

Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Volume 3, Number 2

Who is Exaggerating? The Mystery of Common Sense

“The most difficult thing in the world to learn to see is the obvious, the familiar, the universally taken for granted.”¹ (John Dewey)

Throughout the history of Pragmatism, the notion of *common sense* has been recurrent, but rather than a central feature it seems to be an underlying, over the time changing, and indefinite motif, which nevertheless has unceasingly accompanied pragmatist thought. *common sense* has taken on a range of meanings, varying from vague beliefs, everyday-knowledge, common experience, sound understanding, good judgment, anachronistic truth, hidden intuition, custom and routine on the one hand to innate knowledge and universal truth on the other hand - just to name a few. To add some confusion, *common sense* has sometimes been located in the past, sometimes in the present or even in the future. It focuses either on epistemological, moral, or aesthetic questions. So, in a way, *common sense* touches almost all the philosophical fields and concerns pragmatism has ever embraced. What is the use of dealing with a notion at once so obvious and yet so vague? The insistence on a critical reconsideration of *common sense*, which I pursue in this essay, has to do with the general trajectory of pragmatism. While it contains many different and competing positions (some prefer to call pragmatism a method applicable to any kind of subject) all the varying pragmatist accounts have something in common: a strong resistance against philosophical exaggeration. Of course, the criterion applied to detect those philosophical exaggerations is a pragmatist one, namely, the validity of philosophy for practice, even if in a remote way.

In this essay I wish to show that *common sense* in pragmatist thought has functioned – and still functions – as a critical correction to the philosophical tendency of exaggeration (including certain exaggerated interpretations of *common sense* itself). However, it is important to underscore that the notion of *common sense* in pragmatism has not been conceived as a fixed entity with perennial contents. As the philosophical debates and their related contested issues have been changing from the early to the contemporary pragmatist thoughts, the contents of the related purported philosophical exaggerations have been changing as well. In consequence, different aspects of the postulated *common sense* have been emphasized. In fact, *common sense* itself might have undergone slight changes, a question to be discussed shortly at the end of this essay.

In the following pages I am going to outline the conceptions of *common sense* as a specific regulatory function in the philosophies of some central pragmatist figures. I shall trace the interpretation of *common sense* in the early pragmatism from Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, also discussing two contemporary pragmatists, the philosophies from Richard Rorty and Richard Shusterman. In comparing their diverse approaches, I am going to sketch a rough picture of *common sense* as a critical pragmatist voice, presenting some arguments for a careful revival of this controversial notion. In this inquiry, I will also show some aspects which mark the difference from the early to the so-called neo-pragmatists. Finally, I will summarize some promises and dangers implicated by a pragmatist account of

common sense:

The promise of *common sense* points at its potentiality as an almost regulative ideal, which at the same time is founded in a historical contingent community – a particular pragmatist notion, in fact getting close to the notion of *sensus communis*. In contrast, the danger of *common sense* lies in the tendency to simplify and trivialize philosophical issues – a prejudice often uttered against pragmatism. This reservation has been expressed repeatedly and points at the core of this philosophical dispute, which is: Who is exaggerating? Who is trivializing? There needs to be a critical examination, as to how far either of these criticisms on certain aspects of pragmatism are legitimate or not.

The Roots of Pragmatism

Before taking a closer view on the specific pragmatist positions, it will be helpful to give a short account on the philosophical background of *common sense* which has been consequential for pragmatism: The first philosopher who wrote explicitly on *common sense* was Thomas Reid in 1764. In his *Inquiry into the Human Mind*, he challenges philosophical scepticism which he sees galvanized by Cartesian philosophy and the ascent of modernist dualism. To assume that an individual should be capable of doubting the outer world through introspection opposes the “original principle of our constitution”². In opposition to Descartes, he claims a position of natural realism. While Descartes seeks certitude through universal doubts, Reid condemns this method as artificial. He states the evidence of *common sense*, instead of subjective certitude. That is, the ‘self-evident’ “is the province, and the sole province, of common sense.”³

„Thus the Wisdom of philosophy is set in opposition to the common sense of mankind. The first pretends to demonstrate a priori, that there can be no such things as a material world. (..) The last can conceive no otherwise of this opinion, than as a kind of metaphysical lunacy, and concludes that to much learning is apt to make man mad...”⁴

Reid sees *common sense* as an “amorphous body of ill-defined, yet self-evident principles which guide our judgment in the normal course of life.”⁵ These self-evident principles are not acquired through critical reflection – they are not, strictly speaking, knowledge, but instead instinct-like beliefs and innate to human nature. Reid’s philosophy has been exposed to severe criticism, most prominently by Kant, who, in his *Prolegomena*, accused him of having detected the scepticist problem of the empiricists without resolving it.⁶ Kant charges Reid and his successors (sometimes termed as the Scottish School) of having, by referring to *common sense*, only shunned the central task of analyzing human reason, postulating instead a notion that does not explain the core question, i.e. the condition of the possibility of knowledge.

Reid’s position eventually entails a metaphysics he cannot legitimize, as he asserts an unchanging human nature. In his account, human reason is unthinkable without *believing* in certain principles: The evidence of a persisting world, the evidence of an ego persisting over time, etc. Because he ascribes their origin to the nature of human beings, such evidences can neither be verified nor falsified. Thus Reid himself falls back under his criticism of ‘metaphysical lunacy’, as he does not consider the possible historical dynamic of *common sense* beliefs. He cannot give an explanation for the possible conflict of two differing claims based on *common sense*. There is only one innate and unchanging capacity of human beings as there is only one unchanging world, which human beings directly perceive. With this, Reid advocates a naive

sensualist realism, ultimately justified by the divine creator.⁷

But apart from his own exaggerations, some important ideas remain valid: there is a limitation to the transparency of human reason towards itself. The basis of beliefs rather remains opaque and the self is not capable of fully pervading its own assumptions. To a certain extent it is dependent on the empirical world. So to claim Cartesian universal doubts against the world in which one is situated, for Reid simply is impossible. Rather, it represents an absurd idea, a mere speculation and does not give a correct description of the doubting self. These suppositions, particularly the concept of doubt and belief, have had a strong impact on the empirical psychology of Alexander Bain, who in turn has been very influential on the philosophical thoughts of Charles Sanders Peirce. Bain himself was 'Professor of Logic' in Aberdeen, where Reid taught, and Bain can be considered as a „successor of that which Thomas Reid originated in the eighteenth century.“⁸ The empirical psychology developed by Bain contains some significant thoughts which Peirce adapted, most importantly the idea of conceiving a self empirically and not conceiving a self through an introspective philosophy of consciousness, and the idea of a connection between beliefs and acts.

The notion of belief in Bain's empirical psychology attempts to resolve the problem of how to explain the structure of judgments without introducing a consciousness. This would consequently entail the distinction between an object simpliciter and an object of knowledge, including all the subsequent problems of dualism, Bain wants to avoid, like Reid and Peirce. For Bain, as later for Peirce, there is no possible distinction between the perception of a subjective state and the perception of an object. Beliefs are not discernible into subjective and objective parts.

Although Bain in many respects followed the ideas of Reid, he accentuates the specific connection of beliefs with the acting self and defines belief as “that upon which a man is prepared to act.”⁹ The self he describes acts along its beliefs which in turn form habits, a term also taken over from Reid. „Habit differs from instinct, not in its nature, but in its origin; the latter being natural, the former acquired. Both operate without will or intention, without thought, and therefore may be called mechanical principles.“¹⁰ But whereas Reid's concept is too mechanical, Bain rather points at the dynamic interrelation of doubts and beliefs in which habits are shaped. These thoughts have left such a strong impression on Peirce that he once remarked, pragmatism “is scarce more than a corollary” of Bain's theory.¹¹

Self-control, Susceptibility, and the Vague

One of the most prominent philosophical exaggerations which pragmatism has always challenged, is philosophical dualism. Stressing continuity rather than sharp demarcations, pragmatism from its beginnings opposed dichotomies. Instead of a sharp distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, or between the transcendental pure reason and the *Ding-an-sich*, pragmatism emphasizes the constitutional interrelation of the acting self and its environment. In this regard, there is a resemblance with other philosophical traditions, for example the phenomenological tradition, in which the self also is situated in the everyday 'life-world'. But an important difference remains: Pragmatism not only underlines the interplay of self and world, but the *agency* of the self in an open and changing world. Put in a broader way: pragmatism interrelates with practice. Even in epistemological questions, reasoning is conceived as an activity in the world. Hence, strictly speaking, there is no more rigid demarcation between epistemological, aesthetic, or ethical questions in pragmatism. Every knowledge attains its value out of the practical melioristic perspective of the acting self in its environment. That is to say, pragmatism aims

at improvement and growth for self and society. The acting self, be it in epistemological regards of investigating, in aesthetic regards of producing and experiencing art, or in moral and political regards, has continually been central to pragmatism throughout its different phases. Out of a relative doubt a relative belief is generated which does not serve for absolute certitude, but creates a habit and enables the self to act. Fixed dualistic distinctions between the self and the world, or in between parts of the self contradict the pragmatist approach of the acting self, and in this sense represent an exaggeration.

Peirce, like his predecessors, introduces the relationship of doubt and belief in his pragmatism by criticizing the cartesian approach of absolute all-embracing doubts, stressing instead that, for a doubt to be valid, it has to be a vivid and particular doubt. „Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts.“¹² Descartes believed he could achieve certitude through critical introspection, independent from the life-world he was in. While Descartes trusted his *cogito* as a guarantee for certitude, Peirce accentuates the concrete and particular doubt which is always relative to the situation, and out of which only a relative belief can follow. Against the founder of modern dualism, Peirce brought into play the Bainian dynamic of an ongoing process of doubt-belief-doubt chains. But like his Scottish predecessors, Peirce advocates a realistic position out of which he develops his theory of inquiry: The particular doubts and beliefs one has are conceived in some kind of teleological perspective. The knowledge one accumulates through the establishing of beliefs continually adapts to the environment, eventually culminating in the knowledge of the community of investigators. Still, this remains an ideal, and knowledge will never be final, as certitude will never be. There can only be a fixation of beliefs but no fixation of final certitudes.

Like Reid, Peirce acknowledges that for a human being certain beliefs are indubitable. But whereas Reid considers the principles of *common sense* ahistorically as self-evident, Peirce in a post-darwinian manner regards *common sense* as historically evolving. Furthermore, he not only states the possibility, but the necessity to criticize assumptions which seem to be indubitable. Peirce differentiates two kinds of indubitable beliefs: The reasonable fixation of beliefs which should be confined to deliberate, self-controlled propositions and the ‘acritical’ beliefs which themselves cannot be criticized. “It will be found to follow that there are, beside perceptual judgements, original (i.e., indubitable because uncriticized) beliefs of a general and recurrent kind, as well as indubitable acritical judgments.”¹³ Peirce asserts that the task to subject each belief and judgment itself to criticism (potentially an endless procedure) never will be resolved for two reasons:

1. The logical reason is that this procedure will lead without fail to an infinite regress, as the first (or last) principle is regarded as the ultimate. This principle itself has to be subjected to criticism, otherwise there has to be admitted that it is a postulation. But postulating a principle without a justificatory ground turns out to be itself a belief which does not differ from a Reidian *common-sense* principle. So the conclusion Peirce draws is that the categories of critical philosophy themselves are an expression of *common sense*: “We see clearly that Kant regards Space, Time, and his Categories just as everybody else does, and never doubts or has doubted their objectivity.”¹⁴ Therefore, he can claim that “Kant (whom I *more* than admire) is nothing but a somewhat confused pragmatist.”¹⁵

2. The second reason is that the ‘acritically indubitable’ of *common sense* assumptions “is invariably vague.”¹⁶ Now the problem with the vague is that it can never be completely cleared or defined. “Even in our most intellectual conceptions, the more we strive to be precise, the more unattainable precision seems.”¹⁷ The vague, in turn, has to do with the pragmatist assumption that the self is not completely

transparent to itself. In my view, it entails that the self remains opaque against itself and therefore it is intrinsically *susceptible*. The self cannot choose to doubt, but is rather overridden by the environment which generates doubts on assumptions beforehand believed. “Doubt, usually, perhaps always, takes its rise from surprise, which supposes previous belief; and surprise comes with novel environment.”¹⁸ The error of Descartes was to believe he could doubt at will. “A proposition that could be doubted at will is certainly not *believed*.”¹⁹ This is a position which Peirce also ascribes to ‘the critical Philosopher’: He „seems to opine that the fact that he has not hitherto doubted a proposition is no reason why he should not henceforth doubt it. (At which Common-Sense whispers that, whether it be ‘reason’ or no, it will be a well-nigh insuperable *obstacle* to doubt.)“²⁰

At the same time Peirce postulates the need for critical thinking. That is the reason why he locates pragmatism between critical philosophy in the tradition of Kant and *common sense*. According to Peirce, there is a degree of self-control that can be deployed, and it should be the task to go behind indubitable beliefs. Still, the limitations of deliberate thoughts endure: “For what one cannot doubt, one cannot argue about. [...] Neither the philosophy of Common-Sense nor the man who holds it accepts any belief *on the ground* that it has not been criticized. For, as already said, such beliefs are not ‘accepted’. What happens is that one comes to recognize that one has the belief-habit as long as one can remember.”²¹

This leads to a paradoxical situation: Acting rationally, self-controlled means “taking a habit, or disposition to respond to a given kind of stimulus in a given kind of way.”²² Without habits, the self would not be capable to act, but that which makes the self act self-controlled, simultaneously escapes its own control. “For believe, while it lasts, is a strong habit, and as such, forces the man to believe until some surprise breaks up the habit. The breaking of a belief can only be due to some novel experience, whether external or internal.”²³ So in stating the limits of self-control through beliefs which are part of the *common sense*, Peirce portrays a self, whose motivations rise out of a source which in part is pre-reflexive or pre-rational. On the other hand, these habit-beliefs (which are so close that you cannot see them clearly) need to be questioned, if they are not coordinated with the environment of the self. But this means that doubt arises out of a change in the situation to which the self is exposed. So changes are not initiated *ex nihilo*, they respond to a given situation. Consequently, the concept of agency needs to take into account the fundamental capacity of the self to be affected which I call its *susceptibility*. Without considering the susceptibility, admitting that the self is not completely transparent to itself, the concept of the self will remain under an illusion of agency due to free, independent decisions, under the illusion of a possible ‘doubt at will.’

Like Reid, Peirce contests dualistic philosophy, whose demarcations are artificial constructions. But whereas *common sense* for Reid is self-evident and clear, for Peirce it remains opaque and vague. Peirce’s pragmatist approach of a *Critical Commonsensism*, as he designates it, corrects both the exaggerations of Reid and Kant: neither the principles of *common sense* nor the ones of critical philosophy are clear and transparent. His critique is legitimated by a new factor he introduces to *common sense*: time. *Common sense* and the self which takes it on, are subject to historical change and to an unknown future.

But why does Peirce assume that the indubitable is intrinsically vague? Peirce posits – so to speak – the ‘question-mark’ in the real of which the self forms a part, and not in the self, where Kant had posited it. The epistemological background is that Peirce advocates a realistic position, and although his philosophy differs in almost any respect to the one of Reid, this is something they have in common (still, Peircian realism is very different from Reidian realism). Peirce’s theory of doubt and belief ultimately is

legitimated by this realistic approach, in that the process of adaptation relies on a reality, to which the self has access. As he states:

“This activity of thought by which we are carried, not where we wish, but to a fore-ordained goal, is like the operation of destiny... The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real. That is the way I would explain reality.”²⁴

Although Peirce is known for his critique on individualism – „the individual man since his separate existence is manifested only by ignorance and error, so far as he is anything apart from his fellows, and from what he and they are to be, is only a negation“²⁵ – he advocates a notion of the self whose doubts originate out of its *particular* position, in the sense that it has a unique position in the world, while being at the same time a contingent and susceptible *part* of it. The self has the possibility to transgress *common sense* from which it simultaneously forms a part. The description of the self in this double-edged manner is made possible by the dynamic conception Peirce formulates. But once his ambiguous position of the self is made clear, other questions arise: Why should we believe that all human beings share the same notion of *common sense*? As Peirce himself notes: “No communication from one person to another can be entirely definite, i.e., non-vague... It should never be forgotten that our own thinking is carried on as a dialogue, and though mostly in a lesser degree, is subject to almost every imperfection of language.”²⁶ The questions become even more intricate when the notion of *common sense* not only is applied to epistemological problems, for which Peirce suggests a teleological solution, but to aesthetic or moral problems. In other words when the focus is shifted from outer reality to the particular self.

And another question still remains unanswered: How is it possible for the self to criticize *common sense* beliefs, if it cannot doubt at will? Is there any agency left for the self? Peirce claims as a *Critical Commonsensist* to have a “high esteem for doubt. He may almost be said to have a *sacra fames* for it. Only, his hunger is not to be appeased with paper-doubts.”²⁷ What is a real doubt, then? To answer this question, we will have to take a closer look at the subjective perspective.

Discovery or Invention? Subjectivity, Old and New

One significant contribution from William James to pragmatist philosophy is to have undertaken this shift to the subjective perspective. In his approach, *common sense* is discussed in conjunction with his conception of truth, which in turn is closely related to his account on beliefs. More than Peirce, James sheds light on the subjective aspect of *belief*: To gain a new point of view the self can believe in, it needs to undergo a process in which old and new opinions get ‘married’. The development of a new belief is inseparable from the particular modifications of old beliefs within the self. Similar to Peirce, James describes the development of new opinions out of an unusual situation. The self experiences “inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from which it seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. He saves as much as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives.” This process is some kind of adaptation or appropriation in which the new “truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions.” He continues: “It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity.”²⁸ In contrast to simple ‘additive’ truth which remains in the realm of the self’s *common sense* assumptions, this process of acquiring new opinions, new truth through ‘inward trouble’ unsettles the subjective beliefs.

In this evolvment of new truth which alterates old beliefs, and in which the self has to consolidate its new beliefs, a connection between *common sense* and the very *particularity* of the self is given. For *common sense* neither is completely objective nor completely subjective. Like many key terms of pragmatism, *common sense* instead has to be located *between* the particular self and the historically contingent assumptions of a society. While Peirce characterizes *common sense* as intrinsically vague, for James it represents sedimented, old belief. “In a lecture on ‘common sense’ I shall try to show what I mean by truths grown petrified by antiquity.”²⁹ But in comparison to Peirce, James takes a kind of micrological view at the transition from old to new, to the mode in which it is subjectively experienced, whereas for Peirce the *common sense* presently experienced by the self remains a riddle. This is another aspect which gains contour through James’s philosophy and which most notably is marked by the subtitle of his first book on pragmatism: *A New Name For Some Old Ways Of Thinking*. As we are going to see in the following, the tensions and transitions between the old and the new are not only central for his account on pragmatism, and more specifically on *common sense*, but will also reappear in the neo-pragmatist discussion on the imperative of innovation.

So although we already found the position of particularity as *susceptibility* in Peirce’s *Critical Commonsensism*, he rather focuses on the future of *common sense* as an idealized community of investigators, and does not scrutinize the momentary subjective experience of a transformation from the old to the new, as James does. But James not only stresses the subjectivity of the momentary process. Apart from the micrological subjective evolvment of new beliefs out of old (*common sense*) beliefs, James tries to find a macrological explanation for its general historicity. In a genealogical speculation he assumes that the *common sense* we hold today, “may have been successfully *discovered* by prehistoric geniuses whose names the night of antiquity has covered up... No reason appears, why it may not have been by a process just like that by which the conceptions due to Democritus, Berkeley, or Darwin, achieved their similar triumphs in more recent times.”³⁰ However, it remains dubitable if the ‘marriage-function’ of old and new truths through the self has to be merely considered as discovery, as an irremovable aspect of subjectivity is incorporated in the process. It seems to be rather undecidable, as to how far the marriage is an *invention* or a *discovery*. This turns out to be even more the case, when beliefs are considered in respect to the agency of the self. New beliefs, in the end, are approved by the self, in so far as they help to develop new habits, in other words, when they are helpful for practice, a point recently underscored by Charlene Haddock Seigfried: “One reason *common sense* occupies a privileged place in James’s philosophy is that his reconstruction of it uniquely demonstrates the instrumental character of all knowledge whatsoever.”³¹

But James himself insinuates this undecidability between discovery and invention: In his enumeration of possible ‘discoverers’ of *common sense* you also find philosophers, and it should be clear to him that philosophical truths are not necessarily discoveries. So he himself discloses the possibility of *common sense* as some kind of *invention*.

However, it is surprising that James, who himself has been harshly criticized for his concept of truth in which he rejects the correspondence theory, “that no theory is absolutely a transcript of reality, but that any one of them may from some point of view be useful,”³² in other passages still holds on to the idea of discovery. Truth, as James says, means the ‘agreement’ with reality. The quarrel begins “only after the question is raised as to what may precisely be meant by the term ‘agreement’ and what by the term ‘reality’, when reality is taken as something for our ideas to agree with.”³³ According to James, this agreement is inseparable from the possibility of agency, “that the possession of true thoughts means

everywhere the possession of invaluable instruments of action.” This leads to the “general notion of truth as something essentially bound up with the way in which one moment in our experience may lead us toward other moments which it will be worth while to have been led to. Primarily, and on the commonsense level, the truth of a state of mind means this function of a *leading that is worth while*.”³⁴

Maybe the vacillation between discovery and invention in the Jamesian account on the generation of truth can be best explained by his pluralism: *common sense* is considered as one of three methods to gain truth, the other two being philosophic criticism and science. “There is no *ringing* conclusion possible when we compare these types of thinking, with a view to telling which is the more absolutely true. (..) *Common sense* is *better* for one sphere of life, science for another, philosophic criticism for a third; but whether either be *truer* absolutely, Heaven only knows.”³⁵ Now this distinction between *better* and *truer* is not convincing, since James himself says, “that truth is *one species of good*.”³⁶ So ultimately his own position entails an epistemological agnosticism in which the particular self and its agency have the last word. Still, by introducing the subjective factor into the discussion on *common sense*, James opens up a new path. That is, the conception of the self as *particularity* – located between *common sense* and new truth, being simultaneously the *inventor* and the *discoverer* of new perspectives, which themselves might eventually be incorporated in *common sense*: “So it comes about that intellects *sibi permissi*, intellects only curious and idle, have forsaken the common-sense level for what in general terms may be called the ‘critical’ of thought.”³⁷ In this passage James (as in the quoted passage on the geniuses) also names Berkeley, who as a result turns out to be simultaneously a protagonist of the founders of common sense and one of those who have forsaken common sense. So Berkeley can be taken as an Jamesian example of the indicated *particularity* of the self. The particularity in contrast to Peirce then underlines apart of the susceptibility of the self the possibility of an active transformation of *common sense* through the particular self. This suggests not only that the rigid distinction between critical thinking and *common sense* is blurred, but more generally that the ascription of something to *common sense* turns out to be historically contingent and ultimately a question of the adapted perspective. *common sense* as a notion in between the subjective and the objective in consequence can be transformed by everyone. But it also turns out to be a question of agreement, in other words: it becomes a question of politics.

The pluralism of James’s philosophy (at least, in this early phase of his development) remains too disjointed to capture these consequences, therefore there needs to be a correction towards a closer connection of the different spheres of truth he drafts. *common sense* is not confinable to only one region of thought or action, but pervades all kinds of different aspects. And once the historicity of *common sense* is itself acknowledged, in particular the correlation to society and politics becomes crucial and needs to be reflected.

The Cultivation of Flexibility

Before turning to the ‘neo-pragmatist’ approaches, the position of one of the most important pragmatists needs to be discussed, who somewhat marks the transition from ‘old’ to ‘new’ pragmatism. It is only a little step from James’s insinuation of the possible invention of *common sense* to the ‘aesthetic turn’ in parts of pragmatist philosophy, and which has been initiated by John Dewey. But by bringing into play the term aesthetics, Dewey does not wish to restrict a demarcated terrain of pragmatism to problems of art and aesthetic experience. On the contrary, he seeks to recover “the continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience”³⁸, to amplify the undermined interdependence from

aesthetics and life, broadening the term of aesthetic experience to the extent that every kind of experience should be called aesthetic, in so far as it enriches the self and opens up new perspectives of growth and enhanced pleasure. Like his predecessors, Dewey objects to philosophical dualism and the danger of fixed oppositions. In his view, many prejudices against the term *common sense* result out of this dualistic tendency, leading to artificial separations, in which “mechanical routine or sensuous excitation” is ascribed to *common sense* and opposed to “academic and unapplied learning.”³⁹ According to Dewey and in contrast to James, *common sense* represents an irrefutable and indispensable mediator between philosophical and ordinary life, and thus can help to overcome false demarcations which Dewey incessantly contested throughout his philosophical career. *common sense* neither depicts a steady catalogue of fixed categories or rules, nor grown-old truths – *common sense* depicts the necessary basis of habits, enabling the self to situate in its environment. James had shown the subjective implications of this process of situating, but Dewey proceeds one step further: the self needs to cultivate those habits and in consequence needs to reflect upon the *common sense* for an ongoing enhancement of adaptation and appropriation.

In Dewey’s opinion there is a potential which has to be unfolded. So dealing with *common sense* is some sort of task. “The most difficult thing in the world to learn to see is the obvious, the familiar, the universally taken for granted.”⁴⁰ The problem stressed by Dewey is that the self cannot escape *common sense*. It shapes our beliefs and habits in any case, so the best way to handle it is not conceiving *common sense* as a restraint, but as a positive source which should be cultivated. Properly understood, *common sense* can function as a mediator between the ordinary and the philosophical, between the particular and the common.

“Shall philosophy start with the common material at hand or with the more abstract intellectual results of thinking? I think that philosophy should start with the common experiences. But there is a difficulty. The commoner and more familiar things are, the harder they are to deal with ‘philosophically’. We lose consciousness of things that are quite familiar.”⁴¹

Dewey suggests two things: The purported obvious is rather opaque than clear to us, and he ascribes a positive potentiality to this common experience which still needs to be unfolded. But what does the value of common experiences consist of? Pragmatism runs the danger of affirming every-day-knowledge, which might result in an affirmation of the state of being, which in turn – considered under political aspects – might spawn devastating consequences when taken for granted. So besides of the philosophical problem, Dewey considers the political dangers of an unreflected *common sense*:

”Men who are thrown back upon ‘common sense’ when they appeal to philosophy for some general guidance are likely to fall back on routine, the force of some personality, strong leadership or the pressure of momentary circumstances.”⁴²

As ‘academic and unapplied’ abstract thought represents one side of an exaggerated dichotomy, the trivializing of *common sense* results to be the other one, being conflated not only with routine, but also finally related to dangerous political contents. Dewey points at the following: *common sense* becomes trivial when the complexity of the ordinary is ignored, furthermore when the ordinary serves as pernicious counter-part to alleged pure philosophical and political ideals. Thus *common sense*, rightly understood, is a critical correction not only to the flights of philosophical speculation, but both to

exaggeration and trivializing which turn out to belong to the one head of Janus, each one the necessary opposite of the other one. This artificial dichotomy then makes *common sense* wrongly appear as vulgar, disdaining the potentiality of the ordinary which is “the most difficult thing in the world to learn to see.”

Maybe ‘the’ *common sense* does not really exist, and instead only particular perspectives and interpretations of what one assumes to be taken as common sense. So by clarifying (which also means appropriating, as James showed) what a particular self conceives as *common sense*, its concept of *common sense* might simultaneously be modified, as the self adapts it to other, possibly conflicting opinions. It turns out that the supposed intimacy of notions which are subsumed under the term *common sense* might be difficult to grasp. Assumptions which are too close to the self get imprecise, just as the hyperopias view becomes blurred the closer an object gets. So the process of clarification itself is confounding because it turns out to be undecidable in how far the clarifications made are invented by the *particularity* (understood as uniqueness) of the self, or if they rather adopt to the *common sense* of which the self in its *particularity* is a *part*. How much voluntarism should be attributed to the self? For in order to act, the self needs to develop habits (to be located somewhat in between inner appropriation and outer influence) in which to believe, which means to incorporate them to such a degree that they become part of the self. By questioning them arbitrarily, the basis of the self would dissolve. This entails, paradoxically (as already seen in Peirce’s account), for a self to be capable of agency, it needs an ordinary basis which it cannot dispose of, and over which it does not exercise full control. For that reason, Dewey urges the necessity of the self to become more flexible in its habits, an indirect way of exercising control over them.

“By a seeming paradox, increased power of forming habits means increased susceptibility, sensitiveness, responsiveness. Thus even if we think of habits as so many grooves, the power to acquire many and varied grooves denotes high sensitivity, explosiveness. Thereby an old habit, a fixed groove if one wishes to exaggerate, gets in the way of the process of forming a new habit while the tendency to form a new one cuts across some old habit.”⁴³

The reason why the cultivation of *common sense* has been underestimated might be that the ordinary seems simply too obvious to be worth of philosophical consideration. Here we come back to the philosophical tendency of exaggeration. While philosophy traditionally is concerned with the first and last questions, by withdrawing too far from its point of departure, it loses sight for the alleged obvious and simple. Not cultivating *common sense* thus not only entails the danger for the self to fall back on rigid custom and routine. Philosophy itself tends to become stiff and inflexible, holding on to abstract principles which Reid already denounced as ‘mere speculation’. This tendency even includes the concept of *common sense* itself: That is, uncriticized common sense becomes the trivial counter-notion of purported high ideals of philosophy. “Consequently uncriticized common sense is a very mixed affair.”⁴⁴

Finally, there is a significant consequence resulting out of Dewey’s contestation of Dualism. Whereas Peirce advocates realism and James in his later philosophy developed a “radical empiricism”, Dewey’s epistemological position is to be located between realistic and idealistic approaches due to his dismissal of dichotomies and his advocacy of the flexible. And maybe *common sense* could be a promising term to denote this epistemological middle-ground.

Idiosyncrasy and Particularity

In the last decades, the philosophical landscape has been changing: The linguistic turn, the advent of the

'postmodern' and of deconstruction, and the criticisms on the modernist concept of the subject have brought up new disputes and an alteration in pragmatist philosophical perspectives. The 'neo-pragmatist' philosophers, which I am going to discuss in this final section, have to be perceived in this transformed context, which considerably influenced their thoughts. Both Richard Shusterman and Richard Rorty have abandoned the idea of fixed, unchanging essences, be it in the self or in the outer world. In consequence, their concepts of *common sense* do not point anymore at an ideal community of investigators or at the discovery of some hidden categories or realities. Instead philosophy is considered by Shusterman as "theory between transcendental cognitive privilege and servile impotence, one which recognizes the primacy of practice but also the power of theoretical intervention." So he takes the route of an "intermediate pragmatist position."⁴⁵ The task of philosophy therefore consists in "the double movement of affirming the ordinary while also seeking its improvement."⁴⁶ Rorty, in contrast, has taken a different course: as a consequence of the dismissal of philosophical foundations, he confines philosophy to the realm of the private which he rigorously separates from the public sphere, attributing to philosophy merely the activity of an aesthetic self-realization. His rigid constraint on philosophy has been gravely criticized for logical and political reasons. The political reason is that he seemed to cut off any possibility of political intervention to philosophy.⁴⁷ The logical reason is that in reacting to philosophical exaggerations (the metaphysical implications of an essence of the self or of an outer world) he himself seems to exaggerate, reducing the self to "nothing more than sentential attitudes – nothing more than the presence or absence of dispositions towards the use of sentences phrased in some historically contingent vocabulary."⁴⁸

The course Rorty took has to do with his specific interpretation of the linguistic turn, which he conceives in a far more inflexible way than Shusterman. In this, Rorty has a lot in common with deconstruction.

The deconstructivist approach assumes the subject to be constituted in and by 'discourse' – simultaneously stressing the primacy of language with respect to the subject (denying a center or locus of the subject beyond language because it is supposed to be 'subjected' in and through language) and relating the subjection to the contingent yet nevertheless powerful impact of society through norms, values, and conventions which themselves are incorporated in 'discourse'. In Rorty's view the only remaining option for agency is to be found in the cultivation of ones own idiosyncrasies, constrained to a privatized philosophy, aiming at the creation of an innovative vocabulary, which would describe the self in a unique and outstanding way. The contradiction in Rorty's account, however, lies in his conflation of a discursive monism with a 'romantic polytheism'⁴⁹. For to advocate aesthetic self-creation there is a need to assume a subjective perspective, which in turn is not compatible with the notion of the self as a mere effect of vocabularies. This problem of locating the agency of the self also applies to deconstruction, in which the subject runs the risk of being dissolved in language. Both, Rorty's neo-pragmatism and deconstruction, reject the idea of a stable point of departure for the self, stressing instead the flux and the ephemeral of language to which the self is exposed. Thus, they "share a fundamental belief in the untrustworthiness of common sense and ordinary language."⁵⁰ Instead, I suggest the trustworthiness of *common sense* for deconstruction and pragmatism: The notion of *common sense* provides a promising alternative, both to the exaggerated concept of language and to individualistic self-creation. Furthermore, I find some convincing arguments indicated in recent theory of Rorty himself.

Recently, Rorty seems to soften his rigid private/public dichotomy in favor of political movements, in which the agency of the self is not only conceived as solipsistic self-creation, but as a practice shared by

a community. In the process of cultivating the idiosyncratic habits, in trying to find a position in a given society and culture “there is no method or procedure to be followed except courageous and imaginative experimentation”, says Rorty, quoting the feminist writer Frye. She describes her own writing as “a sort of flirtation with meaninglessness – dancing about a region of cognitive gaps and negative semantic spaces, kept aloft only by the rhythm and momentum of my own motion, trying to plumb abysses which are generally agreed not to exist.” The problem Frye and Rorty here encounter is the conflict between the existing *common sense* in a society and the self, which tries to develop its own critical *particularity*. Out of this perspective, the ‘inward trouble’ James describes in the transition from old to new beliefs, can be extended to its social and political implications: The tension between *common sense* and subjective belief takes place in between the *latent particularity* and the *menacing partiality* – as part of the society – of the self. “For meaninglessness is exactly what you have to flirt with when you are in between social, and in particular linguistic, practices – unwilling to take part in an old one but not yet having succeeded in creating a new one.” According to Rorty, personhood is a “matter of degree, not as an all-or-nothing affair, something evenly distributed around the species. We see it as something which slaves typically have less of than their masters.”⁵¹

Common sense and its appropriation through the self turn out to be eminently political, the situating of the self being a struggle against meaninglessness, because its particularity is not yet given, but still has to be gradually unfolded. In a way, there is a connection at this point with Reid’s concept of *common sense*, whose assumptions have to face the *argumentum ad risum*: Objections against *common sense* claims are raised by showing their absurdity, their being ridiculous. This decision of whether a claim is dismissed as absurd or worth to be integrated into *common sense* in Rorty’s account amounts to the political and aesthetic power of raising the own particular voice and of being heard. But this is almost impossible to achieve with only one voice, therefore “individuals – even individuals of great courage and imagination – cannot achieve semantic authority, *even semantic authority over themselves*, on their own. To get such authority you have to hear your own statements as part of a shared practice. Otherwise you yourself will never know whether they are more than ravings, never know whether you are a heroine or a maniac.”⁵² Although Rorty’s position sheds light on an important issue, the painfulness of being heard, asserting one’s particularity successfully in *common sense*, Rorty puts too much weight on the idiosyncrasy in contrast to the particularity. This described struggle of the ‘flirtation with meaninglessness’ probably is confined to a few, and it is no coincidence that Rorty is quoting a writer (even if a feminist writer), for he underlines too much the aspect of innovation and of language. This might reflect a shift in *common sense*, in which Rorty as an individual of the 20th century partakes, for the imperative of innovation and the predominance of language represent rather recent philosophical developments. Still, in Rorty’s account a community is insinuated which evolves and shares its particularity, a creative and *particular common sense*, not restrained to a single individual.

In contrast to Rorty, Shusterman pursues an approach in which he outlines the possibility of an evolvement of *common sense* neither restricted to the radically new nor exclusively to linguistic practices. In his examination of popular culture (one example has been Afro-American hip-hop culture) he shows how a relatively new perspective can transform the *common sense* assumptions on music, without claiming to be radically innovative. On the contrary, the originality of rap-music lies in its appropriation of established pop music through sampling. Rap music has not been invented by one genius struggling with his ‘inward trouble’ but has been developed by a community. Furthermore, this transformation of *common sense* has not only taken place in the realm of language, but comprehends a whole range of nonlinguistic practices and habits – including the performance of rap-music, dances, fashion, etc.⁵³ This

aesthetic common sense which in contrast to Rorty not focuses on the painful struggle, but on the joyful aesthetic experience of a community maybe could be interpreted as some sort of *particular sensus communis*, an idea which only can be insinuated in this paper. However, Shusterman's description opens up the perspective to imagine a multitude of alternative and particular *common senses*. His assessment in this clearly is more optimistic than Rorty's position, as Shusterman says:

“Even if the objects of our commonsense world can no longer be regarded as foundational, intrinsically unified elements, their entrenched power and usefulness earn them consideration as more than mere interpretations that can be arbitrarily replaced by others. But this does not entail complacency with our commonsense world. Since its concepts and unified objects have been shaped by historical change and remain revisable, the pragmatist is always ready to improve them so as to promote more satisfactory experience.”⁵⁴

Why should one assume that there is only one *common sense* in a culture? Maybe the idea of pluralism from James can be taken up as a plurality of differing *common senses*. The following critique Shusterman raises against deconstruction also applies to Rorty's position:

“The reasonable assumption that nothing new can be understood without relating it to an already existing structure of belief and practice is falsely conflated with the dubious view that everything understood must already have an accepted place within that structure. ...The argument neglects not only the deep vagueness of our practices but also their intersecting, imbricated, and often conflictual variety, which allows theory to criticize its object-practice by means of understandings and perspectives gained through another”⁵⁵

Taking a close look at our imbricated, conflictual practices – by this not only reconsidering our habits, as Dewey proposes, but also the *common sense* of society – might shed light on positive sources beforehand overseen, or absurdities beforehand taken for granted. So the danger of meaninglessness is not confined to the creative few, but becomes part of a *common sense of contestation*.

Concluding this paper, I want to suggest that maybe a replacement of the term 'discourse' by the notion of *common sense* would be useful. Like the term 'discourse', *common sense* takes into account the embeddedness of the self in society. In contrast to the 'discourse', it is not reducible to language, instead including the nonverbal incarnations of *common sense* as particular and collective habits.⁵⁶ At the same time a flexible concept of *common sense* recognizes the heterogeneity of norms, values, and habits, which can be appropriated and modified by the self or by a group. And it also bears another advantage: while the 'discourse' is solely conceived from an outer perspective as a structure imposed upon subjects, *common sense* can be conceived from an outer *and* from an inner and participant perspective, for (as already said) the self always is particular and a part. While the 'discourse' seems to be an impersonate, overarching structure (even in deconstruction), *common sense* represents the heterogeneous product of a multitude of selves which partake in it. “No longer an elite aesthetic luxury, multiplicity of attitude and the vacillating suspension of both belief and disbelief are a necessity of life. For in what can we still commit full faith and total investment without self-deception or irony?”⁵⁷ This approach does not play down the often violent influence society exerts on the self. The question to be raised is instead, how a self in society is able to encounter agency. For agency is strongly related to the motivation of the self, and motivation rises out of ones everyday-intuitions, which in turn form part of *common sense*. So it seems that the borders between the particular self and common sense are very permeable. On the other

hand agency needs to be located in a particular self which is motivated and capable of reconsidering and, by this means, possibly to alter his or her *common sense* views. Agency thus not only entails following old quasi-automatic habits but the possibility of modifying those very habits into more flexible ones. Particularity, however, does not necessarily mean radical idiosyncrasy in the sense of individualism, for the concept of the individual already represents an exaggerated idea which itself can be considered as imposed by society. The doctrine of individualism postulates independence and innovation. The particularity of the self instead implies the self's being a *part* together with its uniqueness. So it is rather the subjectively experienced qualitative particularity, which does not necessarily entail independence and constant innovation for the sake of it. *common sense* needs to be taken seriously and to be cultivated as a correction to exaggeration in philosophy and even in politics, for it helps to make visible the purported obvious which at once is so simple and odd.

“The fact is, the business is *very* simple indeed, and I make no doubt that we can manage it sufficiently well ourselves; but then I thought Dupin would like to hear the details of it, because it is so excessively *odd*. ’
` Simple and odd, ’ said Dupin.
`Why, yes; and not exactly that either. The fact is, we have all been a good deal puzzled because the idea *is* so simple, and yet baffles us altogether. ’
`Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault, ’ said my friend.
` What nonsense you *do* talk! ’ replied the Prefect, laughing heartily.
`Perhaps the mystery is a little *too* plain, ’ said Dupin. ` Oh, good heavens! Who ever heard of such an idea?’
`A little *too* self-evident. ’
`Ha! Ha! Ha! – Ha! Ha! Ha! - Ho! Ho! Ho! ’”
(Edgar Allan Poe, The Purloined Letter)

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Notes

1. *John Dewey, Middle Works*¹³, ed. by Jo Ann Boydston, Carbondale and Edwardsville 1983, (1920-1921), 420.
2. Thomas Reid, *Inquiry Into the Human Mind* (1764), in: *Philosophical Works*, ed. by Sir William Hamilton, vol.1, *Hildesheim* 1967, 121.
3. *Essays On the Intellectual Powers of Man*, in: *Philosophical Works*, ed. by Sir William Hamilton, vol.1, *Hildesheim* 1967, 425.
4. Reid, *Inquiry Into the Human Mind*, see above,127.
5. Reid, quoted in: John Coates, *The Claims of Common Sense*, Cambridge 1996, 15f.
6. Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können*, in: Immanuel Kant, *Werke*, ed. by W. Weischedel, vol.3, 1959, 117f.

7. For a more detailed account see: Erich Lobkowitz, „Common Sense und Skeptizismus“, *Weinheim* 1986, 131.
8. William Davidson, “Professor Bains Philosophy”, in: *Mind* XIII, 1904, 161.
9. Alexander Bain, *The Emotions And The Will*, London 1875, 506.
10. Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active powers of the Human Mind* (1788), in: *Philosophical Works*, ed. by Sir William Hamilton, vol. 2 , *Hildesheim* 1967, 550.
11. Charles Sanders Peirce, “Pragmatism in Retrospect”, in: *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. by Justus Buchler, New York 1955, 270.
12. Charles Sanders Peirce, "Critical Common-Sensism", 292. Hereafter, CCS
13. CCS, 299f.
14. CCS, 299
15. CCS, 294.
16. CCS, 295
17. CCS, 296f.
18. CCS, 299
19. CCS, 299.
20. CCS, 299.
21. CCS, 297, 298.
22. CCS, 290f.
23. CCS, 299.
24. Ch.S. Peirce, “How to Make Our Idea Clear”, in: Buchler (ed.), 38f.
25. Ch.S Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 5.317. The concept of the self in the Peircian philosophy cannot be discussed here in extenso. For a detailed account on a conception of the self, see Vincent M. Colapietro: *Peirce’s Approach To the Self, A Semiotic Perspective on Human Subjectivity*, Albany/New York 1989.
26. CCS, 295.
27. CCS, 297.
28. William James, „What Pragmatism Means“, in: *Pragmatism*, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1981, 31.

29. William James, „What Pragmatism Means“, in: *Pragmatism*, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1981, 33.
30. William James, „What Pragmatism Means“, in: *Pragmatism*, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1981, 83.
31. Charlene Haddock Seigfried, „The Philosopher’s ‚Licence’: William James on Common Sense“, in: William James. *Pragmatism*, ed. by Klaus Oehler, Berlin 2000, 116.
32. William James, „What Pragmatism Means“, in: *Pragmatism*, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1981, 30.
33. William James, „Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth“, in: *Pragmatism*, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1981, 91.
34. William James, „Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth“, in: *Pragmatism*, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1981, 93f.
35. James, „Common Sense“, in: *Pragmatism*, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1981, 86.
36. James, „What Pragmatism Means“, in: *Pragmatism*, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1981, 37.
37. James, *Common Sense*, in: *Pragmatism*, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1981, 84.
38. John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, ed. by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale and Edwardsville 1987 (1943), 9.
39. John Dewey, *How We Think, Middle Works 6*, ed. by Jo Ann Boydston, Carbondale and Edwardsville 1978, (1910-11), 286.
40. Dewey, *Middle Works 13*, ed. by Jo Ann Boydston, Carbondale and Edwardsville 1983, (1920-1921), 420.
41. John Dewey, „A Résumé of four Lectures on *Common Cense*“, *Science, and Philosophy*, in: *Later Works 6*, ed. by Jo Ann Boydston, Carbondale and Edwardsville 1985 (1932), 425.
42. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy, Middle Works 12*, ed. by Jo Ann Boydston, Carbondale and Edwardsville 1982 (1920), 137
43. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, Dover New York 1958, 281.
44. John Dewey, *Later Works 11*, ed. by Jo Ann Boydston, Carbondale and Edwardsville 1987 (1935-37) 481.
45. Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics. Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, Rowman and Littlefield, New York 2000, 59.
46. Richard Shusterman, „Introduction to: Vor der Interpretation. Sprache und Erfahrung in Hermeneutik, Dekonstruktion und Pragmatismus“, *Wien* 1996.17, 25.
47. For a critique on Rortys concept of privatized philosophy, see Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics. Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, Rowman and Littlefield, New York 2000, 246f.

48. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge, 1989, 88.
49. Richard Rorty, „Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism“, in: *The Revival of Pragmatism*, ed. by Morris Dickstein, Durham and London 1998, 21-37.
50. John Coates, *The Claims of Common Sense*, Cambridge 1996, 2.
51. Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, Cambridge 1998, 217.
52. Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, Cambridge 1998, 223.
53. See e.g. the chapter „Form and Funk: The Aesthetic Challenge of Popular Art“, in: Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics, Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, Rowman and Littlefield, New York 2000, 169-201.
54. Richard Shusterman, „Introduction to: Vor der Interpretation. Sprache und Erfahrung in Hermeneutik, Dekonstruktion und Pragmatismus“, *Wien* 1996, 25.
55. Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, Rowman and Littlefield, New York 2000, 61.
56. The interpretation of common sense I am advocating rather displays some familiarity with Foucault's notion of dispositions, which also are not rigidly constricted to language but to practices in society. Still, the concept of disposition remains structuralist in that it neglects the subjective perspective I have in mind.
57. Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, Rowman and Littlefield, New York 2000, 192.