

'Critical Common-Sensism' (pub. 24.05.14-19:01). Quote in M. Bergman & S. Paavola (Eds.), *The Commens Dictionary: Peirce's Terms in His Own Words. New Edition*. Retrieved from <http://www.commens.org/dictionary/entry/quote-pragmatism-prag-1>.

Term: Critical Common-Sensism

Quote: The phrase denotes a particular stripe of Common-sensism, which is separated from the old Scotch kind by four distinguishing marks. The mark that I find it convenient to describe first is that the Critical Common-sensist holds that all the veritably indubitable beliefs are *vague* — often in some directions highly so. [—]

That veritably indubitable beliefs are especially *vague* could be proved *a priori*. But proof not being aimed at today, it will be simpler to say that the Critical Common-sensist's personal experience is that a suitable line of reflexion, accompanied by imaginary experimentation, always excites doubt of any very broad proposition if it be defined with precision. Yet there are beliefs of which such a critical sifting invariably leaves a certain vague residuum unaffected.

Could I be assured that other men candidly and with sufficient deliberation doubt any proposition which I regard as indubitable, that fact would inevitably cause me to doubt it, too. I ought not, however, lightly to admit that they do so doubt a proposition after the most thorough criticism by myself and anxious consideration of any other criticisms which I have been able to find and understand has left it quite indubitable by me, since there are other states of mind that can easily be mistaken for doubt. If, indeed, the phenomenon in question were at all a common one, instead of being among the rarest of experiences, I should return to a variety of Common-sensism which has always strongly attracted me, namely, that there is no definite and fixed collection of opinions that are indubitable, but that criticism gradually pushes back each individual's indubitables, modifying the list, yet still leaving him beliefs indubitable at the time being. The reason I have of late given up that opinion, attractive as I find it, is that the facts of my experience accord better with the theory of a fixed list, the same for all men. I do not suppose that it is absolutely fixed, (for my synechism would revolt at that) but that it is so nearly so, that for ordinary purposes it may be taken as quite so. [—]

These considerations lead me, quite naturally, to mention another mark of the Critical Common-sensist that separates him from the old school. Namely, he opines that the indubitable beliefs refer to a somewhat primitive mode of life, and that, while they never become dubitable in so far as our mode of life remains that of somewhat primitive man, yet as we develop degrees of self-control unknown to that man, occasions of action arise in relation to which the

original beliefs, if stretched to cover them, have no sufficient authority. In other words, we outgrow the applicability of instinct — not altogether, by any manner of means, but in our highest activities. The famous Scotch philosophers lived and died out before this could be duly appreciated. [—]

...a third mark of the Critical Common-sensist is that he has 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: he must have the heavy and noble metal, or else belief.

He quite acknowledges that what has been indubitable one day has often been proved on the morrow to be false. He grants the presciss proposition that it may be so with any of the beliefs he holds. [—]

I was saying that the Critical Common-sensist feels that the danger — the scientific danger, at any rate; and Philosophy is a department of pure Heuristic Science even less concerned, for example, about practical religion, if possible, than religion ought to be about it — does not lie in believing too little but in believing too much. [—] ...the Critical Common-sensist sets himself in serious earnest to the systematic business of endeavoring to bring all his very general first premisses to recognition, and of developing every suspicion of doubt of their truth, by the use of logical analysis, and by experimenting in imagination. [—]

[Critical Common-sensism] criticizes the critical method, follows its footsteps, tracks it to its lair. To the accusation that Common-Sense accepts a proposition as indubitable because it has not been criticized, the answer is that this confounds two uses of the word "because." 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 had the belief-habit as long as one can remember; and to say that no doubt of it has ever arisen is only another way of saying the same thing. But it is quite true that the Common-sensist like everybody else, the Criticist included, believes propositions because they have not been criticized in the sense that he does not doubt certain propositions that he would have doubted if he had criticized them. For in the first place, to criticize is *ipso facto* to doubt, and in the second place criticism can only attack a proposition after it has given it some precise sense in which it is impossible entirely to remove the doubt. It is probably true, too, that the Common-sensist believes unquestioningly some propositions that might have been criticized and that are not true. We are all liable to do that; but perhaps he is more in danger of it than other men. Still, as a fact, it is

difficult to find a Criticist who does not hold to more fundamental beliefs than any Critical Common-sensist does.

The Critical Philosopher 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.) Accordingly, he will not stop to ask whether he actually does doubt it or not, but at once proceeds to examine it. Now if it happens that he does actually doubt the proposition, he does quite right in starting a critical inquiry. But in case he does not doubt, he virtually falls into the Cartesian error of supposing that one can doubt at will. [—]

The kind of Common-sensism which [...] criticizes the Critical Philosophy and recognizes its own affiliation to Kant has surely a certain claim to call itself Critical Common-sensism.

Source: Peirce, C. S. (1905 [c.]). *Pragmatism, Prag [R]*. MS [R] 291.

References: CP 5.505-525

Date of 1905 [c.]

Quote:

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