Common sense and technics:
towards a technical literacy

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Abstract

The determination of what might mean common sense was a task that Western Thought set for it since its inception in Ancient Greece. However, the specific and systematic treatment emerged strongly in the 17th century and was consolidated in the 18th century. From the plurality of meanings that we can find for this term, we can determine one that holds in all the attempts that history has presented to itself. Common sense emerges as problem solver, but also as an obstacle that needs to be superseded in order to think something anew. It is from the relations media realize that we can find today a hypostatization of the common sense, although there is no precise thematization in this particular problem. In this essay, we try to show how historically the problem moves to other nomenclatures, and causes disturbance in the understanding of the phenomena that media creates, but that has behind it a common ground: a certain literacy that constitutes use of any technique.

Palavras-chave

Common sense; technics; culture; literacy; history

Resumo

A determinação do que possa significar o sentido comum foi uma tarefa que o pensamento ocidental procurou determinar desde a sua origem na Grécia. Porém, o tratamento específico e sistemático surge com força no século XVII e consolida-se no século XIII. Da pluralidade das significações que podemos encontrar para este termo, podemos determinar uma que se mantém em todas as tentativas que a história apresentou. E este aparece, como aqui o designamos, como um resolutor de problemas, mas também um escolho na hora de poder pensar algo de novo. É a partir das relações que os média realizam que podemos encontrar hoje uma hipostasiação do sentido comum, ainda que este nunca assim seja tematizado. Procuramos mostrar como historicamente o problema se desloca para outras nomenclaturas, e causa perturbação no entendimento dos fenómenos que os média criam, mas que tem por detrás um problema base: uma certa literacia que constitui uso de qualquer técnica.

Palavras-chave

Sentido-comum; técnica; cultura; literacia; história

Good sense is the most evenly distributed thing in the world; for everyone believes himself to be so well provided with it that even those who are the hardest to please in every other way do not usually want more of it than they already have. Nor is it likely that everyone is wrong about this; rather, what this shows is that the power of judging correctly and of distinguishing the true from the false (which is what is properly called good sense or reason)

is naturally equal in all men, and that consequently the diversity of our opinions arises not from the fact that some of us are more reasonable than others, but solely that we have different ways of directing our thoughts, and do not take into account the same things. For it is not enough to possess a good mind; the most important thing is to apply it correctly. The greatest minds are capable of the greatest vices as well as the greatest virtues; those who go forward but very slowly can get further, if they always follow the right road, than those who are in too much of a hurry and stray off it. (Descartes, 2006, p. 5)

Common sense: approaching

Common sense is of great importance and cannot be accessed in a simplistic form. An approach to it appears to be a task that always requires a twofold endeavor: Firstly, an effort on the part of who is conducting the enquiry to find the right way to start; secondly, an effort to unveil the subject matter itself, which always presupposes previous knowledge that needs to be clarified in order to get to the first point. Common sense need itself to be common and universal in giving access to what is allowed by itself. Common sense is a form, the classical form, of literacy when taken in its general assumption. Taken literacy literally, as a consequence of a technology, an epiphenomenon of it, Common Sense is inscribed by literacy and last the condition of possibility of the first.

Let us here remember Immanuel Kant assertion –when delving into the problem: "how is Metaphysics as science possible?" – at the end of the *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics:* "only two things I cannot accept: first, the plaything of probability and conjecture, which suits metaphysics just as poorly as it does geometry; second, differentiation by means of the divining rod of the so-called sound common sense, which does not bend for everyone, but is guided by personal qualities" (Kant, 1987, p. A196).

This assertion contradicts the other famous *dictum* on common sense, the one who was previously made by René Descartes in the very opening of the *Discourse on Method*. As Descartes (2006, p. 5) states: "good sense is the most evenly distributed thing in the world; for everyone believes himself to be so well provided with it that even those who are the hardest to please in every other way do not usually want more of it than they already have". Between 1637 and 1783 something very important had happened which we had purposely concealed it in the Kantian book quoted above. It took place in *Prolegomena*, published in Riga – Russian Empire at that moment – and it was an event that revealed and presented to the *Republic of Letters* a phenomenon which will never disappear from universities and that was craved ever since on the frontispiece of *Critical Thinking*, being also one of the most crucial turns in Human Thought. Immanuel Kant (1987, p. A8) was very clear about it: "but fate, ever ill-disposed toward metaphysics, would have it that *Hume* was understood by no one".

Up to that moment, the Scottish philosopher David Hume had the same destiny (*Schicksal,* to mention the word used by Kant) as *Metaphysics*. Expressed in its crudeness, this sounds as an improbable comparison for Kant, since Kant was a man of great

subtlety when it came to give definitions and in making distinctions; we know also that he was not too much prone towards enthusiastic comparisons or wide spectrum analogies. Kant went even further, saying that David Hume was a *destroyer*! David Hume? The man who had a *disputatio* with the irascible Jean-Jacques Rousseau and preserved his good manners, *le bon David*, as he was also known, the young boy who studied in *La Flèche* (sometimes History is a round circle, in the sense that the same conditions that give rise to a movement can also be the host of its most violent opposition, Descartes and Hume) –, the author of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, published in 1739 and written towards 1737, when Hume was only 26 years old and was living in France. Here are Kant's (1987, p. A10) precise words: "*Hume* named this destructive philosophy itself metaphysics and placed great value on it". The most well-known of Kant's (1987, p. A13) *dicta* on Hume is as follows: "I freely admit that the remembrance of David Hume was the very thing that many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave a completely different direction to my researches in the field of speculative philosophy". We would like even to underline and remember once more Kant's (1987, p. A6) sentence, which was made in that precious but little volume, the passage where he states that "it is never too late to grow reasonable and wise; but if the insight comes late, it is always harder to bring it into play". This in-sight is Hume's great *apport* to common sense and to the understanding of its function; but this contribution can be seen both in a positive and in a negative way.

But at this point we already have enough material to start focusing *common sense* and start bringing the forth what Hume still has to say today on the subject, which we think still is of great importance if we read it from a non-*commonsensical* point of view. In fact, it was Kant that opened the door for introducing the *heretic* philosopher in History and into "philosophizing" itself. Hume's was educated at René Descartes' *alma mater* and had conducted a whole battle against Descartes' philosophy and against all rational-ism, which was saved or rescued by one of the giants in the History of Philosophy, the man who tried to destroy *destruction* and carried out a *delimitation* of all human faculties, by applying the notion of *finitude*, of a temporal *differendum*, to all human knowledge, i.e., Immanuel Kant. It's also a known fact that David Hume sold a few copies of his *Treatise* (Harris, 2015) during his lifetime, saying short before his death in 1776 that the book "fell dead-born from the press; without reaching such distinction as even to excite a murmur from the zealots" (Hume, 1964a, p. 2). But we can surely maintain that Hume was right in his *Einsicht*, in his insight that enlightened Kant, about common sense and in stating, against Descartes' that not every human being possesses good sense (the *Bona Mens*), that ability or faculty was not that natural and widespread and if it blossoms late in life it will be hard to put it into play.

These are all matters of facts, historical facts; but as such, they contracted the prev-alent meaning of common sense, just because *common sense* is a matter of historical and social construction, but also because it functions as an established *territorium* from which we a-critically make judgments about reality and about ourselves. Kant's *rendez-vous* with Hume's first *enquiry*, the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1902/1970), around 1760, though it has been translated into German since 1755 and originally published in

English in 1748. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1995, p. 5) as a precise statement to describe such historical situations as human's events that clarify human actions: "the course of history does not show us the Becoming of things foreign to us, but the Becoming of ourselves and for our own knowledge". The meeting under the same problem of these four major names – Descartes, Hume, Kant, Hegel – brings forth the importance of the debate that the nature and the function of Common Sense had in western thought. The final analyses of Hegel are sufficiently clear about the problem, since for Hegel common sense is in the opposite side of thinking[1], stating "'sound common sense' which takes itself to be a solid, realistic consciousness is, in the perceptual process, only the play of these abstractions; generally, it is always at its poorest where it fancies itself to be the richest" (Hegel, 1997, p. 77). By abstractions Hegel means representations that appears to be singular but doesn't contain in themselves the negative moment, which make them mere positives momentous that could not achieve an entire figure of what is reality. *Common sense* lacks self-consciousness and is a simple repetitive moment without its counter-part. But since for Hegel "in reality we are what we are through history (Hegel, 1995, p. 2), since the history of thinking is an introduction to thinking itself (Hegel, 1995), the history of the development of the idea of *common sense* is an introduction to *thinking* itself and its primary moment. With this we can see in the history of thinking the weaving of a grid of fundamental concepts that need to be superseded in order to get a figure, an absolute image of the world. *Common sense* is in this way the interlaced strings of prejudices that allow the first access to reality itself. By this means, it can be taken as a form of literacy in the sense that allows a form, a specific mode, of access to the meaning itself build, which is in fact a process of mediation, though not a process of mediatization (Macho, 2013). In fact, *common sense* can be taken as a *cultural technique*, as it is used by the so-called *German media theory*. This is how Bernhard Siegert (2015, p. 13) exposes them:

> we need to focus on how recursive operative chains bring about a switch from first – order to second – order techniques (and back), on how nonsense generates sense, how the symbolic is filtered out of the real, or how, conversely, the symbolic is incorporated into the real, and how things/signifiers can exist because of the interchange of materials/information across the ever- emergent boundaries by which they differentiate themselves from the surrounding medium/channel.

Common sense: determination

Common sense can be conceived at least in two ways: a) as an immediate access to what things are and to what things are outside any process of cognition and mediation, so to say, outside any process of reasoning, being thus a form of orienting oneself towards practical life or action, a real form of literacy. Common sense, from this point

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[1] For a wide perspective about on the complex relation between common sense and philosophy see Armstrong (1962).

of view, is performative, it leads oneself blindly or a-critically to act or represent in some specific way or to acknowledge things under the same behavioral and cognitive patterns as *the others* do. Yet, we should have to recognize that it is of great use for acting without thinking – without self-consciousness of mediators. This is something that we have to do in our daily lives and, in fact, the unique way we can manage to live our everyday lives. And b) common sense can be an obstacle, as shown by Hegel, for critical thinking, that is, for an enquiry that rests upon attentive personal reflection and which does not admit any conceptual or relational ambiguity and requires a constant effort to suspend *immediate* assumptions in order to unveil what is behind them and what can be identified as a cause and what is following forth from this cause or principle of existence – that is, the meaning of its effects and means (*instrumenta*) in the construction of a representation of the real.

Immanuel Kant was right in pointing out that David Hume's decisive discovery for Philosophy was that he "saw" (the precise term is the action of seeing: in-sight, *Ein-sicht*) that the building block of *Metaphysics* were the relation or connection between *cause* and *effect* (Kant, 1987, p. A7) – that is, the clear manifestation or explicit connection between two *facta*, two *percepta*, and an immediate *feeling* of their relation or connection, which acknowledges that they are temporally un-differentiate. Taking causality as an immanent event of mind and nature, assuming the spontaneous form of linking nature and mind, these are for Hume the sources of every error both in Metaphysics and in common sense, in thinking and in living. Gavin Ardley (1976, p. 107) is very clear about this when saying that "metaphysics (...) is a chimera that haunts the human vanity abetted by the craft of superstitions".

Metaphysics, and its correlate, *common sense*, supersedes all questions about knowledge, its causes, rules and structures, and works as a drive to inquiry or, simultaneously, as an obstacle to any theoretical approach – which is by nature conducted through drive or natural impulse and self-inspection. Both actions are dependent on the pre-notions we started from: a grid of notions that are taken implicitly; but they still have the same function, i.e., they are forms of unnoticed temporal un-differentiation, they are already established process of mediation of, as German Media Theory name it: *Cultural Techniques*, historical interwoven forms of meaning that allows an access to reality and that means, literacy: knowing how something function without knowing why it function that way (Siegert, 2015).

We can then consider *common sense* in very different ways and in very different fields, such as in morals, aesthetics, and in present times, in sociology, economics, communication studies, but we still have the same stumbling block; when we focus on common sense as a cultural technique, we realized that goes beyond any description in epistemology, morals, ontology, metaphysics, aesthetics or whatever form we can think of. Common sense is, in itself, a previous, not rationally accepted or even subject of belief, a ground that can be shared with *the others*. Using again the word "historical", as we have made before, means in this context the acquiescence of something that have established meaning, something that is accepted and transmitted both in space and in time. To other

form to express the same, *common sense* is a form of knowledge, a set of little problem-solvers that are time-framed and that we cannot recognize as so, because precisely it solves problems and do not create them. In *The Sceptic*, David Hume (1964b, p. 223) is clear about this: "as to the rest, we trust to common sense, and the general maxims of the world for our instruction"; and this means that past knowledge, which is accounted as a sort of Nature, is in fact an artificial construction, a pure human narrative. The question here should the clear and the answer even more: What does common sense do? It naturalizes all artificiality, all human construction. Common sense, as was suggested in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, "requires it shou'd be esteem'd a cause, and be look'd upon as an instance of that necessity, which I wou'd establish" (Hume, 1975, p. 410).

Common sense and mediation

Going again with History we reach the problem of artificialization of historical time, the *differentiation* problem we quoted above. Lets think, for instance, on the notion of epochs for they are artificial modes that express a human, time-centered historical construction, a definition made by means of artificial connections, though we can take them as a natural phenomenon. *Zeitalter*, the German word for epoch is even more clear in this subject, because it literally translates the Greek word *epoche*, *epekhein* (to pause and take position), meaning in its roots the becoming old or passing away, a delimitation of time.

In that way, we are pointing to an exercise of abstraction that is carried out to frame and naturalize time. Therefore, *common sense*, as a cultural technique, cannot be immediately approachable, it lacks the identification of the form of mediation that lies underneath itself. It always needs some sort of mediation. *Common sense* is made out of complex structures, being them social, cognitive processes and not innate forms of recognition that belong to all humankind, as Descartes stated. It resembles Aristotle's definition of *koine aesthesis*, but should not be taken as a natural ability to reach the mind of *the others*, but as an artificial, tacitly, human construction built in a narrative way. The superb in-sight of David Hume – only towards the middle of the 18ᵗʰ century – is that he already realizes that *common sense* was an artificial concept which expresses an artificial disposition of things; it is a mediator to which there is no access but through itself, in the sense that it can only be access through deconstruction. David Hume saw common sense, with the help of his skeptical eyes, as a cultural technique. The Hegelian notion that we are only really humans when we can reach *others* consciousness and build a common ground, something repeated to exhaustion the "Preface" to his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, was now destroyed, at least relativized, by the Human assertion that common sense is a narrative historical and artificial construction.

For David Hume, contrary to "common sense philosophy" and to *philosophy of common sense*, time is not perceptible by the senses, but an *abstract idea* produced by the mind and formed by it, a pure human construction or mediation. For him, human beings can only achieve the general principles or rules that shape human beings in themselves

by inquiring time and the association of ideas: "the idea of time is not deriv'd from a particular impression mix'd up with others, and plainly distinguishable from them; but arises altogether from the manner, in which impressions appear to the mind, without making one of the number" (Hume, 1975, p. 36). The identity problem has its roots here, since if time is not perceived in the idea of an impression (sense), there is no perceptual unity, nor any trace of the unitary permanence of something. The absolute is *absolutely* canceled. It becomes an illusion of knowledge: a mere fiction, a mere construction. But, for the very same reason, for the author, *Metaphysics* is very distant from any perusal of truth. No evidence of connections can be obtained, since Metaphysics is itself a historical narrative construction. For Hume, we can only have access to the relations themselves as experienced by ourselves in themselves: they are pure mediation process.

This is why Hume is associated with skepticism, agnosticism and empiricism and historical landmark of the severe critic of *common sense*. For Hume, thinking processes are of great importance; he is not merely a *destroyer*, he was perhaps the first Nietzschean Philosopher, at least the first nihilist, someone who knows that any theoretical approach is a step taken in the direction of wondering. *Le bon David* was not concerned with achieving any notion of truth, but with the notion of authenticity. For him common sense is a complex network of problem-solvers created by humankind and which is used as a trigger to jump out away from the act of thinking, allowing acritical life to come in within life itself. Stop and start, this are the effects of Hume's thinking: re-enquiring and go back and forth, etc. For Hume thinking is a method of achieving self-knowledge, but it needs a remedy without which it can be a dangerous endeavor for everybody who try speculative achieving's. That counter-part is precisely common sense: a cultural technique clear on this matter:

> most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther. (Hume, 1975, p. 269)

Technology and science, media and remediation processes of knowledge and information in social networks, in the context of modern societies, are assuming the same social role that Hume attributed to common sense: they produce immediate belief, even faith which allows humans to have stable, but technical, identity. For Hume identity doesn't mean authenticity, for authenticity is a process of uninterrupted exercise of seeking evidence and not accepting anything else then what is evident, which for Hume means an impulse to belief. Kant tried to solve the problem by pointing to a new concept: the transcendental. But in times of a total mediated society we should ask: what

is now transcendental? And the answer may be: the obvious fact that these mediations exist, that these processes of mediation are embedded in the construction of relations between individuals and societies. And the fact that there are cultural techniques and we are aware that they exist. Mark B.N. Hansen (2006, p. 298) is clear at this point:

> for this very reason, media theory marks a chance for us to move forward in our thinking, to displace definitively (at least in some sense) the empirical-transcendental divide that has structured western meditation on thinking, including the thinking of technics.

For David Hume evidence means a mode of being able to believe without any obstacle. Common sense is very useful for that reason: it is a unique way of stopping the process of thinking. Thinking is a state of exception that can only be supported by common sense. Both techniques need each other. Hume's drive towards evidence is a symptom of his search for authenticity. He knows that there is no metaphysical principle that could solve such problem. His philosophy is a consequence of suffering of a strong, lucid character and never wanting to be deceived in handling whatever subject matter. Technical and media literacy need to be approach in these two directional ways: using technology and inquiring the material structure of each medium. There is no single answering or absolute picture on what is technical or media literacy can be made. We are always, when thinking about l media and literacy, about technology and its effect, in the middle of the subject matter itself. Literacy is a by-product of media, not only an epiphenomenon, since it is rooted on the first universal media: phonetic and vocalic Greek alphabet. Since the Greek inventions have shaped Western culture, it has brought forth History as the background of all possible literacy. If we take seriously Hannah Arendt (1978) crucial question, "where are we when we think?" the answer is not *nowhere*, but a *now* and *here*, in the *middle* of History, in the middle of the intricate grid of historical narratives and the middle of the complex interwoven strings of media.

Friedrich Kittler (1999, p. xxxix) used a now commonsensical presentation of media when stating that "media determine our situation, for it or because of it, it deserves a description". But the most precise definition on media literacy was made by one of his most prominent disciples, Bernhard Siegert (2015, pp. 2-3):

> in contrast to the content analysis or the semantics of representation, German media theory shifts the focus from the representation of meaning to the conditions of representation, from the semantics, itself, to the outside and to the material conditions of what it may constitute the semantics. From then on, the media are not only an alternating picture for philosophy and literature, but also an attempt to overcome the fixation of French Theory in discourse, through a change of discourse from its philosophical and archaeological to its historical and technological footsteps.

These recursive operative chains are precisely *common sense* that can only be inspected by the use of thinking on the *medium* that shapes our own History. And was the

great *in-sight* of Marshall McLuhan when he named this task, in 1964, *Understanding Media*. Put it in a formula: media are the *a priori* of the senses, *for it or because of it*, common sense deserves a description[2].

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[2] As a matter of fact, this was already point out by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1975). But these analyses should be made separately for a determination of the archeology of German Media Theory.

Biographic note

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