Ultimate Logical Interpretant

1907 | Pragmatism | CP 5.475-6

…the problem of what the "meaning" of an intellectual concept is can only be solved by the study of the interpretants, or proper significate effects, of signs. [—]

In advance of ascertaining the nature of this effect, it will be convenient to adopt a designation for it, and I will call it the *logical interpretant*, without as yet determining whether this term shall extend to anything beside the meaning of a general concept, though certainly closely related to that, or not. Shall we say that this effect may be a thought, that is to say, a mental sign? No doubt, it may be so; only, if this sign be of an intellectual kind – as it would have to be – it must itself have a logical interpretant; so that it cannot be the *ultimate* logical interpretant of the concept. It can be proved that the only mental effect that can be so produced and that is not a sign but is of a general application is a *habit-change*; meaning by a habit-change a modification of a person's tendencies toward action, resulting from previous experiences or from previous exertions of his will or acts, or from a complexus of both kinds of cause. It excludes natural dispositions, as the term "habit" does, when it is accurately used; but it includes beside associations, what may be called "transsociations," or alterations of association, and even includes *dissociation*, which has usually been looked upon by psychologists (I believe mistakenly), as of deeply contrary nature to association.

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I do not deny that a concept, or general mental sign, may be a logical interpretant; only, it cannot be the ultimate logical interpretant, precisely because being a sign, it has itself a logical interpretant. It partakes somewhat of the nature of a verbal definition, and is very inferior to *the living definition that grows up in the habit*. Consequently, the most perfect account of a concept will consist in a description of the habit it will produce; and how otherwise can a habit be described than by a general statement of the kind of action it will give rise to under described circumstances?

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It is evident that a definition, even if it be imperfect owing to vagueness, is an intellectual interpretant of the term it defines. But it is equally evident that it cannot be the *ultimate* intellectual interpretant, inasmuch as it is itself a sign, and a sign of the kind that has itself an intellectual interpretant, which is thereby an intellectual interpretant of the term defined. This consideration compels us to seek elsewhere than among signs, or among concepts, since they are all signs, for ultimate intellectual interpretants. This same consideration cuts off from searching among desires, expectations, etc., for ultimate intellectual interpretants, since such intellectual character as desires, etc., possess is due solely to their referring to concepts. At the same time, the ultimate intellectual interpretants must be some kind of mental effects of the signs they interpret. Now after an examination of all varieties of mental phenomena, the only ones I have been able to find that possess the requisite generality to

interpret concepts and which fulfill the other conditions are habits.