

# The Imagination Machine XXIII:

## The Semiotic Lens and the Justification Loop

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### Abstract

This paper develops a phenomenological grounding for the embedded epistemic framework of the Imagination Machine series. Beginning from a simple perceptual question—why do same-sized objects that are farther away appear smaller?—it establishes that the question itself only has meaning through the semiotics of consciousness, and that there is no view from nowhere, no Archimedean point outside of semiosis from which to grasp things in themselves. It then extends this observation to the problem of justification: the standard triad of faith, logic, and experience turns out to be not three alternatives but three aspects of a single recursively self-correcting loop. This loop—in which experience gives meaning to symbols, logic filters incoherent collections of belief, and faith commits to provisional closures that experience then tests—is the phenomenological form of the inference-implication loop. The paper makes no new formal claims. It describes what it is like to be inside the bubble.

## 1 Introduction

How are propositions ultimately justified? The question has three standard answers: through faith, through logic, or through experience. I want to argue that choosing any one of these options in isolation is misguided—not because the question is meaningless, but because the three cannot be separated. What appears to be a choice between three foundations turns out, on examination, to be a single recursive process in which each term presupposes and enables the others.

To see why, it helps to begin not with epistemology but with perception—with something as simple and immediate as the apparent size of objects at a distance.

## 2 The Semiotic Lens

Why do same-sized objects that are farther away appear smaller? Is it a consequence of the laws of physics, or is it an accident of my perceptual processing? Or is it impossible for me to know either way?

A naive response is that farther objects appear smaller because the light traveling from an object to the retina forms a cone, and farther objects subtend a lesser angle on the retina.

However, it seems that I could conceivably experience that same raw data of the photons subtending a lesser angle in my retina's receptive field as being objects of equal size but a different clarity, or some other distinction. In other words, an alien perception could operate and subjectively appear entirely differently. So in some sense, this particular appearance of order is an accident of my perceptual processing.

Even more strongly, the question itself only has meaning at all through the semiotics of my consciousness. For the reader who may not be familiar with this language, "semiotics" is the study of symbols and meaning-making. I'll next introduce some basic notions about symbols in order to clarify what I mean by "the semiotics of my consciousness."

A "symbol" as I mean it is composed of two interacting sub-parts: there is the signifier, such as a word (e.g. "arm"), and the signified, which is the actual physical process or processes referred to by the signifier (e.g. my actual arm). The meaning of the signifier—that is, the map from signifier to real, physical processes—is given by a particular brain or mind. What I mean, then, by "the semiotics of my consciousness" is how I lend meaning to symbols, such as "my arm."

Let's dive even further into the example of "my arm." To me, "my arm" refers to everything from the shoulder to the tips of the fingers. First, note that the description I have just given requires knowledge of the meaning of a series of other symbols, such as "shoulder," "fingers," as well as an intuitive understanding of the "from-to" relation. Second, one can easily imagine that to another person, "arm" could mean everything from the shoulder to the wrist, but not including the hand. This example illustrates how every symbol is embedded within a system of symbols, and meaning is assigned to them by a particular mind or brain.

Now, what does it mean that the question of why same-sized objects that are farther away appear smaller "only has meaning at all through the semiotics of my consciousness"? Well, for an object to be "farther" than another object at all refers to a third reference point to which one object is closer and the other farther, and to "appear smaller" necessitates a consciousness at that reference point to whom it appears at all. Finally, and significantly, it assumes the notion of an "object" that is in some sense stable and unified enough to be identifiable as one "thing" across time. So this question only makes sense through the semiotic lens of a consciousness that exists at a point or in a limited region of spacetime upon which stable-enough patterns in physical processes can impinge to impart abstract, object-oriented information.

Though we may now be tempted to say that the apparent fact that same-sized objects that are farther away appear smaller is an accident of perceptual processing, we must also acknowledge that our perceptual processing may itself be a consequence of the “true” laws of physics, or divine Logos, if such exists. For example, it could be that such perception is inevitable, given the reality of some general form of the theory of evolution by natural selection and the survival advantage of such an encoding of information—for example, that it allows us to recognize important spatial information about physical reality.

So then we are led to the conclusion that we cannot possibly know either way whether the apparent fact in question is due to the laws of physics or is an accident of our perceptual processing. The two are irrevocably linked through semiosis, the meaning-making process, itself.

Considering all of this, it seems to me that physics tells us how things go on; but not what goes on. “What goes on” is dependent on consciousness, on abstract, semiotic systems mapping that which in the language of physics may be called “spatiotemporal process” to symbols, or object-oriented, timeless representations.

In other words, to “be something” is to “be-something-to.” Physics can tell me how I move my arm, but never what “I” am or what “my arm” is, because those notions are situated within a semiotic system. “My arm” does not physically exist as such. It exists as “arm” only “semiotically,” with its meaning mediated by a particular consciousness.

This is of course not to say that physics is not helpful or useful—not at all—but it follows that there is not necessarily ontological privilege for the fundamental “objects” identified by physics. They also can be said to exist as such only semiotically.

Our perceptual experience is always already imbued with meaning—it is not a “raw” or “neutral” input that we then interpret, but comes to us pre-interpreted through learned categories and distinctions. The visual experience of size and distance is one example of this: we don’t just passively receive retinal images, but actively construct a meaningful, three-dimensional world of objects located in space.

This meaning-ladenness goes beyond specifically human modes of perception. The broader point is that any organism’s *Umwelt* or “lived world” is constituted through its particular ways of making meaning, its semiotic systems. For a bat, the world is primarily a soundscape of ultrasonic reflections; for a dog, a richly textured smellscape; for an electric fish, a field of electrical gradients.

Each organism inhabits a world of significance that is co-constructed through its embodied interactions and evolutionary history. There is no “view from nowhere,” no Archimedean point outside of semiosis from which to grasp “things in themselves.”

The human case is perhaps special in the degree to which our semiotic systems are flexible, open-ended, and mediated by language and culture. But the basic principle of the semiotic constitution of lived worlds applies across the board. Meaning and being are always entangled: ontology is always bound up with semiosis.

### 3 Faith, Logic, and Experience

Now the question of justification presents itself with new urgency. If there is no view from nowhere, if perception is always already semiotic, if ontology is always bound up with meaning-making—then how are propositions justified at all? I want to argue that no one of the standard answers provides ultimate justification on its own, and that the attempt to separate them reveals, instead, a single recursive loop.

#### Faith

By “faith,” I mean a commitment or effort to a belief, or a letting go of the question as to whether a particular proposition is justified. It is, in other words, taking a belief as the basis for action in one’s life, even without ultimate justification.

To say that everything is ultimately justified through faith may therefore be interpreted as meaning that there is no ultimate justification for any proposition to be found in logic or experience (or elsewhere), and that in the last analysis there is some leap of faith in relying on the truth of any proposition.

Faith as I have defined it here factors into human decision-making in essentially all its forms. In interpersonal relations, we (usually) have faith in the good intentions of our loved ones; in traveling we have faith in the soundness of our infrastructure; and in building technology we have faith in the best scientific understanding of our day.

The case for faith as ultimately necessary finds strong support in the Münchhausen trilemma. The trilemma proposes that the effort to ultimately justify any proposition must terminate with one of three unsatisfactory results: (1) the chain of justification terminates with foundational axioms that are dogmatic and not further justified; or (2) the chain of justification is infinite, with every truth having a prior justification; or (3) the chain of justification closes upon itself, producing logical circularity.

Unless this trilemma can be resolved, it seems that “buying in” to any proposition involves an unavoidable element of faith. And yet, this trilemma reveals that faith isn’t strictly speaking a “justification” in itself, but rather a necessary response to the problem of lacking the possibility of ultimate justification through logic and experience alone.

At the same time, faith is a relation between a person and an object of faith. Faith is only “faith-in-something,” and the object of faith is only knowable and evaluable at all through experience and logic.

#### Logic

While the Münchhausen trilemma suggests that there is an indispensable element of faith in believing any proposition, it does not follow that logic has no role in justification at all. Indeed, logic serves a crucial role, along with experience, as part of the framework by which

we decide what to have faith in at all.

Logic is essentially relational. It is not about the absolute truth of propositions themselves, but rather about how the truth value of different propositions relate. Propositions are in turn statements about hypothetical objects' properties and relations.

For example, logic allows us to say that if "all men are mortal," and if "Socrates is a man," then "Socrates is mortal." This is a statement about how the truth value of these statements relate: they all must be true together, or if the conclusion "Socrates is mortal" is false, then it must either be false that "all men are mortal" or that "Socrates is a man." Logic says nothing about whether "all men are mortal" or whether "Socrates is a man"; and as such it says nothing about whether "Socrates is mortal" in any absolute sense.

Indeed, the very meaning of the symbols above are not given in any eternal way. As established in the preceding section, those symbols are ultimately imbued with meaning by an individual consciousness. Objects with properties and relations are abstracted from the fundamentally processual nature of reality. They are unchanging representations that can be said to exist only "semiotically" or symbolically, as a stand-in for a dynamic underlying reality.

In particular, a collection of imaginations in our mind hypothetically maps at a given moment to a single "concept." For example, if I say, "grandmother," you could in principle imagine anything you can possibly imagine and each time say whether it is an instance of the concept "grandmother" or not. But your particular grandmother is or was a dynamic process, not a static, unchanging object.

The relational nature of logic and the role of consciousness in mapping processual reality to symbolic representation are often overlooked but are fairly obvious once one considers them.

The role of logic in justification, then, is to reveal clearly incompatible beliefs. For example, it is logic that allows one to say, "Whatever you mean by 'men', whatever you mean by 'Socrates,' and whatever you mean by 'mortal,' you cannot simultaneously hold that 'all men are mortal; Socrates is a man; and Socrates is immortal.'"

This is a way to make sure that any collection of beliefs is "playing by rules" that constitute it a coherent system of truths, rather than a collection of propositions with no consistent relations between them. Clearly, then, logic plays a key role in creating the "thing" or system of propositions in which one can have faith at all; but it does not provide ultimate justification of the content of propositions.

## **Experience**

It is through experience that symbols are imbued with meaning, and it is experience that gives feedback regarding our faith in systems of propositions. Indeed, faith and logic are themselves experiences or aspects of experience. So then we may be tempted to say that experience

provides the ultimate justification for propositions. However, providing the meaning of propositions and providing feedback regarding the efficacy of faith therein are not the same as “ultimate justification.”

To see why, consider how much our experience itself comes to us pre-processed by our concepts, or our “semiotic lens.” Our perceptions are already laden with meaning. For example, try to look at these words as symbols without simultaneously seeing the meaning or sound of the word; or even seeing it as a word. It is very difficult to do.

What this implies is that our logic and our other beliefs and assumptions color our experience itself. Experience is not raw data that we receive objectively, according to which we can decide in an absolute sense between propositions. Rather, there is a bootstrapping or recursion between experience giving meaning to symbols and symbols shaping experience itself. This process begins when we are very young, when for example a parent or guardian points to an image of a truck and repeats “truck,” and then we see a different vehicle and point to it ourselves and say, “Truck!” It doesn’t stop for our whole lives.

At the same time, experience gives us a point of contact with the rest of reality (the “not-me” or the “Other” in my usual parlance). Without experience to provide meaning to systems of logically related symbols, and without experience to give feedback on our commitment to such systems, the whole justification process makes no sense at all.

If experience is theory-laden, then there is some form of faith that colors experience; while logic filters out collections of incoherent propositions in order to exclude unhelpful objects of faith; and experience provides feedback on both our logical arguments and our articles of faith in order to recursively self-correct the whole process.

## 4 The Loop

What is the ultimate justification for the propositions that I have presented here? I can offer you none. But you can hopefully see that these propositions are logically coherent. Then you can choose to take these ideas on faith. If you do, they can color your experience. For example, once you see the fundamental difference between processual reality and its symbolic representation, or the theory-ladenness of experience itself, you may start to notice differences in your everyday experience. And the results of those changes in experience—perhaps the efficacy of your new beliefs, the way they make you feel, feedback from others—may lead you to reconsider your belief in its logical coherence or your faith in its truth. This may lead you to dialogue: to clarify what was meant by one thing or another, since meaning is ultimately ascribed to these symbols by an individual consciousness.

This process highlights how meaning-making and belief-formation are fundamentally dialogical, pragmatic, and recursively error-correcting without providing ultimate, unassailable justification.

Where does this leave us? What does it mean that justification is a recursively self-

correcting and dialogical process involving provisional faith, logic, and experience, rather than an ultimate “yes or no” status granted by experience alone?

It encourages us to engage actively in this process of belief formation and meaning-making, in the knowledge of what we are doing. It is also to adopt a stance of intellectual humility. This allows us to meet others in a spirit of genuine intellectual curiosity, with the potential for our minds to be changed. It also encourages collaboration and diversity in institutions of meaning-making and belief formation, such as higher education.

All things considered, it strikes me as best to proceed with humility and commitment to the project of developing systems of symbols and propositions that provisionally represent reality in ways that better allow us to navigate life collaboratively and dialogically. That’s what we’re doing anyway.