

5. The Construction of Understanding

The body is like the Boddhi tree. The mind is a clear mirror standing

Be sure to polish it faithfully. Allow no grain of dust to cling!

Anonymous Zen monk

The body is nothing like the Boddhi tree, and there are no clear mirrors anywhere!

Fundamentally, not one single thing exists. Where then is a grain of dust to cling?

6th Zen patriarch

With conversation shattered into fragments of culture and self-interest (as we saw in Chapter 1), our idea of reason becomes problematical. What it produces can be nothing like the hierarchical structure of knowledge that Aristotle conceived. Its outcome, rather, is a jungle of competing ideas or *memes* – an ecology of mind, as Gregory Bateson called it. Classical reason lacks the means, even in theory, to adjudicate the claims of rival cognitive factions. Each of these, having its own values and schemes of interpretation, stands on its own.

Some form of relativism may then seem unavoidable. But relativism fails to show how cross-cultural dialogue might be possible. Worse, it places negative value on such dialogue as actually occurs: All it can accomplish, the extreme relativist insists, is to undermine the integrity and uniqueness of the participating cultures. At the extreme of this position, since each of us constitutes a personal culture of his own, we cannot and should not talk to anyone at all for fear of distorting our unique and precious identities! From this limit of absurdity, how does thought proceed?

As a first step, we can suggest that the hermeneutic problem of sense-making is better approached through the concept of *understanding* than through that of *interpretation*. The latter term highlights the creativity, but also the self-serving arbitrariness of cognition. By contrast, the word “*understanding*” highlights our need to render the world intelligible – for example, to avoid getting run over while crossing the street. *Understanding* is every bit as polyphonic as *interpretation*; but it is a public as well as a personal project (as we shall see), and it cannot afford to be irresponsible. It tends to emphasize the stakes that ride on our cognitive strategies, as the word *interpretation* tends to conceal them.

Interpretation is an act of power, as Nietzsche recognized; understanding is the fruit of patient, sympathetic attentiveness. *Interpretation* invokes a metaphor of never-quite-accurate translation from one language to another; *understanding* has a connotation of solid reliability, reminding us of the firm earth under our feet, or the roof over our head. Above all,

understandings ask to be compared and shared, where interpretations are merely propagated and foisted. Even when we disagree, your understanding against my own establish the polarities of a jointly constructed, polyphonic understanding. The word itself suggests a colloquium of scholars, or a married couple with issues they hope to resolve. “Interpretation”, by contrast, suggests a duel of rival shamans or “communications” specialists.

Interpretation and Understanding stand toward each other like Yang and Yin in the ancient Chinese cosmology, or like Dionysos and Apollo in the Greek myths. Interpretation is spontaneous, orgiastic, centrifugal; Understanding is disciplined by the real world on one hand, and by conventional, public understandings on the other. While an interpretation may be interesting and solid enough to afford new understanding, it does not constitute understanding as such. I may interpret a poem or a person in a certain way. I am free to take that interpretation for a sufficient understanding – to be satisfied with that understanding, and dig no deeper. However, my satisfaction is no guarantee that I have understood the thing in question. At any moment, it may grow strange, present me with fresh riddles, catch me unprepared. At a minimum, what we hope from genuine understanding is to be spared unpleasant surprises.

At this point it is worth pausing to observe how the present argument bites its own tail: Its statements, which concern matters of interpretation, cannot be truth-claims in the classical sense as we have agreed that no absolute claims are feasible. Like all flat statements they are suggestions merely – to look at something, and to see it in a certain way. Yet something more than “just another interpretation” is being attempted. Our project, in fact, is to articulate a workable understanding of understanding itself. That is what logic and epistemology are ultimately about. What is offered here, certainly, is an interpretation of the field and its problems, but it is not “merely” interpretation. I must believe, and accept responsibility for convincing you, that my account contributes to a workable understanding of these matters. The reader, of course, is free to form his own opinions, and to deny, correct or add to my proposed understanding as he sees fit. But when he goes public with his opinions, he implicitly invites me to ignore him unless he accepts the same responsibility. There is little reason to take an interpretation seriously unless it is fundamentally serious, and accepts some basic obligations of seriousness: to be honest, to be as clear as subject matter and language permit, and to propose some worthwhile understanding.

This is always the case, whatever matter is at issue. We can always engage each other, across whichever cultural divide, over the question of whether a given interpretation amounts to workable understanding of what it purports to understand. On the other hand, it must be admitted that an

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understanding that suits my purposes may not suit yours, and vice versa.

For a paradigm case of “workable understanding,” we might consider the situation of some palaeolithic tribe gathering mushrooms in the forest. There are many varieties. Some are good to eat; some make you sick; some bring marvellous visions; some can kill. The problem is to know which to gather for a given purpose. Today there are reference books that will tell you; though even now, matching the entry in the book to the fungus in your hand can be a tricky task of interpretation. But thirty thousand years ago, this problem (and many like it) were on the cutting edge of human knowledge: Which things are significantly different from one another? Which are alike – for the purpose at hand?

It comes to this: accepting that interpretations are free, and that everyone is entitled to his own, it is still possible to be wrong – dead wrong – about something. A given interpretation may betray us in unpredictable ways, when we rely on it for a given purpose. For this reason, the license of interpretation must be balanced by a certain prudence. A workable epistemology must reflect both the freedom and the constraints on understanding.

5.1 Understanding

Before we can think about the sharing of personal understandings in conversation, we must clear away some common misunderstandings.

- The first of these is that understanding is exclusively, or even primarily an affair of language.
- The second is the Platonic and Cartesian demand for philosophical certainty, with its corresponding disdain for the ordinary understandings of daily life.
- The third is the very common and very dangerous confusion between believing a propositional statement, and being committed to a mode of understanding. We are rarely careful to draw this distinction, but our failure to draw it causes a great deal of mischief, and sometimes bloodshed.
- The fourth seems to lie at the root of the ancient quarrel, still going strong, between scientists and almost everybody else: between persons who subscribe to the ideal of detached, value-neutral understanding, and persons who find this ideal abhorrent. We shall find that the familiar distinction between “fact” and “value” does not work as advertised, but that it cannot be discarded entirely.

These misunderstandings dealt with, it becomes possible to make sense of the

thorny problem of *reference*, the connection between thoughts and things, perhaps the central riddle of philosophy. Only then can we discuss with clarity what I would take to be the fundamental questions of epistemology: By what processes, ought we to form our personal understandings? On what grounds should we consider one understanding better than another?

Understanding: Verbal and Non-Verbal

It is a great mistake, and one to which philosophers have been peculiarly prone, to think of understanding as exclusively or primarily a verbal matter.

Understanding a matter, and being able to make true statements about it are two very different things. As a physics teacher once reminded me, the ability to recite Ohm's law does not confer a working understanding of electric circuits. On the other hand, animals without language clearly manage to understand their world after a fashion, as do human toddlers who have not yet begun to talk. Experiments with animals show that quite subtle pragmatic categorization is possible in the absence of language. How could it not be? If our primate ancestors were not already forming and deploying pre-verbal categories – like my cat, who gets excited when any small can is taken out of a kitchen cupboard – how could true language have evolved?

For adults of our species, it may be that language is so intimately bound up with cognition that it becomes impossible to conceive an understanding not modulated by linguistic categories and structures. But it is surely wrong to conceive human understanding as a purely verbal ability, as if meaning were nothing more than an equivalence class of sentences. Even before they begin to talk, toddlers have cognitive abilities as good as those of young chimpanzees, and there is no reason to think these non-verbal cognitive abilities are lost as language is learned. As we learn new motor skills, they will be further developed and refined through childhood, and indeed throughout life – just as language skills themselves are enhanced and extended. Language is not a replacement, but an extra cognitive mode, added on top of modes that other primates possess. The aesthetic and physical sense of right relationship, needed for driving or dance or carpentry or any other skill, amounts to a kind of understanding. Without this pre-verbal basis, the more abstract, language-modulated understanding would scarcely be possible. “*Il n'y a rien hors du texte!*” must rank among the silliest statements of all time.

Certainty and Sureness

The tradition of Western philosophy has tended to follow Plato and Descartes in drawing a sharp distinction between practical and philosophical knowledge, insisting that genuine knowledge had to be certain – not just plausible and useful. We were taught that truths had to be *proven* – established with such certainty that only a fool could doubt them.

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On matters of fact (as we call them), where alternative possibilities appear to be mutually exclusive, we hope and expect that argument will converge to consensus. Where this happens, truth continues to mean some particular understanding of reality backed by evidence and arguments in its favour. But where argument does not converge – either because the evidence is inconclusive, or because the issue is inherently a matter of interpretation – then tensegral truth is the best we can hope for. Strictly speaking, this is not a condition of doubt or uncertainty, which can exist only where there is hope and expectation of classical truth. It is simply a permanent frustration of the desire for closure. Having once seen both the old gypsy lady and the young one in the Gestalt drawing, we will never be rid of either possibility.

Just at this point we observe a fateful difference in people's temperaments: Some people find opportunity and cognitive wealth in such states of multiple possibility; others find it intolerably painful. For the latter, it is as if the absence of cognitive certainty deprived them of animal sureness as well. They cannot act with sureness as a matter of personal choice and commitment. They need to feel that what they choose to do is forced upon them by *facts* that are absolutely true and certain. When others perceive and choose differently, they feel intensely threatened.

The distinction between certainty and sureness marks a crucial difference between classical logic and the logic of conversation. The former yearns for certainty and hopes to find it; the latter renounces certainty as an illusion, and resolves to make do with sureness. It works to resolve doubts, mobilize energies, find closure – and get on to the next piece of business. Provided they can achieve and maintain such working *sureness*, conversations and individuals can get along quite nicely without epistemological *certainty*. For this reason, only philosophers have been troubled by Hume's problems with inductive reasoning: that no amount of past experience establishes with certainty that the sun will rise tomorrow. In the sense of classical philosophy, we are uncertain that the sun will rise, and indeed, it may not; but until the dawn comes late, our *sureness* is not disturbed.

Certainty is an attribute of Aristotelian propositions, and a measure of our confidence in their (classical) Truth-value. We are *certain* that the sum of the angles of a triangle on a plane surface equals 180 degrees. Statistics and “fuzzy logic” attempt to quantify our certainty – to help us deal with situations where our certainty is less than perfect. But certainty of this kind is not what we live by. Mostly, we live by *sureness*, an entirely different matter.

Sureness might be characterized as cognitive *clarity* combined with motor *confidence*. A poker player is said to deal the cards with *sureness*,

meaning that he deals swiftly, and without fumbling or hesitation. An artist or craftsman works *surely* with his materials. In the *Family of Man* album there is a page where two photographs are wonderfully juxtaposed: The first shows a schoolboy pointing to a blackboard and announcing with proud sureness that “ $2 + 2 = 4$.” The second shows Einstein standing over a cluttered desk, looking terminally confused.

Cognition and Valuing

We are accustomed to think of understanding as having two components: an “objective” understanding of what is the case, and an *evaluative* understanding of what this means to a given individual – to his interests and prospects as he perceives them. The relation of these components – of *fact* and *value* – is a vexed matter in the history of philosophy. What we are willing to count as “knowledge” depends closely on how we handle it.

Convenient as it has been for classical philosophers of science and for objectivists in general, the absolute Humean distinction between “facts” and “values” just doesn’t hold water. It is not only that judgments of what is the case are readily perturbed by what is feared and desired. When we probe deeply, we find that our capacity to value – to love as the mystics bluntly said – is an indispensable instrument of cognition, comparable to the microscope: To know anything well, we must first value it. Without the valuing, we can never get it to disclose itself, which always depends upon the attention we pay to it, and the questions we care to ask.

At the same time, we can’t afford to lose sight of the “objectivist” distinction between “fact” and “value”: Clearly, my desire for a million dollar bank account is not the same as a deposit. In the waking state, the world does seem to have a certain hard persistence to it, independent of my values and my explicit wishes. Thus, on one hand, science (and the reality principle in general) needs the concept of value-free *fact* as a safeguard against wishful thinking and myth. On the other, intellectual honesty requires us to admit that the domains of fact and value cannot be separated in any clean way. At least, no satisfactory way of separating them has yet been found, and there are good reasons to think that none is possible.

No more than suggestions or interpretations are values the sorts of thing that can be absolutely right or wrong; and it is again a category error to ask which values are the “true” or “correct” ones. On the other hand, it is at least as great an error to think of values as wholly arbitrary and whimsical in nature. And it is pure confusion to imagine that the value of a thing is measured by its market price. To understand valuation as an aspect of cognition, we need to grasp that valuing – like interpretation – is an active, sense-making activity that responds to, but is not determined by the real-world features of which sense is

to be made. To value a thing is to perceive its relationship to ourselves and our intentions. Because we enter into different kinds of relationship and entertain many different purposes, there must be many kinds of value. This is why it is not possible to gauge value adequately on a simple numeric scale.

The source of values, or of “the Good,” is one of the great questions of classical philosophy: Is a thing good because the gods love it, or is it the nature of the gods to love what is good? I would see value as a property that attaches to things, actions and people from the conversations in which they participate – especially from those that have a game-like character. Some things are valued because they improve our position and status in the conversation. Wealth, beauty, recognized abilities, and a good dinner are all values of this sort. Other things are valued because they further conversation itself. Loyalty, charity, productivity, and various kinds of honesty are values of this second kind. It is not so much that we want to possess or embody them ourselves, as that we want to be able to count on them in others. Accordingly, by a kind of “social contract”, we give (or at least pay lip service to, and avoid committing public outrage upon) these qualities that we hope to find in others. Reason (however we understand it) must be a secondary value in this sense.

Some form of reason remains possible for two reasons: First, our value judgments can no more afford to be arbitrary or irresponsible than our perceptual ones. It is just as important to be clear that it would be a good thing to stay out of the way of that oncoming car, as to be clear that it will kill us if it runs us over.

At the same time, despite the close entanglement of fact and value in our cognitive process, we remain capable of a fallible but necessary conceptual distinction between what we want, and what appears to be the case. The basis of this distinction lies in the notion of conversational integrity, to be discussed in Chapter 7. Roughly, the epistemic value of a conversation on some matter is a function of the extent to which it is “in touch” with that matter, and of the extent to which that “in-touchness”, having been asked a question, is left undisturbed on its way to an answer. This is an elaborate way of saying that values may permissibly influence cognition in our choice of questions, but should be held to a feasible minimum in our search for answers.

From Belief to Commitment

In the classical philosophy of knowledge, the concept of belief is bound up with that of absolute truth. To believe a statement means to believe that it is true – permanently, universally, and as much for others as for one’s self. In turn, thinking of knowledge as consisting of such true beliefs shapes our conception

of argument. In domains where classical truths are more or less possible – matters of fact, as we call them – conflicting beliefs are mutually exclusive: If you and I assign different truth-values to a given statement on such matters, at most one of us can be right. Either the cat is on the mat, or she isn't. Various arguments may bear upon the question, either inductively or deductively; and such an argument may be thought to compel acceptance of its conclusion: You must submit to the argument and concede the point, or accept whatever social penalties attach to being considered “unreasonable.”

In polyphonic domains of competing interpretation, by contrast, propositions are not true-or-false in themselves. Here, the concept of truth attaches to the whole structure of understanding and argument around an issue, and not to any individual statement. What we loosely call the *truth-value* of a given statement is more precisely its *understanding-value*: its contribution to someone's understanding of the matter. Correspondingly, what we loosely refer to as *belief* in some proposition or mode of understanding is more appropriately thought of as *commitment* to it. It is now a question of willful, active loyalty to some perception, not of simple submission to its (absolute) truth.

This distinction between *cognitive commitment* and *belief*, too often overlooked, is absolutely crucial. We cause ourselves and others no end of trouble when we fail to make it, becoming intolerant when we should be polyphonic and ecumenical, and flabbily tolerant when we should be rigorous. Strictly speaking, the concept of *belief* applies only to falsifiable propositions. It is meaningless, as the positivists insisted, to claim to believe a statement that cannot be wrong. In particular, one cannot properly be said to believe or disbelieve what is fundamentally just an interpretation – a strategy of understanding. The point is that cognitive *commitment* is irreducibly voluntary and personal. The concept of *belief*, by contrast, entails a public claim.

We often speak loosely and invoke the notion of *belief* when *commitment* is what we really mean. We all do this, and it is usually harmless enough – until we commit the blunder of attributing facticity to our own mode of understanding, and error to the understanding of others. For example, if you see the just-conceived foetus as the vessel of a human soul, while I see it as a blob of undifferentiated cells, our views cannot be called beliefs, in the rigorous sense. They represent strong and opposing commitments, to be sure, but the truth-claims made for either position are as meaningless as in the case of the Gestalt drawings of the old/young gypsy woman. Talk of “belief in God” commits the same error. Though English grammar makes no distinction, a statement like “There is a God in Heaven” is of different logical type than “There is a fly in my soup.” The former is a mode of understanding: a way of leading one's life and making sense of life. The latter, for most ordinary

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purposes can be considered a question of “fact,” since it can be assigned a fairly rigorous operational meaning, and then tested and perhaps falsified.

In every case, one’s resolution of an issue is achieved through the formulation and implementation of personal commitments. If we think of conversation as backed by a certain passion or energy, then our cognitive commitments are channels for that energy. If we think of the suggestions made in conversation as analogous to liquid assets that can be exchanged and converted freely, then commitments are like fixed investments, that can be liquidated only with delay and cost.

A third metaphor, was suggested by a friend, Mr. Eugene Theil, while this book was being written. The notion of polyphonic truth reminded him of an old science fiction movie called *Forbidden Planet*, about an interstellar expedition plagued by an invisible monster. The crew's energy weapons bounce off the monster harmlessly, but when it is finally surrounded, with everyone shooting at the same time, it becomes visible by the energy beams reflecting off it. In just this way we might imagine conversation as surrounding, splashing off, and thus delineating the elephant in our parable of the blind sages. The beast-in-itself is inaccessible to human cognition, but something of its nature may be inferred from the conversation that surrounds it. Pursuant to this image, we might say that "knowledge value" is achieved when conversation – like a wet tee-shirt – covers and clings revealingly to its topic. A commitment can then be thought of as the habit we may have of shooting always from the same angle, and therefore seeing the monster only from one side.

Finally, we can think of commitment structure as a kind of exoskeleton, by which a conversation holds itself together. Conceiving culture as a kind of exoskeleton of material and cognitive commitments, helps us understand it both as an outcome of conversation to-date, and as constraint on further conversation. Culture can be thought of as the total structure built and maintained by some enduring conversation, in the interests of its own shape and sureness.

Now, it will be obvious that whenever alternative, conflicting views of some matter are available, reasonable interlocutors will need to maintain a certain loyalty to their own viewpoints and opinions, without dismissing their adversaries as crooks or cretins.

This combination of existential tenacity with tolerance is not easy to learn, but absolutely vital for reason in a complex, poly-cultural society. It is the crucial post-modern virtue. We cannot live in a condition of permanent doubt. We need personal understandings, and must commit our lives and fortunes to these on a daily basis. At the same time, we have to learn, (and a painful

learning it is), that our understandings and commitments are not universal truths – that other people’s understandings seem no less valid to them than our own to us. The whole post-modern problematic arises from our existential need for serviceable cognitive commitments without grounds for confidence that these are true in any absolute or public sense.

Cultural commitments derive from various sources: Some remain as they are because they would be too expensive to change, or because no way to improve them has been found. Some represent enduring patterns of suggestion and auto-suggestion. Much of our sense of self, and most of our beliefs and values fall into this category. Some are formed through a tacit bartering process. (For example, our social roles represent commitments of this type. By offering to satisfy the expectations of others, we in turn hope to make them predictable and amenable to our own purposes.) Finally, many of our strongest commitments – language being the supreme example – are matters of sheer habit, sustained by sheer familiarity, and relative ignorance of alternatives.

A workable commitment is not ignorance or confusion if you are sustained and guided by the ideas you cling to; but it is not knowledge in the classical sense when you are constantly reminded, and cannot honestly deny, that some other ideas might serve as well or better. It is rather like being married: After a time, your mate no longer seems so very special, except for the peculiar fact of being *yours* – which, if you are lucky, makes her or him unique and infinitely desirable. Similarly, as that which lies beneath, and supports intentional “stance”, our cognitive commitments are like the ground beneath our feet. The ground beneath another person’s may be entirely different.

The distinction drawn here between beliefs and commitments will have significance when we discuss *argument*, and the construction of public knowledge. In a Nietzschean, polyphonic domain of competing interpretations, just what do we assert and argue for, if not that our perceptions are *true*? Strictly speaking, in such domains the assertion is nothing more than a suggestion and a statement of one’s own commitment. If I insist to you that the picture is of a young gypsy woman, all I can be saying is that it is the young woman I see. Implicitly, I am suggesting that others might see her also, but I cannot possibly be asserting that the picture really *is* of a young gypsy woman. I am in no position to make such a claim, and would be deluding myself if I tried to do so.

We conclude:

- (1) that understanding is a matter of *praxis* – sensory-motor aptness and discrimination – before it is a theoretical question of valid description through some appropriate language.

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- (2) that it aims at sureness rather than at philosophical certainty. To understand a thing is to achieve a measure of competence in confronting and dealing with it; to find it viably located in a personal world of operation and experience.
- (3) that understanding is always value-laden. It works at “getting a handle”; at sketching and classifying things, at arranging them in cognitive relationship to ourselves, at holding them (so to speak) “ready-to-hand.”¹
- (4) that finally – and just as Nietzsche taught – verbal, theoretical understanding is a matter of willful commitment, rather than true belief. It is wholly legitimate and only to be expected that people will understand what they take to be the same things and issues in different, seemingly contradictory ways.

It follows that when we speak of *public* understanding, we must either mean a hegemonic mode imposed through rhetorical or physical power, or else some cognitive digestion – something like what we are calling “the structure of argument” of the differing understandings in play. The former being a matter of manipulation or coercion can have little to do with reason. Therefore, our hope of a public understanding grounded in reason must depend on the latter approach – on something like the line we have been following.

The next steps then must be to grasp how understandings are stabilized, how a stable public understanding might be possible, and then how understandings may be stabilized and destabilized through reasoned argument. We still have to show that reasoned argument is possible – that the idea even makes sense in a post-Nietzschean terms.

Our theme in the next few chapters has been called “the social construction of reality,” a phrase that overstates conversation’s role and thereby restores Man to the centre of cosmic affairs in a wholly inappropriate way. We can only gain in clarity and salutary humility by accepting that reality-in-itself (Kant’s *noumenon*, or *ding-an-sich*) is beyond mere social convention. “It is what Is,” to paraphrase slightly: not an artifact of our conversation, but what that conversation is about. However, human understanding really is socially constructed; and that is quite enough to give reason a headache, as we saw in Chapter 1.

5.2 A Stable Understanding

¹ *zuhanden*: Heidegger’s concept and term.

Supposing, then, that we live in an objectively unknowable but jointly inhabited “real world,” our concern here is with the practical problems of epistemology² that each individual faces:

- in forming a satisfactory personal understanding of that world, and of the things in it that concern him;
- in dealing reasonably with persons who understand things differently; and then finally (if possible)
- in piecing together and maintaining some worthwhile tradition of public knowledge from the divergent understandings on offer.

We have the following results, so far: My understanding of anything is sensual and manipulative, not primarily verbal; and it is relational – even exploitative – rather than merely descriptive in nature. To understand a thing is to understand what it is good for – how it is to be handled and used, and what may be expected from it. Understanding may concern itself, eventually, with what things are in themselves; but it is primarily and always concerned with what they are *to me*. Thus, it is essentially personal, and it includes valuation as part and parcel of the cognitive process. Partly for this reason, it is primarily a matter of commitment rather than belief, insofar as the notion of belief is tinged with the fantasy of absolute truth, beyond interpretation.

Hermeneutic Circles

Perhaps the simplest way to see what understanding means in practice, is to consider the ways in which it can be deranged or destabilized. With ordinary objects like coffee mugs this does not often happen, except under the influence of magic mushrooms or the like; but people, works of art, cultural institutions and other complex entities demand re-understanding all the time. Everyone has known the disorientation we feel when our habitual understanding of someone comes to seem uncertain or unreliable. Everyone has seen the excitement that children display when some fresh insight is coming into focus. Thomas Kuhn wrote about the epochs of paradigm shift when scientific understanding is in flux. Shifts of the same kind happen everywhere – in ordinary life as well. For anything at all, one may come to feel it has been wrongly or inadequately understood, and is in need of re-understanding. To think about how this happens shows much of what understandings are, and how they are constructed in the first place. To see how understandings finally come unstuck is to comprehend their stubborn durability also.

First of all, understanding may be destabilized internally, when it is noticed that the whole and its parts are incongruous in some way. The

² The metaphysical question – In what sense, and by what means can some hypothetical “real” elephant be said to “cause” our various perceptions of him? – we can afford to leave alone.

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reciprocal dependence of whole and parts in any interpretive process is called the “hermeneutic circle,” and is a commonplace of literary criticism. For example, our understanding of a poem is based on our reading of each line and word, but our understanding of these in turn depends on our reading of the whole. The meaning of any sentence must be construed from the meanings of its individual words, which are in turn construed from one’s take on the whole sentence.

“Time flies like an arrow” is a well-known example. From the alternative meanings of its words, the sentence can be read in several ways: as saying something about the preferences of a certain creature, or about the passage of a life, or about the method for studying how long it takes to put a zipper in a pair of pants. In practice, however, the sentence is quite stable in the meaning it conveys, since only one of its possible meanings actually seems to say something interesting (except perhaps in some very specialized context of discourse). This meaning of the sentence pins down the meanings of its individual words, and remains consistent with them.

This circular relationship between the meaning of a sentence and that of its words is completely general. The same relationship of wholes and parts is found at every level – between a paragraph and its sentences, between a chapter and its paragraphs, between the book and its chapters – and, for that matter, between some whole field of human concern and all the books that have been written about it. A similar interdependence of whole and part is found outside the realm of text, and seems to be characteristic of all understanding whatever. You have only to think about the stringency of dress codes to recognize what importance we attach to the self-consistency of images, and how disturbed we are by small incongruities. In every case, a hermeneutic circle connects our take on the whole to its component parts, and *vice versa*.

The deconstructionists made much of hermeneutic circles, and sought to treat text as a self-contained system, whose meaning depends entirely and unstably upon itself alone. Yet understandings may be destabilized from the outside too. For example, what we perceive as a chair may turn out to be a balsa wood movie prop that collapses as soon as we sit down. I believe my landlord to be an honest man until he tries to renege on an important clause in my lease that I thought had been clearly agreed. I take him to court; and whether I win my case or not, I have gained a better appreciation of his character. In such cases, understanding is destabilized by hard experience – specifically, by frustrated expectations. Dis-confirmation of conjectured understanding is crucial for all cognition, not just for science.

Understandings may also become destabilized in the attempt to

articulate them for someone else's benefit. The fable of the centipede who tried to explain how he walked is the cautionary tale on this subject, but every instructor of a physical skill will have experienced the effect. In the story, the poor centipede got so confused that he never walked again. In real life, what usually happens is that senior students only begin to understand what they are practising when they try to teach their skill to others. In this attempt, the effort to explain constantly disturbs and renews their understanding – and forces some re-thinking and improvement.

The understandings of others, and the conversation around us may also disarrange our understandings. Jane Austen's last novel, *Persuasion*, provides an example: The heroine is in love with a handsome sea captain who is in love with her. They want to marry, but allow themselves to be persuaded by their friends that the match would be a misalliance. Years later, granted a second chance, they finally come together. Their story has a happy ending. But who has not, at one time or another, allowed himself to be persuaded against his own best judgment?

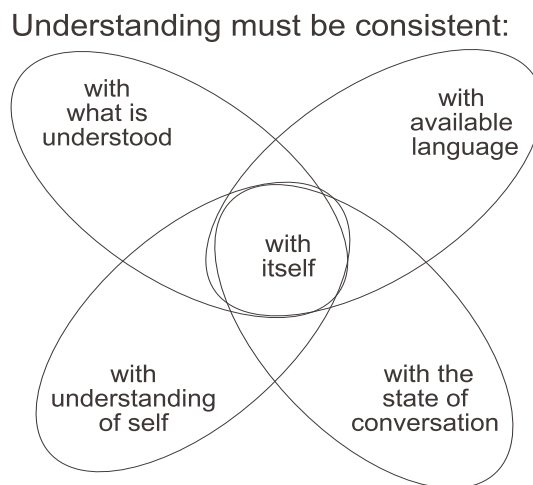
Finally, understandings are often destabilized by changes of life-style or circumstance. Values, tastes and self-understanding change easily when we gain in income or status, or make a new friend. Seeing ourselves in a new way, or wanting very much to do so, alters our relationship to our own lives. With loss the changes are more gradual because accepted so much more reluctantly. Still, in time, the same thing happens: A change in age, or health or social status alters perception itself.

In conclusion we can say that understanding must be consistent, first of all, with itself. Second, it must be consistent with the object of understanding, as manifest in our perceptual and motor habits for dealing with it. Third, it must be consistent with the language available to describe it. Fourth, it must be consistent with our take on the present state of conversation about it. And fifth, it must be consistent with our self-understanding and our psychic needs. These five overlapping requirements are represented in the diagram below.

Now, as everyone is aware – even for single individuals, let alone whole communities and cultures – our patterns of understanding are usually very stable indeed; and the diagram suggests why a mind, once formed, is so difficult to change: Precisely because understanding can be upset from so many directions, its stability (when it is stable) is also redundantly guaranteed from every quarter. There is resistance to input of any kind that might undermine the present understanding. There is resistance to doing the thinking that would eventually lead to a shift of understanding, and to the fruits of such thinking when done. There is resistance to applying a new understanding when its recommendations conflict with old habits. These multiple resistances arise just because understanding has to be anchored in so many different ways. Later on,

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in Chapter 8, we'll turn to the study of reasoned argument, defined as the attempt to destabilize the understandings of others by advancing suggestions that deserve to be seriously considered. What is already clear is that we may think of our understanding of anything at all as a complex pattern of relationship to it – a pattern both cognitive and pragmatic that defends its own stability by ignoring or altering suggestions that would disturb or embarrass it. Past some point, however, such a pattern becomes unstable, and remains so until some new pattern supervenes – in much the way that Kuhn described for the succession of scientific paradigms.



Hermeneutic Petals

In weighing some interpretation as a candidate for our reliance and commitment, we hope, first, that it renders intelligible what it purports to understand. Most urgently, it must locate its subject intelligibly in relation to ourselves, telling us what we should hope or fear, and how we should act toward it. It should be reliable, in the double sense that it does not leave us at a loss when intelligibility is wanted, and that expectations and choices based upon it turn out well. In a word, to qualify as a genuine understanding, an interpretation should not betray or embarrass us. Preferably, it should also be acceptable to our interlocutors, and to our conversation as a whole.

Here then is the basis for a renewed conception of *reasoned* argument: In light of these three qualities – intelligibility, reliability, acceptability – it makes sense to form commitments to one understanding in preference to another, and to argue that it is a better understanding. It is even possible to say (albeit rather loosely) that an understanding is “correct,” meaning only that it is conspicuously

and consensually more intelligible, reliable and acceptable than its alternatives – but **not** that it is absolutely “true.”

At the same time, on controversial matters, the idea that there must be a single “correct” or “true” understanding is obvious nonsense, because divergence in people’s values will preclude the coronation of any given understanding as the correct one – except through the rhetorical or coercive power of some “knowledge elite.” In such cases, public understanding and knowledge must be polyphonic, because only the structure of argument among competing understandings can be authentically public.

5.3 Public Understanding

The collective understanding of a group – a composite picture, possessed by everyone and no one in particular – works differently from that of individuals. We can imagine it floating above the group like a balloon, visible to all and tugged about by their interaction. Margaret Mead once called this “the idea in the middle of the table”: a montage of personal understandings, amalgamated and glossed and structured by the conversation process. Some such idea is needed if one wants to conceive the group as a cognizing entity in its own right.

For a whole conversation as for an individual, the claim to have knowledge (as opposed to mere opinion) about something is best understood as a claim about the epistemic process behind that opinion. It is a claim that processes of perception, investigation, revelation, deduction and discourse are to be trusted. For the individual, the processes of personal cognition are affirmed to be reliable. For public knowledge, it is the integrity of the whole discourse that is affirmed. In both cases, the possibility of knowledge depends on whether the processes of knowledge gathering and packaging are trustworthy. Finally then, the possibility of public knowledge on some matter depends on the group’s collective perception of its own integrity on this matter. No integrity – no authentic public knowledge.

Public Knowledge and the Issue Paper

Public understandings can be documented. In particular, we can imagine the structure of viewpoint and argument around some issue carefully documented to provide a balanced overview of the divergent understandings in play. Indeed, many books do precisely this, surveying a given topic or issue by displaying the range of argument around it. Such a book or document meeting a high standard of integrity we’ll call an *issue paper*. Once drafted, negotiated amongst the stakeholders and signed off by them, such a paper not only displays, but actually *constitutes* public knowledge by capturing the most rigorous public understanding of that issue in a convenient artifact.

On any controversial matter, such a paper – not a collection of flatly

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true statements – will be the outcome of epistemic conversation; and such a paper, polyphonic as it may be, must be considered knowledge insofar as it represents the point of departure for all further conversation. We can still utter flat statements, but only as suggestions to imagine or think in some particular way. Even in a discussion of tomorrow’s weather, a statement like, “It will rain all afternoon” represents one suggestion, among others, to imagine and prepare for a certain state of affairs; and when forecasts differ, our actual *knowledge* of tomorrow’s weather will be the documented structure of close argument among the competing opinions, with the mutual criticisms and rebuttals. In general, the answer to any question will not be a true-or-false statement, nor even a statement scored numerically on its likelihood, in the manner of probability theory or fuzzy logic. It will be a structure of argument as represented in an issue paper or a whole library.

The Structure of Argument

Such a paper (or library) articulates the state of public understanding on some given matter, without yielding any definite “true” answer. As such, it implements the last chapter’s suggestion that public issues are best divided into epistemic and pragmatic components, addressed through distinct conversations that are kept well insulated from one another. We divide a complicated quarrel into two phases which should prove easier to manage separately.

As we’ve seen, the ground-rules of reason in these phases are completely different: The cognitive or *epistemic* conversation is about the nature of reality (including desires and interests and values, a crucial aspect of our personal realities). It thrives on diversity, so long as civility and mutual intelligibility – the “meeting of minds” – can be maintained. By contrast, the pragmatic conversation requires ultimate convergence to common choices, because its basic question, “What are we to do?” requires a collectively binding answer. By keeping these conversations separate, each is allowed to function on its own terms, according to its own necessities. The theoretical desirability of this separation has long been understood (however vaguely and imperfectly) in the Western world, as attested by our traditions of free speech, academic freedom, and the separation of church and state. To this extent, the epistemology we are building here is already entailed by our constitutional commitment to the freedoms of worship and speech.

The actual preparation of an issue paper would be done by gathering representatives of all stake-holding factions around a table and getting them to explain themselves to each other while keeping their own records of the proceedings. This material would then be organized, edited, and structured to

produce a single document that all are willing to sign reflecting their differences of interpretation. With their acceptance of this document, the stakeholders, in effect, publicly register agreement on a joint understanding of their differences. They do not agree, but are agreed at least on a formulation of the issues dividing them, though by no means on their resolution.

Documenting *understanding* in this way should prove easier than documenting classical *truth*, because *understanding* embraces contradictory interpretations and opinions, while classical truth is supposed to be free from contradiction. Where classical Truth is a bone to fight over, the quest for polyphonic understanding is a feasible exercise of listening skills, imagination and patience.

As an input to pragmatic conversation, the issue paper serves at least three purposes: For the executive decision-makers or negotiators, it documents political and practical reality on a particular issue – the real constraints that any practical decision must satisfy. In doing so, it satisfies the requirement identified in the previous chapter, that pragmatic conversation must not allow itself to become entangled in the epistemic wrangles of its stakeholders, but must rather take these as the constraint on a negotiated resolution. A signed issue paper blocks the use of epistemic and value-laden rhetoric as a weapon in the negotiation of concrete choices, rendering these negotiations more flexible and business-like.

Second, for stakeholder constituencies and the general public, the issue paper is an avenue of communication to the upper echelons of pragmatic conversation, and an instrument for holding it accountable. In establishing a cognitive background against which decisions and actions must be explained and justified, it defines a standard of competence and public concern by which concrete policies and outcomes can be evaluated.³

Finally, and again for the executive decision-makers or negotiators, it provides a means for handling the clamour of special interests. To a complaint that some action or policy does not suit a faction's wishes, the executive can respond by pointing to a signature on the issue paper, acknowledging other concerns that also had to be met. This shifts the burden of argument somewhat: Unless a dissatisfied faction can show how some other course would have better served the structure of concerns on the table, it has no leg to stand on.

The preparation and use of issue papers factors the epistemic argument out of the governing one. Having achieved a meeting of minds – mutual acknowledgment and understanding – as to their differing cognitive commitments, stakeholders can proceed to negotiate a jointly acceptable

³ Though, of course, the various stakeholder factions will evaluate these outcomes differently.

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solution to a common problem that the issue paper articulates. Concrete choices should be easier, and should turn out to be better choices, than could be made through negotiations continually subject to disruption with epistemic claims. Pragmatic conversation can now be seen as working its way toward concrete choice through some negotiated settlement based on specific jointly acknowledged perceptions and concerns.

As we've seen, in contentious situations where there is no common paradigm or consensual scheme of values, the concept of a best or "optimum" choice loses all meaning. Nonetheless, a chain of reasoning and accountability still connects the whole process, because each step is vulnerable to embarrassment: Suggestions and proposals will be embarrassed if they cannot justify themselves to constituents in light of their understandings of reality and their own wishes. Tabled options will be embarrassed if they do not meet the identified constraints. The agreed plan or policy will be embarrassed if it cannot be justified as a sensible choice among the alternatives. Results are the ultimate basis of accountability. If the plan or policy fails in execution, it is embarrassed before everyone.

This vulnerability to embarrassment is crucial for any possibility of reason. If we are brazenly immune to embarrassment, undisturbed by the prospect of being caught short in our accounts or arbitrary or capricious in our understandings, we have no need to be prudent in our cognitive commitments, and thus no need for reason. Conversely, it is just because and to the extent that we can be intellectually embarrassed – by events, if nothing else – that we must get our cognitive commitments in order.