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Thomas Reid in America: a Potato-Pop Gun? Some Remarks on Peirce's Critical Common Sense

J.M.C. Chevalier

Charles S. Peirce, the founder of pragmatism and of semiotics, used to identify his position not only with 'extreme scholastic realism' (8.208),[1] but also with what he called 'Critical Common-Sense'. It refers to a supposed blending of Kant's critical philosophy with the Scottish philosophy of common sense, whose best representative Peirce held to be Thomas Reid. Such a melting-pot of ideas seems as glamorous as improbable. It nevertheless was the ideal paring for Peirce, who can be said to have 'learned the desirability of constructing a system on the German model, but wished to do it with the British empirical method'.[2] In this paper, I attempt to elucidate Peirce's concept of critical common sense in taking a closer look at the developments of his understanding of Reid. It more precisely aims at accounting for the radical change in Peirce's evaluation of Reid's philosophy, first considered as almost anti-philosophical, and eventually the essence of how philosophy should proceed. I want to show it relies on the development of the whole of Peirce's philosophy, and especially, against all expectations, on his cosmological views.

Peirce's Early View on Philosophical Common Sense

Peirce was not fated to warmly support Reid's thought, nor did he have a particular taste for common sense. His logical and metaphysical mind, fond of cryptic discoveries and subtle abstractions, did not resonate with the apparent simplicity of philosophical common sense. Indeed, Peirce advocated *against* Scottish thought, even making fun of Reid with all the fierce contempt of his mischievous youth: 'I hold the Doctrine of Common Sense', he wrote at age 25, 'to be well fitted to Reid's philosophical calibre and about as

[1] A volume number followed by a dot and a paragraph number stands for the *Collected Papers*. W followed by the volume, a dot and the page number stands for the edition of the *Chronological Writings* of Peirce, and MS (with the number in the Robin catalogue) for the unpublished manuscripts.

[2] James Feibleman, 'Peirce's Use of Kant', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 42:14 (Jul. 5, 1945), 365.

effective against any of the honored systems of philosophy as a potato-pop-gun's contents might be against Gibraltar' (W1.153). Common-sensism only reflects laziness (W1.71), Peirce claims, for one chooses to stick to one's most obvious, immediate, *prima facie* beliefs. In this respect, it is almost the contrary of philosophy, which requires one to examine and to criticize one's prejudices.

Though he does not state it explicitly, one can presume that Reid would be a good example of the method of tenacity that Peirce condemns in his 1877 text 'The Fixation of Belief'. What does the method of tenacity consist in? We apply this method by 'taking as answer to a question any we may fancy, and constantly reiterating it to ourselves, dwelling on all which may conduce to that belief, and learning to turn with contempt and hatred from anything that might disturb it' (W3.249). Common sense is a variation on such a method, which does not select *any* answer, but the most common, that is shared by everybody. It thus sounds like a defense of our most natural prejudices.

One would expect Peirce to favor Kant as the critical opponent of common sense. On the contrary! Kant's aim is to adopt a transcendental view with the help of his critical method, but it is not to Peirce's taste to make 'a transcendental orgy' (W1.314). Worse, what Kant really does, according to Peirce, is nothing more than a psychological investigation into our everyday opinions. 'In one point of view indeed, pure *a priori* reasoning is a misnomer; it is as much as to say analysis with nothing to analyze. Analysis of what? I ask. Of those ideas which no man is without. Of common sense' (W1.111). For instance, the so-called *a priori* external form of intuition, space, is nothing but our spontaneous representation of space, which has no real primacy over non-Euclidean spaces. It is true that we cannot but start from these representations, but Kant's critical method is not strong enough. He takes for granted what he pretends to criticize. In philosophy, one indeed needs common sense, but cannot stop there: 'Metaphysics stands in need of all the phases of thought of that uncommon sense which results from the physical sciences in order to comprehend perfectly the conceptions of the mind' (W1.111–12).

Thus, from the very start, Peirce considers that Reid and Kant both rely on the 'immediately given', meaning not only the contents of perception, but all kinds of naïve creeds and vulgar prejudices. The fact that the one accepts them without questioning whereas the other submits them to a critical investigation does not make an actual difference. Not afraid of paradoxes, Peirce analyses Kant's (and even Hegel's) contributions to philosophy as supporting psychologism and common-sensism, for common-sensism *is* a form of psychologism. Peirce himself is not opposed to psychology, but his

'unpsychological view' of logic and epistemology requires making a sharp distinction between an inquiry into human thought and the inquiry towards truth.

Peirce's Change in Mind about Reid

How then is it possible that some three or four decades later Peirce has become a strong advocate of common sense, albeit tempered by critical examination? Reid and Kant, who were supposed to make the same mistakes, eventually are held to correct each other, so that put together they provide the adequate method. In 1905, Peirce clearly identifies pragmaticism, the name he gave to his own form of pragmatism, with 'critical common-sensism'. Such a label uniting the contraries sounds awkward. Understood in a weak sense, Kant's critical position is indeed not really critical, but directly admits what should be doubted and tested, whereas in a strong sense it excludes common sense, which refuses to criticize our shared beliefs. To sum up, 'Critical Philosophy and the Philosophy of Common-Sense, the two rival and opposed ways of answering Hume, are at internecine war, impacificable … The Criticist believes in criticizing first principles, while the Common-sensist thinks such criticism is all nonsense' (5.505). Puzzlingly enough, this is a confession Peirce made at the very time he coins his critical common-sensism! One could even be more pessimistic than Peirce. Not only do Kant and Reid form a very ill-assorted union, but critical common-sensism risks suffering from the flaws of both the German and the Scottish approaches: if common-sensist, it accepts poorly psychological material; if critical, it discusses such a very unsteady base. As a result, we actually face two problems in order to get an idea of Peirce's thought: (why) did he change his view about Reid? And (how) did he manage to realize a fruitful mixture of philosophical common sense with Kant's critical method?

Let me tackle the second question first. Despite their differences, Kant and Reid still share some common points, some of which they also share with Peirce. Though Kant and 'even Reid' are nominalists (1.19), they both recognized the importance of the three categories (5.77n). Peirce defends the doctrine of immediate perception, 'which is upheld by Reid, Kant and all dualists who understand the true nature of dualism' (5.56). Peirce's biographer Joseph Brent even conjectures that 'Because of close similarities between some aspects of Reid's philosophy and that of the philosopher Immanuel

Kant, it was perhaps also Reid who provided an introduction for Peirce's study of Kant, and for his denial of Humean skepticism and Cartesian doubt as well'.[3] The fact that Reid was known through his editor, publisher and tireless expounder, Sir William Hamilton, deserves to be underlined: Peirce had but only contempt for him, especially as a logician, because of the uselessness of the quantification on the predicate, and as a metaphysician, because of his 'law of the conditioned' which proclaims the impossibility of knowing the absolute. The pursuit of the unconditioned is an attempt to escape both limitations of the unknowable thing-in-itself and of the implicit contention 'that our knowledge of the world is "conditioned" by the principle of common sense'.[4] In Hamilton's system, Reid's 'presentationism' is a way of defeating Kant's skepticism: the antinomies are not specific to a reason which would be 'infected with contradiction', as Kant believed,[5] but reflect a poor conception of its powers. Paradoxically, it is thus a Scot who introduces German idealism into the school of common sense. Hamilton corrects Kant with Reid's direct realism while Peirce rather corrects Reid's naïve realism with Kant's critical procedure. But Hamilton may anyway be seen as a primary source from which Peirce attempts to synthesize Kant and Reid, and the extensive annotations of his edition of Reid's works must have triggered Peirce's ideas as much as John Stuart Mill's reply, *An Examination of William Hamilton's Philosophy*, whose impact on himself Peirce always recognized:

> When Mill's *Examination of Hamilton* came out in the spring of 1865, I put the volume into my portmanteau and betook myself alone to a sea-side hotel, long before the season had begun to open, in order that I might study it in solitude; and it influenced me decidedly, and helped me to clear up my opinions. (MS 620, 1909)

Not only the edition of Reid proper should be mentioned, but also Hamilton's several papers on the comparison between Kant's and Reid's doctrines.[6] So that it could almost be said that critical common-sensism was on its way under Hamilton's pen, and perhaps that Peirce's often harsh tone against the 'little'

[3] Joseph Brent, *Charles Sanders Peirce: a Life* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1993), 52.

[4] Gordon Graham, 'Scottish Philosophy in the 19th Century', Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

[5] Sir William Hamilton, 'Kant and Reid', in Mansel (ed.), *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic* (Boston, 1861), Vol. 2, 402.

[6] Among others, a portion of an introductory lecture from 1836 on Scottish philosophy, and the paper titled 'Kant and Reid.

Hamilton (as compared to William R. Hamilton, the mathematician) may be due to the great closeness of their views. 'There is a strong general analogy between the philosophies of Reid and Kant', Hamilton writes, 'and Kant, I may observe by the way, was a Scotsman by proximate descent'.[7] The topic of Hamilton's influence on Peirce could be developed further if other matters were not more relevant for my point.

As for the first question about Peirce's change in view, there are two possible answers. One is to say that Peirce was driven to modify his understanding of Reid in reconsidering the latter's writings. Armando Fumigalli suggests that he may have been influenced by reading *Thomas Reid* (1898) by A.C. Fraser, whose edition of Berkeley's works Peirce had carefully reviewed in 1871[8]. Becoming aware that Hamilton's presentation of Reid was biased would be another factor. The second way of handling the matter is to deny any significant discontinuity. Despite some evidence, it is not obvious that the mature Peirce is closer to Reid's philosophy than the young one, for two reasons. First, in the 1900s, Peirce still expresses some reluctance to endorse the views of 'the old Scotch school' (5.504). To be true, in accepting immediate beliefs, it provides a sound method to halt a recurrent and continuous questioning, and, in a word, safely prevents us from the slide into skepticism. But it does not mean that uncriticized beliefs should be *ipso facto* regarded as the very truth, contrary to what the historical common sense philosopher opined (5.505). In other words, Peirce insists that he has not become a blind supporter of Reid. The second reason is that the young Peirce probably underestimated the proximity of his own philosophy to Reid's. To follow a suggestion by Claudine Tiercelin, it is likely 'that there are more points of agreement between the philosophers than Peirce himself would admit'.[9] In particular, during the years when he is laughing at Reid's small philosophical caliber, Peirce himself argues for the very Reidian idea that man has no faculty of intuition, that is, no cognition not determined by previous cognitions (but determined directly by the transcendental object, cf. W2.194). It is related to Helmholtz's theory of unconscious inferences. (One of his favorite examples is the fact that the needle-points of the eye are much bigger than what we can perceive.) Such an inferential theory implies that every perception and every thought (every

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[7] Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logics,* Vol. 2, 396.

[8] Armando Fumigalli, *Il Reale nel linguaggio: indicalità e realismo nella semiotica di Peirce* (Milano, 1995), 170.

[9] Claudine Tiercelin, 'Reid and Peirce on Belief', in M. Dalgarno and E. Matthews (eds), *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid* (Amsterdam, 1989), 216.

impression and every idea, Hume would say) is a consequence of a mental process and a semiotic interpretation of a previous perception or thought. In other words, there is no 'first', no initial sensation, no original perception that would link us to the thing 'in itself'.

Inferentialism about perception seems to conflict with Reid's direct realism, but it may not be the case. Peirce's so-called anti-Cartesian texts of 1868–69 in many respects agree with some of Reid's most fundamental theses. It has been shown[10] that his anti-Cartesianism is also secretly, and maybe more profoundly, a struggle against Aristotle's direct realism, the idea that there is nothing in-between us and the world. Such an opposition between Helmholtz, the great discoverer of unconscious inferences, and direct realism probably accounts for Peirce's following remark: 'That "English Common Sense", for example, is thoroughly peripatetic' (W6.168). But what Peirce still did not realize at the time, however, is that he would be progressively attracted by Aristotle's position, or more precisely, that his denial of intuition and of the transcendental object was in fact a form of direct realism (despite the physiological unconscious process needed to get such perception). His late theory of direct perception (sometimes dubbed 'peirception' by Peircean scholars) is akin to Reid's realism for, either inferential or not, the 'percepts' do not *represent* the world but they *present* it (hence the name 'presentationism', often used in the nineteenth century, chiefly after Hamilton). To seem red and to be red is the same (7.561). After clarifying his own position, Peirce would then understand that it entails almost no change that 'We have the direct experience of things in themselves' (6.95). The opponent is the "way of ideas" denounced by Reid, that is, the supposition of intermediate entities between the perceiver and the object of perception. The theory of immediate perception was accepted by both Reid and Kant, Peirce claims in 1905 (8.261), and 'this doctrine of immediate perception is a *corollary from the corollary* of pragmaticism that the object perceived is the immediate object of the destined ultimate opinion' (8.261).

It leads to other respects where Peirce and Reid concurred as early as the 1860s. Contrary to Descartes' advice, 'We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy' (W2.212). This is a point articulated in relation to a second Reidian principle: 'to make single individuals absolute judges of truth is most pernicious' (W2.212). Reid does not ask us to rely on our

[10] Claudine Tiercelin, *La Pensée-signe* (Nîmes, 1993), 60–1.

own thoughts, but on *common* beliefs, shared by all mankind. 'We individually cannot reasonably hope to attain the ultimate philosophy which we pursue; we can only seek it, therefore, for the *community* of philosophers', Peirce echoes (W2.212). Another point where Peirce (unconsciously) meets Reid is the faith in a scientific method, and the 'conviction that the methods of science must, some time or other, meet *real* laws and the agreement of the community'.[11] Epistemological anti-individualism and the criticism of 'paper doubts' (Peirce) or 'chamber doubts' (Reid) make them allies.

It thus becomes slightly clearer why pragmaticism and common-sensism (in its critical version) are logically related. They share a common view of knowledge as a set of fixed beliefs on which all agree and which preserve us from doubts, therefore facilitating practice and action. The pragmatist maxim announces that the signification of a concept is the whole of its practical possible consequences. Then, if the substance of his thought consists in a conditional resolve, the pragmaticist

> will be of all men the man whose mind is most open to conviction, and will be keen up the scent of whatever can go toward teaching him to distinguish accurately between truth and falsity, probability and improbability. This will suffice to make the pragmaticist attentive to all those matters of every-day facts which critical common-sensism takes into account. (5.499)

Far from applying the method of tenacity, the common-sensist is now regarded as someone paying attention to common, daily observations. It seems that Peirce plays on the various meanings of the adjective, both referring to the community and to the normality of both the facts and the exercise of our powers.

Criticism and Doubt

Peirce's synthesis tends to show that in making use of his *sensus communis* the Reidian already exerts some (proto)critical ability. But it is not enough: there is an ethical command to critically examine every belief of one's own. One can wonder what difference it makes with Kant's actual (if not avowed)

[11] Claudine Tiercelin, 'Reid and Peirce on Belief', 217.

method, namely, not a transcendental but a psychological examination. Since Peirce blames Kant for analyzing only our most common beliefs, should he be viewed not as a bad criticist but as a good critical common-sensist? In fact, their attitudes toward common-sense differ in the method of analysis. It does not consist, according to pragmaticism, in voluntarily doubting our beliefs, but in considering whether it would be possible to doubt them or not, and even more simply, in wondering whether one actually doubts them or not:

> 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. (5.498)

Indeed, Peirce argues, we do not have an infallible introspective faculty of immediately being aware of what we believe and what we doubt (5.498). Peirce has been struggling against such a transparency principle since his first years as a philosopher. Thus, the critical part of Critical Common-Sensism is but 'the systematic business of endeavoring to bring all [one's] 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' (5.517). A powerful logic and a method of mental experimentation (Peirce's phaneroscopy, which may remind of Husserl's eidetic variations) are the tools whose necessity Kant failed to recognize.

If Scottish common sense refused to introduce such a critical part in its method, it is partly due to the history of its birth: it was mainly constituted to reply to the damaging consequences of Hume's (supposed) skepticism. Reid shows the necessity of taking for granted some beliefs which, as the skeptic rightly emphasizes, are not properly justified. Some of our beliefs can neither be doubted nor justified; so let us believe them anyway, since it is a fact that we do have them. However, one of the main differences between Peirce's and Reid's theory is that pragmaticism acknowledges that there is a greater risk than skepticism. Worse than believing too little is the risk of believing too much:

> 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. (5.498)

In this regard, Peirce strongly dissents from the views of William James, whose 'will to believe' admonishes us to maximize our set of beliefs. As a consequence, the nature of our most 'natural' beliefs (Kant's *a priori* principles, which Peirce reinterprets as innate ideas) entails a dilemma each horn of which he is obliged to refuse: either to admit unjustified beliefs (which his 'will to know' and attempt to ascertain truth cannot accept) or to doubt at will, in an insincere manner. At least one element is missing, however, to allow us to understand how he escaped the dilemma, which is presented in the next section.

The Anthropological Frame

The remaining task is to explain why Peirce can converge towards Reid's acceptance of natural beliefs, and in the same move, how it can be combined with a critical approach. My hypothesis is that the (qualified) shift from anti- to moderate common-sensism (so to speak) can be ascribed to a general tendency toward naturalization in Peirce's epistemology. Peirce's early dismissal of the psychological base in Reid's epistemology comes with the idea that man is most of the time 'abnormal' in employing his mental faculties. Were he not so, the common-sensist would be perfectly right in trusting the causal authority of things in their effect upon us. That is why, notwithstanding his dispraise of Reid, the young Peirce recognized: 'The common-sense doctrine is to be held as far as this goes,—that there are no fallacies. Prove that a given belief really arises from certain data universal to all mankind and it must be admitted' (W1.339). If there were no visual illusions for instance, that is, if our eyes and our interpreting brain were perfectly reliable in every case, then we would be justified in trusting our direct sensitive experience. (This is not Reid's position, who never claims that our common sense beliefs are justified, but rather that we can and should hold them even if not justified.Peirce's view of common sense is fundamentally related to a normative approach: Reid's theory (as well as Kant's) is unsatisfactory, he believes, because it conflates facts (our opinions) with norms (knowledge). But if norms were naturally instantiated in facts, that is, if normative cases were the 'normal' cases, then Reid would be right. Common sense relies on the implicit premiss that our senses and

faculties are trustworthy.[12] Were it always the case, no critic would be required at all.[13] As a reliabilism, it relies too much on internal justification, whereas some form of evidentialism is needed. Reid's list of first principles will 'lack any epistemological bite'[14] if not embedded in an appropriate framework. But it is far from sure that Reid's psychological, internalist reliabilism (to put it in a paradoxical way) does the job. Hence, one can suspect that Peirce's (apparent) change of attitude toward Reid corresponds to an (apparent) evolution of his conception of epistemic norms.

Paradoxically, Reid's *principles* are too naturalistic for an epistemological account, while Peirce's notion of *belief*, less logical and more psychological as it seems, in fact allows a normative approach. For the only function of thought is to settle the opinions, that is, to produce satisfactory beliefs. Consequently, despite the psychological and hedonistic appearance of this theory, it in fact reveals a strong criterion for a good belief: it is a disposition to be satisfied by a proposition (whereas doubt is 'a state of mind marked by a feeling of uneasiness' (5.510)). 'The feeling', Peirce writes, 'does and ought to vary with the chance of the believed thing, such as deduced from all the arguments' (W3.293). The creed ought to be proportional to the weight of evidence. Thus, the opposition of belief and doubt creates a normative space, a place for what ought to be. In brief, whereas Reid's set of fundamental principles or axioms just describes what is common to every healthy man and woman, Peirce's common beliefs prescribe a quest for truth, a revision and a fixation of satisfying creeds.

Peirce's notions of common sense and of revision of beliefs are not antagonistic to one another. They both delineate a set of beliefs that one cannot revoke in doubt. As Peirce puts it: 'To say that I hold that the import, or adequate ultimate interpretation, of a concept is contained, not in any deed or deeds that will ever be done, but in a habit of conduct, or general moral determination of whatever procedure there may come to be, is no more than to say that I am a pragmaticist' (5.504). Thus, since a belief is a habit, such

[12] Compare Reid's analysis of the reliability of memory: although we cannot prove that it is reliable in a non-circular way, it would be foolish to consider that our memories do not reflect past facts; see, Derek Brookes (ed.), Thomas Reid, *Essay on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (Pennsylvania, 2002), 6.5, 474).

[13] Reid's position can thus be identified with a form of reliabilism, where our natural beliefs are in fact justified by the fact that we soundly produce them, similar to the view of Alvin Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge, 1986); see also, Philip De Bary, *Thomas Reid and Scepticism: His Reliabilist Response* (London, 2002).

[14] Philip De Bary, *Thomas Reid and Scepticism*, 65.

indubitable beliefs refer to habits which are constitutive of our species, for they are anchored in us, so to speak. Peirce interprets the 'indubitables', the fundamental presumptions or presuppositions, as innate beliefs or instincts:

> Now every animal must have habits. Consequently, it must have innate habits. In so far as it has cognitive powers, it must have *in posse* innate cognitive habits, which is all that anybody but John Locke ever meant by innate ideas. To say that I hold this for true is implied in my confession of the doctrine of Common-Sense. (5.504)

The relation to pragmatism then becomes obvious: if 'it is the essence of pragmaticism to make existence to consist in action' (MS 280), then one has to trust the natural precepts of practice. The ultimate interpretation of a concept is in a habit of conduct, which is always partly innate (as for instance in the animals): such a faith in innate and instinctive beliefs and habits commits to common sense. Another way of putting it is to say that both Peirce and Reid considered signs in nature on a par with conventional signs: as Richard Smyth notices, 'Reid vastly extended the notion of testimony to include "original testimonies" given "in the natural language of the human countenance and behavior"'.[15] However, whereas Reid's principles are fundamental in the sense that they are original and universal, Peirce's beliefs are original, therefore not universal. They refer to a kind of instinct in given circumstances. Thus 'the indubitable beliefs refer to a somewhat primitive mode of life' (5.511), and concern matters within the purview of the primitive man. In the course of human progress, some previously indubitable beliefs can become subject to a sound doubt. Indubitability is not forever, a fact that Reid did not realize: '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'. (5.511)

Evolution really is the solution to the dilemma between unjustified beliefs and impossible doubts, and Darwin (or rather Lamarck) the key to the tension between Reid and Kant. Peirce's great idea is that indubitable beliefs emerge: since a belief is that which resolves the tension of doubt, it is a product of evolution. Hence, 'Common-sensism has to grapple with the difficulty that if there are any indubitable beliefs, these beliefs must have grown up; and during the process, cannot have been indubitable beliefs' (5.512). Such a difficulty is

[15] Richard Smyth, *Reading Peirce Reading* (Lanham, 1997), 100.

precisely what the theory of critical common sense accounts for. Contrary to common sense principles, the idea of a common sense belief implies the possibility of a change. It gives an argument for fallibilism, that is, the principle that anybody at any time can be mistaken, so that certainty never implies truth. The fallibilist 'quite acknowledges that what has been indubitable one day has often been proved on the morrow to be false' (5.514). In consequence, since not to doubt sincerely is not to doubt, it is sometimes impossible to doubt about propositions which in fact are wrong: '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' (5.499).

Such a process also somehow accounts for the emergence of normativity itself, in paralleling the development of reason out of irrational thought through what Peirce calls self-control: a continuous series of self-criticisms and self-correcting mechanisms progressively creates the consciousness of the true/false dichotomy, which is the basis of normative thought and rational behavior. Nevertheless, the parallel should not be pushed too far. For if, contrary to what Reid thought, there is no fixed list of permanent principles of common-sense, neither do they vary in the course of a sole life. Peirce would probably agree that 'Most men continue all their days to be just what Nature and human education made them. Their manners, their opinions, their virtues, and their vices, are all got by habit, imitation, and instruction; and reason has little or no share in forming them'.[16] It would be tempting, though, to grant to reason a most prominent place in the development of every individual. Hence Peirce's confession:

> 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. (5.509)

Unfortunately, Reid's view sticks closer to reality: the evolution of common sense takes place at the scale of mankind and not of individual life. Indubitable beliefs vary a little and but a little under varying circumstances and in distant ages.

[16] Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind*, chapter 6, §24, 201.

> 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. (5.498)

Such 'facts of experience' are in fact, Peirce adds at more than sixty-five, the results of 'some studies preparatory to an investigation of the rapidity of these changes', that he wants to resume in order 'to go to the bottom of the subject' (5.444). It gives an idea of how central the matter appeared to him: it opens the path to an epistemology of the revision of beliefs at the scale of species. Peirce eventually confesses to own his adhesion, 'under inevitable modification, to the opinion of that subtle but well-balanced intellect, Thomas Reid, in the matter of Common Sense' (5.444).

Such a kind of moving fixity of beliefs has a name: vagueness. Every doubt bears on something definite, but what is doubted about this thing is vague (W3.61). It is a fundamental feature of Peirce's common-sensism as opposed to Reid's. Reid did not see that the indubitable needs to be vague. It is vagueness which gives doubt life (W3.23). A belief is a habit, and a habit begins to be 'vague, special and meager' before getting precise (W4.164). Once it is precise, it is no longer indubitable. Common beliefs are intrinsically vague: 'they are very vague indeed (such as, that fire burns) without being perfectly so' (5.498). Indeed, 'fire burns' is absolutely true as long as it remains vague, that is, not determinate according to various precise circumstances (fire does not burn in water, or without oxygen, fire does not burn diamond, and so on). 'All the veritably indubitable beliefs are vague' (5.505). That is why indubitable creeds cannot rely on science, for science itself lies on the logical principles that are to be warranted. There is reached the limits of inquiry. For the philosopher cannot investigate in his own indubitable beliefs: the fact of some universal presuppositions is an object of genuine inquiry, not their matter, '[b]ecause an investigation of such themes would be question-begging and not, as Peirce sometimes says, because of the psychological fact that no lively doubt propels the investigation onwards'.[17] However, saying that science stops where instinct starts, in our common sense, is not even exact, because the very roots of the scientific method are not different: 'those vague beliefs that appear to

[17] Arthur Smullyan, 'Some Implications of Critical Common-sensism', in Philip P. Wiener et F. H. Young (eds), *Studies in the Philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Cambridge, 1952), 120.

be indubitable have the same sort of basis as scientific results have. That is to say, they rest on experience – on the total everyday experience of many generations of multitudinous populations' (5.522). Such a vision completes the circle of Peirce's natural epistemology.

I would like to end this study with some socio-historical remarks that are worth keeping in mind regarding Scottish thought in America. It has been shown that when groping for a national spirit both independent from Europe and from England, the USA turned toward the Scottish tradition of Enlightenment. It may not be stranger to Peirce's insistence on a supposed family resemblance between John Duns, the so-called 'Scotus', and Thomas Reid, however artificial such an association actually is, as if there were a Scottish turn of mind immune to most traps of nominalism. Such a confidence in Scottish thought was of course far from a personal invention of Peirce's, but rather a national duty. It is enough to recall that the famous 1776 pamphlet by Thomas Paine that advocated the independence of America from the United Kingdom, a symbol for the unity of the new nation, was titled *Common Sense*. One could even suspect it may have played a part in Peirce's early contempt toward Reid's small 'caliber': could the young, mischievous and often impertinent Charles, have accepted the dull official doctrine of Harvard teachers? His mind was too highly preoccupied by investigations in the theory of categories to understand that a corrected epistemology based on common sense could help him develop his metaphysic. In the universities, the basic teaching material was often provided by Scottish philosophy, which was extremely widespread on the East Coast. Francis Bowen, once Peirce's logic professor at Harvard and his colleague when Peirce taught a class on 'British logicians', was an official adversary to Kant and a promoter of Hamilton's ideas. Several presidents of universities (most famously John Witherspoon and Samuel Stanhope Smith at the soon-to-be Princeton University) tried to establish Reid's thought as one major influence in North America. Peirce's difficulties with the institution may explain his reluctance to adopt such a model. But on the other hand he quickly guessed the fruitfulness of some intuitions of common sense, for instance in a Scottish writer he quoted when he was fifteen, and which has Peirce's biographer write: 'The general origins of pragmatism in the popular common-sensism of Henry Home, Lord Kames, seem clear'.[18] The elements of ambivalence could be listed again and again. It can for instance be related to the Concord writers. 'One offshoot of Scottish common sense philosophy

[18] Brent, *Charles Sanders Peirce*, 51–2.

at Harvard was the rise of New England Transcendentalism. (…) Emerson in particular seems to have been influenced by Reid and Stewart'.[19] As Peirce treated Emerson with a mixture of diffidence and respect, almost sarcastic but in any case admiring, he may have been both intrigued and embarrassed with Reid's principles of common sense and direct realism.

However, those factors mostly form the intellectual frame in which Peirce's thought would have to develop: if different, Peirce would probably have found different means to realize the same project, the founding of an epistemology overcoming the idealist versus realist dichotomy – that is, an approach enabling us to fix beliefs both on nature and on the mind. Kant's transcendental overcoming being in fact ignorant of its own epistemological presuppositions, the solution was in the clarifying and accepting such presuppositions: such is common sense, and such is pragmatism. These actually were seen as two alternatives for a national philosophy in America. But Peirce's pragmatism was really a kind of revival of Scottish philosophy. So the debate was over what kind of revival it should be. Peirce very much relied on Alexander Bain's theory of belief, of which he said pragmatism was 'scarce more than a corollary' (5.12). But Bain regarded himself as a rival to James McCosh, the president of Princeton University, as his autobiography shows. Strikingly, nevertheless, it seems that despite the apparent rivalries, their intellectual projects were quite similar, in realizing a fusion of Reid's common sense and Kant's criticism. That is why I think the now traditional view that Peirce was 'the first writer in America to begin tolling the death knoll of the "old" psychology as the psychology of Porter and McCosh was later to be called',[20] should be qualified, if not challenged.[21] To some extent, McCosh regards Kant and Reid as very close:

> Both appeal to reason, which Reid called reason in the first degree, and the other pure reason. The one presents this reason to us under the name of common sense that is, the powers of intelligence common to all men; the other, as principles necessary and universal. The one

[19] Benjamin Redekop, 'Reid's Influence in Britain, Germany, France, and America', in Terence Cuneo and René van Woudenberg (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid* (Cambridge, 2004), 332.

[20] Thomas Cadwallader, 'Peirce as an Experimental Psychologist', *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 11:3 (1975), 171.

[21] Cf. Grant R. Brodrecht, *The Scottish Common Sense Tradition And Pragmatism: The Thought of James McCosh And Charles Sanders Peirce Compared,* Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, M.A. 2000.

> pointed to laws, native and fundamental; the other, to forms in the mind. The one carefully observed these by consciousness, and sought to unfold their nature; the other determined their existence by a criticism, and professes to give an inventory of them. All students should note these agreements as confirmatory of the truth in both.[22]

He even almost sketches the doctrine of critical common sense when noticing that, 'Pure reason, according to Kant, can criticise itself. But every criticism ought to have some principles on which it proceeds'. That is, as Peirce would say, criticism without common sense principles to be criticized is criticism of nothing. Unfortunately, McCosh was too confident in traditional logic, which is a reproach Peirce made of Kant as well, and adds: 'Kant, a professor of Logic, fortunately adopted the forms of Logic which I can show had been carefully inducted by Aristotle, and hence has reached much truth'.[23] Peirce's work in logic is the proper demonstration that such a conception is completely wrong. McCosh later blamed Sidgwick for robbing him of his title,[24] but Sidgwick did more: he went one step further than McCosh had dared. In joining both Reid and Kant, philosophy can be considered as 'a means for criticizing and changing common sense beliefs'.[25] Sidgwick concluded that 'the premisses of Criticism, as far as we have yet examined them, are illegitimately and inconsistently assumed'. For him, Kant pretends to rely on common sense,[26] whereas Peirce argues to the contrary that Kant pretends to go beyond common sense through transcendental deduction. But he of course does not, and uses some more sophisticated reasoning.[27] Thus, pragmatism and American Scottish thought have a lot in common,[28] and in particular they both endeavoured to give America a 'national' philosophy. But whereas

[22] James McCosh, 'A Criticism of the Critical Philosophy', *Princeton Review*, 1878 (published as a book in 1884).

[23] Ibid., 339.

[24] Henry Sidgwick, "A Criticism of the Critical Philosophy", *Mind*, 8 (1883).

[25] Marion Ledwig, *Common Sense* (New York, 2007), 31.

[26] 'But how impossible it is for Kant to appeal to Common Sense with any consistency, appears more manifestly when we ask what he means by the "experience" that verifies the universals of physical science; since there is at any rate no doubt that his view of it is fundamentally different from the common sense view of the plain man'; Henry Sidgwick, 'A Criticism of the Critical Philosophy', *Mind*, 8 (1883), 82.

[27] 'Can we suppose that Kant (…) relies not strictly on induction from experience, but on Common Sense uncontradicted by experience?'; Ibid., 81.

[28] Probably much more than with Chauncey Wright, one of Peirce's very good friends, who was very critical towards McCosh; see 'McCosh on Intuitions' and 'McCosh on Tyndall'.

McCosh intended to bring Reid's ideas to a new fruition, Peirce thought that 'the Scotch school of philosophy (…) is too old a tree to bear good fruit' (W2.278). If Peirce's position seems to remain ambiguous, it is because one cannot understand it without plunging into its logical and metaphysical roots.

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