be more synthetic than this same idea of truth, at least if we understand it as the Thomistic tradition does, not as an empty form, but as the onto-logical reactive agent, so to speak, that allows for the articulation of all and any possible content, or as the horizon itself within which all inquiry, judgment, reasoning, are conducted?

It is certainly the case that for Balthasar and Schindler it is a *gesture*, the mother’s smile, that brings the gift of the intelligibility of reality to the child. But one might ask why this is the case and, even more strongly, if it *must* be the case that

14 “The mother’s smile is understood by her child, and in this event the world of being as a whole lights up behind the world of images; this happens simultaneously in the I and in the Thou, inside and outside. When this illumination occurs, the sensible image is understood as pointing to an appearing ground. This capacity of projection constitutes the first foundation of the freedom of the I from the mere world of images, its power to read them as a sign or a meaning. Years can pass in the life of the child between the moment when this freedom lights up—when being as a whole becomes luminous—and the acquisition of the art of transposing these appearances understood as signs, into a sign-speech reflecting its freedom. [. . .] Looked at superficially, of course, the origin lies in the recognition that the appearance and what appears are simultaneously identical and different: the mother’s smile is the index of her presence” (Balthasar 2004, 254–255).

only a gesture can bring to the child such gift. Maddalena's framework helps us articulate the beginning of an answer (Maddalena 2021, Chapters 4 and 14): if what is gifted and received is the intelligibility of reality and therefore a *maximum of vagueness and syntheticity*, it is precisely a gesture that can accomplish such task insofar as a gesture is the best-suited tool for understanding-communicating vagueness and syntheticity.

What is the anthropological value of vagueness and syntheticity? Why is it so important for a human being to acknowledge that meaning is vague and synthetic and that it is carried by gestures such the mother's smile? Because, I suggest, this means that *meaning is not identical to intention*—and this, I submit, is the fundamental basis on which we can distinguish gestures from actions. In other words, while according to Aristotle's definition, the "bearer" of meaning in action is the clear intention of what one is doing, when it comes to gestures, due to the lack of the analytic awareness characteristic of actions, either we say that gestures have no meaning (e.g., Agamben 2017), or we claim that the bearer of the meaning must be different from the intention.

Following the framework I have discussed, we must say that the latter is the case. It is *gesture itself* that carries the meaning. In this sense, the meaning carried within a gesture always *precedes*, *exceeds*, and *underlies* the "clear and distinct" intention of an action. One could put this by saying that our analytic awareness does not "live up" to the meaning guarded in our gestures and that it must always again "catch up" with the richness present in it. This is certainly true in the case of the smile of the mother, the gesture that carries that maximally vague and synthetic meaning that neither mother nor child fully grasp in their analytic awareness and with which they will both try to catch up for the rest of their lives.¹⁵ Surprisingly, one can find a similar dynamic present in the biblical account of creation, where the analytic acknowledgment of the "goodness" of each created thing on the part of God comes after the *gesture of creation* itself. (Would it be better, then, to talk about the *gesture* of creation rather than the *act* of creation? What would a *Christian theology of gestures* look like?)

15 "The primal knowledge that man receives here is, however, only like a flash of lightning: even if the entire subsequent experience of the world looks from the outside like an addition (or "synthesis"), it remains in its most hidden reality a subtraction; it contains a fundamental disappointment, viz., that everything does not correspond to my first intuition (Gustav Siewerth), neither things nor human beings (and, ultimately, even my mother is one of these): all this is "only" world, not God, only things that exist, not Being" (Balthasar 1993, 32). Work remains to be done to show in what way such metaphysical "disappointment" is related yet irreducible to the origin of "neurosis" according to Freudian psychoanalysis. On this, see Norman O. Brown (1985, 15–19 and 113).

7 Unpacking the Dramatic Structure of Truth through the Logic of Gesture

Maddalena's framework is also helpful in order to try to provide a more explicit articulation of the way in which an *a priori* condition is also at the same time given, gifted, and instituted. In fact, one should explore the possibility that the almost paradoxical relation of the twofold "givenness" of presupposition-institution of the dramatic conception of truth developed by Balthasar and Schindler can be explained in light of the logic of the gesture. This logic allows to respond to the vagueness of a content by initiating the development of a corresponding general habit of interpretation through the mediation of a gesture which, as such, must be concrete and particular. The gesture, says Maddalena, brings a content that is predominantly potential and vague to a communicable-knowable universal-general content, ultimately realized in a habit of action and interpretation, within which also the work of analysis must take place (Maddalena 2021, 41).

If we adopt this rich logic of the gesture, we can propose the idea that what is presupposed in the Balthasarian dramatic idea of truth is the openness of the human mind to reality in all its dimensions, which is utterly vague and, in this sense, still incapable of a response until it is brought into itself by something else—as we know at this point, a *supremely meaningful gesture*, the smile of the mother. The particular, concrete, contextual, historical, smile of the mother summons the energies of the child, which blossom in the child's smiling response to the mother, and this response starts giving shape to that general habit of wonder which is the only habit befitting the utterly rich vagueness and syntheticity of truth understood as a transcendental.

8 From Transcendental Gesture to Gesture as Transcendental?

The fact that there are "transcendental gestures" leads us to wonder whether "gesture" could or even should be considered, in a certain sense, a transcendental property of being as such.¹⁶ We enter here a territory in which Balthasar and

¹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas (1998a, 55) speaks of the "gesture of being" (*geste d'être*) in a different context and with a different meaning (it is a different way to express what he sometimes calls "essence"). However, it is interesting to note here that, while Levinas speaks of the "gesture of being" as another way to characterize the self-sameness of the being of Western ontology, my

Schindler have not explicitly ventured. According to this idea, “being” would be not only “true,” “good,” and “beautiful” (and “one,” etc.), but it would also be “gesture.” While seemingly shocking, this point might well be a necessary corollary of an onto-logical view of truth that *takes into account the genetic, evenemential conditions of the dawning of intelligibility of being* in the consciousness of a child and that sees these genetic and evenemential conditions as *essential to the unfolding of truth*. Being “appears” to us as meaningful, that is, phenomena appear to us as the “signs” of an “appearing ground,” only because this “appearing” is originally a gesture, for instance, the transcendental gesture of the mother’s smile.

In and through her *free* gesture of self-giving to the child in the smile, the mother fulfills and enacts what nature aspires to do but cannot do if left to its own resources, namely, *being* a gesture of *personal love*. Thus, the fact that *nature* can offer *its own intelligibility* as an *instance of personal love* only *in and through the gesture of the mother’s smile* does not detract from the possibility of considering “gesture” as a transcendental *of being*. On the contrary, it points in the direction of the need for a deeper meditation on and systematic development of the essential connection between metaphysics and anthropology.¹⁷

St. Thomas famously says that the transcendental “truth” adds to the notion of “being” the idea of the relation of “correspondence” (*convenientia, concordia, adaequatio*) of being with “other,” in this case, the intellect.¹⁸ One could thus extend the same reasoning to “gesture.” In this sense, “gesture” would add to “being” the relation of correspondence of being with the genetic and evenemential conditions (for instance, the mother’s smile) that make being “become what it is,” namely, “true” for the child’s consciousness. In a synthetic formula: “gesture,” seen as a transcendental property of being, is the *performativity* of the “beautiful,” whose teleology is being itself affirmed as “good” and thus made available to the child’s consciousness in its intelligibility, in its “truth.”¹⁹ Balthasar notoriously places the transcendentals in an unconventional order—beauty first, goodness second, and truth last—and laments the all too common forgetfulness of beauty in metaphysical discussions. I

proposal shows how being and its transcendental properties should be understood as always already belonging to a dia-logical context. In a different essay it could be shown that even the transcendental “one” results from a sort of ontological settling of a dia-logical situation.

¹⁷ In turn, anthropology is “fulfilled” in Christology. Ferdinand Ulrich, who greatly influenced Balthasar’s thought, states that in his work the “subject matter itself [the study of being as being] has transcended ontology into anthropology and anthropology into Christology” (2018, 1). In this sense, one could say that the smile of the mother *analogically recapitulates* the meaning of God’s creation, i.e., love, of which Christ is the ultimate and definitive recapitulation. Balthasar says that he understands “metaphysics” as “meta-anthropology”; see Balthasar (1988, 470).

¹⁸ *De veritate*, Q. 1, A. 1.

¹⁹ See Schindler (2013, 58 and 69–80).

wholeheartedly agree with Balthasar's presentation. One could wonder, however, whether one should not lament the forgetfulness of another transcendental, gesture, whose role would even "precede" beauty in the order of the transcendentals insofar as it is the *performativity of the beautiful* (in Peircean categories, the Secondness of Thirdness in its fullest form). As Goethe says, "In the beginning is the act."

The Thomistic picture of the transcendentals presented in *De veritate* would thus receive a certain completion that is not explicit in Thomas. Just to mention one possible improvement, according to my proposal, "being" would still be "good" because the human *appetitus rationalis* is always already teleologically oriented to affirming being's lovability, but this metaphysical point would have an originally *dialogical nature*²⁰ whose irreducible *performative dimension* must be acknowledged in its specificity.²¹ In other words, transcendental goodness

20 See Balthasar (1988, 470–471): "Now man exists only in dialogue with his neighbor. The infant is brought to consciousness of himself only by love, by the smile of his mother."

21 Speaking of gesture as the "performativity of the beautiful" and seeing this in relation to the dialogical nature of the coming into themselves of the transcendentals force us to pause for a second and consider once again the question of the "order" of the transcendentals. In fact, the idea itself of the "performativity of the beautiful" seems almost confused. Are gesture and performance not relative especially to the good? And is the beautiful not relative primarily to perception? This apparent confusion is overcome once one sees the notion of performativity of the beautiful as a threshold notion between mother and child, that is, if one sees it from the point of view of the dialogue between them. One might say, then, that being is primarily "good" (and then beautiful and true) from the point of view of the mother, who *performs* the beautiful; while it is primarily "beautiful" (and then good and true) from the point of view of the child, whose performative response is the unfolding of the *perception* of the beauty of the mother's smile. The fear that putting goodness before beauty and truth might imply a form of irrationalism (see Schindler 2011, 312) could be put aside once one understands this idea from the point of view of the ontology of motherhood and the abiding meaning of pregnancy for it. The mother, in fact, in her expectant pregnancy, already loves and affirms as good one who already exists while being in a deep sense non-appearing—she loves and affirms as good one whose "glory" is yet to come. (See Psalm 139: "You formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother's womb. [. . .] My bones are not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, fashioned in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw me unformed; in your book all are written down; my days were shaped, before one came to be.") It is not a mistake to say, as Emmanuel Levinas does, that the mother is "sensitivity" as "pure passivity," namely, the passive dwelling place of responsibility and being-for-another, see Levinas (1998b, 67); cf. Jennifer Rosato (2012, 348–365). Nevertheless, such characterization could and should be enriched with reference to the transcendentals. The mother already *actively loves and affirms* as good in her body the other, the one who exists but who does not appear yet. There should not be any opposition or mutual exclusion between the mother's "vulnerability" posited by Levinas and a certain *self-assertiveness for the other* on her part. In fact, the mother already expresses an intentionality which is eminently performative, which implies the primacy of the good. Of course, the one who is loved, the child, is already given to the mother's consciousness in some way even before his birth, but he appears paradoxically as yet-to-

would require the gesture of the mother—affirming “being” in and through her smile to the child and thus disclosing its lovability and “goodness”—opening up to the possibility of the child’s loving response. But the first meaningful “word” spoken by the mother to the child is precisely a “word made flesh,” a word-as-flesh, the gesture that *performs* as an act of love the beauty of being and thus proposes it to the child’s flourishing consciousness.

If being is “good,” it is not only because the child’s will is structurally attuned to it (Thomas’ view); it is also because being is originally presented *as embraced* by and in the mother’s smile;²² in the mother’s gesture, being is originally “smiled at” and thus affirmed in its goodness, and that is why the child can in turn delight in seeing the mother’s smile, that is, he can rejoice in the beauty of reality. This is also why he can simultaneously embrace being by smiling in return (affirming its goodness *in actu exercito*) and by so doing he is introduced to the meaningfulness of reality as such (truth).²³

9 Conclusion

The concept of transcendental gesture, which is the result of a possible mutual enrichment between Maddalena’s philosophy of gesture and Balthasar’s understanding of truth as dramatic, could open the doors to a study of those gestures

appear, namely, he appears in the mode of expectation. This is why the original intentionality of the mother is primarily performative, namely, it unfolds from its focus on the good as primary. While “expecting” the “glory” of the child (beautiful), the mother already affirms him as good. The mother’s love is “without measure” because she loves the child before he appears and “no matter what he looks like.” This performative intentionality which remains full of expectation for the yet-to-appear still abides in the mother’s smile to the child. Understood this way, there seems to be nothing irrational about positing a primacy of the good in the case of the mother. This hypothesis regarding the order of the transcendentals should be explored further, especially in theological perspective (could one say that the order of the transcendentals from the point of view of the mother’s gesture analogically mirrors the order of the transcendentals from the point of view of God the Creator and the Redeemer?). Note that in both cases, truth remains the “ultimate” transcendental.

22 Can one go as far as saying that there is a sort of original mimetism at work in the dawning of the transcendentals? That the child desires being (i.e., affirms being as good) because being is originally presented to him as desired by the mother? Could the work of René Girard shed some light on this point?

23 In this sense, the mother’s smile could be considered the first and most fundamental “educational” gesture insofar as “education” is defined as “an introduction to reality in its totality,” *Eine Einführung in die Gesamtwirklichkeit*, according to Josef A. Jungmann’s definition (1939, 20), then adopted and developed by Luigi Giussani (2005, 65–66).

that, analogously to the mother's child, are closer (for reasons that would need to be made clear) to the transcendental conditions of the human person. For instance, one could think about those gestures that institute meaningfully in us the sense of our sexuality—given, and yet in need of being received again as a gift; or those gestures that institute meaningfully in us the sense of our generational relations—being a son, a daughter, a father, a mother, a brother, a sister, etc.—which, despite being given, must be received anew as gifts and thus instituted in their meaningfulness.²⁴ Assuming that the notion of transcendental gesture is coherent and heuristically useful, the determination of the concrete form or *Gestalt* of these other gestures must be postponed to future studies.

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²⁴ Cf. Francesco Botturi (2009, 163–194 and 204–209) on "recognition" as essential to "identity." "Transcendental gestures" could then be considered the chief expression of this dynamic of identity-generating recognition.

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