

## Teaching the Between: Hirsch, Heidegger, and Peirce

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Since the publication of *Cultural Literacy*, E.D. Hirsch has advocated for employing schools in the service of cultivating and transmitting an American cultural identity.<sup>1</sup> His recently published book *American Ethnicity: A Sense of Commonality*, reiterates that “acquiring American literacy depends upon gaining American ethnicity.”<sup>2</sup> He explains that, because becoming literate is inextricable from cultural familiarity, teaching reading, without also teaching cultural norms, popular trends, and historical references, is a frivolous project. The explicit transmission of “shared background knowledge”<sup>3</sup> should therefore be concomitant with reading instruction. Pointing to data from his Core Knowledge Foundation,<sup>4</sup> Hirsch claims that this method results in higher test scores and greater economic opportunity through higher literacy rates.<sup>5</sup>

Though academic critiques of Hirsch are already plentiful,<sup>6</sup> I argue that, because the timing of his latest publication coincides with the passage of “patriotic civics education” bills in states such as Florida, Texas, Oklahoma, and Georgia, Hirsch’s philosophy of education deserves further scrutiny.<sup>7</sup> While a direct link between Hirsch and civics education bills cannot be drawn, it is evident that a rhetorical commonality exists between them. Florida governor Ron DeSantis, for example, claims that

If we did a better job of doing civics education, I don’t think we’d have as many divisions in our country that we have. If you don’t have a common understanding of our constitutional structure, of our founding principles, it makes it a lot harder to agree on different types of issues.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Oklahoma legislators recently established an advisory committee “to promote patriotic education and increase awareness of Oklahoma values.”<sup>9</sup> In Arizona, House Bill 2008 lists, under the heading “competency requirements,” “a comparative discussion of political ideologies, such as communism and to-

talitarianism, that conflict with the principles of freedom and democracy that are essential to the founding principles of the United States.”<sup>10</sup>

Hirsch’s non-profit Core Knowledge Foundation pre-dates these initiatives by more than three decades and omits the overt partisan gestures that accompany the political maneuvers of politicians with national or presidential aspirations. Marketing itself as advancing “excellence and equity in education” with a concern for empowerment, democracy, and closing the racial gap in job opportunities, the Core Knowledge Foundation sells ready-made curriculum materials, accompanied by suggested benchmarks to align the appropriate information with the corresponding grade level. With hundreds of schools worldwide already using the Core Knowledge curriculum, known as “The Sequence,” the program is well-situated to appeal to all ends of the American political spectrum.<sup>11</sup> It would therefore be an easy mistake to misidentify Hirsch’s project as something *other* than, or not *also*, a “civics education program” of the sort promulgated in the states previously mentioned.

Utilizing universalist conceptions of language and rationality from Martin Heidegger and C.S. Peirce, I analyze Hirsch’s “cultural literacy” on the basis of the ontological ground of the “common.” I provide an overview of Hirsch’s argument in *American Ethnicity* before explaining Heidegger’s philosophy of language and Peirce’s notion of “energizing reasonableness.” I argue that Hirsch relies on a conceptual restriction of language such that cultural and linguistic differences constitute preventative barriers to meaningful interaction. An ontological examination of language and rationality suggests that these cultural differences are grounded in a more originary, universal experience of finitude.

### HIRSCH, PATRIOTISM, AND EDUCATION

Hirsch begins by explaining what he sees to be the pertinent problems facing schools in the U.S: economic and educational inequality, political disunity, and a decline in patriotism.<sup>12</sup> “*The* central purpose of modern elementary school,” he writes, is “to impart to every young citizen the national ethnicity.”<sup>13</sup> The “developmental, child-centered individualism” endemic to “early education” weakens “the emotion of allegiance and commitment to one’s co-ethnic

group,” resulting in tribalism caused primarily by an inability to communicate effectively.<sup>14</sup> He therefore holds that literacy deficits contribute to growing partisanship and inequality. For Hirsch, because “in human speech . . . much always remains unstated,”<sup>15</sup> effective communication and mutual understanding are not guaranteed to follow *ipso facto* from mouthing the same syllables and deciphering the same symbols. To use Hirsch’s example, “if people in our culture tend to agree that a robin is more typical than a pheasant in the bird category, it is likely that, all other things being equal, they will think of a robin-sort-of-creature when they hear the word bird.”<sup>16</sup> If we substitute “the bird is sitting in the bush on my porch” with “the robin is sitting in the bush on my porch,” the intended meaning of the sentence, in Hirsch’s example, is preserved. If we instead mistakenly replace “bird” with “penguin,” the meaning is significantly altered, and our assumptions, built from our background knowledge, are proven incorrect. Effective communication of the *meaning* of the sentence “the bird is sitting in the bush on my porch” therefore requires, for Hirsch, that the sentence’s addressees all possess the same ethnicity.<sup>17</sup> Though this example is seemingly benign, Hirsch points out that these “exemplars or prototypes of category words” become more urgent in the case of a fire, a policy proposal, or a legal dispute.<sup>18</sup>

As a condition of *effective* literacy, then, a further requirement must be met: the early and explicit transmission of a standardized canon of background knowledge.<sup>19</sup> Absent this condition, new readers will inevitably have trouble even with simple sentences like “the bird is sitting in the bush on my porch.” The reader, ignorant of cultural conventions, might associate any number of plausible, but incorrect, referents to these nouns,<sup>20</sup> rendering their communication with other, more informed students ineffective and misleading. Such misunderstandings, according to Hirsch, result in lower test scores, decreased job opportunities, and economic inequality. He argues that this neutral, unavoidable feature of language is exacerbated by pedagogical initiatives that deemphasize the direct role of the teacher in favor of a child-centered approach. To mitigate the possibility of misapprehension inherent to language, students need explicit contextualization of word meanings and cultural norms.<sup>21</sup>

Hirsch's project is thus a political one. In addition to reducing inequality, he aims to "constrain our instinctive narrow sub-tribal allegiances with a broader *national* tribalism," such that the USA can "flourish in a dangerous and competitive world."<sup>22</sup> He is careful, however, to qualify his argument as one not beholden to nationalism. He endorses, for example, the notion of "biculturalism," the possession of both a "culture of the home" and a "culture of the school."<sup>23</sup> While "the equal validity of all cultures" is not in question, however, the *exclusive* interest in cultural equality "change[s] the subject away from *income equality and equal citizenship*."<sup>24</sup> He would, in other words, be willing to sacrifice cultural equality in favor of a hegemonic culture, assuming that the culture in question facilitates effective communication.

#### HEIDEGGER, LANGUAGE, NOTHINGNESS

An uncritical observer might, after a superficial reading of Peirce and Heidegger, conclude that both would be sympathetic with Hirsch's *cultural literacy*. Heidegger was, after all, a German nationalist, exposing himself as such during the 1930s in speeches about "blood and soil."<sup>25</sup> Peirce, on the other hand, was concerned with establishing a firm ground for the scientific method, and for making inquiry efficient and productive, an ideal which Hirsch, too, professes to value. These associations would, however, be wrongheaded. First, though one might interpret Hirsch's project as an elevation of the educational and existential importance of language, a comparison with Heidegger's phenomenological analysis of language suggests that Hirsch, rather than over-valuing, instead *under*-values language.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger outlines the ontological predicates of what he refers to as *dasein* (the type of being of human beings as the "being there" of the world). One of these predicates is "discourse."<sup>26</sup> In the ontological sense, discourse is the way in which the world, the totality of meaningful references, expresses or discloses itself, or the way in which the world is always already "communicated" to, for, and by *dasein*.<sup>27</sup> Humans are therefore beings for whom discourse is an essential characteristic; *dasein* exists as a discoursing being. Languages are made possible by the more originary ontological discourse as "the articulation of the intelligibility of the there."<sup>28</sup> Because *dasein's* existen-

tial characteristics form a referential whole, understanding how this originary articulation works requires a concomitant understanding of the ontological predicates Heidegger refers to as “attunement,” and “understanding.”

With the term attunement, Heidegger is attempting to capture the way in which humans are always already in a *mood*, “surrendered to the world” such that things in the world have significance. “Initially,” Heidegger explains, “we never hear noises and complexes of sound, but the creaking wagon, the motorcycle.”<sup>29</sup> Our perceptions, even those that are vague, are always already taken *as* something significant and intelligible. Even when listening to foreign languages, “we initially hear *unintelligible* words, and not a multiplicity of tone data.”<sup>30</sup> Understanding, on the other hand, is characterized by the possibilities that beings have in their significance.<sup>31</sup> *Dasein* understands, in the ontological sense, how (or that) things work, and that they can be put to use in any number of their contingent possibilities.

To summarize, where discourse characterizes the way in which the world is articulated, attunement explains that the articulations are always meaningful, and understanding captures the way in which these significantly articulated things carry multiple possible interpretations. Through these ontological characteristics, Heidegger characterizes language as an originary, existential communicability, such that interacting with and in the world constitutes the basic, homeostatic state of existence for human beings. Language, in other words, has always already taken place, such that it does not, as Hirsch seems to hold, first need to be acquired for communication to be possible.

Heidegger’s ontological analysis also avoids the notion, put forth by Hirsch, that linguistic and cultural barriers are exclusionary hindrances to communication and meaningful interaction. Heidegger’s concept of *mitsein*, or *being-with*, for example, is another existential predicate that captures the fact that *dasein* is never a closed-off “internal” consciousness over and against an “outside” world. In everyday existence, *dasein* encounters other beings, and specifically other *daseins*, as occupying the same surrounding world in which one finds oneself. If we exist in the same, shared world that is always already articulated and significant, then the argument that language disparities hinder

meaningful communication is, at best, tenuous.

Heidegger's account of authenticity and its relation to the world provides further evidence against Hirsch's claim. An authentic comportment to, with, and in the world "participate[s] in a disclosive being-toward what is talked about in discourse."<sup>32</sup> *Dasein*, in this case, will discover and communicate beings and their being, or the way in which they exist, both by experiencing them firsthand and by investigating their ontological foundations. This use of language is externalist, such that we "relate to things in the world and not to mere mental representations of them."<sup>33</sup> "Idle talk," however, which Heidegger labels an inauthentic comportment, refers to a common, "average intelligibility," in which things are "understood without...turning toward what is talked about."<sup>34</sup> "Idle talk" speaks in the language of reified mental representations and approximations, without bothering to scrutinize commonly held beliefs. Authenticity, on the other hand, maintains a relationship with things themselves in their myriad potentialities.

The authentic comportment reveals, as Daniel Dahlstrom explains, both "the world *and* our way of being in it."<sup>35</sup> The "and" in Dahlstrom's explanation means that authenticity, in addition to knowing beings and their web of relations, also understands the temporal contingency of our way of being-in-the-world. Authentic *dasein* understands, in other words, that our existential potentialities do not begin and end in our own circumscribed existence. Heidegger associates this radical contingency with finitude and nothingness, for, if we are to avoid unknowable metaphysical claims, we must acknowledge that, as far as we know, death is permanent, and our ways of life will eventually be nonexistent. Authenticity therefore reveals that things and ways of being-in-the-world have no ultimate, eternal foundation. "Thrust" toward the "nothingness of the world," authentic *dasein* is precluded from grounding their being in worldly things and endeavors.<sup>36</sup> The realization that existence is finite is, in other words, a bell that cannot be unrung, and, once realized, the meanings attached to present ways of being are no longer taken for granted but must be constructed anew. In contrast to the inauthentic forgetfulness of finitude, authenticity forces one to confront and appropriate one's *own* essential potential—the nothingness of—death in

such a way that one can engage in pursuits with a more “sober understanding of the basic factual possibilities.”<sup>37</sup> Heidegger is suggesting that, though the available possibilities are limited, one can, with an authentic comportment, carry them out with a more critical understanding. An inauthentic, neoliberal comportment, for example, might take corporate slogans at face value, refrain from scrutinizing orders, and equate its entire identity with the dictates of a prefabricated, unexamined way of being. An authentic comportment, on the other hand, because it recognizes the finite contingency of our economic and political system, would question the motivations and veracity of rules and processes, look beyond the banality of day-to-day tasks, and construct an identity on its own terms.

Meaningful ways of being are, then, not reliant on ethnic norms or things at all, but from the lack of ground constitutive of being. Language, too, receives its being from this lack. If discourse, for Heidegger, is the ontological articulation of things in the world, then the “gap” that persists *between* the referentially whole world and discursively articulated things *in* the world is constitutive of language.<sup>38</sup> Worlds *are* to the extent that things “have a bearing” on humans, and to the extent that humans are “concerned” with things *in* the world.<sup>39</sup> Said differently, the world “worlds” through the everyday activities of humans, through the ways in which humans interact with “things” *in* the world, which are things only by virtue of the worldly, referential meanings which they entail. “The intimacy of world and thing,” Heidegger explains, “obtains only where the intimate—world and thing—divides itself.”<sup>40</sup> That world is not things, and that things are not world, is the condition of the possibility of their reciprocal completion of each other. Heidegger refers to this difference between world and thing as *language* because it provides the spacing that allows objects to be significant. Language is therefore an ontological feature of the world, though one that is grounded in a lack. Heidegger argues that human languages must be predicated on this more originary ontological gap, for if the world did not first become amenable to us, then “we could not use one single word of language.”<sup>41</sup> This nothingness, as a universal feature of existence, exists not within, but between cultures and languages. Because the nothingness is productive of critical, investigatory ways

of being, it constitutes a sort of universal public, from which existence draws a common meaning. Put simply, finitude and contingency are universal aspects of existence in which specific existences participate to cultivate authentic ways of being. Hirsch, by advocating for the direct instruction of specific ethnic norms, leaves this public unacknowledged. He therefore widens, rather than narrows, the linguistic gap between ethnicities, guaranteeing that teachers and students remain confined to inauthentic, idle talk.

### PEIRCE'S ENERGIZING REASONABLENESS

Though Hirsch claims to be providing practical solutions with tangible results, his is a version of “pragmatism” that would be foreign to Peirce. Where Hirsch would place social stability and political unity as priorities, Peirce argues that doing so “would retard the progress of science.”<sup>42</sup> “The only desirable object which is quite satisfactory in itself without any ulterior reason for desiring it,” Peirce argues, “is the reasonable itself.”<sup>43</sup> Motivations such as “social stability,” which Peirce characterizes as narrowly-concealed patriotism, are short-sighted, and no better than arguments from authority.<sup>44</sup> He acknowledges that lamentations over the dissipation of historical cultures is at least partially warranted, for maintaining social authority and stability leads to more peaceful societies.<sup>45</sup> This sort of cultural stability also, however, stultifies the doubt and curiosity that arise from the realization that people “in other countries and in other ages have held to very different doctrines,” and that our (often unexamined) beliefs arise from accidents of space and time.<sup>46</sup> Even if the “social” qualification were to be expanded to include all of humanity, Peirce wryly observes, “the human species will be extirpated sometime; and when the time comes the universe will, no doubt, be well rid of it.”<sup>47</sup> The perpetuation or prosperity of humanity is therefore disqualified as an “ultimate” end of inquiry. Furthermore, the factors that result in social stability are so varied, and require so many assumptions, as to be virtually unknowable, and therefore cannot be part of a systematic, precise methodology.<sup>48</sup> How, for example, are we to define “stability?” Are we to assume that the “social” is also easily identifiable?

Peirce’s “pragmatic maxim” precludes consideration of such inconsequential, unknowable hypotheses. Cheryl Misak explains that the pragmatic



maxim, because it is concerned with consequences, renders illegitimate all “hypotheses which have no consequences...for they assert nothing that can conflict with the way things are.”<sup>49</sup> Said differently, pragmatism requires that hypotheses, when put to the test, must have consequences that accord with the type of claim they put forward. An ontological or metaphysical claim about the world, for example, should have experiential, observational consequences to qualify as a valid hypothesis. A logical claim ought to have consequences for how one reasons. Pragmatism, put simply, requires that the consequences of valid hypotheses have some bearing on how one acts; if a hypothesis merely alters one’s beliefs with no consequences for observation, reason, or action, then that hypothesis is inconsequential and pragmatically invalid. A hypothesis that is unknowable is also inconsequential, and is therefore also disqualified.

Peirce acknowledges that “different men [sic] think the same fact in different ways.”<sup>50</sup> He thus agrees with Hirsch that different languages and cultures interpret facts differently, which should prevent us from assuming “on those grounds that a given form of thought belongs to every intelligent being.”<sup>51</sup> Hirsch errs, however, in deducing from such cultural differences that a linguistic or rational barrier exists between them. “Thinking a fact in a different way,” Peirce explains, “will not alter its value as a premise or as a conclusion.”<sup>52</sup> Interpreting a fact in a culturally particular way does not, in other words, abolish the “factness” of a fact. When comparing different propositions, the inquirer must consider what practical consequences are being expressed, beyond the cultural appropriation of them. Explaining Peirce’s pragmatic universalism, Susan Haack observes that *all* cultures infer causes from effects, and seek to provide “explanatory stories to accommodate their experience.”<sup>53</sup> Facts therefore “stand unmoved by whatever you or I or any man or generations of men may opine about them.”<sup>54</sup>

Furthermore, Humans are in a necessary relation to “facts” such that the consequences of our actions *with* the world suggest the existence of an “external permanency.”<sup>55</sup> Our actions, for example, have consequences which have empirical, tangible effects *in* the world, and can be tested similarly across disparate cultures. The fact that inquiry is a universal, and consequential mode of

being suggests humans live not behind cultural moles and drawbridges, difficult to surmount. Rather, that inquiry *is* such a possibility “proves that there is an energizing reasonableness that shapes phenomena in some sense, and that this same working reasonableness has moulded [sic] the reason of man [sic] into something like its own image.”<sup>56</sup> Laws and generalities are not pieced together *post facto* through an “external,” “mental” imposition, but are rather experienced, “habituated” characteristics *both* of the world *and* of humanity reciprocally. Human reason is therefore “akin to the truth,” such that cross-cultural intelligibility, *pace* Hirsch, is always already a possibility; not something that must be produced *within* a culture, but *between* them.

### TEACHING AND LEARNING

The crux of the issue seems to be Hirsch’s uncritical attitude toward his stated goals of efficiency, stability, and equality. He assumes, apparently at face value, the efficacy of an economic and political system that creates and perpetuates the existence of educational and economic inequality. The solutions he offers to alleviate this inequality leave the overall system entirely intact, while implicitly placing the blame for political division and inequality on the presumed pedagogical inadequacy of schools and teachers. He offers, for example, to sell school districts a “sequence” of lesson plans, learning materials, and standards, the implementation of which will, purportedly, increase language learning and decrease educational achievement gaps. These resources are to replace the resources that were created by the teachers themselves. Hirsch therefore implies that these achievement gaps exist because of poor teaching, particularly of the Deweyan, student-centered sort. Hirsch assumes, further, that the linguistic-intelligibility gap exists merely *between* languages, ignoring the possibility that, to the extent that it exists at all, it might exist *within* them. Finally, Hirsch discounts the extent that *all* existence, particularly all *human* existence, is predicated on the same “wellspring of reality from which . . . fundamentally different languages arise.”<sup>57</sup> For Peirce, this “wellspring” consists of the energizing reasonableness inherent to the universe, and upon which our ability to predict and inquire is founded. For Heidegger, we share a common existence by virtue of the nothingness that precludes eternal meanings while making possible those that are

concrete, realistic, and free of inessential trivialities. Both Heidegger and Peirce depend upon an element of the unknown resulting from finitude. While this element for Heidegger should be obvious from my previous remarks, for Peirce it stems from the understanding that there are things which are unknown to us, which first makes inquiry possible.

I argue that this “wellspring of reality,” and the public nothingness essential to it, suggests that direct instruction, of the sort advocated for by Hirsch, is an ineffective and inauthentic pedagogical tool, particularly if the goal of education is authentic being-in-the-world which examines things as they exist, including their ontological foundations. Education of this sort would require that teachers work with students to unsettle commonly held “hearsay,” resist the presentist temptations to assume that existing potentialities are natural, and critically question all inconsequential, invalid hypotheses in favor of a more pragmatic form of inquiry. Properly speaking, teachers of this sort will not “teach” anything. An essential aspect of this “teaching” should be redirecting students toward the finite nothingness of existence, clearing away inconsequential concerns to make room for knowledge of existential import. Acknowledgement of the “nothing” of finitude, the “nothing” that makes inquiry possible, and the beings (including ourselves) that exist as a result of these “nothings,” illuminates the common “wellspring” that constitutes a shared experience, rather than a preventative barrier, between speakers of different languages. Institutional reification and transmission of a particular culture will be avoided, in favor of an investigation into that universal, common space from which different cultures and meanings arise. Concerns over intra-cultural, or intra-societal perpetuation and stability will thereby be replaced with inter-cultural or inter-societal collaboration and inquiry.

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