EDUCATION AS SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION:
PRAGMATISM, PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS AND THE “SEA CHANGE” IN CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY

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In this thesis I characterize, through an analysis of some of the key themes and central insights of both Charles Sanders Peirce’s pragmatism and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, what Bernstein (2011) has called a “sea change” in contemporary philosophy. I illustrate how their main insights are profoundly educational and how they offer us an effective means of reconceptualising what education means within the context of our world today. I will particularly stress two important elements of this ‘sea change’ that figure prominently in both Peirce and Gadamer’s work. First, the central importance of situated agency, and second, the affirmation of a relational process ontology. When taken together, these insights entail a conception of education that radically affirms the transformative potential of human agency based on the fecundity of educational experience. This ‘sea change’ will be presented in juxtaposition to the problematic modern/Cartesian framework that is current in educational thought today.
Acknowledgements.

The ideas contained in this thesis are, in large part, the fruit of a personal journey of search and my attempt to understand and articulate how within the commonplace is held unimagined possibilities (unbeknownst to us) for both personal and social change. In that journey I have been assisted by a great many people who I am ultimately indebted to for the thoughts contained in these pages.

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Finally, this thesis would also not have been possible were it not for my encounter with the writings of the Bahá’í Faith. From the Bahá’í perspective every one of us must be regarded as “mine rich in gems of inestimable value” and it is on the basis of this view of each and every human being that I have striven to articulate my educational perspective. To seek knowledge and understanding for the purpose of serving humanity and unearthing the gems hidden in each of us is our vocation as human beings and it is through the lens of Baha’u’llah’s teachings that I have come to understand the profound implications of this vision.
To re-establish the link between insight into the actual and imagination of the possible in human affairs is to revolutionize the agenda of social theory. Why not now?

Roberto Mangabeira Unger.¹

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¹ Excerpt from *The Revolutionary Project of Social Theory*, part of the *The Mind At War* lecture series.
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Introduction.

There is a common perspective on education today which has inscribed within it certain problematic assumptions regarding the nature of human agency and knowledge acquisition. We often work under the assumption that we, as educational practitioners, can indeed adequately ascertain and assess the condition of one’s learning in a relatively straightforward manner without the threat of serious harm. But can we, in fact, rest confidently on such an assumption? Is education simply the transmission and internalization of information, and our duty then simply to transmit and verify (through tests) whether that transmission was a success? Or does the very manner in which we conceptualize education (an the agents engaged in the process) carry with it moral, social and political implications? The purpose of this thesis is to not merely illustrate the latter, but more specifically to illustrate how the widely held perspective on education today takes for granted a profoundly dis-abling perspective of human agency which serves to obscure the subtleties of learning along with the transformative capacity we each possess.

Part of this stems from the failure to adequately understand, within education, some of the central sociological and philosophical insights of the past several decades. There is a general consensus emerging in the social and human sciences regarding the ‘socially constructed’ and perspectival nature of human experience.\(^2\) The world we live in is not, as is often assumed naturally given as is but rather it is the product of a complex process of social construction and negotiation that we are each implicated in (Bourdieu, 1977, Unger, 2007). The meaning of any given experience is not essentially internal to the experience itself but rather significantly

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\(^2\) Generally the concept of social construction has been employed to sustain relativism and that is not how I am employing it here. To claim that we live in a socially constructed world is to emphasize that our world of experience is not ‘natural’ as is, but rather that its particular form is the consequence of human actions. To say this is not to dichotomize natural from social but rather to emphasize that we encounter the ‘natural’ world within systems of meaning that are largely the product of human social negotiation. They can, in other words be different than they currently are.
affected by the social, cultural and historical context in which it takes place. By saying this I am not attempting to reaffirm the problematic dichotomy between the natural and the social, but rather to stress their fundamental unity. We cannot reasonably divide what we think to be ‘natural’ from what we think to be ‘social’ because the line between the two cannot be ascertained with certitude. Every vision of the world is, in some respects, an imposition on the world that takes for granted a particular perspective rooted in particular past experiences. This is due to the fact that we all develop within formative social contexts which tacitly incline us to understand the world in a particular manner. In our everyday lives we exist within a structured order that is, while indeed contingent upon the natural order, ultimately a product of how human beings have understood reality and acted upon it. In that sense, our social world, far from being immutable (always having existed as is), represents simply the current codified and institutionalized state of human knowledge, meaning and understanding. As social agents, we are each and all simultaneously ‘products’ of a social world, and actors who sustain both the reproduction and (potentially) the transformation of that social world. We are not, as is often tacitly assumed, passive beings that exist within a predefined and immutable natural world lacking the ability to affect it. Rather, as a product of construction, the world in which we exist is always open to revision but if we cannot see that, we cannot actualize its truth.

My reason, however, for stressing the social dimension of human experience is specifically because it is this dimension of our being in the world that is neglected in contemporary thinking about human agency. We tend to take it as given that we live in a world that exists as is, insusceptible to our agentic efforts. A world that is there, external to us, and that,

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3 I employ natural here in the sense of that which is unaffected by human choice. The ‘natural’ in this sense is that which develops as a result of it’s own inner logic independently of the context in which it exists. The ‘natural’ is thus that which functions independently of human individual or collective agency. Laws and forces are considered natural because human beings are subject to them and must function within them.
because it exists statically, we can know with relative confidence through relatively simple observation. Rarely does the thought emerge that because we are a part of that world, we cannot simply step back and see it with such clarity. Even more rare is the realization that, it is in the very act of seeing the world that we have already (tacitly) imposed upon it a particular vision that is rooted in a particular social and cultural matrix which is the product of collective life and not of our own personal making.

While at first glance it may not seem so, this is inherently an educational problem. That is because as earlier mentioned, in the process of learning, we are not simply acquiring brute information, but generating a way of seeing and being in the world. This process also entails a sense of how we, as agents, relate to the world as well. It is in the process of learning that we come to understand ourselves either as passive or active agents; where we learn to relate to knowledge either as recipients or as creative agents; and where we learn to see the problems of the world either as ‘someone else’s’ or as our own. In sum, it is through educational processes that we develop (or fail to develop) a sense of how we as individuals are situated within, and connect to, the world around us. It is through education that we develop (or again fail to develop) a sense of how our own personal faculties (intelligence, creativity, imagination… etc.) are connect to the world in which we live; where we learn to think of ourselves fundamentally as ‘individuals’ or as social beings that are members of a community. These assumptions are inscribed within educational practices and constitute a significant part of what has been called the “hidden curriculum”.

As it currently stands, however, the generalized framework that underlies many of our educational efforts neglects this dimension of human experience and takes for granted assumptions that are incompatible with these findings. Contemporary perspectives on education are rooted within a philosophical tradition that foregrounds both individualism and a static
conception of our relationship to reality, and the costs, as I will highlight throughout this work, are quite hefty. This framework, however, is certainly not always explicit. Indeed, what makes it particularly problematic is the degree to which it implicitly informs our everyday thinking about education without us ever realizing or questioning it. While we are not inclined to see the philosophical framework that sustains this problematic perspective on education (because it is like the ocean within which we exist), it nevertheless serves to constitute what we take to be the ‘normal’ in our educational efforts. To view our individuality as our essential property and our relationship to knowledge as a straightforward ‘viewing’ of reality is clearly predicated upon philosophical assumptions that can be radically questioned. And yet we generally fail to see these propositions for what they actually are: assumptions. In doing so, we unwittingly ‘naturalize’ or reify them and thus act on them as though they were accurate and unproblematically true.

Since we tend to misperceive our philosophical assumptions as ‘natural’ or ‘normal’, it follows that the ideas that we hold about ourselves and our reality, ideas which are predicated on our philosophical framework) have acquired a sense of ‘natural’ immutability. For instance, it has become commonplace to treat human agency ultimately as rational calculation propelled primarily by instrumental self-interest. Importantly, however, for those who hold this perspective on human agency, it would be utterly irrational to act differently because, in doing so, we would be jeopardizing our own self-interest. The result of this, as we can witness in society today, is that our taken for granted assumptions inhibit us from seeing the world in a different light. But even more problematically, however, is that they also serve as the justification for patterns of conduct which, in their execution, serve to validate our central assumptions in the first place (i.e. since we believe people to be inherently selfish we act accordingly and, in acting out our beliefs, others respond to us selfishly in return thus validating the initial assumption which caused us to
act selfishly in the first place). Thus, the grounds for a self-fulfilling prophecy are established and our taken for granted, and disempowering, assumptions about human agency contribute to widespread collective disenchantment.

Far from being encompassed under one simple heading, the unconscious and normalized framework that underlies much of our educational thought today has been the outcome of hundreds of years of philosophical debate that continues in our day (however this debate is being threatened by the diminishing importance of philosophical inquiry in contemporary academia). For ease of expression however, the general outlines of the framework I am referring to can be designated the ‘modern’ worldview which has been accompanied, according to Toulmin (1992), by both a metaphysical and epistemological ‘scaffolding’ as well as a notion of the human subject that derives largely from the mechanistic Cartesian worldview and the related philosophical quest for certainty. By employing the word ‘modern’ here, my intention is not to affirm or reproduce the overly simplistic modern/post-modern divide, which has become so popular in contemporary academics. Rather, my intention is to demonstrate how two important contemporary philosophical approaches, Charles Sanders Peirce’s pragmatism and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, help us to move away form the stultifying debate between reified polar extremes such as modern/post-modern, objectivism/relativism, theory/practice, natural/social and reason/emotion by reframing some of the central assumptions that generate these polarizing debates.

Such dichotomies retain much of their validity largely within a framework that treats concepts as reified entities⁴ and that fails to recognize them as intellectual constructions whose meanings are socially and contextually bound, necessarily open to revision. We have come to

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⁴ Within this framework it is believed that our ideas of the world are complete descriptions of reality as it actually is as opposed to mere heuristics that enable us to understand complexity more adequately. This has been a central tenet of the correspondence theory of truth.
think that we live in a world of natural and immutable ‘objects’ and that when we speak of ‘reason’, for instance, it is actually something that exists in isolation from what we call ‘emotion’. This way of understanding ideas and reality produces many serious philosophical problems that compel us to think differently. While they are certainly necessary heuristics, it would seem that a more appropriate perspective would take it as a central principle that the complex reality of such ‘objects’ (like reason and emotion) will always transcend the words that we use to describe them, thus requiring a careful and constant reflexivity in the use of concepts and ideas. Furthermore, such a perspective would entail that we understand such ‘objects’ in a more relational manner as opposed to distinct and separate reified entities.

Nevertheless, generally speaking, this ‘object’ orientation is central to contemporary thought and has served as a grounding assumption for much of contemporary western approaches to knowledge and inquiry (Bourdieu, 1989, Emirbayer, 1997, Rescher, 2000). The result is that we treat such ‘objects,’ which are relational and largely conceptual, as ‘natural’ and act on them as though they were real. The concept that best describes this propensity in Western thought (to treat relational concepts as objects) is reification which, according to Bewes (2002), “refers to the moment that a process or relation in generalized into an abstraction, and thereby turned into a ‘thing’” (p. 3). In this manner, reification has become a dominant mechanism (or instrument) of contemporary thought because we have overlooked the deeply rooted conceptual framework that naturalizes a world of reified objects and that neglects their relational constitution. In other words, the problem is not that we have ‘objects’ of thought and action, which is indeed quite inevitable, but that this reifying tendency seduces us into thinking that our concepts are essentially reality as it is, unmediated by conceptualizations. It is this framework,

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5 Bourdieu (1989) and Emirbayer (1997) have called this orientation a substantialist orientation in that ‘substance’ is afforded primacy over ‘processes.’
and the educational principles that are normalized through it, that I intend to problematize in this work.

However, not only am I attempting to problematize what I perceive to be a problematic philosophical framework, but rather, I will more importantly strive to demonstrate how a widespread consensus is indeed emerging around certain central philosophical insights that have emerged within contemporary philosophy and sociological theory. Indeed, the extent of this consensus is so vast that Bernstein (2010) has called it a ‘sea change’ in contemporary thought. It is as a means of illustrating the nature and import of this ‘sea change’ that I will be undertaking a complementary analysis of two rather distinct philosophers: the founder of pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Hans Georg-Gadamer, who developed the philosophical approach known as philosophical hermeneutics.

Before my analysis, however, it is worth noting what the notion of a sea change actually implies. It implies a type of change that reaches to the deepest assumptions at work in our thought processes. Like a gestalt switch or paradigm shift, a ‘sea change’ implies a change in contemporary thinking that stretches beyond the work of any one thinker or discipline and instead designates a fundamental shift in the generally accepted metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological frameworks that have structured contemporary thought and practice for hundreds (if not thousands) of years. It implies a change in the ‘sea of ideas’ within which we are immersed as social agents and that we take for granted because they are what we do not see.

While the implications of this sea change are numerous and affect many fields of human endeavour, one could distil some of the salient features for the purposes of this work as such: the recognition of the essentially embedded and perspectival character of all human experience and a concomitant transition away from a theory of knowledge that neglects the finite and situated character of human actors; the integration of theory and practice as mutually co-dependent and
inextricable; the “entanglement of fact and value” and the recognition that ‘facts’ are always rendered meaningful within complex frameworks of values and assumptions (Putnam, 2002). A further entailment of the "entanglement of fact and value" is that our thoughts and actions always bear social and political consequences and that, as a result, no choice is in and of itself value-free (Freire, 1998). Arguably, such insights rest on a deeper shift away from the ontological “substance bias” characteristic contemporary Western thought towards a process or relational ontology which undermines the widespread tendency of conceptual reification (Rescher, 2007). Essentially, these features of the sea change, along with several others, can be understood as a latent refutation of the ‘modern’ metaphysical and ontological framework that has retained many problematic Cartesian and empiricist elements (such as the Cartesian overemphasis on materialism and substance, wholly neglecting relations (Ryle, 1949)).

Before moving on to the main argument, it is worthwhile for me to first explicitly address why I have chosen to focus this thesis on the work of Charles Sanders Peirce and Hans-Georg Gadamer. In selecting these two philosophers, I am not trying to make a grand claim about their uniqueness or to claim that they alone have offered philosophical insights that are relevant to my argument. Rather, by framing their work as two distinct instances of the ‘sea change’ in contemporary philosophy, I am trying to emphasize the fact that they are both part of a much broader shift in contemporary thought. Indeed, many other important thinkers (and schools of thought) can equally be regarded as major contributors to this shift including, but certainly not limited to, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hannah Arendt (Bernstein, 2010), Pierre Bourdieu, Paulo Freire, Roberto Mangabiera Unger, many (if not most) feminist philosophers, as well as many others. In other words, contemporary philosophy is moving in a particular direction and, as I will argue, the educational implications of that movement have not been adequately understood or integrated in our understanding of education today. It is through my
analysis of both Gadamer and Peirce that I hope to take part in explicitly drawing out some of those implications.

Still, despite this explanation, one might justifiably still wonder why I specifically chose to focus on Peirce and Gadamer and not any of the several others that I referenced above. Indeed, given the drastic differences that exist between the two, it might seem like a bit of a stretch to attempt, even a basic, reconciliation between them. But that in itself is partly the reason why I chose these two thinkers and not others. The very point of calling this a ‘sea change’ in contemporary philosophy is to stress that so many different thinkers have converged, and are converging, upon similar principles that the principles themselves come to take on greater plausibility because of the diversity of thinkers that come to them. This in itself is partly the reason that I chose to focus on Peirce and Gadamer because they are in fact so different in their philosophical style that when one sees the common elements that they share, it is all the more striking and illustrative of that larger movement in philosophy.

In particular points of comparison, the reason why Peirce and Gadamer are apt to compare is that they both, in their own way, place the generation of knowledge and meaning at the center of their philosophical projects, but in a manner that actually complements one another. For example, while Peirce offers a highly rigorous and philosophically robust account of human inquiry as both a personal and social phenomena that commences with doubt (thus the encounter with the unknown), Gadamer's approach offers a perspective that commences with the individual's effort to understand in their encounter with the unknown. Thus, by foregrounding the ontological primacy of understanding, Gadamer helps us shed more light on the phenomenological dimension of inquiry while Peirce offers us a means of understanding inquiry as a collective enterprise. We must refrain, however, from taking this distinction too strongly. Part of the value of both Peirce & Gadamer's work is that they both strive to understand human
beings as situated, social agents, and thus both take care to refrain from simplistic notions of isolated individuality. Every individual is the part of a socio-historical context and interprets from that vantage point. In this respect, while Peirce and Gadamer are indeed not social theorists or sociologists, their insights carry profound sociological implications. Both their emphasis on situated agency and their foregrounding of the linguistic/symbolic mediation of reality (to be addressed later in this work) represent an integration of the social dimensions of experience into the life of the individual. Thus, in both their work the barrier between self and society is blurred, which has important implications in our conception of education.

Another divergent and yet complementary point of comparison that can be made between Peirce and Gadamer is the intellectual traditions with which they engage in. While Peirce’s philosophical approach deals more with the contemporary questions of logic and scientific inquiry, Gadamer’s work engages more with the humanistic tradition drawing on and employing valuable philosophical concepts such as *bildung* and *phronesis*. Generally, these traditions are taken to be incommensurate based on their different points of emphasis and focus and yet, in the work of both Gadamer and Peirce, we can witness a common point of focus: a critique of the framework that has come to characterize contemporary thought that originated with Descartes. In that sense while Peirce and Gadamer direct their attention and energies to significantly different questions, they nevertheless share strikingly similar features that enable us to see many contemporary problems through different yet, as I will argue, subtly complementary lenses and thus in a clarifying light. After outlining their respective projects, I will further explore their convergent themes in Chapter 4.

Another important point of emphasis is in order here. To call Peirce’s pragmatism and Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics ‘sea change philosophies’ is not to say that their significance lies in the pure novelty of their perspectives (although some of their work indeed is
truly novel). Their significance (along with the others mentioned above) rather lies in the fact that they offer, through a critical and profound analysis of the formative ideas of our age, a way of conceptualizing knowledge generation and inquiry that is radically different from that which is generally taken for granted in contemporary thought. Indeed, in many respects, what both Gadamer and Peirce achieve with such amazing success is that they engage with the ideas of past thinkers with such insight and proficiency that they help revive some of the profound philosophical insights that have been displaced and undervalued within contemporary philosophical thought.⁶

While, indeed, my general intention is to illustrate how the sea change in contemporary philosophy and social theory helps us to reconceptualise and advance our understanding of many problematic elements of contemporary thought, my specific intention is to illustrate how it does this by emphasizing, and in some way redefining, the role of education in human life. Through my account of Peirce’s pragmatism and Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, I will argue that once we abandon the quest for a final Archimedean point and the brand of certainty that is characteristic of the modern/Cartesian framework that has formed the fundamental narrative of education throughout the modern scientific age, we must situate our aspirations more locally and accept that it is mainly through on-going communal inquiry that we can come to know reality more fully and thus organize our social and political lives in a manner that reflects the exigencies of our time more appropriately. Once we give up the false sense of certainty all too common within a paradigm that takes human knowledge and meaning to be absolute and immutable, and adopt a posture of humility in the face of complexity, we are then faced with the challenging task

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⁶ We might take as an example Gadamer’s encounter with Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics and his insightful appropriation of phronesis within his own philosophical approach. In Peirce’s case we may look at his encounter with both Aristotle and Kant (particularly the Critique of Pure Reason) as central to his philosophical approach.
of actually taking up inquiry and making it, and its on-going improvement, our operating principle. This move away from the stultifying certainty generated by an absolutist conception of knowledge and meaning, towards a more probabilistic perspective, rooted in ingenuous curiosity and the desire to understand (itself rooted in the realization that human knowledge is always provisional), is a cardinal implication of the sea change that I will be characterizing throughout this work. This shift is educational because it foregrounds the educational quality human experience and recognizes that learning is not located only in classrooms, but rather, it is that quality of human life that is the primary engine of advancement and progress.

To achieve my goal, this thesis will be broken down into five chapters. In chapter one, I will offer a general overview of some of the salient features of what I have above referred to as the modern/Cartesian philosophical framework. I will focus mainly on how the disembodied and decontextualized theory of knowledge (and it’s accompanying theory of the subjective knower) that has become deeply rooted in ‘modern’ Western thought since the time of Descartes contributes to a notion of education that is quite problematic. It posits a relationship between the subjective agent and the domain of knowledge that neglects human finitude and the relational manner in which knowledge emerges and grows. I will claim that an important outcome of this framework, owing to the manner in which it conceptualizes knowledge and inquiry, is a tendency to reify concepts and thus obscure their relational existence. As a response to this framework, I will dedicate the successive two chapters to an overview of two schools of contemporary philosophy that set out to rework the core assumptions of philosophy, both of which are formulated largely in opposition to the modern/Cartesian approach to knowledge.

In chapter 2, I will focus my attention on the pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce. I will illustrate how the pragmatic approach to philosophy can only be properly understood within a fundamentally different framework than that affirmed by the modern/Cartesian perspective. One
that abandons the notion that we (human beings) can attain a God’s eye view. In support of this, I will offer an overview of Peirce’s theory of inquiry rooted in his behavioural theory of meaning, a perspective which foregrounds fallibilistic experimentalism and communal inquiry as essential requisites of individual and social growth. I will furthermore offer an analysis of Peirce’s semiotics as an instance of his relational process ontology.

In chapter 3, I will illustrate how, although in a fundamentally different vocabulary, the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer could likewise be interpreted as an exemplar of the ‘sea change’. To begin, I will offer a basic analysis of Gadamer’s account of prejudice, tradition and authority and how these concepts have been severely distorted within modern/Cartesian (and Enlightenment) philosophy. I will follow this with an account of Gadamer’s conception of understanding (through the fusion of horizons) and the problem of application. Finally, I will highlight the importance that Gadamer places on language in his philosophical hermeneutics. Throughout this entire section I will attempt to illustrate how many of Gadamer’s most important philosophical contributions emerge quite directly from his radical affirmation of human situated agency, and that as a result of this he places the process of understanding at the centre of his philosophical hermeneutics.

In chapter 4, I will direct my attention to drawing out the common elements that emerge from these two different perspective in contemporary philosophy in an effort to demonstrate what we might consider to be an emerging consensus in contemporary thought about the nature of human knowledge acquisition and learning. In that effort, I will mainly focus on the similar conception of prejudice that these two thinkers place at the forefront of their projects and what that conception entails for our understanding of human agency and the process of inquiry. This discussion of prejudice will be taken in two main directions. First, I will draw out the implications of the central importance of situated agency to their respective projects. Second, I
will highlight the importance they both place on of the symbolic construction/mediation of reality. The goal will be to stress how the symbolic construction/mediation of reality, when considered in the light of embedded agency, offers a means of understanding education as the basis of personal and social transformation; which will constitute the topic of the final chapter.

Finally, in chapter 5, I will draw out some of the explicit social and political consequences of the educational core of these philosophies. I will argue that the central element that both pragmatism and philosophical hermeneutics affirm is that human experience can be fundamentally educational, and that in order to do justice to a new way of philosophizing, we must understand the centrality (and fecundity) of education to human life. We must redefine education as an active process of creative inquiry and social action that is an essential part of our humanity. That education takes place when the individual dedicates his/her efforts and capacities to the resolution of both personal and social problems and indeed that the individual, avoiding the reification characteristic of the ‘modern’ framework, refrains from envisioning the self as distinct from the social order within which they develop. In that regard, the sea change that I have been characterizing throughout this work serves as a means for us to recognize the socially transformative quality of active educational inquiry.

Before moving on to my analysis of the modern/Cartesian perspective and both pragmatism and philosophical hermeneutics, I feel that it is necessary to preface my analysis with some preliminary clarifying points to ensure that I am properly understood. My intention in this work is not to whole-heartedly identify myself with one school of thought and their entire project as opposed to another, and argue for its merits at any cost. Such an approach to philosophizing, I believe, is emblematic of the type of philosophical approach that I am attempting to problematize in this work. The guiding question that I will employ throughout this essay is a rather pragmatic one asking: “what difference does a given idea make?” Or as
Bernstein (1982) puts it “what is the difference that makes a difference?” Ultimately, my goal throughout this thesis will be to approach these two distinct philosophers in a manner that draws out their fruitful insights while keeping in mind that any philosophical perspective is limited. As Peirce would argue, any inquiry is open ended and must have practical implications that can be tested in our everyday lives. In that sense, inquiry (including this one) is not about elaborating a final account that ends further inquiry, but rather about generating thinking that can help us improve the world in which we live. Gadamer also, in his own way, illustrates a similar point when he argues that in our dialogue with thinkers of the past, we must not suffer the delusion that we are engaged in the reconstructive effort of their original intentions for, in doing so, we fail to account for our own situated historical embeddedness as interpreters. According to Gadamer, what we must instead aim for is a fusion of horizons where the problematic engaged by authors of the past may meaningfully contribute to our contemporary struggles. It is in that spirit that I approach both Peirce’s and Gadamer’s work. My overriding intention is to understand the manner in which their insights are meaningful to our contemporary plight and particularly how their work could offer us visionary possibilities for the future. In an important way, what I am proposing in this thesis can be likened to a reconstructive vision of what philosophy and education could be if approached differently and in a manner consonant with some important insights of modern philosophy, sociology and psychology.

Chapter 1: The Dominant Approach to Knowledge, Practice and Social change.

To offer an overview of what I am calling the dominant approach to knowledge, practice and social change is in certain respects a problematic enterprise for a couple of reasons. First, it rests on the assumption that there is indeed a singular conceptual framework which one can call ‘dominant’ at work in our society and culture today. Such an assumption could be deeply
problematic because it can serve as a drastic oversimplification which suppresses the recognition that human beings exist in a plural world characterized by a multiplicity of visions and indeterminate perspectives. In that light, it is worth stressing that, by articulating what I am calling the dominant framework, it is not my intention to articulate the only perspective on knowledge, practice and social change at work in our cultural and social context. Rather, my intention is to highlight that, as social agents, we develop within structured social contexts within which particular beliefs about knowledge practice and social change are institutionalized and enshrined. As a result, while there may not be one single framework at work within a given social context, and while there may be numerous different beliefs and assumptions at work at any given time in the lives of individuals, there are nevertheless common generalizable assumptions that serve as the grounding logic at work within institutionalized social systems (such as the educational/academic system) of a given social order. It is these elements that I will articulate in this chapter and yet, I will stress at the outset that while such generalizations can be heuristically helpful, we must refrain, as I will illustrate throughout this work, from succumbing to the problematic tendency to reify our conceptual generalizations and treat them as though they are essentially real.

Second, and more minor, is the problem that we confront in the attempt to adequately characterize such a complex framework within the limited confines of a thesis chapter. Clearly, to articulate the general elements of a perspective on knowledge, practice and social change is a massive enterprise and yet, in order to adequately characterize the sea change in contemporary thought, it becomes necessary to offer, at the very least in outline, such an overview. Therefore, within its context it must be taken for what it is: a basic account of a topic of great complexity. Because of such challenges, rather than attempt to offer a genealogy of its origins and causal
influences\textsuperscript{7}, I will instead offer a snapshot of some of the basic characteristics of the modern framework.

A further point of caution is in order at the outset of such a chapter. There exists a common and erroneous tendency to either wholeheartedly affirm or deny the contributions of the thinkers of the past, to assume that either they were right or wrong. By doing so, we turn these thinkers into mere caricatures without due attention to the complexity of their work, nor how that work has successively been taken up by those who came after. Rather than grant them the respect and serious consideration they deserve, admitting that any set of ideas is accompanied with inherent qualities, which we can benefit from, and challenges, which might usher in difficult problems, we tend to fall into the trap of reification, turning their work into an object of our own imaginings.\textsuperscript{8} In many respects, this is a symptom of our times rooted in the propensity towards quick and easy answers despite the complexity of the problems we face. By doing this however, we tend to distort the value and obscure the insights of such thinkers failing to recognize that their achievements, within their context, once served as the grounds upon which our current insights are partially based.

It cannot be understated that, from the perspective of this work, this simplistic and problematic conception of intellectual contribution is entirely inadmissible. I will rather maintain that any set of philosophical ideas is accompanied simultaneously with both positive and negative implications which come as a package. As such, while in this chapter, I attempt to demonstrate how certain Cartesian assumptions have proven problematic for our current conceptions of knowledge, it is important to concede that that may indeed be a symptom of how we have received (or misused) Descartes over the past centuries. In that sense, rather than take

\textsuperscript{8} It is part of the goal of this thesis to problematize this all too common intellectual disposition.
this work as a critique of Descartes, it must instead be understood as a critique of how certain ideas, which Descartes may have played an important role in outlining, have been taken up and deployed within our time in a harmful manner. It must be said, however, that within the confines of such a brief work, I cannot possibly offer an analysis of Descartes that does justice to the real complexity of his work. In that light, it is important to remember throughout this chapter that by highlighting the negative that has accompanied certain thinkers, whether by merit or by misinterpretation, it is not meant to imply that they haven’t also been pioneers of great advance as well.

1. The Quest for Certainty

Contemporary Western notions of knowledge, practice and social change have deep roots in a philosophical tradition that has taken its mission to be the quest for certainty in the discovery of the immutable framework of reality. This posture towards philosophy and inquiry emerged most forcefully, whether as a direct consequence of their work or our misapprehension thereof, with modern scientific rationalism and with pivotal thinkers such as Descartes, Galileo (Toulmin, 1992), Bacon (Bleicher, 1980) and Isaac Newton (Dewey, 1960). The worldview that this movement helped usher in has most commonly been called the ‘modern’ worldview and although the characteristics of modernity have been debated at length, an underlying consensus is perceivable regarding the nature of human rationality and the nature of knowledge acquisition (Bernstein, 1983, Toulmin, 1992). Although far from being the sole protagonist in the emergence of the ‘modern’ worldview that I am here describing, it was in his Meditations that Descartes articulated the notion that, through radical doubt, we could finally reach a mathematically firm foundation, or Archimedean point, for all knowledge, thus ushering in a metaphor for knowledge
as a structure requiring stable ground (Descartes, 1999). It has been this quest for an Archimedean point in epistemology, and the general metaphoric that has accompanied it, that has served as an important model for modern scientific rationalism since that time and has characterized rational inquiry in the modern era (Bernstein, 1983, Lakoff and Johnson, 1999).

This effort to discover secure foundations for all knowledge, and the universal frame of interpretation within which we can interpret such knowledge, has been at the core of one of the most heated debates in contemporary social and philosophical thought over the past several decades, a debate which has had a decisive impact on contemporary academic thought. It has been characterized as the modern vs. postmodern, whereby modern it is meant “any science that legitimizes itself with reference to a metadiscourse …, making explicit appeal to some grand narrative such as the dialectics of spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth” (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiii). Thus, the modern is that which appeals to a legitimizing foundational narrative. The postmodern, on the other hand has been characterized most famously as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv), where “[p]ostmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable” (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxv). While this shift from the ‘modern’ towards the postmodern seems appealing to many within contemporary thought, it is, I will argue, not a novel step away from the problematic facets of modernity but rather one of its culminating moves. When the search for knowledge is characterized as an either/or endeavour (either we must have absolute truth, objectivism, or none at all, relativism), we will inevitably witness perpetual vacillation between these poles.⁹ They become our only possible options within a framework based on the polar

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⁹ One can always, depending on circumstance, offer convincing arguments for or against both objectivism and relativism.
extremes of objectivism and relativism. This dichotomous stance on deep epistemological and metaphysical principles is, as I intend to illustrate, one of the defining characteristics of the modern/Cartesian worldview that has served as the template for rational inquiry throughout the modern age.

This move from the modern to the postmodern can be best understood as a symptom of what Bernstein (1983) has called The Cartesian Anxiety: the seductive appeal to take for granted the distortive either/or as our only possible means of advancing our philosophic understanding. This is because, when functioning within a Cartesian framework (i.e. when employing some of his central assumptions), we find ourselves inclined to the extreme opposing poles of objectivism or relativism (mind or body, theory or practice … etc.). The assumption is that either we can have absolute knowledge and work towards a predefined telos or we are forced to concede that all talk of metanarrative serves simply to suppress the differences of subjective context. We are faced with an either/or that is fundamentally stultifying. Within the dominant modern/Cartesian framework, such dichotomous polarities become irresolvable aporias because we take for granted a metaphysical and ontological framework that inhibits us from moving beyond such dichotomies. For instance, within Descartes’ work, the mind/body dualism emerged essentially because of his commitment to a mechanical theory of nature and the resulting challenge of explaining how the human mind can fit within that mechanistic world. He solved his problem by positing a split between mind and body, each of which are constituted by a different ‘substance’ (Ryle, 1949). A split which has since become one of the dominant (and problematic) features of contemporary conceptions of human mind and agency.

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10 In this context, by relativism I particularly mean relativism that is understood as subjectivism, i.e. that we are each inescapably trapped within a world of personal subjective meaning and that, as a result, the opinion that all truth is entirely subjective.
Within this framework, (which is tied to Descartes’ perspective) inquiry is conceptualized as inherently both an individualistic enterprise and as an effort of the rational mind alone and as a result, we fail to see a way out of the stultifying dichotomies of modern thought. As I will illustrate later in this work, by re-establishing the connection between theoretical contemplation and practical experience, and recognizing them as inseparable parts of a whole that jointly bear upon human thought and action (or to put it another way: by re-embodying the mind and re-minding the body), many of the seemingly irreconcilable debates in contemporary philosophy can be understood in a rather different and potentially clarifying light. In that sense, this sea change can be understood as an effort to move beyond this stultifying framework and reframe the problems of philosophy, epistemology and metaphysics in a manner that takes seriously the limitations that situated embodiment places on us as human beings. In that regard, both Gadamer and Peirce explicitly argue that we must work within our limitations and develop a notion of inquiry which, while abandoning the ‘God’s eye view’, strives to learn through the application of an experimentalist ethos (Peirce et al., 1992, Gadamer, 2008).

2. Defining the Modern/Cartesian Framework.

Before undertaking a more detailed analysis of the modern/Cartesian framework to which I am juxtaposing the sea change philosophies of Gadamer and Peirce, it is necessary to offer a preliminary overview of what specifically I mean by modern/Cartesian. I employ the conjunction modern/Cartesian as a means of stressing the importance that Cartesian philosophy has had on contemporary thought while maintaining that the ‘modern’ framework reaches beyond simply the work of Descartes. Essentially, the important appeal of Descartes’ project is that his philosophical ‘quest for certainty’, along with his metaphysics, captures the zeitgeist (spirit of the
age) of what we now call the modern scientific and rationalist age. For Toulmin, Descartes inaugurated a

“theory-centered” style of philosophizing—i.e., one that poses problems, and seeks solutions, stated in timeless, universal terms—and it was just that philosophical style, whose charms were linked to the quest for certainty, that defined the agenda of ‘modern’ philosophy from 1650 on.

Beginning with Descartes, the ‘theory-centered’ style of philosophy is (in a word) modern philosophy, while conversely ‘modern’ philosophy is more or less entirely theory-centered philosophy. (Toulmin, 1992, p. 11)

Thus, with Descartes we witness the emergence one of the driving narratives for both philosophical and scientific inquiry: the quest for an immutable, unifying theory that is immune to revision. This transition towards a philosophical approach that aimed to discover timeless and universal truths with absolute certitude was especially facilitated by the general metaphoric framework that emerged from Cartesian thought. According to Lakoff & Johnson (1999), “[w]hat emerged from Descartes’ philosophy was a new metaphoric view of the mind as representing in some “inner” realm the objects existing in the “external” world” (p. 391). This conception of mind had an important impact on how knowledge generation would, from then on, be generally conceived. By removing the mind from its context and positing that knowledge generation simply consists in observation (or seeing), a relatively passive notion of knowledge generation gained prominence.

It is important to note that this fundamental shift in philosophical thought rests importantly on a distinct view of the human mind; a view which renders the philosophical quest for certainty possible in the first place. This view takes it that certainty is possible because the mind is a fundamentally different ‘substance’ from the body. Being disembodied, it is capable of contemplating pure and abstract truths unadulterated by the uncertainties and contingencies of the practical world (Dewey, 1960). It is this essential shift in the modern characterization of the mind and rational inquiry that has served to sustain the philosophical posture that has
characterized the modern age. The philosophical quest for certainty and the quest for a universal immutable theory largely rely on this redefinition of the mind because, in order to be ‘objective’, we must possess intellectual faculties that are up to the challenge. This understanding of the rational mind has had an important impact on contemporary notions of inquiry in that it has helped sustain the model of inquiry as a quest for certainty (Dewey, 1960, Toulmin, 1992). Many problems emerge from this disembodied characterization of the mind; most notable among them is the distortion of human praxis because our understanding of the link between thought and action is profoundly obscured, a point which I will address in more detail shortly.

Thus, when I employ the conjunction modern/Cartesian, it is in an effort to highlight how this model of philosophizing and the human mind, which gained prominence through the work of Descartes, has come to frame the larger project of modernity. After Descartes (and scientific thinkers like Newton), it became the task of philosophy to discover the universal theory of human progress; one that can offer answers, once and for all, to all human questions and be applied universally, irrelevant of context, as a means to guide human affairs. This approach to philosophy was a departure from a significant strand of Western thought that highlighted the important role of phronesis (practical wisdom) for human understanding\(^\text{11}\) (Toulmin, 1992). Thus, the philosophical project initiated by Descartes became the implicit framework within which the aspirations of the modern age were to play out. The modernist notions of infinite progress based on the exercise of human reason took this latent framework as its core and neglected the situated nature of human experience.

It is the manner in which Cartesian thought, its mechanistic worldview and mind/body dualism, informed the major projects of contemporary society that makes it such a deeply

\(^{11}\) For instance, one might take, as Toulmin (1992) did, de Montaigne’s renaissance humanism to contrast Descartes’ project and illustrate that Descartes’ work represented a departure from humanistic insights about knowledge and practice.
ingrained element of contemporary experience, and that causes me to advance the argument that it still continues to inform the institutional organization, as well as the practical functioning, of contemporary education (at the very least). Not because this stance is explicitly accepted, but rather because it continues to serve as the latent framework for contemporary approaches to knowledge and human agency today. From this vantage point learning is akin to seeing, it is passive and can take place in isolation from meaningful, practical everyday experiences. The standard of learning becomes an abstract indicator such as a grade on an exam\textsuperscript{12}, and learning becomes severed from meaningful engagement in every day life. From this perspective, success is not a matter of translating our thoughts into meaningful actions that serve to advance the condition of life, but rather simply achieving certainty in the realm of the mind and being able to demonstrate it at times of inspection (such as tests). This view of education is clearly not consciously condoned, but rather it is the outcome of the deeper philosophical commitments that are held in contemporary educational thought (Smith, 2006). Commitments rooted in the modern/Cartesian framework that I will elaborate in the next section.

3. Important Elements of the modern/Cartesian Framework for this Work.

For the sake of brevity, I will highlight two main features of the modern/Cartesian framework that figure prominently in educational thought and that have profoundly problematic implications for the organization of social, political and educational life. Firstly, a fundamental component of any understanding of the world is the manner in which it understands the relationship between knowledge and human beings (whether socially or individually). Within the Cartesian framework individual human beings can attain foundational truth through the purely

\textsuperscript{12} By this I am not trying to vilify grading but rather simply to draw attention to the fact that to consider grades as the only indicator of learning success is very problematic.
cognitive exercise of rational doubt (and the bracketing of prejudices) unadulterated by experience. This central tenet of Cartesian epistemology relies on a necessary dichotomy between mind and body where it is in the realm of the mind alone that truth is achieved. As I will illustrate, the model of human subjectivity that emerges from the Cartesian epistemological framework is profoundly problematic for several reasons.

The second problematic feature of the modern/Cartesian framework that I would like to highlight is the manner in which ‘substance’ is afforded ontological primacy and the simultaneous devaluation of processes or relations (Rescher, 2000). While the ontological primacy of substance predates contemporary thought considerably (for instance, it was a fundamental tenet of the Greek atomist as well as Aristotelian metaphysics (Rescher, 2007)), it is notably problematic within the modern/Cartesian framework owing to how the philosophical quest for certainty tends to naturalize reification\(^\text{13}\) because it presupposes that we can in fact know the ‘objects’ of our inquiry with absolute certainty. It inclines us to assume that the constructions of our individual investigations, owing to our learned disposition of radical doubt which affords us an objective position (a disposition that both Peirce and Gadamer consider impossible), truly and correctly reflect a realm of truth beyond the world of human construction and that therefore are not in need of any significant revision. In other words our ideas and constructs become naturalized components of our experiential environment beyond the scope of critical reflection.

The point here is not to claim that human beings are condemned to subjective relativism and that they cannot advance in understanding towards truth, rather, it is to assert that the

\(^{13}\) While it is true that reification is always a risk we run in our attempts to understand reality, it must be acknowledged that certain frameworks are more reflexively conscious of this tendency and therefore include self-referential consciousness and revision as an important component of inquiry. This is a central property of scientific experimentalism that is threatened by a philosophic framework that takes for granted a simple ‘rational choice’ model of agency because rational choice presupposes that we have complete knowledge of our assumptions and the reasoning behind our decisions; a claim that cannot be fully substantiated.
modern/Cartesian framework overlooks certain essential characteristics of human experience (such as the cognitive limitations of the human mind as well as the socially situated nature of all human experience) and thus posits a mode of philosophizing that is at best a fanciful dream, predicated on the impossible notion that human beings can leap outside their situated historical and social circumstance, and thus attain a level of ‘objectivity’ that is only possible within an abstract realm of disembodied mind safe from the vicissitudes of lived experience (Dewey, 1960). This perspective is accompanied by several serious problems. Since it is assumed that we can gain ‘objective’ knowledge through mere acquisition and observation, there is a dangerous tendency, as a result of this perspective, to treat the opinions of others without due respect. We are inclined to see our perspective as ultimately valid, because we believe it to be the fruit of our own ‘rational’ reflection and, as a result, honest and open dialogue are seriously threatened because we assume that we have attained truth on our own. As such, this notion of the disembodied mind (and the belief that knowledge acquisition takes place in the mind alone) tends to foster a disposition of intellectual hubris that isolates us from one another and is thus poisonous to the collective and unified generation of knowledge (we witness this disposition perpetually within contemporary educational contexts today). A second, and connected, problematic feature of this perspective is that we also ominously neglect the transformative potential latent within the process of knowledge generation. If we think of learning passively we risk overlooking the how our thoughts and actions are profoundly connected, and fail to realize the actual socially transformative potential latent in the human praxis (i.e. the integration of thought and action).

I must clarify, before moving on, that I am not claiming that the assumptions outlined above are overtly accepted within contemporary thought. On the contrary, the postmodern shift has largely been an attempt (with limited successes) to move away from these problematic
features of the modern framework. Nevertheless, I claim, along with Bernstein (2010), that tacitly these elements of the modern/Cartesian framework still continue to form part of the essential core of contemporary approaches to knowledge, rationality and subjective agency and that as such they continue to deeply inform the functioning of contemporary Western society. Most importantly though, both of these tenets culminate in an educational model that assumes that learning takes place removed from the meaningful and practical contexts of everyday life. That learning takes place outside of lived experience and simply in the mind alone. Because we assume that learning only concerns the mind, we unwittingly detach it from one of its most important dimensions: the practical application of our understanding to everyday life. This perspective on learning has very serious implications, particularly in that it obscures the nature of human praxis and the implicated role of individuals in the process of social transformation, largely concealing the transformative potential of individual agents.

a. The Status of Knowledge and the Subjective Knower within the Modern/Cartesian Framework.

A central feature of the modern/Cartesian framework is the problematic model of the human subject that emerges from certain Cartesian epistemological commitments. As the philosophical quest for certainty became dominant in the modern era, a particular model of the human subject came to prominence along with it. In order for philosophy to validly be construed as the universal quest for an immutable framework, it is necessary to concede, since philosophy is clearly a human enterprise, that the human mind can indeed adequately encompass the vast complexity of reality ‘as it is’. Grossly simplifying the debates of contemporary philosophy, this has been accomplished by portraying the rational mind as the domain of objective truth unadulterated by experience. To speak of philosophy as a quest for certainty is to make a
particular claim about the capacities of the human mind. If we can, indeed, take part in this philosophical quest, it follows that we possess the capacity to achieve, through rational reflection, intellectual certainty. It is in this way that the dichotomous separation of mind from body, where it was assumed that unassailable truth is accessible in the realm of the mind alone, served the philosophical quest for certainty that has characterized the modern era. This is because it is within the practical contingent world that we are subject to unknowable vicissitudes which threaten our conceptual stability (Dewey, 1960). As a result, it is with the quest for certainty that we witness why the deeply entrenched modern dichotomies between theory/practice and reason/ emotion… etc. take on their real import because, in order to retain a notion of truth within the philosophical quest for certainty, we require some aspect of human experience that can be safeguarded from doubt.

The model of human subjectivity that came to dominate contemporary thought in light of the philosophical quest for certainty was formed in the context where it was assumed that the ultimate goal of individual inquiry was to attain to absolute truth and immutable knowledge; to discover the objective framework which could be achieved as an effort of rational reflection alone. It is a model that takes for granted a deep individualism while positing that each individual agent is a purely rational actor. The contemporary progenitor of this longstanding set of assumptions is the economic rational choice theories of human agency that served in the formation of contemporary social sciences (Bourdieu, 1988). From the perspective of rational-choice theory, human beings are naturally calculating agents who make decisions in order to maximize ‘profit’ and minimize ‘loss’. This has become what we consider rational action to consist of: the calculation of experiential factors in order to maximize profit. According to rational choice theories, human action is fundamentally economic in that it is rationally governed by self-interest and the satiation of physical propensities. Importantly, in such rational
calculation the individual is assumed to retain complete conscious awareness regarding his/her reasoning processes and decisions. In his article *Vive la Crise!: For Heterodoxy in Social Science*, Bourdieu (1988) highlights a key problem with this widely held perspective:

> [t]he conditions for rational calculation almost never obtain in practice where time is scarce, information limited, alternatives ill-defined, and practical matters pressing. Why then do agents “do the only thing that is to be done” more often than chance would predict? Because they practically anticipate the immanent necessity of their social world, by following the intuitions of practical sense that is the product of a lasting subjection to conditions similar to the ones they are placed in (1988, p. 783)

In other words, rational-choice theories, like the Cartesian subject, neglect the fundamentally social, practical and habitual nature of human experience. Thus, rational-choice theories of human action rely themselves fundamentally on the theory/practice dichotomy inaugurated by Descartes. Essentially, the central Cartesian assumptions regarding the individualistic mind that can have complete and accurate knowledge is reproduced in rational-choice theories and has, as the educational philosopher Richard Smith (2006) argues, become the dominant ethos of the contemporary student. He claims that, in educational contexts “[i]t is as if the Cartesian ego had never been challenged: as if our highest image of humankind were still individuals transparent to themselves.” (p. 24). For Smith, this ideal of self-transparency has culminated in what he calls ‘a culture of knowingness’: a culture “of a one-dimensional self-awareness that posits transparency as a ready ideal; of a dangerous kind of perfectionism; of education that neglects and falsifies the human condition of contingency” (p. 26). In other words the model of human subjectivity and agency that has come to characterize our thinking in education has fostered a disposition of knowingness in student life. Students learn to think of themselves as fully conscious and aware, as though they are the product of completely independent rational choice. They learn to think of themselves as rational agents capable of discriminating truth from error easily through rational calculus. And the truths that are thus achieved become firm and unquestionable since they have
already undergone scrutiny and have passed the test. Thus, by neglecting the socially and historically embedded nature of human experience and by conceptualizing themselves as fully autonomous agents, students today fail to understand many of the formative influences of their lives. Instead, they learn to think that their perspective is the right perspective. Their view becomes natural and precludes the possibility of a different way of thinking. As a result of this, education loses much of its reflexive dimension and instead serves a reproductive function. With the principle of self-transparency at the forefront we become blind to ourselves.

Within the modern/Cartesian framework, this model of a purely rational and individualistic knower has become the dominant model of human subjectivity and agency. As alluded to above there are many problematic implications of such a model within education. A second component of the modern/Cartesian framework that complements this model of subjective agency and that poses a serious threat to the plight of education in contemporary society is the ontological substance bias that remains to this day deeply entrenched in contemporary thought.

b. The “Ontological Substance Bias” of the Modern/Cartesian Framework.

Central to any conception of knowledge and inquiry is an accompanying ontological framework that helps us understand and explain what exactly it is we are investigating. Such a latent framework cannot be ignored because it informs how we conceptualize inquiry in the first place. Throughout the modern era, the dominant ontological stance has been to conceptualize the ‘real’ in a materialistic fashion or as ‘substances’ (Rescher, 2000). Within the Cartesian framework, those substances were divided into mind, matter, and God and the ultimate purpose of all human inquiry, as described above, was to discover an ultimate immutable theory that could describe reality appropriately (Browning and Myers, 1998). One cannot dissociate such
ontological commitments from a more general theory of human inquiry because our ontological commitments inform how we understand inquiry. In the preceding section, I aimed to illustrate how the theory of human subjective agency that came to dominate the modern/Cartesian framework of human rationality was closely tied to the philosophical quest for certainty that Descartes inaugurated. In this section, I will illustrate how this theory of subjective agency relies on a deeper ontological commitment to substance as the essential category of reality and how that commitment serves, in an important manner, to undermine creative inquiry by fostering an inclination towards conceptual reification.

According to the American pragmatic philosopher Nicholas Rescher, Western philosophy suffers from an “ontological substance bias” (2000, p. 7) or a “revolt against process” (2000, p. 34) which he characterizes as such:

1. The appropriate paradigm for ontological discussion is a thing (most properly a physical object) that exhibits qualities (most properly of a timeless—i.e., either atemporally or temporally fixed—character).
2. Even persons and agents (i.e., “things” capable of action) are secondary and ontologically posterior to proper (i.e., inert or inertly regarded) things.
3. Change, processes, and perhaps even time itself are consequently to be downgraded in ontological considerations to the point where their unimportance is so blatant that such subordination hardly warrants explicit defense. They may, without gross impropriety, be given short shrift in or even omitted from ontological discussions.

In other words, we suffer from a learned bias to regard the essential ‘core’ of reality as a set of things. This focus on substance is a prominent element of Cartesian metaphysics which “held that there existed in the universe three sorts of substance: mind, matter, and God. Presupposed in this doctrine are the two classical principles of substance and causality, i.e., the principle that all appearances are attributes inhering in a substance and the principle that there can be no more in the effect than in the cause” (Browning and Myers, 1998, p. xii). The notion here is that it is the essential attributes of a given substance that has causal efficiency and thus, to understand the effect, we must understand the essential attributes of substance.
Far from being a mere epiphenomena of the modern/Cartesian framework, this bias towards substance has served as one of the crucial sustaining factors of the philosophical quest for certainty that has had such a marked and troubling impact on contemporary thought. That is because, as Dewey (1960) argued, along with the notion “of unchangeable substances having properties fixed in isolation and unaffected by interactions, must go the notion that certainty is attained by attachment to fixed objects with fixed characters” (p. 128). As a result of this position, “the quest for certainty [henceforth] becomes the search for methods of control; that is, regulation of conditions of change with respect to their consequences” (ibid, p.128). Thus by assuming that immutable substances form the core of natural reality, the manner in which we can obtain certainty becomes primarily through the refinement of instrumental techniques. Certainty becomes a matter of method alone. In this context inquiry is not a creative enterprise, but an effort of instrumental control that, if successfully achieved, will promise certain truth. This notion, while certainly not universally held, is nevertheless not uncommon in the culture of scientific inquiry which often continues to take for granted the quest for certainty as the appropriate model for human inquiry.

The impact that such a model has on our notion of educational inquiry cannot be underestimated. By taking substance to constitute the essential core of reality, learning consists not in the creative enterprise of relational understanding, but rather in understanding the static properties inherent in the object of investigation. The relational character between ‘objects’ of investigation and indeed between the investigator and the subject of his/her investigation are considered irrelevant to the attainment of certain truth which (it is believed) is a property of the substances themselves. Such a stance informs a notion of inquiry that fails in a very serious way to account for the embodied nature of the human mind (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999) as well as some of the most pivotal insights of the post-empirical history and philosophy of science (i.e.,
the socially constructed nature of scientific knowledge paradigms) (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, Kuhn, 1996, Bernstein, 1983).

A further important implication of this ‘ontological substance bias’ is the manner in which it fosters a tendency towards conceptual reification. According to Bewes (2002), “[r]eification refers to the moment that a process or relation is generalized into an abstraction, and thereby turned into a ‘thing’.” (p. 3). Thus, reification occurs when we treat an ‘object’ (which could be anything we are trying to understand) as a static thing removed from the relational world of which it is a part; when an integrated part of a whole is taken out of context and treated abstractly in caricature form.\(^{14}\) Within the modern/Cartesian framework, reality is assumed to consist primarily of such things or objects resulting in a dominant way of viewing the world that foregrounds static properties of objects of inquiry and extracting them from the relational contexts within which they exist. It is exactly this ‘extraction’ where ‘things’ are removed from their relational context and therefore rendered abstractly ‘rational’ which is a hallmark move of the Cartesian mind/body dualism. The philosophical quest for certainty relies on this dualism because certainty is only possible in a world of abstract and unchanging essences (Dewey, 1960). Furthermore, by envisioning reality as a collection of things, objects or substances, the modern/Cartesian framework naturalizes a tendency to view all things, social relations included, as static objects.

The result of all this is that circumstances that are in fact the product of social negotiation are conceptualized as static and natural properties of human life that are not subject to revision (for instance, there is a tendency to conceptualize structures of inequality as naturally justified

\(^{14}\) Such reification is particularly present (and obscuring) in discussions around social/political questions such as race (where it is often wrongfully assumed, both among learned and within popular culture, that skin colour offers a valid indicator of biological differentiation) and gender (where ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are treated as static concepts). Both of which are assumed to designate natural categories but that are in fact much more the product of social negotiation and construction.
elements of social organization when in fact, they are the result of complex social relations that could be otherwise) (Dewey, 1960, Unger, 1987). The substance bias of the modern/Cartesian framework impels a way of seeing and understanding the world in which we exist as static and inert, and as a result, we come to understand ourselves likewise. We become reified (thing-ified), “a process or relation… generalized into an abstraction, and thereby turned into a thing” (Bewes, 2002, p. 3). This is what occurs when we accept our social categorizations (for instance, middle-class white male in my case) as an accurate depiction of who we actually are. The fact is that no category or concept could possibly accurately describe the limitless potential of the complex beings we are. As Unger (2007) puts it “there is always more in us, individually and collectively, than there can ever be in them.” (p. 66)

The ultimate implications of the elements of the modern/Cartesian framework mentioned above (the theory of subjective agency and the ontological substance bias) is the inevitable distortion of the nature of human inquiry and praxis. This is because as we learn to dissociate knowledge from practice (a dissociation that was necessary to sustain the quest for certainty), we come to believe that we are in fact capable of attaining the exalted summits of pure and rational truth without taking the vicissitudes of the real world very seriously. The result is that on the one hand, we run the serious risk of failing to understand how, through our day-to-day actions, we take part in the reproduction of complex social problems. We come to label the problems of our world as problems with abstract and reified social structures and fail to recognize how we, through our own actions, personally contribute to the reproduction of an unjust social order. By seeing ourselves as ‘individuals’ first and foremost, we externalize social problems as something that we have little or nothing to do with. We blame the conditions of contemporary society on some abstract social entity (like the ruling class) and consider social change to consist simply in the forceful reorganization of the social and political sphere. In this manner, the social becomes a
reified category that we treat as independent from us while failing to realize that our actions serve to both produce and reproduce the conditions of that social world. In that way, as a result of our misapprehension of human agency, we unwittingly continue the reproductive process and help sustain in practice the social order that we condemn in words.

On the other hand, by accepting the notion of subjective agency that is characteristic of the modern/Cartesian framework (which assumes by simple reflection we can know truth foundationally and that education is thus the internalization of such predetermined truths), the process of educational inquiry becomes a routine of internalization which has little to do with the exercise of human agency. In this way we come to think of education as a passive experience that someone does to us (the teacher teaches the student). The result of this is that we fail to see our educational process as a creative and constructive enterprise. Consequently, our presuppositions regarding the nature of human agency (presuppositions that have been deeply entrenched in Western philosophy since the time of Descartes) serve to divest us of a sense of personal agency and creative transformative capacity. This happens because we learn to see ourselves as ‘rational actors’ surveying the ‘truth’ from a ledge as opposed to agents in the ongoing and constant process of personal and social construction, reconstruction and transformation. From the modern/Cartesian perspective, knowledge acquisition is not an active process of creative construction or reconstruction. Learning is not considered to be socially transformative because it is taken as the internalization of truth by individuals. The result is that the transformative potential of learning and education is invisible to us. Students and youth acquire a learned helplessness and fatalism regarding the possibilities of social transformation because they fail to see the transformative potential that is present within themselves and the educational contexts of everyday life. As a result of the manner in which knowledge acquisition and construction is conceptualized in contemporary society, they (we) unwittingly take part in
the reproduction and maintenance of the status quo despite its oppressive quality.

This is part of the legacy of the modern/Cartesian framework and while overtly this framework has undergone significant critique from various perspectives, the general metaphysic that has served to sustain it since the time of Descartes continues to underlie many contemporary approaches to knowledge, rationality and social organization. Throughout the remainder of this thesis, I will highlight how both Charles Sanders Peirce and Hans-Georg Gadamer, two philosophers who approach the problems of philosophy from an entirely different metaphysic than that elucidated above, offer a means of re-conceptualizing knowledge, rationality and human inquiry in a manner that considers inquiry and social transformation as inextricable and that highlights the creative capacity of human agency without falling into the traps of the modern/Cartesian framework described above.

Chapter 2: The Pragmatic Turn.

As a distinct school of philosophy, pragmatism emerged in many respects as a critique of what had been the dominant mode of philosophizing in the modern era. Animated by a profound discontent with the problems and excesses that emerged from the Cartesian approach to philosophy, Charles Sanders Peirce, followed by James, Dewey and others, offered an approach to philosophy that attempted to fundamentally reframe the working assumptions of contemporary thought (Bernstein, 2010). Peirce found the traditional approach to both science and philosophy, one which “proceeds from presumably unassailable premises and that builds a system by a chain of reasoning” (Bernstein, 2010, p. 38) profoundly misleading in that it misconstrues the manner in which knowledge advances. Instead of this ‘chain’ metaphor, Peirce preferred the metaphor of a cable “in which there are multiple strands [of reasoning] reinforcing each other. Any one of these strands may be weak, but collectively they can have great strength” (ibid). Most notably,
the implications of this change in perspective is that we can no longer comfortably conceptualize knowledge as a firm structure that when built on solid ground is unassailable. This changed approach to knowledge represents a significant move that is central to pragmatism; one that is rooted in a changed perspective on human cognitive capacity thoroughly rooted in Peirce’s process philosophy.

It is very difficult to characterize a philosophical movement such as pragmatism for a multiplicity of reasons and certainly there would be detractors of any characterization.\(^\text{15}\) As early as 1908 Arthur O. Lovejoy proposed as many as thirteen forms of pragmatism that were “not only distinct, but also logically independent \textit{inter se}” (Lovejoy, 1908, p. 29). One need only look at the differences in the manner in which pragmatic elements have been employed by thinkers such as Rorty, Putman and Habermas\(^\text{16}\) to affirm that indeed under the name of ‘pragmatism’ fall a diverse array of thinkers and positions that seem difficult to ally (Bernstein, 2010). And yet as a movement, when taken as a whole, pragmatism does indeed retain certain key elements that distinguish it. According to Menand (2002), what the early pragmatists (in this case Peirce, James, Dewey and Holmes) share, and what distinguished them from other philosophical approaches, was their attitude toward ideas:

What was that attitude? If we strain out the differences, personal and philosophical, they had with one another, we can say that what these four thinkers had in common was not a group of ideas but a single idea – an idea about ideas. They all believed that ideas are not “out there” waiting to be discovered, but are tools … that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves. They believed that ideas are produced not by individuals – that ideas are social. They believed that ideas do not develop according to some inner logic of their own, but are entirely dependent, like germs, on human careers and environment. And they believed that since ideas are provisional responses to particular

\(^{15}\) We need only look at the first pragmatists, Peirce, James and Dewey, to see such disagreements emerge.

\(^{16}\) While, indeed, Habermas is a critical theorist, according to Bernstein (2010), a significant aspect of his work is informed by the American pragmatists, him being one of the few European philosophers to take the pragmatic tradition seriously. Bernstein thus characterizes his philosophy as a form of Kantian pragmatism which is not to say that he is a pragmatist, but rather that his work is significantly informed by pragmatism.
situations, their survival depends not on their immutability but on their adaptability. (p. xi-xii)

This stance towards ideas can be described most simply, according to Lee (1976), as a behavioural theory of meaning which one finds expressed in the pragmatic maxim coined by Peirce: “consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.” (Peirce, 1878, p. 45). Or in simplified terms, the conceivable effects that an idea or object may have on our practical conduct is essentially what that idea or object meaningfully ‘is’ to us and nothing more. It is this kernel of pragmatic thought that was first formulated by Charles Sanders Peirce and that has since served as the general groundwork for what we call pragmatism.

Within the context of this chapter, I will focus my analysis on what I take to be the core of Peirce’s pragmatism: his behavioural theory of meaning, his concept of abduction, and his fallibilistic evolutionary realism. Taken together, these components of Peirce’s pragmatism illustrate how his approach to philosophy can only be understood in terms entirely different from those that characterize the modern/Cartesian framework described above. All three rest on an entirely different view of the human mind (as cognitively limited and socially and historically situated) and culminate in a theory of communal inquiry to which the individual is subject. One might say that in light of the recognition of human social and historical embeddedness, Peirce’s pragmatic method may be understood as an effort to reconceptualise what scientific inquiry might look like when undertaken by the situated beings that we are.
1. The Behavioural Theory of Meaning.

According to Peirce, the methodological doubt that has served as the orienting framework of philosophers since Descartes is not only problematic, but is indeed an illusion that fails to understand the philosopher or scientist as the socially embedded agent they are. Peirce could not accept the notion that the philosopher or scientist could reach a state of pure objectivity from which s/he could begin inquiry and thus ensure objective and scientific certainty throughout. He argues,

We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy. These prejudices are not to be dispelled by a maxim, for they are things which it does not occur to us can be questioned. …Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts. (Peirce, 1868, p. 140-141)

This perspective on human prejudice in Peirce’s philosophy must ultimately be understood within the larger framework of Peirce’s philosophical work. For Peirce, one of the crucial shortcomings of the philosophical approach inaugurated by Descartes is the manner in which it makes single individuals the absolute judges of ‘truth’ merely by the feigned (or simulated) exercise of doubt (Peirce, 1868). For Peirce, “[w]e individually cannot reasonably hope to attain the ultimate philosophy which we pursue; we can only seek it therefore, for the community of philosophers.” (Peirce, 1868, p. 141). For Peirce, ‘truth’ is not achieved independently in the mind of the individual alone, but rather it is that dynamic and regulative ideal that keeps the process of communal inquiry ongoing. It is “[t]he opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate” (Peirce, 1878, p. 56-57). Thus for Peirce, practically speaking, the ‘truth’ is a conclusion that permanently resolves doubt, and yet the complete and total resolution of all doubt seems unlikely. In the process of inquiry, therefore, the truth is not what we currently

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17 The Cartesian notion of doubt posits that we should doubt everything until it be proven. For Peirce this is not “real and living doubt” but artificial. He says “Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts” (Peirce, 1868, p. 140-141). For this reason I call it feigned (or simulated) doubt.
know (which might be provisionally true), but rather what we aim (and will always aim) to know as part of a scientific community. Thus, from Peirce’s pragmatic perspective, the philosophic obsession with truth has been a seriously misguided one because it relies on a notion of the human mind that is decontextualized. Therefore, instead of a theory of truth, Peirce offers a theory of meaning as a way of understanding human inquiry more appropriately.

In his popular essay *The Fixation of Belief* (1877), Peirce proposes a radical and interesting way of understanding inquiry when he argues that “[t]he irritation of doubt causes a struggle to attain a state of belief. I shall term this struggle *inquiry*” (Peirce, 1877, p. 16). For Peirce, the attainment of belief has particular implications: “[t]he feeling of believing is more or less a sure indication of there being established in our nature some habit which will determine our actions. Doubt never has such an effect” (Peirce, 1877, p. 15). Therefore, from this perspective, “the sole object of inquiry is the settlement of opinion” (Peirce, 1877, p. 16) in order to reach a state of belief that allays doubt. One will note the distinct absence of ‘truth’ as the object of inquiry and may take issue with that. However, in making this proposition, Peirce was fully aware of the response it would elicit and thus added that

> [w]e may fancy that this is not enough for us, and that we seek not merely an opinion. But put this fancy to the test, and it proves groundless; for as soon as a firm belief is reached we are entirely satisfied, whether the belief be false or true. … The most that can be maintained is, that we seek for a belief that we shall think to be true. But we think each one of our beliefs to be true, and, indeed, it is mere tautology to say so (ibid).

Ultimately, what Peirce is arguing here is that inquiry cannot be construed as an effort to attain incontestable truth because all we can justifiably claim to achieve is a belief that we think to be true. However, this does not imply that we cannot, as a community, move towards truth but rather simply that, as individuals, we cannot escape the fact that it is our beliefs that govern the process of inquiry. When we believe that we have attained truth our doubt is satisfied and inquiry ceases until further ground for doubt emerges. This is a significant proposition because from this
perspective, inquiry does not commence with the kind of methodological doubt, undertaken in a vacuum, proposed by Descartes but rather inquiry is the result of “real and living doubt” (ibid, p. 17) that emerges from real life circumstances and that propels us to search for a means of ‘fixing’ (the term that Peirce uses to describe the attainment of stable belief) belief. Thus in the process of inquiry, when striving to move out of a state of doubt towards a state of belief, it is the practical meaning of an idea that serves as its distinguishing parameter and that means something to us.

This way of understanding human inquiry, which lies at the heart of pragmatism, is essentially evolutionary in its perspective because it understands the human mind as an organ that has evolved in order to respond ably to the vicissitudes of practical survival. For the purposes of survival, what matters to us is not whether an idea reflects the ‘truth’ of some abstract metaphysical order, but rather what that idea implies for future action. Furthermore, ideas that prove functionally and practically effective in securing human wellbeing, both individually and collectively, become widely accepted not because of their rational merits per se but rather because of their practical implications.

Another important aspect of the pragmatic maxim and the behavioural theory of meaning, from the evolutionary perspective, is the manner in which it addresses the constraints of cognitive economy that we face as living breathing organisms.

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18 When William James adopted the term pragmatism in his influential lectures now published under the title *Pragmatism and Other Essays* he employed the concept, according to Peirce, in a manner far too individualistically. It was this, along with other perversions of the term that later led Peirce to coin another word for his philosophical approach: pragmaticism.

19 It is important to understand the practical here not in the physicalist terms that are characteristic of modern/Cartesian materialistic thinking (i.e. practical success implies growth). Rather, for Peirce metaphysical and philosophical assumptions have profoundly practical implications and it is indeed those implications that we employ to differentiate one perspective from another.
2. Cognitive Economy and Abduction.

Generally speaking, human beings are woefully unaware of the inherent limitations of their cognitive capacity and of the mechanisms that serve to enable action within social and environmental circumstances of inestimable complexity. Much of Western philosophy has committed this sin of omission in assuming too much of the human mind and failing to recognize in fact just how much our capacity to think and act is the result of functional simplifications that occur at every step of our thought. This has been a serious oversight of Cartesian philosophy which assumed that we indeed have the capacity, through rational reflection alone, to step out of our experiential world and to reflect abstract truths as they are. It is this perspective which justifies many fruitless debates over ‘truth’ and which fosters a false sense that we can know truth and reality purely on the basis of ‘objective’ rational reflection. From the evolutionary pragmatic perspective, this stance is deeply problematic because it fails to understand the limitations that have been imposed by circumstance on the human mind.

Being thoroughly dissatisfied with the manner in which philosophers since Descartes overlooked the situated nature of human agency Peirce, early in his philosophical career, began focusing on the limitations (or incapacities) that hinder human inquiry in order to understand how inquiry actually takes place. In one of his earliest works Some Consequences of Four Incapacities (1868), Peirce attempts to highlight how the Cartesian approach assumes too much of the human mind and in doing so posits a philosophical posture that is essentially a fantasy (Peirce, 1868). Much of Peirce’s subsequent work aimed at rectifying this grievance in order to develop a way of thinking of human inquiry that accounted for both the evolutionary (changing) and embedded (situated) experience of the human organism. An important element of this
reformulation was his effort to stress the economic dimension of the theory of knowledge because for Peirce, inquiry cannot be possible unless it relies on the cost-effective use of intellectual resources. Rescher (1989) has called this feature of Peirce’s work *cognitive economy* because the intellectual resources employed in the process of inquiry are cognitive resources. Although not often considered explicitly as his point of departure, when looking carefully at Peirce’s work one can see that many of his important and novel contributions to philosophy begin in his effort to account for the economic dimension of inquiry (cognitive economy). He argues,

> The question of economy is clearly a very grave one.

> In very many questions, the situation before us is this: We shall do better to abandon the whole attempt to learn the truth, however urgent may be our need of ascertaining it, unless we can trust the human mind’s having such a power of guessing right that before very many hypotheses shall have been tried, intelligent guessing may be expected to lead us to the one which will support all tests, leaving the vast majority of possible hypotheses untested. (Peirce, 1957, p. 251)

Thus, for viable inquiry to take place, we require a means of delimiting the possibilities we confront in the vast complexity of experience. Because of the important manner in which cognitive economy characterizes the mind, it is for Peirce a central problem of philosophy that necessitates, in his opinion a branch of epistemology called “economy of research” (Rescher, 1989). As Rescher (2001) describes, the problem of cognitive economy is ultimately the outcome of how meagre our intellectual resources are in the face of reality. He argues, “one of the most fundamental aspects of our concept of a real thing is that our knowledge of it is inevitably imperfect—that reality is presumably such as to transcend what we can know of it” (p. 100). This

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20 The human mind faces limited capacities and as a result our ability to think depends on functional simplifications that can reduce the complexity of what we face in reality. By overlooking the dimension of cognitive economy in the theory of knowledge, much of western philosophy has failed to recognize the constraints that bear on our thinking and actions and has thus led to ways of thinking of human thought and inquiry that is simply unrealistic (such as the rational actor theories discussed above).
unknowable aspect of the ‘real thing’ is at once the outcome of the complexity of reality as well as the inherent limitations of the human mind, which lacks the capacity to fully ‘know’ the ‘real’.

The root of this problem is that we are characterized by profound intrinsic limitations on our perceptual and cognitive processing powers. We can only make sense of a fraction of the information that constantly presents itself to us. The stability of the sense that we can make is therefore fragile. Our models of experience are limited, incomplete, and chronically prone to failure (Peterson and Flanders, 2002, p. 431).

When taken seriously, the problem of cognitive economy poses a serious challenge to philosophers and scientists because it highlights how a complete analysis of all possible parameters in the process of inquiry (often thought to be the grounds for ‘objectivity’) is simply impossible. From the modern/Cartesian perspective, the individual could rationally investigate objectively by simply ‘bracketing’ the irrelevant information in order to ascertain the foundational truth upon which to construct an immutable framework. However, the reality of cognitive economy forces us to reject this approach in favour of the recognition that any perspective takes certain things for granted simply based on the nature of our cognitive limitations. In his work, Peirce offers an important concept that helps us understand how inquiry actually takes place while fully accounting for our social and historical embeddedness.

In his attempt to offer a viable conception of inquiry and hypothesis rooted in the realities of cognitive economy, Peirce developed the concept of abduction: that first inferential leap of thought where we employ the vastness of our previous experience and cognitive background in order to reduce the complexity of our experience and enable coherent action (Peirce, 1957). For Peirce, this leap of abduction is not merely limited to the field of scientific inquiry, but rather it is an essential property of human thought at all times (ibid). We exist within complex social and
Looking out of my window this lovely spring morning I see an azalea in full bloom. No, no! I do not see that; though that is the only way I can describe what I see. That is a proposition, a sentence, a fact; but what I perceive is not a proposition, sentence, fact, but only an image, which I make intelligible in part by means of a statement of fact. This statement is abstract; but what I see is concrete. I perform an abduction when I so much as express in a sentence anything I see. The truth is that the whole fabric of our knowledge is one matted felt of pure hypothesis ... Not the smallest advance can be made in knowledge beyond the stage of vacant staring, without making an abduction at every step (Peirce cited in Joas et al., 2009, p. 4-5; my emphasis).

Thus, from this we can understand that through the concept of abduction (which I will discuss below), Peirce is offering us a way of understanding how, in the face of limitless complexity, human thought and inquiry takes place. It is not that we rationally reflect upon all the potential and viable alternatives presented to us, but rather that our previous experience serves, through abductive leaps, as the ground upon which we render current experience, and the possibilities thereof, intelligible. In that regard, every act of thought is an abduction, a functional simplification, rooted in our past guiding us into the future. In that sense, it is our past experience with complex social and symbolic orders that enables us to understand future experiences coherently. The principle of abduction thus serves as Peirce’s means of understanding how human agents, who face profound cognitive limitations rooted in experiential contexts, can effectively function and undertake inquiry.

If we take Peirce’s concept of abduction and interpret it, in the light of cognitive economy, as a necessary mechanism for the functional simplification of experience we are afforded some profound insights into the nature of Peirce’s pragmatism and his pragmatic maxim. In his work on the nature of hypothesis Peirce advances this claim: “[i]f you carefully consider the question of pragmatism, you will see that it is nothing else than the question of the
logic of abduction” (Peirce, 1957, p. 252). This is a very important statement because it draws a deep and explicit link between the logic of abduction (which foregrounds the fact that previous practical experience serves to delimit the scope of future experiences) and the pragmatic maxim (which highlights how we know ‘objects’ through their practical implications). Both of these elements of Peirce’s pragmatism are rooted in a conception of human agency that is profoundly embedded and that, as a result of the incapacities borne of such embeddedness, cannot step out of the everyday world and ‘bracket’ his/her prejudice. With the logic of abduction past experiences serve to functionally delimit the scope and meaning of present and future experiences because we could never possibly cope with the complexity of the world if we didn’t have some means of simplifying it. Similarly, with the pragmatic maxim, Peirce stresses that the meaning of an object is essentially its conceivable practical applications because, once again, we are not equipped with the cognitive tools to know the essences of things. Thus, both of these elements of Peirce’s pragmatism emerge from his radical affirmation of situated agency and the limitations that such situatedness places on the human mind. As a result, these elements of Peirce’s pragmatism require the abandonment of the “God’s eye view” or the “Archimedean Point” as our ultimate goal in philosophy because we are not agents that can achieve such perspective when trying to know the world. We can only know it from where we stand and nowhere else.

While many would protest that once we abandon such a philosophical project we must inevitably succumb to relativism, Peirce would disagree. For Peirce, we advance scientific knowledge not as independent agents who engage in inquiry, but rather as a community of inquirers. A basic overview of his particular brand of metaphysical realism (more aptly labelled his “evolutionary realism” and “experimental fallibilism”) will illustrate how Peirce proposes we understand communal inquiry and thus overcome the relativist quagmire.
3. Evolutionary Realism and Experimental Fallibilism.

In attempting to categorize Peirce’s work, it would seem that the most appropriate (though certainly not the only; see Hausman, 1991) descriptor would be to call him an “evolutionary realist” (Hausman, 1991, Hausman, 1997). Evolutionary realism can best be understood as a particular brand of metaphysical realism, which Rescher (2001) defines as “The doctrine that the world exists in a way that is substantially independent of the thinking beings it contains that can inquire into it, and that its nature—its having whatever characteristics it does actually have—is also comparably knowledge transcending” (p. 105). Supporting this doctrine, Peirce explained that something

I call ‘real,’ be it anything asserted or imagined, or conceived, or any element of such assertions, image, or concept, or of whatever other sort it may be, if, and only if, it possesses characters which it would possess, just the same whether or not, you or I, or anybody else, or everybody living during any limits of time, opines, fancies, or otherwise thinks it possesses some characters that are not of that description. (Peirce cited in Hausman, 1991, p. 479-480).

So, ‘real’ things are those things that exist independently of us as individuals and that possess properties that are not the result of our whims and desires. In that sense, the real imposes itself on us and we must accept it as real for that reason. In a different context, Peirce described the relationship between truth and reality in this manner: “[t]he opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real. That is the way I would explain reality” (Peirce, 1878, p. 56-57). This statement has significant implications in that it illustrates something very important about Peirce’s realism. While the ‘real’ does indeed exist, Peirce’s realism is tempered by a much more subtle and complex account of how we acquire knowledge of such real things. For Peirce, knowledge of reality is not the outcome of individual inquiry, but rather it is through communal scientific (i.e. experimental) inquiry that we achieve a state of belief regarding what is real that
dispels doubt\(^{21}\) (Peirce, 1877). Therefore, effective inquiry is a communal thing and as we advance this process of communal scientific inquiry and generate knowledge that remains consistent despite on-going revision, we attain a state of belief, which we think to be true but which nevertheless remains open to continued revision as on-going inquiry persists.

From this perspective then we cannot know with absolute certainty whether the real is actually achieved through inquiry. Instead, ‘reality’ importantly serves as a ‘dynamical object’ that, in our on-going effort to know it, propels experimental inquiry. So, while we cannot know it in its absolute form we can still, as part of a community of inquirers, continually strive to know it more fully. As Hausman (1997) put it, “in place of …foundations, Peirce looked to the future, to a fallibilistically knowable foundation – an evolving ground that is foundational as an ideal limit” (p. 197). In that sense, truth (the object of which is reality) for Peirce becomes a regulative ideal that simultaneously propels inquiry while fostering a necessary sense of humility since ultimately, reality is unknowable in its absolute form.

An integral aspect of this fallibilistic perspective on inquiry is the importance of experimentalism in the process of inquiry. To speak of inquiry as a fallibilistic and indeterminate enterprise entails that, throughout the process of inquiry, we continue to experiment in order to continue learning. In that sense, experimentalism is intricately connected to fallibilism because it is through an experimentalist approach that we safeguard ourselves from the inevitable errors that we are prone to. In that way, experimentalism and fallibilism come together and jointly reinforce Peirce’s ‘realist evolutionary’ perspective. Furthermore, by highlighting that, in the process of inquiry, reality serves as a dynamic object, we are further compelled to acknowledge

\(^{21}\) In his article The Fixation of Belief (1877) Peirce outlines four methods for “fixing” belief: the method of tenacity; the method of authority; the method of congruity or the a priori; and the method of science which he deems to be the superior of the four because it rests on fallibilistic inquiry that is reflexive in its nature.
the value of an experimentalist ethos because, since it is dynamic and not static or fixed, we will always be faced with the challenge of reassessing what we take for granted. An experimentalist ethos offers this opportunity.


In this concept of the dynamic object we can observe one of the central insights that runs throughout Peirce’s pragmatic approach: the affirmation of process or continuity as the primary category of thought and existence. He argues that, in philosophy, “[w]e are accustomed to speak of ideas… as if they were substantial things” (Peirce, 1892, p. 534) and neglect that “one of the most indispensable [ideas] to philosophy… [is] continuity” (ibid). In light of this general neglect, Peirce proposes the concept synechism which means “[t]he tendency to regard continuity… as an idea of prime importance in philosophy” (ibid). In fact, Peirce later in life would go so far as to argue that the idea of continuity “is the master key which adepts tell us unlocks all the arcana of philosophy” (Peirce, 1897, CP 1.163). Indeed one may liken it, at the very least, to the master key of Peirce’s philosophy.

The importance of continuity and process in Peirce’s work might best be understood when we consider the manner in which he relates the principle of continuity with the doctrine of fallibilism. He explains that relationship in this manner: “[t]he principle of continuity is the idea of fallibilism objectified. For fallibilism is the doctrine that our knowledge is never absolute but always swims, as it were, in a continuum of uncertainty and of indeterminacy. Now the doctrine of continuity is that all things so swim in continua” (Peirce, 1897, CP 1.171). In other words, the doctrine of fallibilism, a doctrine that takes evolutionary change as its fundamental core, maintains that our knowledge is always and necessarily fallible because the relationship of
understanding, in which we are always implicated, is bound to a changing world. Such change not only characterized the objects of our experience, but also our own selves in that we are not fixed and unchanging beings.

In his important essay *Fallibilism, Continuity, and Evolution* (1897), Peirce draws together the doctrine of fallibilism, the principle of continuity and the theory of evolution maintaining that “fallibilism cannot be appreciated in anything like its true significance until evolution has been considered” (CP 1.173) adding that, in the widest sense of the word, “[e]volution means nothing but growth” (CP 1.174). So for Peirce, the implications of evolution run truly to the core of philosophy and inquiry because when it is taken seriously, we are forced to grant continuity, growth and change primacy of place in our thinking. As his central concept of continuity, evolution has been the orienting framework for Peirce’s pragmatic approach.

This realization allows us, at this juncture, to reconnect Peirce’s conception of evolution, fallibilism and continuity with his pragmatic maxim and behavioural theory of meaning. As earlier illustrated, for Peirce, the meaning of an idea or object is essentially what that idea or object implies for our practical conduct. In light of his emphasis on continuity and the manner in which continuity implies fallibilism, the pragmatic maxim can be understood as a way of conceptualizing thought that adamantly guards against the all too common tendency of reification (or essentialism) in contemporary thought (Bohm, 2002).

Simply put, “[r]eification refers to the moment that a process or relation is generalized into an abstraction, and thereby turned into a ‘thing’” (Bewes, 2002, p. 3). Within the traditional modern/Cartesian framework, which considers substance (or unitary things) as the ontological basis of reality (Bohm, 2002, Rescher, 2000), we have witnessed the sustained tendency to reify concepts that in fact are relational. Examples abound of this type of reification within
contemporary thought\textsuperscript{22} and the destructive impact of this tendency. Of particular note is the manner in which it obstructs the path of inquiry and promotes an infallibilist doctrine. By affirming continuity and process as primary in philosophy and thought, and providing a means of understanding human inquiry (through the pragmatic maxim) that avoids essentializing and thus reifying the objects of inquiry, Peirce provides us with a valuable perspective that promotes sincere questioning while avoiding the stasis of unwarranted certitude.

5. Semiotics and Process Ontology

While Peirce is widely known for his work on pragmatism, he was in fact a prolific polymath who has made contributions, throughout his career, to a number of disciplines. One such area was his complex and important contributions to the field of semiotics, which, as Bernstein (2010) has argued, foreshadowed many of the insights at the heart of the linguistic turn. Within the context of this discussion, I will not venture to offer a detailed overview of Peirce’s semiotic thought because its breadth and complexity far exceed the scope of this work. As a thinker, Peirce was prolific, meticulous, and astoundingly original and as a result, the complexity of his thought is often hard to capture in a manner that does it adequate justice. As such, within this text I will offer only a basic account of some important themes that concern his semiotic approach while leaving the vast majority untouched.

For Peirce, the fundamental property of thought is that it is functions as sign activity. In this sense all cognition is rooted in, and partakes of, systems of signification that are socially negotiated. One of the most important aspects of Peirce’s semiotic thinking is the manner in

\textsuperscript{22} For instance, the generally accepted categories of social analysis (race, class, nationality, ethnicity, gender) are often treated as immutable properties of groups or people and their social origins are obscured. This is reification. Furthermore, the defining debates of contemporary philosophy and social theory (objectivism/relativism; structure/agency…etc.) have also suffered from this tendency of contemporary thought to reify.
which he redefines the nature of representation. Traditionally, semiotic thinking frames representation as a dyadic relationship between the sign and what it represents. This dyad assumes at one level that the sign stands in a static relationship with the object that it represents in a relatively constant manner. However, for Peirce this is not so. As Bernstein (2010) explains, “[o]ne of Peirce’s most original and central claims is that all sign activity is irreducibly triadic: a sign (first term) stands for an object (second term) to an interpretant (third term)” (p. 44). As a means of simplifying what Peirce means, one could say that, by including the interpretant within the relation of signification, Peirce is offering a means of accounting for how the meaning of a sign relation invariably depends on how one is interpreting it. Or in other words, the representation has an essentially social quality in that the relation between sign and object is fundamentally connected to the interpretant.

But in one way, this account of Peirce’s triadic perspective on sign activity is a gross oversimplification. This is because for Peirce, to speak of the interpretant and not the interpreter is quite intentional. By employing the term interpretant, Peirce means to stress that within this relationship, the interpretant is itself a sign. This complicates Peirce’s perspective on signification considerably. As Bernstein (2010) highlights, “if signification involves sign, object, and interpretant, and every interpretant is itself a sign, there is potentially an endless series of signs” (p. 44). How could one make sense of this complex account of signification? W. B. Gallie explains it in this manner:

If then, every sign requires an interpretant in the form of a further sign, and admits of such interpretation in a virtually endless number of alternative ways, it follows that there can be no such thing and the (one and only) sign of a given object, and no such thing as the (one and only) interpretant of a given sign. The belief – still all too prevalent among philosophers – that a sign can stand in a simple two-term relation, called its meaning, to its object, is thus to rest on a radical misconception of the kind of thing a sign is and of the way in which it functions. The truth is that a sign can only function as an element in a working system of signs (Gallie cited in Bernstein, 2010, p. 44).
Thus, this perspective on signification points to an extremely important element of Peirce’s pragmatism: that the meaning of a given object is truly open and subject to a multiplicity of legitimate understandings. Human thought can only take place through sign activity and from this perspective, the signs that we employ function as elements in a ‘working system of signs’. In other words, as social agents, we are immersed within systems of signs and signification that are both pre-established (as in they exist before us), and mutable.

This perspective on the semiotic mediation of reality entails that, as agents born into pre-established systems of signification, our thought process are, in large part, dependent on our world of semiotic experience. We require such systems of signification in order to think at all and yet they are never perfect and always open to revision. This explains, in part, why Peirce so vigorously emphasised, throughout his work, the importance of both evolution (i.e. everything is changing), and experimentalist fallibilism. In a world that is always changing and which is always open to semiotic indeterminacy, we require a disposition of inquiry that accepts that we will likely continue to discover things that problematize our current state of understanding.

In this chapter, I illustrated how the pragmatic perspective formulated by Charles Sanders Peirce can best be understood within an entirely different philosophical paradigm than that which has characterized philosophy since the time of Descartes. I have attempted to show how it is an instance of what Bernstein (2010) calls the ‘sea change’ in contemporary philosophy, and that the implications of this shift are truly radical. In the upcoming section I will turn my attention to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, which, although very different from Peirce’s pragmatism, I will argue, shares some remarkable and rather profound similarities.
Chapter 3: Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics.

In this section, I will provide a general overview of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics with the specific intention of illustrating how his philosophical approach represents a departure from what I have earlier in this thesis called the modern/Cartesian framework that has dominated philosophical discourse in the modern era. In order to construct a line of reasoning that does justice to the complexity and scope of Gadamer’s work, I will begin my analysis with a basic discussion of his notion of prejudice and what that notion implies for our understanding of human rational agency. With his more subtle notion of human rational agency in place, I will continue with a discussion of his effort to rehabilitate two important concepts that have been thoroughly and unjustly denigrated within Enlightenment thought: authority and tradition. Following this, I will address Gadamer’s treatment of understanding employing the concept of the fusion of horizons. Afterwards, I will address his account of the hermeneutic problem of application. And finally, following the logical presentation that he makes in his magnum opus *Truth and Method*, I will end with his account of language and the linguistic mediation of reality. In the next chapter, I will connect these aspects of Gadamer’s thought directly to those elements of Peirce’s philosophy already discussed.

Traditionally, the primary aim of hermeneutics\(^{23}\) has been to devise a method that would grant the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*) scientific objectivity akin to the natural sciences. From this perspective, the proper goal of the hermeneutic thinker was to objectively reconstruct the text or work of art of the past according to the original intentions of the author. In that light, hermeneutics became the method of scientific control that would ensure the correct reconstruction of the author’s intentions thus granting it scientific ‘objectivity’. It is in response to this widely held general perspective that Gadamer wrote his masterwork *Truth and Method* in

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\(^{23}\) Namely the hermeneutics of Dilthey and Schleiermacher.
which he attempts to reframe the working assumptions of hermeneutics. For Gadamer, the effort to develop a hermeneutic approach that, through methodological control, secured ‘scientific’ objectivity was rooted in a philosophical perspective that woefully failed to account for the historicity of *Dasein* (our being in the world). Before Gadamer, hermeneutics took it for granted that its task was to reconstruct the object (the text or work of art) as it would have existed in its original context. As he argues, “[u]ltimately, this view of hermeneutics is as nonsensical as all restitution and restoration of past life. Reconstructing the original circumstances, like all restoration, is a futile undertaking in view of the historicity of our being” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 159). For Gadamer, this problematic assumption is the consequence of a latent Cartesianism within hermeneutics which assumed that, through the methodological control of prejudice, the thinker could achieve an entirely objective rational reconstruction of the object under investigation. In this manner, hermeneutics committed itself to the same set of philosophical assumptions (and problems) that emerged with Descartes.

In opposition to this hermeneutical approach, Gadamer argued that “the most fundamental task of hermeneutics is not to develop a procedure of understanding, but to clarify the conditions under which understanding actually happens” (Kisiel, 1985, p. 6). In this way, Gadamer moves hermeneutics away from a mere methodological effort to control prejudice in the process of understanding otherness to argue that hermeneutics “denotes the basic being-in-motion of Dasein that constitutes its finitude and historicity, and hence embraces the whole of its experience of the world” (Gadamer, 2004, p. xxvii). Because hermeneutics denotes that basic being-in-motion of Dasein, and “[s]ince human experience is hermeneutical through and through[,] its description along these lines constitutes and all-embracing and hence philosophical hermeneutic” (Kisiel, 1985, p. 6). It is in light of this move that Gadamer aims to rehabilitate
both the concepts of prejudice and tradition, both of which have been considerably distorted as a result of the Cartesian posture of Enlightenment thought.

1. The Hermeneutic Notion of Prejudice:

For Gadamer, since the Enlightenment, philosophy has suffered from what he has called the “Enlightenment prejudice against prejudice”, which takes it as given that any and all form of prejudice are necessarily bad and thus need to be avoided. According to Gadamer, beginning with the Enlightenment (and namely Descartes, although certainly not sustained solely by him), the concept of prejudice has taken on the purely negative meaning of “unfounded judgement”. This usage represents a departure from the original Latin meaning which Gadamer clarifies: “[a]ctually ‘prejudice’ means a judgement that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 273). This original meaning did not take it as given that prejudices were always and only bad. It is in his effort to restore the positive meaning of prejudice, and all that it implies, that Gadamer’s thought takes on its truly remarkable character.

According to Gadamer, it is in the Enlightenment’s (and post-Enlightenment philosophy’s) ‘prejudice against prejudice’ that we can ascertain one of the central assumptions about human consciousness that has characterized contemporary thought since the Enlightenment. The notion that we must, in our search for truth, first overcome all forms of prejudice betrays, within contemporary philosophic thought, a faulty and problematic concept of human conscious agency. From this perspective human finitude is overlooked, “reflection is granted a false power, and the true dependencies involved [in the process of thinking] are misjudged on the basis of a fallacious idealism” (Gadamer, 2008, p. 33). From this perspective, the historicity of human existence is completely overlooked with devastating consequences. In
the name of objective and unbiased inquiry, we thus cling to a far more severe prejudice: a notion of ourselves as completely autonomous, rational, and objective agents. It is this very notion that Gadamer, throughout his work, devastatingly undermines offering instead a way of understanding ourselves that is, as I will show, far more accurate.

He argues,

It is not so much our judgements as it is our prejudices that constitute our being. This is a provocative formulation, for I am using it to restore to its rightful place a positive concept of prejudice that was driven out of linguistic usage by the French and English Enlightenment. It can be show that the concept of prejudice did not originally have the meaning we have attached to it. Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us (ibid, p. 9).

Immediately, one might note the remarkable similarity that exists here between Gadamer’s conception of Prejudice and the pragmatic conception of habit, earlier discussed, which employs a similar notion. To claim that prejudices ‘constitute our being’ is indeed quite provocative, especially in light of the purely negative meaning that is current in the contemporary use of the term. However, upon deeper reflection, this notion proves stunningly profound, and its implications are really quite revolutionary.

Prejudices constitute our being because, as embedded agents, we can never fully examine “all the elements that determine a situation” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 273) and as a result we cannot possibly avoid rendering judgements before a complete examination has taken place. This is not a bad thing but rather, simply an inevitable consequence of our historicity and positionality. We are each rooted in a “hermeneutical situation” and

[t]he very idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside it and hence are unable to have any objective knowledge of it. We always find ourselves within a situation, and throwing light on it is a task that is never entirely finished…. The
illumination of this situation—reflection on effective history—can never be completely achieved; yet the fact that it cannot be completed is due not to a deficiency in reflection but to the essence of the historical being that we are. To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete. (ibid, p. 301, his emphasis)

We are not autonomous agents coasting above the traditions of our historical and social world. Rather, we are elaborations of such social and historical worlds, active in the production, reproduction and transmission of tradition (ibid, p. 293). He argues, “[t]he focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuit of historical life. That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgements, constitute the historical reality of his being” (ibid, p. 278, his emphasis). In this manner, because of our situated historicality, prejudices constitute our being and it is through them that our experiences are intelligible to us at all. It is through lasting immersion in social and historical contexts that we are furnished with ‘biases of openness to the world’ that thus render what we experience intelligible. In other words, our prejudices allow us to anticipate the meaning of things and “only what stands under anticipations can be understood at all” (Gadamer, 2008, p. 121). This is because our prejudices constitute our unconscious frame of reference within which the new can be rendered intelligible at all (one might again highlight here the important connection that exists here with Peirce’s account of abduction addressed above).

It is because of these prejudices and the historical nature of our being that Gadamer develops the concept of effective history and the historically effected consciousness as a way of describing the effect of the past on human consciousness. It is the complete neglect of our historicality and sociality that is one of the major oversights of the modern/Cartesian (and Enlightenment) perspective because it fails to understand human agency as it actually exists: embedded within complex social, cultural and historical situations. A consequence of this oversight is that we are inclined to misunderstand how our social and historical situation actually
serves to enable our agency in the first place.

2. The Rehabilitation of Authority and Tradition:

A central property of this decontextualized and disembedded model of human consciousness and agency that emerged with the enlightenment was that it stressed the rational capacity of human agency above all else. It is for this reason that the prejudices resulting from our historicity were framed in purely negative terms, because to accept such prejudices as inevitable poses a serious threat to the model of autonomous agency and rational action upon which most of the liberatory hopes of the Enlightenment (and modernity) were based. Along with the veneration of rational autonomous agency also came the severe degradation of both tradition and authority since it was believed that both posed a threat to the autonomous exercise of reason.

Indeed, Gadamer recognizes the Enlightenment’s distinction between faith and authority and the exercise of one’s own reason and acknowledges the legitimacy of the distinction. Clearly, at the time of the Enlightenment the dogmatic domination of the church was a serious affront to the ideal of human rational capacity and much of the aim of the Enlightenment was to overcome this in order to empower the people to exercise their own reason. However, the problem with the Enlightenment treatment of authority was that it considered authority to be a negative thing *in and of itself*. According to Gadamer, the Enlightenment “distorted the very concept of authority. Based on the Enlightenment conception of reason and freedom, the concept of authority could be viewed as diametrically opposed to reason and freedom: to be, in fact, blind obedience” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 280-281). This treatment of authority and its placement in

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24 This is essentially the message of Kant’s now famous article *What is Enlightenment?*
opposition to reason missed a very important element of the essential meaning of authority. As he argues,

this is not the essence of authority. … authority … is ultimately based not on the subjection and abdication of reason but on an act of acknowledgement and knowledge—the knowledge, namely, that the other is superior to oneself in judgement and insight and that for this reason his judgement takes precedence—i.e., it has priority over one’s own. (ibid, p. 281)

It is on the basis of this rational notion of authority that Gadamer then attempts to rehabilitate another form of authority that the Enlightenment has thoroughly denigrated in opposition to reason: tradition. During the Enlightenment, tradition was placed in abstract opposition to “free self determination, since its validity does not require any reasons but conditions us without our questioning it” (ibid, p. 282). But once again this notion of tradition is a significant distortion that misses a crucial point. As Gadamer argues,

[t]he fact is that in tradition there is always an element of freedom and of history itself. Even the most genuine and pure tradition does not persist because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated. It is, essentially, preservation, and it is active in all historical change. But preservation is an act of reason, though an inconspicuous one. For this reason only innovation and planning appear to be the result of reason. But this is an illusion. (ibid, p. 282)

By setting tradition in diametric opposition to reason, the Enlightenment neglected this important aspect of tradition, and in so doing significantly distorted our relationship to the past. From the Enlightenment perspective, in order to achieve the autonomous use of one’s own reason we must first distance ourselves from the prejudicial influences of the past thus freeing ourselves from tradition. From Gadamer’s perspective, this is simply impossible. Owing to our embedded historical agency “we are always situated within traditions, and this is no objectifying process—i.e., we do not conceive of what tradition says as something other, something alien. It is always a part of us, a model or exemplar…” (p. 283). Therefore, rather than advocate, as the
Enlightenment has, for the need to overcome temporal distance, Gadamer instead claims that such temporal distance is in fact the productive ground on which understanding takes place. It is in our attempt to understand the temporally distant that we are made aware of both our productive and negative prejudices. Thus, for Gadamer, the implications of embedded historical agency are truly taken to the hilt and thus serve as a decimating critique of the latent assumptions characteristic of the Enlightenment. In his 1967 article *The Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection* he concisely summarizes his position:

> [m]y thesis is – and I think it is the necessary consequence of recognizing the operativeness of history in our conditionedness and finitude – that the thing which hermeneutics teaches us is to see through the dogmatism of asserting an opposition and separation between the ongoing, natural “tradition” and the reflective appropriation of it. For behind this assertion stands a dogmatic objectivism that distorts the very concept of hermeneutical reflection itself. In this objectivism the understander is seen... not in relationship to the hermeneutical situation and the constant operativeness of history in his own consciousness, but in a way as to imply that his own understanding does not enter into the event. But this is simply not the case. (Gadamer, 2008, p. 28)

3. The Process of Understanding: the Fusion of Horizons:

The metaphorical concept that Gadamer thus employs to describe how embedded historical agents understand is the *horizon*: “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point.” (Gadamer, 2008, p. 28). For Gadamer, a horizon is the fluid and changing space within which understanding is elaborated and as such serves a very important dual purpose within Gadamer’s work. First, the horizon implies a limitation in our scope of vision and understanding affirming situated agency. But secondly, the concept of horizon implies its own transcendence in that what exists outside one’s horizon (the unknown) is necessarily far more than what exists inside. It is this relationship between the known and the unknown that characterizes the fluidity of our horizon. Our horizon is “continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices” (ibid, p. 301). In
this manner, Gadamer ties the concept of the horizon to that of prejudices by positing that it is through the encounter of different horizons that prejudices are brought to light. He claims, “[i]t is impossible to make ourselves aware of a prejudice while it is constantly operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, provoked. The encounter with a traditionary text can provide this provocation” (ibid, p. 298). As a different horizon (the horizon of the past), our encounter with such a text is illuminating because in our effort to understand it enables us to see our current historicity more clearly. Ultimately, for Gadamer, “understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves” (ibid, p. 305, his emphasis). Gadamer frames this encounter with the traditionary text, and the fusion of horizons that comes of it, as a conversation in which the reader and the text come to an understanding together. In this sense, the task of the reader is not to reconstruct the original intentions of the author (as earlier noted), but instead to open him/herself to the other (implying the need for reflexive self-awareness) in order to come to an understanding about the subject in question.

It is through the dialogical process culminating in the fusion of horizons that we gain deeper insights regarding our historical situation and develop a deepened reflexive consciousness that opens us to the possibilities of future experiences. Indeed, for Gadamer it is in fact this antidogmatic character that is the hallmark of the experienced historical consciousness which “by renouncing the chimera of perfect enlightenment, is opened to the experiences of history” (ibid, p. 370). Through our encounter with the unexpected elements of different horizons, we are afforded the opportunity of self-understanding rendering our prejudices and positionality more visible to us. In this way, “characteristic of every phase of the process of experience [is] that the experienced person acquires a new openness to new experiences…” (ibid, p. 351). It is in this way that the fusion of horizons fosters deepened consciousness of effective history and our finitude in the face of the vast realm of possibilities that the unknown holds in store. In this
manner, for Gadamer, the hallmark of experience is humility and a readiness to encounter the different and unknown in a manner that treats it as a valid claim to truth not as a static object. This is one of the problematic tendencies of the Enlightenment (and modern/Cartesian) approach because “[a]cknowledging the otherness of the other …[and] making him the object of objective knowledge… involves the fundamental suspension of his claim to truth” (ibid, p. 303) and fails to understand the value inherent in the different horizon.

As indicated earlier, this objectifying process is quite central to the modern/Cartesian framework and constitutes a form of symbolic violence25 that distorts our ability to understand otherness. For Gadamer, a reflexive consciousness of effective history, borne of experience, safeguards us against reducing otherness to a static object. It assists us in overcoming the reifying tendency characteristic of the modern/Cartesian substance bias by foregrounding the limited and finite perspective of Dasein and the validity of the truth claim that otherness makes on us. The objective of all this is to forefront how human understanding takes place and to safeguard the process of understanding from the distorting tendencies that are widespread in our time.

4. The Hermeneutic Problem of Application:

The implications of this principle of the fusion of horizons, and the manner in which it implies the abandonment of an objectivist philosophical posture, thus leads us to another essential part of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics: the hermeneutic problem of application. With reference to Aristotle, Gadamer maintains that “hermeneutic philosophy is the heir of the older tradition of practical philosophy” (Gadamer cited in Bernstein, 1983, p. 145). For

25 According to philosopher and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu symbolic violence denotes a type of aggression sustained through the passive and tacit acceptance of a set of ideas and assumptions rendered into habitual forms of conduct that results in the domination and subjugation of conscious subjects. In that way the modern/Cartesian perspective that I have outlined throughout this work can be seen as a symbolically violent perspective because the objectification of others serves to sustain systems of tacit domination within which they are placed.
Gadamer, understanding is a form of *phronesis*: a “form of reasoning and type of knowledge that involves a distinctive mediation between the universal and the particular” (ibid, p. 146) and that is constitutive of human praxis. It is on this basis that Gadamer draws the link between his philosophical hermeneutics and the older tradition of practical philosophy. But by and large this connection was lost in the romantic hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey who foregrounded other aspects of hermeneutic experience.

In the early hermeneutic tradition, hermeneutics was subdivided in three ways: “there was a distinction between subtilitas intelligendi (understanding) and subtilitas explicandi (interpretation); and pietism added a third element, subtilitas applicandi (application)…” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 306). Within the romantic hermeneutic tradition the emphasis placed on the ‘inner fusion of understanding and interpretation’, which implied that “interpretation is the explicit form of understanding” (ibid, p. 306), culminated in the complete exclusion of application from the field of hermeneutics.26 The implications of *phronetic* understanding were abandoned and hermeneutics moved towards the type of objectivist approach described above. An important aspect of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics is that it aims to restore the inner unity between not only interpretation and understanding, but application as well (the importance that Gadamer places on application points to another important theme that his work shares with pragmatism; this will be discussed in the upcoming chapter). He does this, once again, by stressing the historicality of our being, and thus our capacity to understand. To really understand something means that we can employ that understanding effectively *within the historical context within which we are situated*. In this sense, “understanding proves to be an event” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 308, his emphasis) of tradition. Not a reconstruction of objective knowledge, but the

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26 One might take for example the near complete exclusion of the question of application in biblical hermeneutics. Understanding was not considered to imply the successful application of an idea in a given context but rather it was intellectual.
effective mediation between the universal and the particular which becomes constitutive of human praxis. What this means is that in acting, we make judgements and draw upon rules which we modify and interpret to suit the particular situation at hand. Therefore, for Gadamer, understanding entails the ability to employ the universally valid knowledge in a manner suitable to the everyday concrete situations that we face and as such, “[u]nderstanding …is always application” (ibid, p. 308).

5. The Linguistic Mediation of Experience and Relational Process Ontology

So far in this chapter, I have emphasized how the dominant theme of situated agency (both social and historical) runs throughout Gadamer’s work and what his perspective on human agency implies for our understanding of contemporary philosophy and inquiry. As a final point in that effort I will now address the importance that Gadamer places on language in his philosophical hermeneutics. Notably, I will stress how his emphasis on language can be understood as his means of affirming a relational process ontology. My reason for addressing this aspect of his thought last is because, in order to adequately understand its implications, we need, beforehand, to have at the very least a basic understanding of his philosophical hermeneutics. Having already outlined his philosophical perspective we may now elaborate upon it by stressing that it all takes place within language. Gadamer takes a similar approach in his magnum opus Truth and Method, the last part of which is directed entirely to the question of language. From the title of this last section (Language as the Medium of Hermeneutic Experience) we can begin to understand the central importance that Gadamer places on language within his philosophical hermeneutics.

From the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics, our being-in-the-world is
fundamentally and primordially linguistic. What this means is that we cannot exist outside of language or, to put it another way, our “language-view is our worldview” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 440). From this perspective, language is not a mere tool that we use to understand a reality external to ourselves, “rather on it depends the fact that man has a world at all” (ibid, p. 440, his emphasis). One can explain Gadamer’s meaning, as Kisiel (1985) has, in this way: language constitutes our most fundamental prejudice.

This insight underlies the elements of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics discussed above, and ties them together in an important manner. As I’ve attempted to illustrate in this chapter, central to Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics is an ontological conception of situated human agency that undercuts the exaggerated emphasis placed on the polar extremes of objectivism and relativism within the modern/Cartesian (and Enlightenment) perspective. Gadamer instead places the emphasis on our finitude and highlights the manner in which understanding in not an act of stepping out of our historical and social situation but rather relying on it as the grounds for a fusion of horizons. For Gadamer, this “fusion of horizons that takes place in understanding is actually the achievement of language” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 370, his emphasis).

a. The conversational /dialogical structure of understanding:

The emphasis that Gadamer places on language can be best understood when we realize that for him, the very structure of hermeneutic experience (rooted in the hermeneutic circle) implies a circular (dialogical or conversational) dialectic of question and answer. As noted earlier, the problematic tendency to conceptualize understanding as an act outside of history and tradition serves to objectify and reify the ‘object’ of analysis, and essentially suspends its claim to truth. It is in this manner where the logic of the question takes prominence in Gadamer’s
thinking. For Gadamer, a sincere question “always brings out the undetermined possibilities of a thing” (ibid, p. 368). The sincere question is the logical outcome of the structure of experience itself because “just as the dialectical negativity of experience culminates in the idea of being perfectly experienced—i.e., being aware of our finitude and limitedness—so also the logical form of the question and the negativity that is part of it culminate in a radical negativity: the knowledge of not knowing” (ibid, p. 356). Clearly, this is not a novel perspective. As Gadamer himself explains, this insight is in fact the famous Socratic docta ignorantia (ibid, p. 356), which emphasises the importance of humility in the face of the vastness of knowledge. Indeed, it would be very helpful to consider the Platonic dialogues in our effort to understand the importance of dialogue in Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics.

Thus, for Gadamer the nature of hermeneutic experience is essentially linguistic and, as a result, dialogical because language is a social medium that necessitates a plurality of voices to generate meaning. As a result, the dialogical structure of question and answer is not simply a helpful heuristic, but indeed is a fundamental property of experience itself. What this means is that understanding fundamentally implies openness and requires a real and sincere question in order for understanding to be achieved. Understanding thus cannot be treated as the process of reconstructing a static ‘object’ because this implies the suspension of the question that the other actually puts to us and thus the suspension of real understanding. The nature of hermeneutic experience requires that we abandon such ‘objective distance’ and instead seek to understand what difference has to say to us in our current historical positioning. This is the significance of the fusion of horizons, because understanding is ultimately an integrative act.

Earlier in this work, I made the claim that Gadamer, like Peirce, affirms and employs a process or relational ontology and it is mainly in his discussion of language that this claim can be effectively demonstrated. By framing the process of understanding dialogically, Gadamer
highlights that understanding is a constant and ongoing relationship that cannot come to a halt and conclude. In other words, unlike the modern/Cartesian perspective, understanding is the product of a relationship between the embedded agent and the ‘text’ or ‘object’ that s/he is seeking to understand. But such understanding is not a fixed product because we do not exist within a fixed world. The fusion of horizons discussed earlier exemplifies this relationship and importance of process within Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics.

b. The sociality of language:

A second important aspect of Gadamer’s treatment of language is that, since our reality is verbally and linguistically constituted, it is also supremely open to reconstruction and redefinition. It is not statically given, but actively constructed. As he maintains,

the verbal constitution of the world is far from meaning that man’s relationship to the world is imprisoned within a verbally schematized environment. On the contrary, wherever language and men exist, there is not only a freedom from the pressure of the world, but this freedom from the environment is also a freedom in relation to the names that we give things, as stated in the profound account in Genesis, according to which God gave Adam the authority to name creatures (ibid, p. 441).

Thus, in language we possess the ability to understand the world in a flexible and indeterminate manner. Language allows us to create in the world objects or stimuli that can engender different patterns of thought and action. In that sense, language permits a certain degree of freedom to frame the contingencies of life in vastly different ways. And it allows us, through dialogue, to reach an understanding of the world that would not be possible without language. Ultimately, it is through “linguistic communication, [that the] “world” is disclosed” (ibid, p. 443). This represents a profound sociological insight. What this entails is that the social world, which we are a part of, is not a fixed and natural world that we are imprisoned in. Rather, our social reality is verbally and linguistically constituted and, as a result, we have the capacity to affect it. It is for
this reason that the dialogical nature of understanding which culminates in the fusion of horizons is fundamentally transformative because, with the fusion of horizons, our verbal and linguistic repertoire is broadened, and we are able to see the world that we take for granted from drastically different perspectives. One might recall here Gadamer’s assertion that our “language-view is our worldview” (ibid, p. 440), and if this be the case, then the fusion of horizons becomes the grounds for a fundamentally different worldview.

In this chapter, I have aimed to demonstrate how Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, by foregrounding the importance of situated historical agency and all that it implies, represents a philosophical perspective that critically undermines the latent assumptions of the modern/Cartesian framework discussed earlier in this work. I have attempted to illustrate how his work represents an instance of what Bernstein (2010) has called a ‘sea change’ in contemporary philosophy. More specifically, I have attempted to highlight how Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics presents us with a way of conceptualizing understanding and inquiry in a manner that affirms the transformative potential of educative experience at both the personal and social level.

Having now completed a basic overview of some key elements of both Charles Sanders Peirce and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s work, I will continue in the upcoming section with a comparative analysis of their work with the goal of highlighting the shared and common themes of these two very different thinkers. To be sure, my intention is not to make these two thinkers more similar than they actually are. Rather, my intention is to demonstrate how, despite the differences of their approaches and perspectives, they in fact seem to share several surprising common elements that scholars have generally overlooked.

The most apparent point of comparison between Gadamer and Peirce, and which distinguishes them from most contemporary philosophical approaches, is certainly their similar perspectives on the nature of human prejudice. The basic notion of prejudice that these two thinkers seem to share signals, as I will argue, a deeper and more significant common vision of the nature of human rational agency and knowledge acquisition that is truly radical. In this chapter, I will begin with a comparative discussion of their perspectives on prejudice in order to demonstrate that, despite their different philosophical vocabulary, they were both, nevertheless animated by a similar intention, namely to undermine the Cartesian philosophical perspective tacit in most contemporary philosophical approaches and to elaborate a philosophical perspective that resolved many of the problems that emerged from the Cartesian model (Bernstein, 1983). I will then elaborate this discussion of prejudice in two main directions.

First, I will comment on how their understanding of prejudice signals a very particular understanding of human agency as both socially and historically situated. I will highlight what this perspective on human agency implies in their respective projects as a means of demonstrating the remarkable similarities that emerge.

Second, I will address how both Gadamer and Peirce construe our world of experience as a linguistic (Gadamer) or semiotic (Peirce) construction to which we are subjected and which is constantly under negotiation. I will illustrate how this insight foregrounds a relational perspective that abandons the rigid substantialist ontology described in the first chapter of this work. From this perspective, one might say that we exist within a world of experience that is a linguistic or semiotic construction and that, as embedded agents, it is precisely this linguistic or semiotic dimension that we acquire in everyday practice and that serves as one of our most
fundamental prejudices. As I will illustrate in the upcoming sections (as well as the next chapter), part of my reason for highlighting these two insights is that when taken together, these two insights signal a fundamental shift in our understanding of human knowledge acquisition and learning.

1. The Question of Prejudice:

In the earlier sections of this work, I offered a basic overview of both Peirce and Gadamer’s philosophical approaches. In both sections, the question of prejudice was discussed in an attempt to illustrate how both thinkers seriously oppose the commonly held notion that, in the process of inquiry, we possess the capacity to simply ‘bracket’ our prejudices in a manner that offers our investigations objectivity. At this point, I will deal with their perspectives on prejudice in more detail as a means of preparing for further comparisons throughout this section.

There is little doubt that when it comes to a discussion of prejudice, it is primarily Gadamer, with his provocative and radical statements on the nature of prejudice, that stands out within contemporary philosophy. As he famously argued,

It is not so much our judgements as it is our prejudices that constitute our being. This is a provocative formulation, for I am using it to restore to its rightful place a positive concept of prejudice that was driven out of linguistic usage by the French and English Enlightenment. It can be shown that the concept of prejudice did not originally have the meaning we have attached to it. Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us. (Gadamer, 2008, p. 9)

With this provocative statement, Gadamer positions himself against a philosophical tradition that supposes that the ultimate goal of human inquiry, and the standard for true understanding, is the
gradual eradication of prejudice and the simultaneous convergence on a singular truth through the exercise of one’s rational faculty. For Gadamer, this assumption, which has become foundational in contemporary thought, is simply untenable because it fails to understand human agents as they actually exist: embedded within (or part of) social and historical contexts. While Peirce does not express himself using the same terms, he too articulates a perspective on prejudice that is strikingly similar to Gadamer’s and that is articulated in opposition to the philosophical posture that has been common to philosophy since Descartes. He argues,

We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy. These prejudices are not to be dispelled by a maxim, for they are things which it does not occur to us can be questioned. …Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts. (Peirce, 1868, p140-141)

Thus, in comparing the two statements made above we can see that both Peirce and Gadamer stress not only the inevitability, but indeed the importance of prejudice to human thought. They both emphasize that such prejudices are necessarily operative in our everyday thinking, essentially attempting to restore a positive conception of prejudice. In that respect, both Peirce and Gadamer position themselves against one of the central Enlightenment assumptions which contrasts prejudice with reason.

Both Gadamer and Peirce’s perspective on prejudice exist as part of a larger philosophical project that attempts to elaborate and understand how human inquiry and understanding take place in practice. Both agree that most contemporary philosophy has seriously mischaracterized the nature of human thought having committed to a brand of objectivism or relativism that either granted too much or too little to the mind. As a result, at the heart of their discussion of prejudice lies a deeper assertion concerning the nature of human thought and agency that is truly revolutionary and that signals a paradigm shift (or sea change).
a. Situated Agency and Communal Inquiry

As I have endeavoured to argue throughout this thesis, one of the most significant shifts that the work of both Gadamer and Peirce share is the degree to which they affirm the importance of situated agency. As I will show in this section, both thinkers take the implications of situated human agency to the very hilt, and in doing so, offer a means of conceptualizing the process of inquiry and understanding in a truly enlightening and humbling manner. The similarity that I am attempting to draw out between these two very distinct philosophers is, I believe, not a superficial one and indeed, as I will illustrate, represents a subtle and powerful theory of how human learning takes place.

In my earlier section on Peirce, I dedicated much of my attention to his behavioural theory of meaning which frames the process of inquiry, not as the quest for certainty, but as the struggle to attain a state of belief that allays doubt. He argues, “[t]he irritation of doubt causes a struggle to attain a state of belief. I shall term this struggle inquiry” (Peirce, 1877, p. 16). Thus, for Peirce the process of inquiry is fundamentally generated by the negativity of experience. In other words, inquiry is propelled primarily by the irritation of doubt caused by experiences that thwart our expectations and only concludes when a form of conduct rooted in the attainment of a stable state of belief emerges. Now, in comparing this account of inquiry with Gadamer’s work, we encounter some distinct problems. For instance, for Gadamer, unlike Peirce, the process of understanding is that of truth seeking and Gadamer rarely employs the terms of inquiry and belief. Nevertheless, in his complex discussion of experience there are indeed some striking parallels that can be made between Gadamer and Peirce. For Gadamer, like Peirce, a distinguishing quality of experience is its negativity. He argues, “logically considered, the negativity of experience implies a question. In fact we have experiences when we are shocked by
things that do not accord with our expectations. Thus… [a] question presses itself upon us; we can no longer avoid it and persist in our accustomed opinion” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 360). Thus, for both Peirce and Gadamer, the negativity of experience is the fundamental catalyst for inquiry and indeed, in both cases, “[u]nderstanding …is always application” (ibid, p. 308).

This question of experience and inquiry is tied more deeply to another aspect of both Gadamer and Peirce’s work. In Gadamer’s case, to be experienced means something very particular. He argues that, owing to the essentially negative quality of experience, the foremost property of the experienced mind is awareness of one’s finitude. This is because as one encounters the vicissitudes of daily life and as one’s provisional understandings are consistently challenged by experience, the consciousness of one’s finitude becomes evermore apparent. Thus for Gadamer,

experience is experience of human finitude. The truly experienced person is one who has taken this to heart, who knows that he is master neither of time nor the future… it is characteristic of every phase of the process of experience that the experienced person acquires a new openness to new experiences…. [In this process] all dogmatism, which proceeds from the soaring desires of the human heart, reaches an absolute barrier. … In it are discovered the limits of the power and the self-knowledge of the planning reason. (Gadamer, 2004, p. 351)

From Gadamer’s perspective, then, the realization of our limited capacities is an inevitable outcome of the process of experience and the humility that it engenders is the hallmark of an experienced consciousness. This perspective on experience suggests a particular disposition that is characterized by its posture towards learning. From this angle, the experienced consciousness is one that has been conditioned by the process of experience to accept its inevitable finitude. And what accompanies this realization is an openness to learn from all aspects of experience. As the mind is humbled by the limitless pedagogical potential that everyday experiences promise, a disposition emerges that not only assumes that there is something to learn in every situation, but
that is indeed characterized by its openness and desire to understand. This disposition is one of the essential implications of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. It is a disposition that places the imaginative quality of thought at the forefront of human inquiry by recognizing that “imagination … is the decisive function of the scholar” (Gadamer, 2008, p. 12). It is the ability to see the world differently than what it appears to be and to remain open to the claim to truth the different makes upon us. Such is the posture of learning that real experience (in Gadamer’s sense) entails.

In order to relate Gadamer’s discussion of experience with Peirce’s thought, we are once again forced to move beyond the different vocabularies employed by these thinkers and attempt a more conceptual comparison. While Peirce doesn’t overtly discuss human finitude, a similar notion of finitude, and its utmost importance for human thought, is present in his discussion of cognitive economy. Earlier in this work, I detailed the crucial importance that Peirce granted to the economics of cognition in the process of inquiry. As I argued, for Peirce, one of the main challenges facing the scientist and philosopher is the meagre intellectual resources that s/he can bring to bear on the complex questions of life. He argues,

The question of economy is clearly a very grave one.
In very many questions, the situation before us is this: We shall do better to abandon the whole attempt to learn the truth, however urgent may be our need of ascertaining it, unless we can trust the human mind’s having such a power of guessing right that before very many hypotheses shall have been tried, intelligent guessing may be expected to lead us to the one which will support all tests, leaving the vast majority of possible hypotheses untested. (Peirce, 1957, p. 251)

We confront, in everyday life, a world of vast and seemingly limitless complexity and require, in order to render it intelligible at all, a means of delimiting the scope and complexity of possible
alternatives. This, for Peirce, is the basis for the pragmatic maxim. By foregrounding the insight that the meaning of something is in fact what it implies for human conduct, Peirce offered a way of understanding inquiry that accounts for our finite intellectual resources. Thus, the achievements of inquiry are not necessarily final truths, but they are what we believe to be true given what we currently know (i.e. they are provisional and fallibilistic truths). In that sense, Peirce, with his theory of inquiry, affirms the same aspect of experience that Gadamer affirmed in his own right: that the essential property of experience is that it always possesses educative potential. We cannot come to a theory of reality that exhausts the truths latent therein because the real is that which outweighs our intellectual resources. That does not mean that we cannot advance in our understanding of reality, but simply that the process of inquiry is not about reaching an immutable conclusion. It is about understanding the world in ever-greater detail and texture and developing a pattern of conduct that secures us.

From Peirce’s perspective then, the irritation of doubt propels the process of inquiry, the creative and imaginative effort of intelligent situated beings to attain to a state of belief that satisfies doubt. This relationship between doubt and inquiry is, as was earlier stated, a fundamental property of experience and is thus for all intents and purposes on-going. From this perspective, as with that advanced above by Gadamer, the cardinal property of human agency that emerges is a disposition that, in the search for truth, struggles to achieve a state of belief that survives the challenges of experience. Thus for Peirce, an essential property of human creative agency is that it orients itself towards experience in a manner that seeks to understand and learn from it. It is this disposition that was undermined with the Cartesian quest for certainty because rather than accept the fact that our finite intellectual capacities incline us to error, Descartes

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27 This is similar to the logic of abduction and it is on this basis that Peirce argues that “if you carefully consider the question of pragmatism, you will see that it is nothing else than the question of the logic of abduction” (Peirce, 1957, p. 252)
framed the process of inquiry as the establishment of an absolute framework. In doing so, he undermined a central insight that both Gadamer and Peirce vigorously reaffirm in their respective projects: that as finite and situated agents inquiry implies that we recognize our limitations and develop a disposition that remains open to the unknown and unexpected that we are likely, sooner or later, to confront in every aspect of our lives. Without such a disposition the likelihood of reaching greater and greater truth in the process of inquiry is diminished because we run the risk of succumbing to a dogmatic temperament. This understanding of our finitude in the face of the vastness of reality assists us in maintaining a sense of reflexive humility which secures us from dogmatic rigidity.

A further connection that emerges from this notion of situated agency affirmed by Peirce and Gadamer is that knowledge generation and truth seeking, while sustained by individuals, are ultimately achieved within the community. This stands out most clearly in Peirce’s work when he argues that knowledge advances and deepens not with individuals alone, but through a community of inquirers who, as a unit, test and verify the findings of their colleagues lending such findings greater and greater strength. This notion of communal inquiry is ultimately the basis of scientific inquiry and the scientific method, and as an influential philosopher of science Peirce’s contribution has been well documented (Bernstein, 2010).

While the main thrust of Gadamer’s analysis is phenomenological and focuses on the individual’s encounter with the strange (or atopon) (Gadamer, 2008), there are nevertheless the grounds to argue, as Bernstein (1983) has, that Gadamer’s conception of truth is ultimately that which is communally validated. He claims that “Gadamer is appealing to a concept of truth that (pragmatically speaking) amounts to what can be argumentatively validated by a community of interpreters who open themselves to what tradition “says to us”” (Bernstein, 1983, p. 154). Thus for Gadamer, our understanding of the claim to truth that the strange makes upon us is ultimately
rooted in a community which engages in dialogue and jointly reaches a point of agreement. This perspective, like that of Peirce’s, ultimately affirms that “the conception of reality… essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits…” (Peirce, 1868, p. 155, his emphasis) and that knowledge and understanding are embedded within social contexts.

b. The practicality of knowledge:
Another vitally important theme that both Gadamer and Peirce share is their perspective on the practicality of knowledge. In both cases, they formulate a perspective that opposes the conception of knowledge, predicated on a latent Cartesianism, which assumes that knowing is purely an act of rational calculation (Bernstein, 1983, Bernstein, 2010). In both cases, they redress this tendency by forefronting the practical and situated nature of human experience and the fact that we can never step out of our personal and historical context.

For Peirce, this aspect of his thought stands out most clearly since one of the central insights of pragmatism is that the meaning of something is what it could conceivably imply for action. For Peirce, our cognitive and perceptual faculties evolved within practical contexts whereby the salient property of any object of inquiry was and is what it implies for conduct. Thus, the contemporary exclusion of the practical within philosophic thought has become the grounds for a profound disillusionment because, without the constraint of practice, thought can venture into ever more abstract, or as William James (2000) put it, metaphysical, areas that culminate in fruitless and irreconcilable aporias.

For Gadamer, the re-appropriation of practical philosophy takes on a rather different form from that of Peirce. As I earlier noted, within the romantic hermeneutic tradition, the tendency to stress the inner fusion of interpretation and understanding culminated in the near complete exclusion of the question of application from hermeneutic thought. According to Gadamer, this
tendency was the result of the latent Cartesianism that was affirmed by thinkers such as Dilthey and Schleiermacher, and represented a decisive shift away from the practical philosophy of thinkers such as Aristotle (Gadamer, 2004). With his philosophical hermeneutics, Gadamer aimed to reaffirm the insights of the older tradition of practical philosophy and to stress the *phronetic* nature of human understanding. To understand a text of the past means that we can apply the truths it presents to us to the exigencies of our contemporary world. It is not a rational reconstruction from afar, but a practical re-application of the insights of the past to the only world that we know: that of today.

In both cases, the affirmation of practice is central to their respective projects and, for both Gadamer and Peirce, the practicality of knowledge is integrally linked to our social and historical embeddedness. Knowledge is not something that exists in a world of reflection unadulterated by the course of practical life. Instead, it is through practice, and the application of concepts and principles to the course of everyday life, that knowledge is both generated and rendered meaningful to us. In our neglect of the practical nature of human agency, we have essentially obscured one of the most formative elements of human knowledge acquisition: the daily practical application of ideas. Both Peirce and Gadamer offer a means of reconceptualising how knowledge acquisition and learning take place in a manner that forefronts the transformative potential of everyday experience; a question that will be addressed at length in the next, and final, chapter of this work.

2. Process & The Symbolic Mediation of Reality

In the previous section I discussed how a similar conception of prejudice arrived at by both Peirce and Gadamer points to a particular notion of situated human agency. I argued that,
from both Peirce and Gadamer’s perspective, this notion of human agency forefronts the formative nature of everyday practical experience and implies that, as situated agents, we confront cognitive limitations that necessitate a principle of knowledge generation and acquisition as a communal enterprise. In this section, I will elaborate on a second important point of comparison that, when taken in connection with situated agency, enables us to forefront the educationally transformative properties of everyday experience. I will demonstrate how, for both Peirce and Gadamer, our world of everyday experience is not, as many assume, natural but that in fact we inhabit a world that is a linguistic (for Gadamer) or semiotic (for Peirce) construction. In tying this discussion back to the question of prejudice, I will argue that both philosophers frame this dimension of our experience as one of our primary prejudices.28

We are born into a social world that is at once pre-established and ongoing and that, through prolonged immersion, grounds a particular way of being in the world. But importantly, as both Gadamer and Peirce argue in their different ways, that pre-established world is not immutable. It is, in fact, simply the current state of a reality in constant flux and change and susceptible to transformation through the exercise of human intelligence and reflexive awareness. In this manner, I will argue that both Peirce and Gadamer affirm, in their own way, what I have earlier called a relational process ontology, which affirms that the elements of our experience are products of social construction as opposed to fixed and immutable entities. In other words, our understanding of experience takes place within a context of pre-constructed meanings that, while debatable, serve nevertheless as the basis of our process of inquiry and understanding.

28 It is important to recall here the manner in which prejudice is used in these thinkers’ work. For Both Peirce and Gadamer prejudices can be both enabling and negative. Enabling prejudices are those that we have acquired in the course of experience and which enable us to render future experience intelligible. They are the habituated elements of our consciousness that do not appear questionable to us and are thus necessary, although not necessarily accurate.
a. Peirce’s Semiotics:
As noted earlier one, of the distinctive aspects of Peirce’s work was his novel and complex semiotics. To adequately address the complexity of his semiotics is ultimately beyond the scope of this work. As a result, I will simply highlight, as before, what is generally thought to be one of his most novel aspects of his semiotics.

For Peirce, the fundamental property of human thought is that it function as sign activity. In that sense, we might say that we do not refer to the world as it is, but rather we signify it. Our interaction with the world exists through such signs and not in any direct and unmediated manner. As earlier noted, one of the most important aspects of Peirce’s semiotic thinking is the manner in which he redefines the nature of representation. Traditional semiotics frames representation as a dyad, a relationship that exists between two elements. For Peirce, however, this failed to adequately capture the complexity of signification. As Bernstein (2010) explains, “[o]ne of Peirce’s most original and central claims is that all sign activity is irreducibly triadic: a sign (first term) stands for an object (second term) to an interpretant (third term)” (p. 44). It is with the introduction of the interpretant that Peirce essentially integrated the social dimension into the process of signification. For Peirce, the meaning of a sign relation does not depend on the relationship between sign and object but rather on how one interprets that relation. In other words, representation has an essentially social quality in that the relation between sign and object is fundamentally connected to the interpretant.

But this account of Peirce’s triadic perspective on sign activity is a gross oversimplification. This is because for Peirce, to speak of the interpretant and not the interpreter is quite intentional. By employing the term interpretant, Peirce means to stress that within this relationship, the interpretant is itself a sign. This complicates Peirce’s perspective on
signification considerably. As Bernstein (2010) highlights, “if signification involves sign, object, and interpretant, and every interpretant is itself a sign, there is potentially an endless series of signs” (p. 44). How could one make sense of this complex account of signification? W. B. Gallie explains it in this manner:

If then, every sign requires an interpretant in the form of a further sign, and admits of such interpretation in a virtually endless number of alternative ways, it follows that there can be no such thing and the (one and only) sign of a given object, and no such thing as the (one and only) interpretant of a given sign. The belief – still all too prevalent among philosophers – that a sign can stand in a simple two-term relation, called its meaning, to its object, is thus to rest on a radical misconception of the kind of thing a sign is and of the way in which it functions. The truth is that a sign can only function as an element in a working system of signs. (Gallie cited in Bernstein, 2010, p. 44)

Thus, as opposed to what is commonly assumed, the process of signification is not a fixed relationship between a sign and its object, but rather, it takes place within a working system of signs that are relationally connected. In this perspective, the ‘meaning’ of an object is tied to the social system of signs within which it is being interpreted. This claim draws our attention to the social dimension of meaning and, when taken in the light of our situated agency, culminates in the realization that, as situated agents, we are immersed within such ‘working systems of signs’ from the moment we are born. In that sense, our exposure to ‘working systems of signs’ inclines us to know the world in a particular and situated manner. Furthermore, in our encounter with ‘objects’ this exposure to a sign system plays an integral role in that we carry with us a comprehensive, and unconscious, way of seeing and naming the world that is largely tied to the ‘working system of signs’ that we assume to be normal. Yet, as constructed systems, these ‘working systems of signs’ are in no way fixed, rather their constructed quality foregrounds their mutability.

Ultimately then, this perspective on the semiotic mediation of reality entails that, as agents born into pre-established systems of signification, our thought process are, in large part,
dependent on our world of semiotic experience. Indeed, it is such sign systems that we employ in the abductive leaps we are constantly making to simplify everyday experiences. We require such systems of signification in order to think at all, and yet they are never perfect and always open to revision. This explains, in part, why Peirce so vigorously emphasised, throughout his work, the importance of both evolution (i.e. everything is changing), and experimentalist fallibilism. In a world that is always changing and which is always open to semiotic indeterminacy, we require a disposition of inquiry that accepts that we will likely continue to discover things that problematize our current state of understanding.

b. Gadamer’s Linguistic Turn:
Now to turn my attention to Gadamer’s emphasis on language. There are once again striking stylistic differences between Peirce’s logical perspective on semiotics and Gadamer’s more phenomenological discussion of language. But more importantly, Gadamer’s account of language is significantly simpler than Peirce’s complex system of semiotics. For Gadamer, language is not simply a tool that we employ in order to understand reality, instead reality confronts us in language: “man’s being-in-the-world is primordially linguistic” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 440). This linguistic dimension of our being-in-the-world is a fundamental property of our situated agency. We are beings encompassed by language and as a result, we are “always already biased in our thinking and knowing by our linguistic interpretation of the world. To grow into this linguistic interpretation means to grow up in the world” (Gadamer, 2008, p. 64). As with Peirce, Gadamer stresses that the very fabric of human thought exists as a system of signs (which for Gadamer are linguistic) that we acquire through experience.

Furthermore, it is this linguistic dimension of experience that points to the fact that we are fundamentally social beings. We grow into a world where language (or the system of
linguistic signs) is pre-established, and the acquisition of that linguistic repertory is one of the requisite conditions of coming into being. It is not by personal choice that we acquire the linguistic repertory of our time and culture, but by necessity. Furthermore, it is in the acquisition of such capacities that our understanding of ourselves and the world around us emerge. We are not, as a result, individual islands capable of objective distance from our linguistic world because it is through our linguistic repertory that we know the world at all. In coming into language, we acquire the tools that enable us to think and act in the world. As a result, this linguistic aspect of our experience is one of our primary prejudices; our “language-view is a worldview” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 440). Because of this linguistic aspect of our being, not only are we encompassed by language and a linguistic worldview, we are indeed expressions of that linguistic worldview. Through the acquisition of language, we acquire the dispositions to think and act according to the latent presuppositions of a linguistic world-view. It is thus in our everyday thoughts and actions that we tacitly reproduce anew, and transmit from the past into the future, the linguistic world that has served as the formative context of our coming into language.

We might do well to note that it is in this process (the passive transmission and reproduction of our pre-established formative contexts) that we become unwittingly complicit in the reproduction of the oppressive conditions of our social world. The problem we confront is not that we are complicit in such reproductive processes (which, because of our embedded agency, we cannot really avoid) but that we are unaware of our complicity. In that sense, the reproductive quality of our thoughts and actions can either be deeply problematic (when unconscious) or full of transformative potential (when we understand that we can think and act differently). This highlights the importance that reflexive consciousness holds for transformative agency. In the absence of reflexive self-awareness about the constructed nature of our world of experience, we are inclined to unwittingly reproduce the original conditions of our life
experiences. Working with the assumption that the world we know is ‘normal’, ‘natural’ and ‘unchanging’, we fail to see its constructed quality and how we take an active part in its construction. We come to see our agency as a rather limited thing that has little impact on the constitution of what we believe to be an immutable world when in fact, our world of experience is really quite open and can be both understood, experienced (and thus acted upon) in many different ways. To understand this is to understand something important about ourselves: that our transformative capacity is more than we may even imagine. This question will be the main focus of the final chapter of this thesis.

While Peirce and Gadamer’s accounts of the symbolic mediation of reality differ in several ways, in the previous sections I have striven to demonstrate that they are quite complementary and share a very important common point. Both philosophers stress what I have earlier called a relational (or process) ontology which affirms that the nature of an object is not independent of the relationship of understanding, and that any understanding is inevitably a limited and simplified aspect of a world of profound interconnection and flux. While Peirce advances this insight through his semiotics and the concept of the interpretant, thus socializing the process of representation, Gadamer does so by foregrounding how all experience is primordially linguistic.

By giving primacy of place to the symbolic dimension of human reality, both Peirce and Gadamer foreground the insight that we are implicated in the construction of our world of experience and that it is not simply there as is. What this implies is that the world of experience is really quite open and subject to different valid interpretations and such interpretations differ mainly in what they imply for conduct.

Furthermore, it implies that our linguistic and semiotic biases are constantly operative in the process of experience without rational awareness. To realize this represents a major insight
that further foregrounds the finite nature of human understanding and compels us to accept that our current understandings are by necessity provisional. We are linguistic beings and cannot escape that, but our language is never up to the task of perfectly describing reality as it actually exists (which is an act of reification). Earlier in this work, I described how an ontological substance bias, which foregrounds the static properties of objects of experience and obscures their relational characteristics, has been dominant in contemporary philosophy for some time. It is in relation to the latent modern/Cartesian perspective that we can come to see the innovative character of the relational perspectives offered in both Gadamer and Peirce’s work. By foregrounding how our linguistic and semiotic biases are implicated in the process of understanding, and how those sign systems are constructed rather than given, we are helped to understand the limitations that we face in understanding.

Chapter 5: Recuperating the Socially Transformative Dimension of Educational Experience.

To this point, I have primarily aimed to demonstrate, with an overview of the work of both Charles Sanders Peirce and Hans-Georg Gadamer, that within contemporary philosophy, a ‘sea change’ has been taking place. I have mainly tried to articulate only two significant aspects of that shift: the central importance of situated agency and of the symbolically constructed/mediated nature of human experience (which is an affirmation of the relational ontology discussed throughout this work). Both of these elements pose a fundamental challenge to the dominant yet latent modern/Cartesian framework that continues to inform the manner in which we tend to conceptualize knowledge generation and acquisition. In this chapter, I will illustrate how this fundamental ‘sea change’ in contemporary philosophy can most aptly be...

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29 Again, it is important to recall that I am not claiming that they are uniquely innovative in contemporary philosophy. Indeed, I am rather trying to stress that their innovative insights are representative of a broader shift in contemporary philosophy.
characterized as *educational*\(^{30}\) in its most profound sense. More importantly, I will demonstrate that it heralds an educational perspective that empowers individual agents to become the protagonists of personal and social transformation. Elements of this argument have been alluded to throughout chapter 4 where I stressed those complementary aspects of Peirce and Gadamer’s philosophical projects. As a result, within this chapter, I will follow a similar approach to that of chapter 4.

In the first part, I will commence with a brief reflection on the educational implications of our neglect of situated agency. I will follow this reflection by connecting the analysis of situated agency that I have developed throughout this work in an explicit manner to a notion of knowledge generation and acquisition that is collective at its heart, and that relies on the agentic capacities of the individual dedicated to the exigencies of the world in which they live. An important aspect of the principle of situated agency which I will also discuss in this section is how, for embedded agents, knowledge and practice are fundamentally conjoined and inextricably linked. The intention will be to demonstrate how as a consequence of our embeddedness, we are compelled to affirm an educational approach that, founded on the principle that reliable knowledge is the fruit of a collective process, seeks to elicit the diversity of situated experiences in order to generate understanding that is representative of the complexity of everyday life. Furthermore, it is a perspective which assumes that every human being has something vital to contribute to the generation of knowledge and the needs of the world in which we live; a perspective which implies the radical affirmation of active as opposed to static agency. In the second part of this chapter, I will draw out the transformative implications of adopting the

\(^{30}\) By education here I mean to stress more than simply schooling. By education I mean to stress that quality of everyday experience that is crucially formative and yet often overlooked when we think about learning. As agents immersed within a social context, we are saturated with meanings that we are unaware of and that we fail to see as learned. It is this dimension of educational experience that I am stressing here and schooling is a part of that.
relational (or process) ontology affirmed by Peirce and Gadamer. In that effort, I will first address how, by foregrounding a relational ontology, we are assisted in our efforts to avoid the all too common tendency of reifying our mental and linguistic constructions. Second, I will address how, by affirming that our world of everyday experience is socially and linguistically constructed, we are offered a way of understanding our own *active* part in both the production and reproduction of our everyday world. It is in the realization of this dimension of human experience that we are enabled to understand education in a profoundly transformative light. Through prolonged exposure to a particular language/worldview, we are not merely internalizing that worldview, but acquiring active dispositions that incline us to act in the world in a manner that tends to reproduce that worldview. By recognizing the active role we play in the reproduction of our social world, we are thus offered a view on education that not only foregrounds our agency but that also foregrounds the importance of reflexive consciousness for the transformation of social reality.

1. Situated Agency

a. Education & the Ontological Significance of Situated Agency

I have been arguing that we are agents embedded within social and historical contexts. This embeddedness is a fundamental property of our being that we cannot overlook. This insight, however, has generally been neglected. Rooted in the modern/Cartesian perspective discussed earlier in this work, there is a general tendency to conceptualize human agency as independent from embedded contexts. As a result, education is generally thought of as an individual enterprise where the agent, through the exercise of her/his rational autonomy, independently acquires knowledge. There are many problems that emerge with this perspective on learning, most apparent when we take the implications of situated agency seriously.
By neglecting the socially and historically conditioned nature of our being, we thus lose one of the most fertile educational opportunities we have: to see within ourselves the tacit functioning of the social world of which we are a part. Realizing this constitutes one of the essential attributes of reflexive praxis and the grounds upon which we can re-establish the link between personal and social transformation. However, by neglecting our embeddedness, we come to think of ourselves as separate from the world of experience and learning becomes a simple act of looking at an external object. But from the relational perspectives that Gadamer and Peirce advance, this notion of learning is simply untenable. Through inquiry, we not only learn about the world, but we learn about ourselves because, as situated agents, we are part of the world we investigate.

This tendency to think of education as mere observation and internalization is one of the fruits of the static ‘substance’ ontology that has dominated conceptions of knowledge since the Enlightenment. But this perspective cannot be entirely sustained in light of the relational process ontology that both Peirce and Gadamer affirm. This relational perspective implies that our relationship to the world is not passive, but rather supremely active. In learning, we are not merely internalizing the world, we are recreating it, because it is through our learning that we establish patterns of thought and conduct that serve as the basis for social reproduction or social change. This point will be further articulated in the second part of this chapter.

b. Situated agency, finitude and the collective generation of knowledge

To speak of human experience as inherently situated is to forefront the finitude of individual understanding. But this perspective does not imply that, because we are limited and finite beings, incapable of absolute immutable knowledge, we cannot generate knowledge that is true (albeit provisional) enabling us to move towards greater and greater degrees of truth. From
this vantage point however, the generation of knowledge is fundamentally a collective enterprise (Peirce, 1868). Although individuals are inescapably embedded within social contexts, it is because they are differentially positioned that their perspectives complement each other in a manner that generates knowledge and advances understanding. In that regard, one can envision knowledge generation as a fruit of the collective ‘conversation of humanity’\(^\text{31}\) (Bernstein, 1980). It is thus through the diversity of particular human experiences that we can generate an understanding of complex wholes that lie beyond the grasp of individuals. From a perspective that frames knowledge generation as a collective process, the value of diversity and difference cannot be underestimated. Indeed it is this diversity, when brought into honest and open dialogue, that serves as the engine for collective knowledge generation. As both Gadamer and Peirce stress, it is the negativity of experience that spurs us to sincere inquiry, and it is especially through our encounter with diversity that this process takes place. As a result, from this perspective, we are led not only to safeguard diversity, but indeed to prize it as part of the collective wealth of humanity that bears the latent promise of human advance.

Furthermore, because of the importance and high value placed on diversity from this perspective, the process of knowledge generation holds the promise of empowerment because, if learning and progress depend upon the dialogue of diverse viewpoints, then it would also entail the recognition that in that which we do not understand lies potentially hidden depths of knowledge that we may never have expected. Taking this realization seriously forefronts the fact that everyone has something important to contribute and that, as a result, we must refrain from the all too common tendency to categorize and caricaturize others according to our own limited conceptions and simplistic biases. In this way, the promise of empowerment can be actualized

\(^\text{31}\) While Bernstein actually employs the phrase “the conversation of mankind” I have chosen to employ the more gender neutral “conversation of humanity”.
because we consciously acknowledge that collective wellbeing is rooted in the empowerment and capacity building of the individual agent. In that respect, those who are unlike us (culturally, socially, personally… etc.) and who present us with a challenge cannot be reasonably seen as a problem, but rather as a valuable claim to truth who can serve us in the development of our understanding and learning. To think in this manner is to entirely abandon a dichotomous conception of us/them and instead affirm the unity of humanity in a profound and important sense. It is to recognize that the collective wellbeing of humanity is fundamentally predicated upon individual learning and that, in the growth and development of the individual, we are all beneficiaries.

This perspective furthermore entails that, as embedded agents, an important feature of our learning is a sincere awareness of our finitude. Our understandings are always necessarily provisional. This cannot be thought of as a nuisance, but rather simply as a property of our being in the world that, once accepted, can serve us to gain maximally from our experiences. The sign of this realization is a profound humility in the face of the unknown. To recognize one’s finitude is to forefront the latent pedagogical potential of the unknown and to see in others a wealth of valuable experiences. It entails the emergence of a disposition of epistemic humility that serves to forefront, both in the individually and collectively, ingenuous curiosity and safeguards the process of inquiry from the threat of dogmatic oversimplification (Freire, 1998). Such humility is not simply laudable, but an internal requisite for transformative learning. Without it we are inclined to understand things, not as they may actually be, but as we want or expect them to be. We are inclined to impose our preconceptions on things without due regard for the complexity of reality as it is and reify our intellectual constructions. In such acts, we risk shutting the door to further potential learning and risk succumbing to the dogmatic spirit. Sincere humility serves as a safeguard against such dogmatism.
c. Knowledge & Practice

Our embeddedness further implies something important about how we acquire knowledge. We develop embedded within social contexts that are structured according to particular assumptions and beliefs, and it is largely though our practical immersion within these social environments that our latent beliefs and assumptions take shape and that we master the practical logic of these environments. This is one of the implications of both Peirce, and Gadamer’s account of the practicality of knowledge when understood in the light of our situatedness (Gadamer, 2004, Peirce, 1905, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). This aspect of our embeddedness bears significantly on our learning. Learning is both a practical and intellectual effort and yet as it has become common, owing to the widely held modern/Cartesian perspective on human agency, to conceptualize learning as a rational enterprise alone. As a result, we neglect the formative importance of practical experience at great cost. As beings that are rooted to a world of action, we cannot justifiably conceptualize knowledge separately from action. Knowledge and action exist together in an inextricable relationship and cannot be taken separately. While knowledge is the basis for action, it is also generated and altered through action. In that sense they mutually constitute one another (they are relational concepts). Yet, by adopting the ‘rational actor’ theory of human agency that derives from the modern/Cartesian philosophical perspective, this practical and unconscious dimension of knowledge acquisition is fundamentally obscured. It is this oversight which has become a cardinal property of how we conceptualize knowledge in educational contexts and as a result, knowledge fails to achieve its empowering promise (which can only be achieved through its application), and rather becomes a static and ossified set of ideas that students must internalize for some abstract notion of success later in life.
2. Relational ontology, Linguistic Construction and Social Transformation

a. Knowledge & a Relational Ontology

In chapter 1 of this work, I advanced the argument that contemporary philosophy has been, throughout the modern era, animated by an ontological substance bias that tends to foreground the static properties of objects of inquiry and, in doing so, overlook the relational contexts within which such ‘objects’ are situated. An important outcome that has been normalized through this ontological lens has been the tendency to both naturalize and reify conceptual entities, and to act on them as though they were essentially real. But in doing so, the reflexive awareness of the constructed nature of intellectual conceptions is largely lost. This reifying tendency is rooted in the tacit acceptance that substances constitute the basic constituents of reality, which implies that the more abstract, but equally significant, relations that constitute ‘objects’ are denigrated within our thought and treatment of reality. As a result, it has become commonplace to treat intellectual constructions as reified, natural and immutable entities which serves to insulate them against revision.

However, by advancing the relational ontology that has been articulated throughout this work, this reifying tendency becomes difficult, if not impossible, to sustain. We live in a world that is profoundly relational in two important ways. First, in our relationship with the ‘objects’ of our experience. Our experiential background prejudicially inclines us to encounter ‘objects’ in a particular way. What this means is that understanding is a relationship rooted in our past cognitive and intellectual experiences. As embedded agents, we develop within social and

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32 For example, one can think of the challenge that the concept of ‘race’ poses. Generally it is assumed that ‘race’ denotes a biological difference when indeed race is actually a socially constructed category rooted in physical parameters that differentiate human beings. Nevertheless it is so deeply entrenched in our social world that people act on it as though it were real and in doing so make it real. Nevertheless, we can learn to think and act differently.
historical contexts that are laden with meanings and assumptions. Our immersion within such contexts furnishes us with “biases of openness to the world” (Gadamer, 2008, p. 9) that we thus tacitly employ in our daily lives as a means of orienting ourselves to the world. These tacit biases incline us to see the world and the ‘objects’ of our experiences in a manner that, to a certain degree, situate their meaning to us. Indeed, what the symbolic construction of reality, earlier addressed, implies is that we cannot experience the world in a pure and natural manner. Rather, our experience of the world is always mediated by a wealth of past experiences and constructed meanings that we have actively, yet tacitly, acquired and recreated over the course of our lives.

By foregrounding a relational ontology, we thus problematize the possibility of envisioning the world as an ‘external object’ that presents itself to us in a straightforward manner. As a result, such a relational perspective implies a reflexive disposition towards knowledge acquisition. That is because, with the realization that we are implicated in the observational process, we are compelled, if our goal is to truly learn about reality, to seriously reflect on how our implicit assumptions and prejudices frame our understandings and incline us to particular ways of seeing and being in the world.

A second implication of a relational ontology pertains to the nature of things themselves. Within the traditional ‘substance ontology’, objects exist statically and our knowledge of them consists of understanding their essential and unchanging properties. However, from a relational perspective, we are moved to conceptualize reality differently. We live in a world that is fundamentally characterized by change (or processes). This is best exemplified by Peirce who foregrounds evolution as one of the fundamental attributes of reality (CP 1.173). To place process at the centre of our understanding of reality, we are compelled to move away from a notion of understanding that entails immutable knowledge. If the ‘objects’ of our experience are actually more aptly characterized as elements of a shifting web of meanings, we are thus moved
to realize that understanding can be likened to a snapshot which, while completely accurate, is likely to become less accurate as the world changes. This fact explains the central importance that Peirce placed on experimentalism because if our knowledge is inclined to err over time, we must develop a disposition of inquiry that seeks to understand the world as it changes. In our effort to articulate the educational significance of this vision, we can equally claim that learning requires this same disposition because if our conceptions of reality become ossified and unchanging, we once again run the risk of closing the door to further understanding and growth.

b. Symbolic Construction & Social Transformation

In this thesis, I have developed my argument in order to advance a particular claim: that the ‘sea change’ in contemporary philosophy has profound educational implications because it advances a way of conceptualizing human existence that foregrounds the educational quality of all experience and that indeed places this educational element at the centre of human progress and wellbeing. In this section, I will articulate how another aspect of that sea change, the symbolic construction/mediation of reality, when considered in the light of embedded agency, offers a means of understanding education as the basis of personal and social transformation.

As agents embedded within formative social and historical contexts, we tacitly acquire a linguistic worldview which inclines us to be in the world in a particular way. But we are not simply like passive wax that is moulded by the external environment. We are, rather, active in the acquisition of a linguistic worldview. We do not acquire our worldview in simply a rationally calculating manner, but once again through our practical active immersion within the social world. We internalize social reality through action and, in action actualize a particular vision of the world. In this light, human development can be regarded as the mastery (both practically and conceptually) of the way of being in the world that characterizes a particular social world. It is
through such development and socialization processes that we are exposed to a linguistic/symbolic order which serves as the basis for our being in the world, and which we thus reproduce in our learning and action. In that sense, we are not passive in our learning but rather, in the process of our development, we are actively recreating the world in which we have developed (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

This understanding of human agency carries with it immense implications that are widely overlooked in popular conceptions of human agency today. If we are, indeed, active agents implicated in both the production and reproduction of the social/symbolic order to which we belong, then our capacity for transformative action is indeed far more present than we may think. From this perspective, transformative action is perpetually within our grasp in every aspect of our lives. That is because, if we take part in both the production and reproduction of our symbolic order, then we, in fact, possess the capacity to partake in its piecemeal transformation. This capacity, however, is latent since it depends upon our ability to see the constructed nature of what we assume to be ‘normal’. It is thus a capacity that is actualized by the cultivation of a reflexive disposition oriented towards understanding both our social world and our own implicated involvement it.

According to Gadamer, it is through language “that man has a world at all” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 440, his emphasis) and it is through language that the world is revealed to us. And yet, the verbal constitution of the world is far from meaning that man’s relationship to the world is imprisoned within a verbally schematized environment. On the contrary, wherever language and men exist, there is not only a freedom from the pressure of the world, but this freedom from the environment is also a freedom in relation to the names that we give things, as stated in the profound account in Genesis, according to which God gave Adam the authority to name creatures. (ibid, p. 441)

We encounter the world through language and, as a result, it is always linguistically mediated for us. But this aspect of our experience also entails that we are capable of re-naming or reframing
the meaning of experiences that we encounter. This does not entail that our knowledge of the world is arbitrary, and can thus be rearranged however we want, but simply that experiences and learning might serve as a means to fundamentally shift how we know, name, and thus act in, the world. The diverse potential of the linguistic construction of reality is most evident in the fact that human reality is composed of numerous linguistic worldviews, each of which engender a different way of being in the world and which culminate in the production and reproduction of a particular, and rather unique, world.

Practically speaking, this realization implies that through the reflexive awareness of our own implicit language/worldview and the intentional encounter with different language/worldviews and ways of being in the world, we begin to broaden the realm of possibilities that the future can hold. Rather than simply reproduce what we assume to be ‘normal’, we establish the possibility of acting according to a different logic thus potentially engendering a different world of experience. In this light, we currently possess the capacity to both envision and enact the world differently than how it currently exists. But if we fail to see this, we then assume social reproduction to be a property of social reality itself and cannot see our own implicated agency. We become static subjects of a social world. However, this need not be our fate. By acquiring new ways of seeing and naming the world, we can foster dispositions that actualize our transformative potential.

While to some such transformation might seem rather meagre, it is only because our current conceptions of social transformation generally accept and employ a dichotomous rupture between individuals and society where social transformation tends to take place within society through immediate revolutionary change. Indeed, this conception of social change is immensely problematic, not only because it employs a reified concept of the society, and fails to recognize the relational bond that exists between individual and society. More problematically, such
notions of social transformation are ultimately and profoundly disempowering. By framing social change as a property of some abstract reified system or social order alone, the transformative potential of human action described above is obscured and the possibilities of social change become a matter of happenstance that the individual can have no part in.

This disconnect between individual agency and social change serves to sustain the faulty notion that education simply serves for personal gain. However, from the philosophical perspective articulated throughout this work, personal and social transformation take place together through active learning which, by rendering visible the latent transformative possibilities of everyday experience, can foster dispositions that enact and recreate the world of experience in a radically different light. This is the promise of our reflexive agency, but it cannot be achieved if we hold fast to the faulty assumption that learning is merely an individual enterprise. We posses an unknown wealth of transformative capacity and it is in the interest of all to realize that and share such a realization with others. This is the task of pedagogy today.
Conclusion:

In this thesis, I have offered an analysis of two major themes in the work of Charles Sanders Peirce and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Both Peirce and Gadamer foreground situated agency and the symbolic/linguistic construction of reality (which is an instance of what I have called a relational process ontology) and I have illustrated how, when taken together, these two insights offer a particular way of understanding human agency and educational experience as inherently transformational. This perspective on human agency is presented in contrast to the modern/Cartesian perspective which, as I argued, employs a static notion of human agency and frames learning as observational which implies that, in learning, we are not creating but simply internalizing. From the perspective offered in this work, learning cannot be thought of in this manner. Instead, learning is a supremely creative enterprise within which we either serve to reproduce or transform the social world of which we are a part.

To understand human agency as embedded agency helps us forefront the inextricable and indeed necessary formative influence of the social world (which is informed by a particular language/worldview) on our own personal thought and actions. In light of our embedded agency, the generally held rational actor theory of human agency becomes highly problematic because it leads us to neglect the significant impact that our social world has on us and to assume, instead, that we are entirely the product of our own decisions and efforts. This normalizes the disposition to treat social problems as problems that exist ‘out there’ and that have little to do with us. But from a perspective that foregrounds our embeddedness, we are confronted with the idea that we are immersed within such social systems and that as a result take part in their constitution. In other words, as embedded agents developing within structured social worlds, we practically acquire the dispositions of our social context and in everyday life take part in the reproduction and actualization of that social context.
This realization has us forefront the *active* quality of our agency because we do not exist in the world statically. The social world is sustained as it is through human conduct. It retains an air of immutability not because it is immutable, but rather because we fail to see its constructed quality and our implicated role in its construction. Still, although we may not realize it, we are *always* actively implicated in the creation and reproduction of our social world. But by affirming the split between self and social, we are not inclined to see social problems as personally relevant, even though we are unwittingly complicit in their reproduction. When we neglect this active quality of our agency, we come to think of ourselves in a rather disempowering light. Wrongfully assuming that the social world is insusceptible to our agency, we come to think of ourselves passively and, as a result, the transformative promise of our creative agency is seriously compromised.

It is here that education becomes the key to both personal and social transformation because, in the process of acquiring and generating knowledge, we are afforded the opportunity to not only understand the world in which we live, but ourselves as instantiations of that world. In that regard, all learning entails both inner (personal) and outer (social) transformation because, in coming to understand the social world, and ourselves within it, we can begin to foster dispositions that serve to recreate the world of our experience along new, and more just, lines.
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