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The Story of Understanding

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The Story of Understanding

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Dr. Mattice for the careful, compassionate, and wise guidance provided in the process of authoring this work. Furthermore, I thank my beloved family and friends for the support and feedback on this paper and beyond. Finally, I thank the editors of the Pandion Journal for their assistance with the refinement of this paper.

The Story of Understanding

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration of the role of doubt and sensations in the development of an understanding of an object. Inspired by Charles Sanders Peirce, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, I begin by arguing that understanding is a circular process that begins with a pre-understanding that is then refuted by the intended or inferred as-structure of an object. The belief found to settle the doubt that comes from such a refutation is one's understanding of said object as that object. In the second part of this paper, I explore a method to harness this circular process to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of an object as that object.

Introduction

A story is often a description of the relationship of some character(s) to some other character(s). The author of the story provides meaning to each character by bestowing upon them a role within the world, that is, a part which helps the story become a tale worth telling. In a similar manner, objects are characters in the story of understanding the world around oneself. Much like the characters in a traditional story, objects as such fulfil a role designated by an 'author' who understands his objects as well as those of others through the circular process of understanding.

This paper is an argument for a method of harnessing this process as a means to form an understanding of an object. To this end, I bring a few philosophers into conversation with one another, namely, Charles Sanders Peirce, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Peirce serves to introduce doubt and its role in the motivation of thought into the pursuit of belief. Despite the power of his ideas, he does not sufficiently explain the process by which thought obtains an understanding. For that, I turn to Gadamer, who defends a sound and magnificent art

of understanding, namely, the hermeneutic circle. In order to better understand Gadamer's position, I bring in Heidegger to articulate the as-structure of an object and one's fore-understanding concerning said object. Although Gadamer provides the framework for the circular process of understanding, it is doubt, in the Peircean sense, that motivates thought to go through the circular process to acquire an understanding of an object as that object. In other words, doubt leads to an understanding. Finally, I argue that the circular process of understanding, with the assistance of what I call the 'how' and 'why' questions, is the method one should use to obtain an understanding of an object.

Part I: Understanding an Object

Peirce

According to Peirce,

[d]oubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into a belief . . . The feeling of believing is a more or less sure indication

of there being established in our nature
some habit which will determine our
actions. Doubt never has such an effect.¹

Simply put, a belief is thought's attempt to settle doubt: the lack of any thought that can inspire action. In doubt, one has an 'uneasy and dissatisfied feeling' and may find oneself unable to form any thoughts on the matter that raised the doubt. This mental inaction causes thought to begin "a struggle to attain a state of belief," that is, a "calm and satisfactory state."²

Furthermore, ". . . the action of thought is excited by the irritation of doubt, and ceases when belief is attained; so, the production of belief is the sole function of thought."³ The irritation of doubt causes the action of thought which is a struggle that aims to settle doubt into belief. Once a belief is obtained, thought no longer struggles and so it becomes 'motionless,' so to speak. This implies that thought's sole purpose is the formation of beliefs that aim to settle the irritation of doubt. As Peirce eloquently puts it, "[t]hought in action has for its only possible motive the attainment of thought at rest; and whatever does not refer to belief is no part of the thought itself."⁴

Having found a belief that works, "we cling tenaciously, not merely to believing, but to believing just what we do believe."⁵ Whatever belief can free us from the unease of doubt is one we may adopt and be reluctant to let go to avoid the feelings that come with doubt once more. These feelings are like the pain of a headache. The pain, a symptom of the problem, can be alleviated with pain killers. As a result, they allow one to go on with one's day as if nothing were the matter. However, the problem that caused the headache to begin with is still there. In other words, there is a *reality*⁶ about one's headache that

is independent of whether one feels any symptoms indicating the issue. As an example, suppose I was faced with a food that smelt bad to me, but my friends urged me to try it. Here, a doubt could be raised in respect to whether I should trust my negative internal reaction to the smell or my friend's judgement.⁷ If a belief is found and, say, I trust my friends' claim that the food is worth the try, I would no longer be in doubt since I would have decided to trust my friends and take a bite. Just like a pain killer, so long as this belief takes away the symptoms of doubt, I will not be disturbed by the irritation of indecision, at least momentarily.

To demonstrate the point that many such beliefs can be formed, consider the following scenarios. If one of my friends had suddenly passed out, a fire had started, or any sufficiently dramatic event had occurred, a belief concerning whether to give the decision any attention would be found, that is, I would have formed the belief that a decision about the food is irrelevant. This belief would be sufficient to remove the *feeling* of doubt concerning whom to trust. However, the source of the doubt would remain unresolved. This implies that such a doubt could show up at some point in my life. It is worth noting that to Peirce, the absolute resolution of doubt is better than the temporary alleviation of the feeling of doubt since said doubt will no longer rise again. In this way, one would possess an understanding of that which occasioned the doubt. Only by taking a bite of the food can I truly resolve my hesitancy about trusting my nose or my friends for I would form a belief grounded in *sensations* that come from reality.

Sensations are those elements of consciousness that "are completely present at every instant, so long

1 *The Fixation of Belief*, 121.

2 *The Fixation of Belief*, 121.

3 *How to Make Ideas Clear*, 289.

4 *How to Make Ideas Clear*, 291.

5 *Fixation of Belief*, 121.

6 *How to Make Ideas Clear*, 298.

7 It should be noted, here, that the doubt is not in respect to the taste of the food, but rather to the source of authority in deciding to try a bite of the food. In other words, I am in doubt of whether to trust my nose or my friends to make a decision.

as they last;⁸ be it a smell, sight, sound, or touch, there is always something being sensed. On the other hand, like the air in between musical notes, thoughts “are [mental] actions having beginning, middle, and end, and consist in the succession of sensations which flow through the mind.”⁹ In other words, thoughts are those elements of consciousness that depend on sensations and are formed in response to them. As an example, take a moment to place your hands on any surface near you and notice the thoughts that arise. The existence of the pressure you feel in your hands is a ceaseless sensation. Placing your hands elsewhere would only change the quality of the pressure rather than the existence of said pressure. Although the particular feeling one senses changes over time, sensation itself is ceaseless, so long as one lives. Now, recall your thoughts as you felt. What did you first think of as you began to feel? What are you thinking of now? The thoughts, to Peirce, are certainly not the same. The first thought rose up in your mind, then went away, to let another thought appear in your mind. Hence, unlike sensations, thoughts come and go. These prolonged sensations and short-lived thoughts are both needed to understand *reality* in the Peircean sense.

According to Pierce, “. . . we may define the real as that whose characters are independent of what anybody may think them to be.”¹⁰ Real things are those phenomena that are independent from one’s thoughts. This implies that sensations are a part of reality whilst the interpretation of those sensations may either be fictional or truthful. A fiction is an arrangement of sensations in one’s imagination which is completely dependent on the thinker. Such “[a] figment is a product of somebody’s imagination; it has such characters as his thought impresses upon it.”¹¹

Although the existence of the imagination is a real phenomenon, the elements of the imagination are just expressions of the thinker’s thoughts. Since, to Peirce, the source of one’s doubt lies within sensations and the feeling of being in doubt lies within thoughts, it follows that the feeling can be momentarily alleviated by many beliefs, fictional or otherwise, but the source of doubt can only be resolved by engaging reality.

Response to Peirce

Peirce has, in my opinion, accurately described *why* beliefs are formed and the stimulus needed for thought to begin the struggle for a belief. Being in a state of doubt spurs thought into action to find a belief that will settle that doubt. However, he seems to have overlooked the details of *how* thought forms a belief.

Being more interested in a method that effectively and efficiently produces true beliefs, Peirce answers the ‘how question’ with a brief description:

Images pass rapidly through consciousness, one incessantly melting into another, until at last, when all is over—it may be in a fraction of a second, in an hour, or after long years—we find ourselves decided as to how we should act under such circumstances as those which occasioned our hesitation. In other words, we have attained a belief.¹²

Although brief for the sake of his arguments, the details of the interaction of thought with other mental constituents in the formation of belief is of great importance when thinking of ways to ensure the formation of a truth oriented belief, namely, an understanding.

In need of a deeper dive into the formation of such beliefs, I turn my attention to Gadamer’s thoughts on understanding.

8 *How to Make Ideas Clear*, 290.

9 *How to Make Ideas Clear*, 290.

10 *How to Make Ideas Clear*, 298.

11 *How to Make Ideas Clear*, 298.

12 *How to Make Ideas Clear*, 290.

Gadamer In Consideration of Heidegger

Similar to Peirce, a confrontation of one's understanding from the engagement of an object or, for Gadamer, a text must occur for the process of belief formation or, in his case, understanding to begin. In other words, Gadamer maintains that understanding follows the hermeneutic circle.¹³ Initially, one has a "pre-understanding"¹⁴ of a text, that is, certain *prejudices* and *fore-structures*¹⁵ – fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception – one uses to make sense of a text. Then, upon being confronted by an unfamiliarity within the text, one's pre-understanding thereof is challenged which leads to the formulation of a new and so more comprehensive understanding of the text. This new understanding would then become one's new pre-understanding of the text. Here, the circle begins anew.

Since the fore-structures of understanding depend on Heidegger's understanding of an object *as* that object, that is, the *as-structure*¹⁶ of an object, I begin this section by investigating said *as-structure*. Heidegger understands the "world as ready-at-hand" which means that an object has a significance with respect to the interpretation one has of the function of the object.¹⁷ In other words, the meaning of an object is *in-order-to*¹⁸ do something. For example, a pen *as* a pen can be interpreted as *in-order-to* write by hand. Also, a bicycle *as* a bicycle can be interpreted as *in-order-to* take a person from place to place. In general, the *as-structure* of an object is "the manner or purpose for which" one makes use of an object.¹⁹ The significance of an object *as* that object depends on one's "articulating or emphasizing the *in-order-to* of a particular object, which is to see the

object *as* that object."²⁰ In other words, the meaning of an object is the interpretation of the object *as* that object. With this being established, I move one to Heidegger's *three* fore-structures.

Fore-having is the "prior awareness as to the function and purpose of the parts" of an object "for the *as-structure* to become explicit."²¹ One possesses a pre-understanding of the parts of an object which allow these parts to be made manifest to consciousness if needed. In the case of a pen, one ignores the ink, the tip, the gel, and so on because one treats the pen as a means to express a message rather than a collection of separate objects. However, pressing down on the button that brings out the tip demonstrates that one possesses a pre-understanding of the different parts that make the pen work. This pre-understanding is one's 'fore-having.'

The ability to be able to turn one's attention to a particular part of an object for some reason is *fore-sight*.²² Only when a significant event occurs is attention drawn away from the object as said object and towards the parts which are potential causes of the event. For example, if a toaster does not heat up when set in action, attention turns away from 'making toast' to the different parts of the machine, "which are based on [one's] knowledge of how the [toaster] operates."²³ This "isolation of the possible problem area is called "*fore-sight*" by Heidegger."²⁴

The interpretation of an object that makes the *as-structure* of the object explicit to consciousness is one's *fore-conception*. "That is, the *as-structure* is, in the *fore-conception*, made explicit."²⁵ If a toaster does not heat the bread then the "attitude or disposition" that leads one to interpret the unplugged cable as the

13 *The Hermeneutic Circle*, 232.

14 *Making Space for Knowing*, 70.

15 *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, 95-97.

16 *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, 94-95.

17 *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, 95.

18 *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, 95.

19 *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, 95.

20 *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, 95.

21 *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, 96.

22 *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, 97.

23 *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, 96.

24 *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, 97.

25 *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, 97.

source of the problem would be fore-conception.²⁶ If it were plugged in and the toaster still did not work, then one might think that the cable is not functioning *as* a cable because some wire, a component of the cable, is not functioning *as* it should. Here, the as-structure of the cable and the wire are being made explicit to consciousness. In this way, the fore-conception is the pre-understanding of an object that makes the as-structure of that object explicit.²⁷

The fore-structures in addition to what Gadamer calls prejudices forms the totality of the pre-understanding of an object. A prejudice to Gadamer is a judgement cast on an object, text, or practice prior to the engagement of a particular matter. For example, “the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power.”²⁸ In the attempt to seek the truth, the Enlightenment established as a self-evident truth that no prejudices be allowed in the pursuit of knowledge. This self-evident truth is a judgement made prior to the engagement with the world. Hence, it is a prejudice on the manner in which one ought to investigate the world.

Prejudices, in addition to fore-structures, create an anticipatory understanding of something yet to be engaged. In the case of a text, “[one] projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text.”²⁹ That is to say, one has a *fore-projection* of the text. The initial understanding of the words, phrases, and paragraphs *as* these elements is fore-having. The initial perspective³⁰ that allows one to engage the particular parts of the text is fore-sight. Finally, the initial interpretation of the text *as* a text, the individual parts (words, phrases, paragraphs, etc.) *as* those parts is fore-conception. The totality of these fore-projections constitutes one’s

overall understanding of the text before engaging the text. To Gadamer, this fore-projection works in conjunction to one’s prejudices in the hermeneutic circle when attempting to understand a text.³¹

To begin the hermeneutic circle, one “must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought” which are one’s prejudices.³² These prejudices guide the interpretation of a text and so are cause for a misunderstanding of the text. When reading a word, one naturally interprets the word in the context in which it was originally learned. By not making the initial understanding of the text conscious, one fails to grasp the intended message of the text. Hence, one must “be aware of one’s own [prejudices] so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings.”³³

Eventually, if the text is sufficiently foreign, one will be “pulled up short by the text.”³⁴ That is to say, there will be a word, phrase, or notion that challenges one’s pre-understanding of the text. This will be cause for pause and reconsideration of one’s fore-projections and prejudices. Finally, one will form an understanding of the text that allows engagement without pause. This new understanding will then be a new set of fore-projections and prejudices upon engaging the text once more. Here, the circle begins anew.

Response to Gadamer and Heidegger in Consideration of Peirce

Gadamer, with the assistance of Heidegger, has provided the framework that I shall use to describe the way thoughts, in the Peircean sense, go from doubt to an understanding. In particular, one begins with a pre-understanding of an object, said pre-understanding

26 *A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time*, 97.

27 *A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time*, 97.

28 *The Hermeneutic Circle*, 235.

29 *The Hermeneutic Circle*, 233.

30 *Making Space for Knowing*, 70.

31 *The Hermeneutic Circle*, 235.

32 *The Hermeneutic Circle*, 233.

33 *The Hermeneutic Circle*, 234.

34 *The Hermeneutic Circle*, 233.

is then refuted by a new experience which creates doubt and so leads thought to the production of a belief. Said belief will be one's new understanding of the object or objects in general. This new understanding will in turn be the pre-understanding when engaging objects anew. Here, *the circular process of understanding* has the potential to begin again. A reader may think that this is the hermeneutic circle with Peirce's thought³⁵ added in. This is not so since the hermeneutic circle is a method more so than a process of understanding since it requires one to 'be aware of one's own prejudices,' as quoted above. I do not disagree with such a requirement; however, at this point I am not interested in the most effective process of understanding. Instead, I am concerned with the process thought goes through to obtain an understanding of an object. Hence, to prevent potential confusion I refrain from using the phrase 'hermeneutic circle.' Before describing the step by step process, I begin by explaining certain concepts, namely, meaningful objects, inferences from sensations, and prejudices concerning an object.

Meaningful Objects. Although Gadamer's work is in reference to a written text, a circular process of understanding also holds for the understanding of an object. As mentioned above, Heidegger's description of the significance of objects has to do with the meaning of an object as a text.³⁶ This description of an object allows for one object to be delineated from another object. A car as a car is not a bottle as a bottle because the function, or meaning, of the former is not the same as the latter. Consequently, all objects as such can only be viewed as meaningful since an object is only identifiable as such when a function is assigned to it.

One might contest this claim and argue that an object can be identified without reference to function, and so meaning, but rather to sensations in the Peircean sense. One might go on to say that an object viewed as a distinct collection of sensations implies that said object is meaningless. For example, the sight and touch of the keys on which one types are sensations that are distinct from the sight of black and touch of softness one receives from a couch. Surely, the keys and the couch are identifiable by the distinct sensations received from them rather than their functions. Furthermore, as Peirce mentions, these sensations are independent of what one thinks of them. The fact that one *sees* what one sees and *feels* what one feels is independent of any thought. This further emphasizes the point that objects understood as distinct collections of sensations are meaningless. Although one could question the integrity of the interpretation of these sensations as 'keys and a couch,' the sensations are independent of the interpretation of them as meaningful objects since they are a part of reality, in the Peircean sense. Hence, objects as a collection of sensations are meaningless.

This can appear quite convincing; however, the observation that one set of sensations is distinct from another undermines the very position being argued for. When this past interlocutor senses, he categorizes his sensations in relation to certain functions. The keys as such are only so because he is typing on them. The couch as such is only so because he is sitting on it. Neither one of these objects exists as such within the sensations themselves.³⁷ Rather, the object is a projection of meaning by the interpreter's thoughts onto sensations. In other words, the delineation of one object from another one is in respect to the significance³⁸ each object has

35 No pun intended, but much appreciated.

36 Here, a text includes any object that is 'readable,' that is, an object that presents a meaning that can be interpreted such as a garbage can or a pen. Both of these objects have, as Heidegger would endorse, a significance with respect to the interpretation of their as-structures.

37 The descriptions of colors and pressures felt would be associated to the function of the object rather than descriptive of what the object is.

38 That is, the interpretation of the as-structure of the object in one's thoughts.

in the thoughts of the interpreter of the sensations. Although it is true that sensations are independent of the thinker, it is the thinker that organizes sensations into an object by bestowing a function to a group of sensations. Consequently, raw sensations are without meaning but all objects are meaningful. Without such objects, we are left with the ceaseless totality of all sensations. This is certainly not the world of identifiable objects and so no discourse concerning distinct entities could be had.³⁹ Instead, to discuss objects is to discuss the different functions we infer from and project upon sensations.

Inferences from Sensations. The inference comes from one's interpretation of what the as-structure of an object should be given the sensations received. From the discussion above, it can be understood that an object as such only comes into existence within the thought of the interpreter. This is so since an object is meaningful, and meaning is dependent on thought. This assigned meaning is the function one assigns a collection of sensations. In this way, when one encounters a new object there is an act of 'authoring' on the part of the interpreter.

An 'author' of an object would be the person that either intends to arrange separate as-structures into a singular as-structure or infers an as-structure from a particular collection of sensations. For the former, consider a ball point pen. The spring, the ink barrel, the gel, and the like all come together and are intended to be understood as a tool to write. In this way, the spring *as* a spring, the ink as ink, and the gel *as* gel disappear to become the intended pen *as* a pen. This intended 'message' can be understood by one with an understanding that has adapted itself to a culture, community, and tradition where a pen exists as an object, that is to say, where the as-structure of a certain object is identified as being a tool to write

with ink that is stored within itself.⁴⁰ In this way, similarly to a text, one 'reads' an object as a means to understand the message of the author, he who organizes separate as-structures in such a way that a person within his community would recognize not only a collection of objects, but a singular object with an intended meaning.⁴¹

In the case of inferring an as-structure, the author's intuition indicates to him a potential function that a collection of sensations may serve. In this way, he *infers* the function of the collection of sensations. This inference then becomes, to him, an object. From then onward, the object would have an *intended* as-structure which may or may not be inferred or 'read' by others.

Prejudices Concerning an Object. The inference one makes to 'author' an object or the meaning of an object one has already inherited can be understood as prejudices concerning the function of the object. In other words, thought can inform one's conclusion about the as-structure of an object prior to future engagement. For example, I can presume that bottles can only be as such if they are used to drink a liquid of some sort. However, this prejudice can be confronted by a change in or an additional use for a bottle. For example, one may use a bottle as such to be a container of small stones and pebbles. Being confronted by such a foreign use of a bottle would challenge my prejudice of the as-structure of a bottle strictly meaning the consumption of a liquid. As an

39 Perhaps such a silence would prove to ultimately be the most appropriate way to be truthful in our speech.

40 It is important to note that there are various types of pens which are reasonably understood as distinct that share the as-structure I have just defined. I simply use this example for the purposes of my paper, but I do recognize the importance of describing the rich history and context that should be provided for an accurate description of the as-structure of an object.

41 To better understand this idea, consider a word. Presumably, the distinct letters that make up 'word,' disappear and are understood as a singular object, namely, a *word*. In this way, objects can come together and disappear into a larger object. As another example, consider the parts of a pen versus the actual pen.

additional example, I was sitting in a patch of grass by a lake and noticed that some of what appeared to be blades of grass were growing flowers. Here, my long held prejudice that blades of grass as such were unable to produce flowers was challenged.⁴² The examples above serve to indicate that one can have prejudices concerning the meaning of a certain object which implies that one can have prejudices about the as-structure of an object. Consequently, approaching an object, one has a pre-understanding of the object since one has both fore-structures and prejudices in respect to the object.

At a similar point, Gadamer goes on to say that one will be 'pulled up short by the text,' as quoted above, which will initiate the development of understanding. Unlike a text that 'speaks' for itself, so to speak, an object does not always articulate its own intended as-structure. The question then is, how can an object confront the pre-understanding of the object without stating in words something that challenges the prejudices? In other words, how does one get pulled up short by an object?

The Circular Process of Understanding. The pre-understanding of an object can be confronted by the refutation of the prejudices concerning the as-structure of the object. I shall call this a new experience. Suppose that a pen one 'reads' through the senses is secretly a shocking device someone has planted as a prank. Convinced of one's own pre-understanding of this object as a tool to write, one picks it up and presses down on the button. In doing so, one's nerves and beloved prejudices receive quite the shock! This unanticipated refutation of the pre-understanding of the as-structure of the object would be cause for pause. Here, the Peircean doubt would be raised, and thought will 'spring' into the pursuit

of a belief to settle the irritation that has begun. The doubt that thought will attempt to resolve would be concerning the intended as-structure of the pen.

Here, thought would recognize the inconsistency between one's pre-understanding and the intended as-structure of an object inferred from the sensations, in the Peircean sense, received. In the case of the shock pen, one can infer that the intended as-structure of the 'pen' is to be a device that shocks. Since doubt was raised as a result of the engagement of reality, that is, the sensations one received, it follows that thought would settle one's doubt by adjusting the pre-understanding to match the inferred intended as-structure of the object. The reasoning is as follows.

Since the doubt was caused by an unfamiliar sensation, thought has a constraint on what belief could satisfy this irritation. If thought finds a belief that only removes the feeling of doubt, then the source of doubt would not be addressed. Unless one never interacts with the object again, the same doubt could be raised. Thought would need to form a belief that sufficiently corresponds to the present sensations received from the object in order to completely settle the doubt. Since the aim of thought is to settle doubt, as Peirce rightly argues, it follows that this belief, an informed understanding, should eventually be found. Hence, thought will form a belief that would adjust one's pre-understanding to match the inferred intended as-structure of the object. In particular, thought may conclude that this so called 'pen' is actually a pranking device. Such an adapted understanding would be sufficient to cause the object to become familiar and so settle the source of doubt.

In the case one has never encountered such an object, thought will 'author,' as described above, the new object in respect to what one infers the as-structure of the object to be.⁴³ Thought will define the object

42 Whether blades of grass can truly produce flowers depends on the accepted meaning of 'a blade of grass' by the community of people that bestow meaning to this life form.

43 In this manner, people bestow meaning onto the world and create the realm of objects, that is, the meaningful organization of sensations.

in such a way as to prevent the object from refuting one's prejudices again. Returning to the example above, one will not think of the object as a tool to write, but surely as something else that sufficiently captures the sensations received so as to prevent doubt from being raised when engaging the object again.

One's newfound understanding of the object will then become a part of a new pre-understanding of objects. Such a pre-understanding will then either be confronted by an unexpected intended as-structure that can be recognized by oneself or a collection of sensations with the potential for an as-structure to be inferred. Here, the process described above repeats in response to doubt and ultimately settles when all possible objects corresponding to said doubt are comprehended.

Part II:

Harnessing the Circular

Process of Understanding

As an initial step, similar to the hermeneutic circle, the prejudices concerning an object and the nature of understanding must be made conscious to the greatest extent possible. This should be done through an attempt to articulate one's beliefs. At any point in the articulation where one is in a possible contradiction or is clueless on how to proceed, doubt shall be raised, and thought will form a belief. Since one is engaging thought, the prejudice(s) which is accepted as the way to make apparent one's beliefs would be invisible to oneself. Surely, many other similarly profound prejudices would not be visible despite their influence on one's perspective. These will remain hidden until some new experience refutes them. Nonetheless, to ensure one can begin understanding an external object, expectations and prejudices must be made conscious to the greatest extent possible.

Doing so will allow for any incompatibilities between thoughts and the intended as-structure of an object to become apparent. Noticing such an

incompatibility will cause doubt concerning the comprehensiveness of one's understanding. This doubt will spur thought to find a belief. Since thought's aim is simply the formation of any belief that will remove the feeling of doubt, it is important that once the doubt has been raised, one engages further with the object. Leaving the object after the doubt had been raised will result in susceptibility to a rationalization of the incompatibility as a means to settle the feeling of doubt. Consequently, the 'understanding' of the object will be a fiction rather than a meaningful idea. As mentioned above, this is no way to resolve the source of doubt which is ultimately the source of understanding. Hence, continued engagement with the object is of great importance.

Initially, one should engage an object with one's senses until one achieves a sufficiently comprehensive understanding of the object. Upon first engagement, doubt, in the form of reflexive questioning will rise about each new sensation detected. Thought will promptly answer each question. Since the object is in 'view,' so to speak, thought will not be able to concoct a fiction that is independent of the sensations. Although the beliefs it forms may not be ultimately true, they will be justified. Although the perfection of understanding may not occur with this simple engagement, through a sufficient number of cycles of the circular process of understanding described above, one's understanding and the object would seemingly become one in the same. That is to say, one will sufficiently understand the intended as-structure of the object. As a result, there would be no more motivation for thought to uncover potentially hidden worlds⁴⁴ within the object. Since nonintentional engagement through the senses is exhausted, the next step in this method would be the intentional engagement of the object through experimentation and two types of meaningful questions.

⁴⁴ These could be the separate objects that are held together in some way to make a singular object.

The first of these questions is what I call the ‘how question,’ that is, *how would this object interact with another object?* Before considering this question in depth, I define the source of the possible answers, namely, intuitions. An intuition is any member of the set of all possible arrangements of sensational expectations and prejudices through habits of mind. A sensational expectation, as I define it, is an anticipation of the sensations to be received from an object. According to Peirce “[t]hat which determines us, from given premises, to draw one inference rather than another, is some habit of mind, whether it be constitutional or acquired.”⁴⁵ In other words, a habit of mind is either an internal disposition or a learned ‘mental behavior’ that makes us interpret experiences one way rather than other. These habits constitute the initial understanding of an object since they are thoughts that lead to a response to a stimulus, namely, the sensations from the object. When the how question is posed, one will naturally have an intuition of a possible answer, that is, one will have an idea of what may occur given one’s past experiences, prejudices, and habits of mind.

As a requirement, one must then make the two objects interact in a way that aims to make the intuitions real. If the interaction matches one’s intuitions, then the intuitions can be considered part of the understanding of the object and its properties. If, on the other hand, the interaction refutes one’s intuitions, then doubt would be raised, and thought would be on the pursuit of an understanding since thought is being motivated by sensations. However, to further ensure thought expands understanding rather than formulates a fiction as a means to preserve one’s prejudices during the process of belief formation, one

must ask the following question: *why, given sensational expectations and prejudices, did such an interaction occur?* I call this the ‘why question.’⁴⁶

The why question will lead thought to directly reconsider expectations and prejudices (for brevity, I use the term ‘pre-understanding’ to capture both ideas) about the object. Given the arguments presented above, the reader might think that thought would have already done so to begin with. This is not necessarily true because thought could form a fiction that would preserve one’s pre-understanding. The ‘why question’ provides thought with an orientation and boundary to compensate for the lack of present sensation of the interaction just had. The reader might grow suspicious here and claim that I have contradicted myself. Stating that I previously claimed that sensations prevent thought from concocting a fiction, whilst here I claim that thought can concoct a fiction despite the sensations received from the interaction mentioned above. This would be a fair charge if I had not been careful to specify that thought, bounded by present sensations, would not formulate a fiction. Once a sensation has passed into memory, it is no longer present and so thought would have no boundary preventing the formulation of a fiction to settle the feeling of doubt. Here, the common saying ‘out of sight, out of mind,’ would take on real force. Since the sensations are ‘out of sight,’ thought may conclude that they should be ‘out of mind.’ As Peirce demonstrated, such a conclusion will only result in a fiction. The ‘why question’ reduces the possibility of a fiction by providing a boundary for belief formation, namely, the memory of past sensations. By placing this memory in the forefront of one’s mind, along with one’s pre-understanding, thought can form an understanding of the interaction observed.

⁴⁵ *Fixation of Belief*, 120.

⁴⁶ The prejudice involved in the question that interactions happen for a mechanical reason serves as a productive boundary for thought.

Per the circular process of understanding, this understanding would become one's new pre-understanding concerning the object. As a next step in the method of obtaining an understanding, one would need to ask a modified 'how question.' In particular, one would need to ask: *how will this object react to other objects given one's new pre-understanding?* As with the previous 'how question,' one will have intuitions about possible answers. Through experimentation, one could sift through each intuition. If the object reacts as expected, then nothing need be done. If the object reacts in a way that refutes all of one's intuitions about the object, then another 'why question' should be

asked as a means to orient thought to the formulation of yet an even more comprehensive understanding of the object. Said understanding will be a part of one's new pre-understanding. Here, the cycle repeats and should continue to the satisfaction of all doubt or for other reasons such as ethical concerns.

The final part of this method would be the articulation of one's understanding in a way that is understandable to others. This step is important because another perspective can serve as a refutation to the prejudices that are invisible to oneself. However, the details of such a step are beyond the bounds of this paper and so are left for some future date.

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