

Critical Common-Sensism

1905 | Issues of Pragmatism | EP 2:346-353; CP 5.439-452

Two doctrines that were defended by the writer about nine years before the formulation of pragmatism may be treated as consequences of the latter belief. One of these may be called Critical Common-sensism. It is a variety of the Philosophy of Common Sense, but is marked by six distinctive characters, which had better be enumerated at once.

Character I. Critical Common-sensism admits that there not only are indubitable propositions but also that there are indubitable inferences. In one sense, anything evident is indubitable; but the propositions and inferences which Critical Common-sensism holds to be original, in the sense one cannot "go behind" them (as the lawyers say), are indubitable in the sense of being acritical. [—]

Character II. I do not remember that any of the old Scotch philosophers ever undertook to draw up a complete list of the original beliefs, but they certainly thought it a feasible thing, and that the list would hold good for the minds of all men from Adam down. For in those days Adam was an undoubted historical personage. Before any waft of the air of evolution had reached those coasts how could they think otherwise? When I first wrote, we were hardly orientated in the new ideas, and my impression was that the indubitable propositions changed with a thinking man from year to year. I made some studies preparatory to an investigation of the rapidity of these changes, but the matter was neglected, and it has been only during the last two years that I have completed a provisional inquiry which shows me that the changes are so slight from generation to generation, though not imperceptible even in that short period, that I thought to own my adhesion, under inevitable modification, to the opinion of that subtle but well-balanced intellect, Thomas Reid, in the matter of Common Sense (as well as in regard to immediate perception, along with Kant).

Character III. The Scotch philosophers recognized that the original beliefs, and the same thing is at least equally true of the acritical inferences, were of the general nature of instincts. But little as we know about instincts, even now, we are much better acquainted with them than were the men of the eighteenth century. We know, for example, that they can be somewhat modified in a very short time. The great facts have always been known; such as that instinct seldom errs, while reason goes wrong nearly half the time, if not more frequently. But one thing the Scotch failed to recognize is that the original beliefs only remain indubitable in their application to affairs that resemble those of a primitive mode of life. [—]

Character IV. By all odds, the most distinctive character of the Critical Common-sensist, in contrast to the old Scotch philosopher, lies in his insistence that the acritically indubitable is invariably vague. [—]

Character V. The Critical Common-sensist will be further distinguished from the old Scotch philosopher by the great value he attaches to doubt, provided only that it be the weighty and noble metal itself, and no counterfeit nor paper substitute. He is not content to ask himself whether he does doubt, but he invents a plan for attaining to doubt, elaborates it in detail, and then puts it into practice, although this may involve a solid month of hard work; and it is only after having gone through such an examination that he will pronounce a belief to be indubitable. Moreover, he fully acknowledges that even then it may be that some of his indubitable beliefs may be proved false.

The Critical Common-sensist holds that there is less danger to heurctic science in believing too little than in believing too much. Yet for all that, the consequences to heurctics of believing too little may be no less than disaster.

Character VI. Critical Common-sensism may fairly lay claim to this title for two sorts of reasons; namely, that on the one hand it subjects four opinions to rigid criticism: its own; that of the Scotch school; that of those who would base logic or metaphysics on psychology or any other special science, the least tenable of all the philosophical opinions that have any vogue; and that of Kant; while on the other hand it has besides some claim to be called Critical from the fact that it is but a modification of Kantism. The present writer was a pure Kantist until he was forced by successive steps into Pragmatism. The Kantist has only to abjure from the bottom of his heart the proposition that a thing-in-itself can, however indirectly, be conceived; and then correct the details of Kant's doctrine accordingly, and he will find himself to have become a Critical Common-sensist.

The other purported consequence of pragmatism identified by Peirce is scholastic realism

1905 [c.] | The Basis of Pragmatism | CP 5.498-499

...I am happy to think that you do not yourself sincerely judge all the sages of human nature to have been conscious liars who from time immemorial have testified to their conviction that man possess no infallible introspective power into the secrets of his own heart, to know just what he believes and what he doubts. The denial of such a power is one of the clauses of critical common-sensism. The others are that there are indubitable beliefs which vary a little and but a little under varying circumstances and in distant ages; that they partake of the nature of instincts, this word being taken in a broad sense; that they concern matters within the purview of the primitive man; that they are very vague indeed (such as, that fire burns) without being perfectly so; that while it may be disastrous to science for those who pursue it to think they doubt what they really believe, and still more so really to doubt what they ought to believe, yet, on the whole, neither of these is so unfavorable to science as for men of science to believe what they ought to doubt, nor even for them to think they believe what they really doubt; that a philosopher ought not to regard an important proposition as indubitable without a systematic and arduous endeavour to attain to a doubt of it, remembering that genuine doubt cannot be created by a mere effort of will, but must be compassed through experience; that while it is possible that propositions that really are indubitable, for the time being, should nevertheless be false, yet in so far as we do not doubt a proposition we cannot but regard it as perfectly true and perfectly certain; that while holding certain propositions to be each individually perfectly certain, we may and ought to think it likely that some one of them, if not more, is false.

This is the doctrine of Critical Common-sensism, and the present pertinency of it is that a pragmatist, to be consistent, is obliged to embrace it.

1905 [c.] | Pragmatism, Prag [R] | CP 5.505-525

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.

1907 | Pragmatism | EP 2:432-433

...in this original exposition, I laid down, in the very first place, the doctrine of Common Sense; namely, that there are some propositions that a man, as a fact, does not doubt; and what he does not doubt, he can, at most, make but a futile pretense to criticize. The test of doubt and belief is conduct. No sane man doubts that fire would burn his fingers; for if he did he would put his hand in the flame, in order to satisfy his doubt. There are some beliefs, almost all of which relate to the ordinary conduct of life, such as that ordinary fire burns the flesh, [which] while pretty vague, are beyond the reach of any man's doubt. When the analysis of the meaning of a concept has carried us to such a “practical” matter, it is idle to go further in analyzing it into a habit of conduct. But along with such “instinctive” beliefs, as we may call them, because, however they came about, they resemble the instincts of the lower animals, there are a good many formulae, almost universally accepted, which mean nothing, or, at any rate, nothing indubitable. For example, one often hears it said, “I could no more doubt that than I doubt of my own existence.” But, after all, what does a man mean when he says that he exists? By what concrete experiments in the imagination will he exemplify his meaning? I will not stop to discuss this particular proposition. I will only say that if we are to admit that some propositions are beyond our powers of doubt, we must not admit any specified proposition to be of this nature without severe criticism; nor must any man assume with no better reason than because he cannot doubt it, that another man cannot do so. These remarks give some idea of what is meant by critical common sense, without which the doctrine of pragmatism amounts to very little.

Here, "this original exposition" refers to 'The Fixation of Belief' (1877) and 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear' (1878)

