19

CRITICAL COMMON-SENSISM *

I

PRAGMATICISM was originally enounced in the form of a maxim, as follows: Consider what effects that might *conceivably* have practical bearings you *conceive* the objects of your *conception* to have. Then, your *conception* of those effects is the whole of your *conception* of the object.

I will restate this in other words, since ofttimes one can thus eliminate some unsuspected source of perplexity to the reader. This time it shall be in the indicative mood, as follows: The entire intellectual purport of any symbol consists in the total of all general modes of rational conduct which, conditionally upon all the possible different circumstances and desires, would ensue upon the acceptance of the symbol.

Two doctrines that were defended by the writer about nine years before the formulation of pragmaticism 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. The term "reasoning" ought to be confined to such fixation of one belief by another as is reasonable, deliberate, self-controlled. A reasoning must be conscious; and this consciousness is not mere "immediate consciousness," which (as I argued in 1868) [18] is simple Feeling viewed from another side, but is in its ultimate nature (meaning in that characteristic element of it that is not reducible to anything

* [The first selection in I and both selections in II are from "Issues of Pragmaticism," *The Monist* 1905 (*CP* 5.438-46, 453, 457). The other selections in I are from ms. c. 1905 (*CP* 5.505-8, 511-16, 523-5).]

simpler), a sense of taking a habit, or disposition to respond to a given kind of stimulus in a given kind of way. . . . But the secret of rational consciousness is not so much to be sought in the study of this one peculiar nucleolus, as in the review of the process of self-control in its entirety. The machinery of logical self-control works on the same plan as does moral self-control, in multiform detail. The greatest difference, perhaps, is that the latter serves to inhibit mad puttings forth of energy, while the former most characteristically insures us against the quandary of Buridan's ass. The formation of habits under imaginary action (see the paper of January 1878) [9] is one of the most essential ingredients of both; but in the logical process the imagination takes far wider flights, proportioned to the generality of the field of inquiry, being bounded in pure mathematics solely by the limits of its own powers, while in the moral process we consider only situations that may be apprehended or anticipated. For in moral life we are chiefly solicitous about our conduct and its inner springs, and the approval of conscience, while in intellectual life there is a tendency to value existence as the vehicle of forms. Certain obvious features of the phenomena of self-control (and especially of habit) can be expressed compactly and without any hypothetical addition, except what we distinctly rate as imagery, by saying that we have an occult nature of which and of its contents we can only judge by the conduct that it determines, and by phenomena of that conduct. All will assent to that (or all but the extreme nominalist), but anti-synechistic [14] thinkers wind themselves up in a factitious snarl by falsifying the phenomena in representing consciousness to be, as it were, a skin, a separate tissue, overlying an unconscious region of the occult nature, mind, soul, or physiological basis. It appears to me that in the present state of our knowledge a sound methodeutic prescribes that, in adhesion to the appearances, the difference is only relative and the demarcation not precise.

According to the maxim of Pragmaticism, to say that determination affects our occult nature is to say that it is capable of affecting deliberate conduct; and since we are conscious of what we do deliberately, we are conscious *habitualiter* of whatever hides in the depths of our nature; and it is presumable (and *only* presumable, although curious instances are on record) that a sufficiently energetic effort of attention would bring it out. Consequently, to say that an operation of the mind is controlled is to say that it is, in a special sense, a conscious operation; and this no doubt is the consciousness of reasoning. For this theory requires that in reasoning

we should be conscious, not only of the conclusion, and of our deliberate approval of it, but also of its being the result of the premiss from which it does result, and furthermore that the inference is one of a possible class of inferences which conform to one guiding principle. Now in fact we find a well-marked class of mental operations, clearly of a different nature from any others which do possess just these properties. They alone deserve to be called *reasonings*; and if the reasoner is conscious, even vaguely, of what his guiding principle is, his reasoning should be called a *logical argumentation*. There are, however, cases in which we are conscious that a belief has been determined by another given belief, but are not conscious that it proceeds on any general principle. Such is St. Augustine's "*cogito, ergo sum.*" Such a process should be called, not a reasoning, but an *acritical inference*. Again, there are cases in which one belief is determined by another, without our being at all aware of it. These should be called *associational suggestions of belief*.

Now the theory of Pragmaticism was originally based, as anybody will see who examines the papers of November 1877 and January 1878,[15] upon a study of that experience of the phenomena of self-control which is common to all grown men and women; and it seems evident that to some extent, at least, it must always be so based. For it is to conceptions of deliberate conduct that Pragmaticism would trace the intellectual purport of symbols; and deliberate conduct is self-controlled conduct. Now control may itself be controlled, criticism itself subjected to criticism; and ideally there is no obvious definite limit to the sequence. But if one seriously inquires whether it is possible that a completed series of actual efforts should have been endless or beginningless (I will spare the reader the discussion), I think he can only conclude that (with some vagueness as to what constitutes an effort) this must be regarded as impossible. It will be found to follow that there are, besides perceptual judgments, original (*i.e.*, indubitable because uncriticized) beliefs of a general and recurrent kind, as well as indubitable acritical inferences.

It is important for the reader to satisfy himself that genuine doubt always has an external origin, usually from surprise; and that it is as impossible for a man to create in himself a genuine doubt by such an act of the will as would suffice to imagine the condition of a mathematical theorem, as it would be for him to give himself a genuine surprise by a simple act of the will.

I beg my reader also to believe that it would be impossible for

me to put into these articles over two per cent of the pertinent thought which would be necessary in order to present the subject as I have worked it out. I can only make a small selection of what it seems most desirable to submit to his judgment. Not only must all steps be omitted which he can be expected to supply for himself, but unfortunately much more that may cause him difficulty.

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. It is, for example, quite open to reasonable doubt whether the motions of electrons are confined to three dimensions, although it is good methodeutic to presume that they are until some evidence to the contrary is forthcoming. On the other hand, as soon as we find that a belief shows symptoms of being instinctive, although it may seem to be dubitable, we must suspect that experiment would show that it is not really so; for in our artificial life, especially

in that of a student, no mistake is more likely than that of taking a paper-doubt for the genuine metal. Take, for example, the belief in the criminality of incest. Biology will doubtless testify that the practice is inadvisable; but surely nothing that it has to say could warrant the intensity of our sentiment about it. When, however, we consider the thrill of horror which the idea excites in us, we find reason in that to consider it to be an instinct; and from that we may infer that if some rationalistic brother and sister were to marry, they would find that the conviction of horrible guilt could not be shaken off.

In contrast to this may be placed the belief that suicide is to be classed as murder. There are two pretty sure signs that this is not an instinctive belief. One is that it is substantially confined to the Christian world. The other is that when it comes to the point of actual self-debate, this belief seems to be completely expunged and ex-sponged from the mind. In reply to these powerful arguments, the main points urged are the authority of the fathers of the church and the undoubtedly intense instinctive clinging to life. The latter phenomenon is, however, entirely irrelevant. For though it is a wrench to part with life, which has its charms at the very worst, just as it is to part with a tooth, yet there is no *moral* element in it whatever. As to the Christian tradition, it may be explained by the circumstances of the early Church. For Christianity, the most terribly earnest and most intolerant of religions (see *The Book of Revelations of St. John the Divine*)—and it remained so until diluted with civilization—recognized no morality as worthy of an instant's consideration except Christian morality. Now the early Church had need of martyrs, *i.e.*, witnesses, and if any man had done with life, it was abominable infidelity to leave it otherwise than as a witness to its power. This belief, then, should be set down as dubitable; and it will no sooner have been pronounced dubitable, than Reason will stamp it as false.

The Scotch School appears to have no such distinction concerning the limitations of indubitability and the consequent limitations of the jurisdiction of original belief.

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.

Logicians have too much neglected the study of *vagueness*, not suspecting the important part it plays in mathematical thought.

It is the antithetical analogue of generality. A sign is objectively *general*, in so far as, leaving its effective interpretation indeterminate, it surrenders to the interpreter the right of completing the determination for himself. "Man is mortal." "What man?" "Any man you like." A sign is objectively *vague*, in so far as, leaving its interpretation more or less indeterminate, it reserves for some other possible sign or experience the function of completing the determination. "This month," says the almanac-oracle, "a great event is to happen." "What event?" "Oh, we shall see. The almanac doesn't tell that." The *general* might be defined as that to which the principle of excluded middle does not apply. A triangle in general is not isosceles nor equilateral; nor is a triangle in general scalene. The *vague* might be defined as that to which the principle of contradiction does not apply. For it is false neither that an animal (in a vague sense) is male, nor that an animal is female. . . . No communication of one person to another can be entirely definite, *i.e.*, non-vague. We may reasonably hope that physiologists will some day find some means of comparing the qualities of one person's feelings with those of another, so that it would not be fair to insist upon their present incomparability as an inevitable source of misunderstanding. Besides, it does not affect the intellectual purport of communications. But wherever degree or any other possibility of continuous variation subsists, absolute precision is impossible. Much else must be vague, because no man's interpretation of words is based on exactly the same experience as any other man's. Even in our most intellectual conceptions, the more we strive to be precise, the more unattainable precision seems. 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. I have worked out the logic of vagueness with something like completeness, but need not inflict more of it upon you, at present.

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 reflection, 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.

One ought then to ask oneself, whether, since much of the original belief has disappeared under an attentive dissection, perseverance might not affect the destruction of what remains of it. This ques-

tion always appears reasonable as long as one stands far enough away from the facts of the case, and views them as one would a painting of Monet.

But the answer that a closer scrutiny dictates in some cases is that it is not because insufficient pains have been taken to precide the residuum, that it is vague: it is that it is vague intrinsically. Take, for example, our belief in the Order of Nature. The criticisms of it [above], as well as by various other writers, of whom may be mentioned as long antecedent to the writer, Renouvier, Delboeuf, Fouillée, Blood, and James, and no doubt there were others, and since that time Dewey and I know not who else, appear to me to have stripped it of all rational precision. As precisely defined it can hardly be said to be absolutely indubitable considering how many thinkers there are who do not believe it. But who can think that there is *no* order in nature?

. . . 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.

Doctor Y. What do you mean by "somewhat primitive"? And by what sort of reasoning can a dubitable proposition about experience become indubitable?

Pragmaticist. A searching question, because some of our beliefs, which seem as indubitable as any, are of such a character that they can hardly have entered the minds, say, of Neanderthal men, and in any case, cannot possibly have been transmitted to us from the first conscious animals. Consequently, 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. Still, I see no reason for thinking that beliefs that were dubitable became indubitable. Every decent house dog has been taught beliefs that appear to have no application to the wild state of the dog; and yet your trained dog has not, I guess, been observed to have passed through a period of scepticism on the subject. There is every reason to suppose that belief came first, and the power of doubting long after. Doubt, usually, perhaps always, takes its rise from surprise, which supposes previous belief;

and surprises come with novel environment. I will only add that though precise reasoning about precise experiential doubt could not entirely destroy doubt, any more than the action of finite conservative forces could leave a body in a continuous state of rest, yet vagueness, which is no more to be done away with in the world of logic than friction in mechanics, can have that effect.

As I was saying, a modern recognition of evolution must distinguish the Critical Common-sensist from the old school. Modern science, with its microscopes and telescopes, with its chemistry and electricity, and with its entirely new appliances of life, has put us into quite another world; almost as much so as if it had transported our race to another planet. Some of the old beliefs have no application except in extended senses, and in such extended senses they are sometimes dubitable and subject to just criticism. It is above all the normative sciences, esthetics, ethics, and logic, that men are in dire need of having severely criticized, in their relation to the new world created by science. Unfortunately, this need is as unconscious as it is great. The evils are in some superficial way recognized; but it never occurs to anybody that the study of esthetics, ethics, and logic can be seriously important, because these sciences are conceived by all, but their deepest students, in the old way. It only concerns my present purpose to glance at this state of things. The needed new criticism must know whereon it stands; namely, on the beliefs that remain indubitable; and young Critical Common-sensists of intellectual force who burn for a task in which they can worthily sacrifice their lives without encouragement, reward, recognition, or a hearing (and I trust such young men still live) can find in this field their heart's desire.

[*Character* V.] Yet a [fifth] 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. He really cannot admit that it may be so with all of them; but here he loses himself in vague unmeaning contradictions.

Doctor Y. Can indubitable propositions be demonstrable?

Pragmaticist. Indubitable propositions must be ultimate premisses, or at least, must be held without reference to precise proofs. For what one cannot doubt one cannot argue about; and no precise

empirical argument can free its conclusion altogether from rational doubt.

Yet it is true that whenever one turns a critical glance upon one of our original beliefs—say, the belief in the order of nature—the mind at once seems vaguely to pretend to have reasons for believing it. One dreams of an inductive proof. One surmises that the belief results from something like an inductive proof that has been forgotten. Very likely it did, in a sense of the term "inductive process" that is so generalized as to include uncontrolled thought. But this admission must be accompanied by the emphatic denial that the indubitable belief is inferential, or is "accepted." It simply remains unshaken as it always was. That does not at all interfere with the theory that in the psychological process of its development, the occurrence of single experiences, such as might have been predictively deduced from it, were an indispensable factor, while an original potentiality of the belief-habit must have been a correlative factor. All this is perfectly consistent, too, with the necessity of criticizing the ordinary axioms of reasoning and of morals, as well as ordinarily developed ideals, as soon as they are extended so as to become applicable to the new world created by science.

Doctor Y. Is there any further peculiarity which distinguishes Critical Common-sensism from that of Reid and Dugald Stewart?

Pragmaticist. Yes [*Character* VI]; for it 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. A proposition that could be doubted at will is certainly not *believed*. For belief, 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. Now experience which could be summoned up at pleasure would not be experience.

Kant (whom I *more* than admire) is nothing but a somewhat confused pragmatist. A real is anything that is not affected by men's cognitions *about it*; which is a verbal definition, not a doctrine. An external object is anything that is not affected by any cognitions, whether about it or not, of the man to whom it is external. Exaggerate this, in the usual philosopher fashion, and you have the conception of what is not affected by any cognitions at all. Take the converse of this definition and you have the notion of what does not affect cognition, and in this indirect manner you get a hypostatically abstract notion of what the *Ding an sich* would be. In this sense, we also have a notion of a sky-blue demonstration; but in half a dozen ways the *Ding an sich* has been proved to be nonsensical; and here is another way. It has been shown that in the formal analysis of a proposition, after all that words can convey has been thrown into the predicate, there remains a subject that is indescribable and that can only be pointed at or otherwise indicated, unless a way, of finding what is referred to, be prescribed. The *Ding an sich*, however, can neither be indicated nor found. Consequently, no proposition can refer to it, and nothing true or false can be predicated of it. Therefore, all references to it must be thrown out as meaningless surplusage. But when that is done, we see clearly that Kant regards Space, Time, and his Categories just as everybody else does, and never doubts or has doubted their

objectivity. His limitation of them to possible experience is pragmatism in the general sense; and the pragmaticist, as fully as Kant, recognizes the mental ingredient in these concepts. Only (trained by Kant to define), he defines more definitely, and somewhat otherwise, than Kant did, just how much of this ingredient comes from the mind of the individual in whose experience the cognition occurs. The kind of Common-sensism which thus criticizes the Critical Philosophy and recognizes its own affiliation to Kant has surely a certain claim to call itself Critical Common-sensism.

II

Another doctrine which is involved in Pragmaticism as an essential consequence of it, but which the writer defended . . . before he had formulated, even in his own mind, the principle of pragmaticism, is the scholastic doctrine of realism. This is usually defined as the opinion that there are real objects that are general, among the number being the modes of determination of existent singulars, if, indeed, these be not the only such objects. But the belief in this can hardly escape being accompanied by the acknowledgment that there are, besides, real *vagues*, and especially real possibilities. For possibility being the denial of a necessity, which is a kind of generality, is vague like any other contradiction of a general. Indeed, it is the reality of some possibilities that pragmaticism is most concerned to insist upon. The article of January 1878[9] endeavoured to gloze over this point as unsuited to the exoteric public addressed; or perhaps the writer wavered in his own mind. He said that if a diamond were to be formed in a bed of cotton-wool, and were to be consumed there without ever having been pressed upon by any hard edge or point, it would be merely a question of nomenclature whether that diamond should be said to have been hard or not. No doubt this is true, except for the abominable falsehood in the word MERELY, implying that symbols are unreal. Nomenclature involves classification; and classification is true or false, and the generals to which it refers are either reals in the one case, or figments in the other. For if the reader will turn to the original maxim of pragmaticism at the beginning of this article, he will see that the question is, not what *did* happen, but whether it would have been well to engage in any line of conduct whose successful issue depended upon whether that diamond *would* resist an attempt to scratch it, or whether all other logical means of determining how it ought to be classed *would* lead to the conclusion

which, to quote the very words of that article, would be "the belief which alone could be the result of investigation carried *sufficiently far*." Pragmaticism makes the ultimate intellectual purport of what you please to consist in conceived conditional resolutions, or their substance; and therefore, the conditional propositions, with their hypothetical antecedents, in which such resolutions consist, being of the ultimate nature of meaning, must be capable of being true, that is, of expressing whatever there be which is such as the proposition expresses, independently of being thought to be so in any judgment, or being represented to be so in any other symbol of any man or men. But that amounts to saying that possibility is sometimes of a real kind.

The question is, was that diamond *really* hard? It is certain that no discernible *actual* fact determined it to be so. But is its hardness not, nevertheless, a *real* fact? To say, as the article of January 1878[9] seems to intend, that it is just as an arbitrary "usage of speech" chooses to arrange its thoughts, is as much as to decide against the reality of the property, since the real is that which is such as it is regardless of how it is, at any time, thought to be. Remember that this diamond's condition is not an isolated fact. There is no such thing; and an isolated fact could hardly be real. It is an unsevered, though presciss part of the unitary fact of nature. . . . But however this may be, how can the hardness of all other diamonds fail to bespeak *some* real relation among the diamonds without which a piece of carbon would not be a diamond? Is it not a monstrous perversion of the word and concept *real* to say that the accident of the non-arrival of the corundum prevented the hardness of the diamond from having the *reality* which it otherwise, with little doubt, would have had?

At the same time, we must dismiss the idea that the occult state of things (be it a relation among atoms or something else), which constitutes the reality of a diamond's hardness, can possibly consist in anything but in the truth of a general conditional proposition. For to what else does the entire teaching of chemistry relate except to the "behaviour" of different possible kinds of material substance? And in what does that behaviour consist except that if a substance of a certain kind should be exposed to an agency of a certain kind, a certain kind of sensible result *would* ensue, according to our experiences hitherto. As for the pragmaticist, it is precisely his position that nothing else than this can be so much as *meant* by saying that an object possesses a character.