

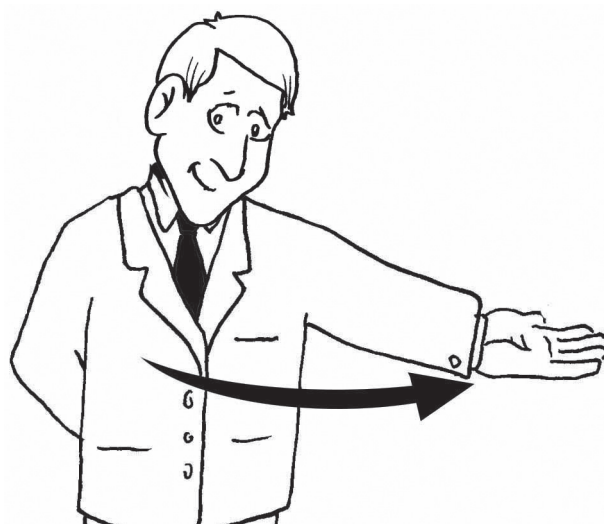


*Conventional Gestures*



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## Meaning and Methodology



Richard L. Epstein

with the assistance and collaboration and illustrations by

Alex Raffi



Advanced Reasoning Forum

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When one thinks through thoroughly its descriptive, philosophical and archaeological parts and when one adds to these the practice of gesture, which can be found in all living nations, one sees how little is known of the power of gestural expression, and how much more there is to observe. But he who has never hesitated before the treacheries of the true Ocean, and who has never been terrified by it, should not allow this Ocean of knowledge to stop him. Courage then.

Andrea de Jorio

*La mimica degli antichi investigata nel gestire napoletano*

It's a swamp.

Epstein

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# Conventional Gestures: Meaning and Methodology

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# Preface

In 1992 I was teaching English as a second language to foreign students in Cedar City, Utah. One day a Japanese student raised his hand to be called on—with his middle finger extended. I told him it wasn't a good idea to do that. He was puzzled. I explained that it was an obscenity, a direct challenge, and if he did it to someone on the street he might get his finger broken. He was glad to know. And I realized that my students couldn't recognize our most common gestures.

So I set out to make a list of those. I asked the other teachers at the school for their suggestions, giving them an idea of what I was looking for with a few examples. I compiled a list of 65 gestures. I described the movement of each gesture in words, in some cases with a little diagram, and gave a short explanation of the meaning of the gesture. This was adequate for use in our classes since we all knew the gestures. The other teachers were enthusiastic about the project, but there wasn't much more I could do because I couldn't illustrate the gestures.

In 1998 I was writing a textbook on critical thinking and was looking for a cartoonist to provide some illustrations. I met Alex Raffi, and we were able to develop over one hundred cartoons for that book. At the end of the project in 1999, I suggested to him that we work together to illustrate a book of common American gestures for students of English and for travelers to the United States.

It took a while for us to decide how we would illustrate the gestures. We needed to show the movement, but we quickly realized that without a context, the use and meaning of the gesture are unclear. So for each gesture we provided a context cartoon as well as a close-up illustration of just the movement. To that we added a telegraphic explanation of its meaning, just enough for a classroom or a tourist.

By observing and discussing with friends and colleagues, we compiled an illustrated draft with about 115 gestures. We showed that to acquaintances in the U.S. and in other countries. They suggested a few additional gestures, and the readers abroad commented on whether the illustrations were clear enough for them to recognize and duplicate. We had a couple offers at that time to publish it as a textbook for English-language classes, but we chose not to do so as no publisher was interested in marketing it to tourists as well.

Over the next several years I began to read more about gestures. I discussed gestures with colleagues in linguistics and philosophy. Alex Raffi and I asked our friends about gestures. We looked at other collections of gestures. We talked with Carolyn Kernberger about how women gesture in the United States. We began to observe more carefully people in daily life and in movies and television, looking for gestures we had missed. By 2003 we had a draft of this essay and an additional 120 gestures.

Still I felt there was much more to learn and puzzle out. I continued to read and to discuss the issues with Alex Raffi. I began talking with linguists at the University of New Mexico. But for the most part we put aside this project while I was writing books on logic and critical thinking and he was starting up a marketing company of which he was the artistic director.

We returned to the project in earnest in 2010. Working together, we completed a new draft of the gestuary with about 340 gestures, though less than half were illustrated. We found as we began compiling, indexing, and cross-referencing that we were less sure of what to include. Though we had begun with a clear idea of what we were trying to illustrate, namely, common American gestures, in order to decide what to include and to distinguish what we were studying from many other ideas of gesture, we had to be clearer about the criteria we had implicitly adopted. We also realized that to make general claims about gestures and to expand on the ideas we needed not just a list but illustrations for all of the gestures. We returned to our work, and now we have over 400 gestures in the gestuary.

We would like to complete that project, but we don't have the money. So we have decided to publish separately this book, which was meant as an introductory essay for the gestuary. Though Alex Raffi is an equal partner in making the gestuary, this work is principally by me, reflecting my concerns about meaning and methodology, and he should not be held responsible for any inaccuracies or mistakes here. We have made available the current draft of the gestuary on the website of the Advanced Reasoning Forum <[www.AdvancedReasoningForum.org/gestures](http://www.AdvancedReasoningForum.org/gestures)> so that the gestures whose names appear in italics in this text can be seen. We also intend to update there the Annotated Bibliography of this book as we receive information about new collections of gestures.

\* \* \* \* \*

We begin here with an attempt to give explicit criteria for what we've included in the gestuary. Then we discuss how others have studied similar classes of gestures, comparing their methodology for compiling collections of gestures. With that as background we try to understand what and how a gesture means. Providing some categories of gestures leads to a better idea of the scope of our inquiry. After considering whether there are any universal gestures, and how gestures change over time, we discuss the difficulties in organizing a gestuary. We conclude with an annotated bibliography of collections of gestures that extends many of the discussions in the text.

# I Gestures and Communication

## A. Conventional gestures

In its widest use, the term “gesture” has been taken to cover almost all nonverbal behavior that someone can take as meaningful.<sup>1</sup>

We, however, take gestures to be a kind of non-verbal *communication*. Though we may infer from someone blushing that she is embarrassed, she does not do it to communicate with us: the blushing is a sign that she is embarrassed.<sup>2</sup> When we see dark clouds lowering over a mountain, we infer that it will rain there; the clouds are a sign that it will rain; there is no communication.

To distinguish between communications and signs, we might invoke intentions: when I wave hello I intend for you to understand an idea I am trying to convey; when I blush I do not do so with the intention of you understanding my mood; and clouds have no intentions at all. But there are big problems in relying on intentions as a defining characteristic of communication. It is often difficult for an observer to discern an intention. Yet unless we can clearly do so, and unless the person is consciously aware of his or her intention, then waving hello would not be different in this respect from blushing: we infer the intention along with the meaning.

Rather, *communications, as opposed to signs, are based on a learned, shared system of acts we do that we deem to be symbolic*. Such acts might be speech, or writing, or movements, or postures, or markers left by a road, or anything else a particular group takes to be part of its system. By this criterion, clouds do not communicate because clouds don’t learn; only sentient creatures learn. This also excludes physical reactions that we cannot control, such as blushing, for they, too, are not learned. Yes, we learn to understand the significance of acts like blushing or a trembling hand, but the person who does them does not learn to do them to *convey an idea beyond the act itself*, which is what we mean by an act being *symbolic*. When we see someone hitting another person, we know that the person who is striking out is angry, but the hitting is not symbolic of that: it’s just hitting, a consequence of the person’s anger, from which we can infer the anger; hitting someone is not part of our symbolic system. By focusing on a shared symbolic system, we substitute an *intersubjective* criterion for communication for the entirely subjective one of intentions.<sup>3</sup>

Communication, then, requires three parts:

- A symbolic system agreed upon by a group.
- A person who uses some part of that system.
- A person who understands that part.

---

<sup>1</sup> See the scope of the articles in the journal *Gestures*.

<sup>2</sup> Betty J. Bäuml and Franz H. Bäuml, *A Dictionary of Gestures*, p. 56, call blushing a gesture.

<sup>3</sup> See Epstein, Fred Kroon, and William S. Robinson, “Reasoning with Subjective Claims,” 2013, for an explanation of what is meant by subjective and intersubjective criteria.

Communication is not solely in the eye of the beholder.<sup>4</sup> When we say that the symbolic system is agreed upon by a group, we do not mean that the agreements need be explicit or that every person who uses the system was consciously aware of learning the symbolic value of each part. When we learn to speak and adopt the symbolic system of our language, we do so by imitation more than by conscious appreciation of symbolic acts.

We understand a dog pushing her food dish insistently to her master to be trying to communicate to him that she wants to be fed. That is learned behavior, which both the dog and her master understand. By our definition, which does not take intentions into account, it is an act of communication. But to extend our study to include dogs, horses, donkeys, and more would be too much. We'll confine our investigation to human communication. So now we have restricted our studies to:

- Human nonverbal communication: nonverbal human acts that are a part of a learned, shared system of acts that some group of people deem to be symbolic.

When someone leaves stones in the form of an arrow in a forest along one side of a fork in a trail, that's an act of communication. But it may be days or even years before anyone reads that message. Let's leave aside such static signals to consider only communication that is done more or less immediately, without a delay between the act of communicating and when another person is expected to understand.

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<sup>4</sup> Compare what Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen say in "Nonverbal Behavior in Psychotherapy," 1968:

The term *communicate* refers to the fact that observers are able reliably to decode information from viewing a sample of nonverbal behavior. There is no implication that the person enacting the nonverbal behavior intended to communicate nor any assumption that the communication is necessarily accurate. p. 186

Morton Wiener, Shannon Devoe, Stuart Rubinow, and Jesse Geller in "Nonverbal Behavior and Nonverbal Communication," 1972, explain the importance of distinguishing between signs and communication in the study of nonverbal behavior:

Investigators who share this perspective also appear to share an assumption that if the observer can make an inference about an individual from his behavior, then the behavior can be considered to be a communication. Unfortunately, this kind of implicit assumption seems to fuse the notion of sign with the notion of communication. For us, "sign" implies only an observer making an inference from, or assigning some significance to, an event or behavior, while "communication" implies (a) a socially shared signal system, that is, a code, (b) an encoder who makes something public via that code, and (c) a decoder who responds systematically to that code. p. 186

If no distinction is made between signs and communications, it is unclear how such an approach could contribute anything to the study of communication as a special system or as a special set of behaviors. In fact, there seems to be no logical basis for excluding from communication instances of any occurrence about which the observer might make an inference. p. 190

- The form of communication is normally done in the presence of someone who could understand it more or less immediately.

A mute person could put down stones in the form of an arrow for someone standing next to her to see, and if she were to do such acts regularly and her companion understood them, then that would qualify under this restriction, too. What counts as normal depends on the group that shares the system of communication.

When we speak in the United States, we often use a chopping motion with our hand and forearm to provide emphasis for what we're saying. Motions like this that we make to accompany speech are important in facilitating communication, but without speech they are (nearly) meaningless. Let's leave those aside to focus on what is more strictly nonverbal.

- The communication can be understood without any accompanying speech, even though words or sounds might often accompany the act and even though that kind of act might at times accompany speech.

A mime on a street corner or a worker pretending to hammer a nail to get someone to bring her a hammer are meant to communicate at that moment without any speech. If we include all such kinds of acting and pantomime, we'll have to survey all that's taught in acting schools. But on what basis are we to distinguish someone pretending to hammer from someone waving hello (*Hello*) as a form of communication? The woman pretending to hammer might just as well intend to communicate that the other person should bring her some nails or that he should next start hammering. Even in a quite particular kind of context what we infer from her movement could be wrong. In contrast, waving hello is a regular part of the repertoire of a large group that uses it with a regular, conventional, standard meaning. That also distinguishes waving hello from someone acting like a bear by standing more than erect with her hands like claws at either side of her head while growling; though most of us would act similarly if intending to convey the idea of a bear, it is not part of our usual repertoire of communication, and we feel when we do it that we're improvising. Let's exclude such communications from our study by being clearer about what we mean by a symbolic value for an act.

- The form of communication has for the group that uses it a regular, conventional, standard meaning, where that meaning may depend on one or a few kinds of context.

Note that by this criterion a gesture has one standard meaning. A single *symbolic movement* that has two distinct meanings depending on context counts as two gestures according to this criterion.

A person who stands still while all around her are running around in panic conveys that she is unperturbed, that she is in command of her emotions. So it seems that standing still while others are running around satisfies the criteria

we've adopted. But in a different context standing still might indicate patience, and in another context it might mean indecision about what to do. Lack of movement doesn't have a regular, standardized meaning, even relative to specified contexts. However, in some contexts it does. When someone offers another person his hand for a handshake, and the other person does not extend his hand in return, we understand that as an insult, an unwillingness to acknowledge the person who is extending his hand. Lack of movement when a response is normally expected to either a gesture or an initiation of a gesture often has a regular, clearly understood symbolic value. So we adopt the following criterion.

- The form of communication involves movement or else is a lack of movement in response to a form of non-verbal communication that normally requires a particular kind of movement in response.

When a woman goes to the main aisle leading to the altar in a Catholic church and crosses herself, many people in the United States would understand what she means. There are many such rituals associated with groups large enough to have influence on most Americans. But to study all rituals is too much for us here.

- The communication is not part of a ritual.

This is not meant to exclude gestures of superstition, particular for good or bad luck, though the line between ritual and generally-held superstition may be difficult to draw.

In summary, the following criteria determine what we mean by *conventional gestures*:

- Human nonverbal communication: nonverbal human acts that are a part of a learned, shared system of acts that some group of people deem to be symbolic.
- The form of communication is normally done in the presence of someone who can understand it more or less immediately.
- The communication can be understood without any accompanying speech, even though words or sounds might often accompany the act and even though that kind of act may at times accompany speech.
- The form of communication has for the group that uses it a regular, conventional, standard meaning, where that meaning may depend on one or a few kinds of context.
- The form of communication involves movement or else is a lack of movement in response to a form of non-verbal communication that normally requires a particular kind of movement in response.
- The communication is not part of a ritual.

In the annotated bibliography you can find discussions of collections of gestures from many different countries and cultures, each different from the others. Even within the general culture of the United States, there are groups such as the old Hispanic communities in northern New Mexico and the ultra-orthodox Jewish communities in New York that have different ways of communicating nonverbally. People who lived in the United States a hundred years ago had a different culture, and there is no reason to think that they had the same system of nonverbal communication as ours. Before we can generalize about nonverbal systems of communication, we need examples of particular ones adopted by particular groups. For our studies here we'll focus our attention on conventional gestures that also satisfy the following criterion:

- Nonverbal communication that is part of the general culture of the United States at the time this book is written: most Americans now would recognize and understand the form of communication, even if they might not typically use it themselves.

We call such forms of communication *American conventional gestures*. In this essay we sometimes use the term “conventional gestures” for American conventional gestures when we’re not comparing them to gestures of other cultures. Indeed, we often use the term “gesture” as shorthand for “American conventional gesture,” trusting to context to make that clear.

## **B. Conventional gestures compared to some other nonverbal behavior**

In order to clarify the scope of our subject, we'll consider whether some particular kinds of nonverbal behavior are conventional gestures.

### *1. Wearing apparel and how we present ourselves*

When a woman goes to work in a suit rather than her usual blouse and slacks, she is indicating to those she meets that she should be taken more seriously than usual. When someone wears a gold ring on the third finger of her left hand, we understand that to mean she is married.

These are forms of communication and they satisfy all our criteria except one: they are not immediate, unless we count all the time a person is wearing a wedding ring as the duration of the act, which might be the rest of her life. These are not conventional gestures.

### *2. Body language*

When we stand talking to someone, we adjust the space between ourselves. Though we often sense that there is a meaningful difference between standing so close that we can smell each others' breath and standing more than an arm's length from someone, we would be hard-pressed to say what that difference is. As one of us moves closer, the other may move a bit further away without any thought by either that some idea has been conveyed by those movements. Though we learn how to

adjust the distance between ourselves, and though an observer might be able to discern the significance of such movements, we ourselves do not consider them part of our system of communication. We do not consider ourselves to be employing part of a symbolic system when we move closer or further. We call *body language* movements and postures that we adopt from which others can infer meaning but which we do not ourselves normally consider to be part of our symbolic system of nonverbal communication.<sup>5</sup> Body language, then, is outside the scope of the study of conventional gestures.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. *Communicative postures*

Closely related to body language are certain static postures we adopt that we do consider to be part of our system of communication; these we call *communicative postures*. It takes no trained observer to know that when someone is standing quietly with his hands on his hips, he's thinking or doesn't want to be disturbed (*Arms akimbo-thinking*). Though the line between these and body language is difficult to draw, we include some of them in our gestuary.

### 4. *Communicating with oneself*

Though our notion of conventional gesture is grounded in the idea of communication, there need not be another person to whom a gesture is directed. It's not unusual to see someone hit his head with his open palm to indicate that he has realized he's made an error (*Blast!—head slap*) even though no one else is nearby. Just as talking to oneself is talking, so conventional gestures done only for oneself are conventional gestures.

### 5. *Objects used in nonverbal communication*

When in a heated discussion with a man, a woman picks up a frying pan and holds it at shoulder level as if to strike, she is communicating that she is mad. Some

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<sup>5</sup> That much body language does not have standard meaning is evident from the often fanciful interpretations given to it. For example, F. Kostolany in *Los Gestos*, 1977, p. 58, says that "gestures which tend to be oriented to the right . . . will be not only an index of generosity and openness (*"entrega"*), but also of prodigality and vanity."

<sup>6</sup> Compare Adam Kendon in de Jorio, *Gesture in Naples and Gesture in Classical Antiquity*, 1832/2000, p. xix:

"Gesture", that is, visible bodily action that is considered to be a part of a person's willful expression.

footnote: A degree of voluntarism always seems implied, and, generally speaking, expressions such as laughing or crying, blushing and the like, are not considered "gestures" unless, perhaps, as is sometimes the case, they can be feigned. Gesticulations that are part of spoken utterance, the use of manual gestures to convey something when speech is impossible, the manual and facial actions of sign languages are all, undeniably, "gesture". Changes in posture or the assumption of one posture or another, though often "expressive" and "voluntary" are not generally considered "gesture" although in some circumstances this may be appropriate.

movements in our shared system of communication involve objects that we manipulate or touch. There are many objects we use, but since we often use just whatever comes to hand, such uses would not be regular enough to count as conventional gestures. Still, some uses of objects are so standardized, so part of our usual repertory, such as *Knocking on a door*, *Knock on wood*, and *Tapping a glass for attention*, that we can count them as conventional. In particular, we include those that involve some part of the gesturer's wearing apparel, such as *Tip of the hat*.

### 6. Stylized emotions

We use the term *stylized emotion* for any standardized movement that indicates an emotion or state of the body that might not typically be used to communicate, even though it can be interpreted easily by an observer. For example, a person might hug herself when cold. An analogue in spoken language to a gesture that is a stylized emotion would be uttering "Ouch" when in pain. A. G. Bills in *General Experimental Psychology*, 1934, says:

Most overt expression is sooner or later used for communication of meaning, as a sort of language, through which individuals convey their moods to others. On this account the overt expression is sure to become conventionalized and exaggerated in conformance to certain social concepts.

L. Carmichael, S. O. Roberts, and N. Y. Wessell in "Study of the Judgment of Manual Expression as Presented in Still and Motion Pictures," 1937, respond to Bills:

The opposite viewpoint holds that, nevertheless, a core of basic reaction patterns independent of learning exists, which is itself sufficiently differential to permit the identification of separate "emotions." p. 133

But the two viewpoints are not necessarily opposed. An emotion could be expressed in a range of ways, all of which we could usually identify, though only one of those, perhaps in an exaggerated form, is typically used in a particular society.<sup>7</sup> For example, Laurence Wylie in *Beaux Gestes: A Guide to French Body Talk*, 1977, says:

Why does a French child shake his finger to express pain or the premonition of pain? I do not know whether this is a spontaneous body reaction or whether children learn the gesture through imitation of adults. In any case, to shake the

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<sup>7</sup> But Mary Key, "Gestures and Responses: A Preliminary Study Among Some Indian Tribes of Bolivia," 1962, reporting on contact with previously isolated tribes in Bolivia (annotated below), suggests that the expression of emotions may be so culturally determined as to be unintelligible to someone from another culture. Robert G. Harper, Arthur N. Wiens, and Joseph D. Matarazzo, *Nonverbal Communication: The State of the Art*, 1978, particularly pp. 77–78 and p. 99, have a review of literature on the question of whether there are universal facial expressions of emotions. Compare also the discussion by Kendon in Section 3.4 of the Introduction to de Jorio, 1832/2000.