

Salaverría, „Critical Common Sense, Exemplary Doubts, and Reflective Judgment,“
in: *Confines of Democracy. The Social Philosophy of Richard Bernstein: Essays on the Philosophy of Richard Bernstein*, ed. Ramón de Castillo, Ángel M. Faerna, Larry A. Hickman, New York, forthcoming.

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Critical Common Sense, Exemplary Doubting, and Reflective Judgment (Preview)

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing
and rightdoing there is a field. I'll
meet you there.
(Dschalal ad-Din ar-Rumi)

Beliefs are what divide people.
Doubt unites them.
(Peter Ustinov)

One of the most dangerous attitudes of modernity, from a pragmatist point of view, consists in the “quest for certainty”.¹ Craving for absolutes represents a perspective from which, in Bernstein’s words, “the only alternative to solid foundations and moral certainties is to be lost in a quagmire of relativistic opinions.” Pragmatism rejects this “grand Either/Or”: absolute certainty and absolute relativism represent, metaphorically speaking, two sides of one coin, which belongs to a fictitious, thus dangerous currency (of course, in real life every currency is fictitious, but that is a problem way beyond metaphorical consistency). Uncertainty, pragmatically understood, does not simply belong to a different currency, but rather forms part of a whole other economy with a “high tolerance for uncertainty, and the courage to revise, modify, and abandon our most cherished beliefs when they have been refuted.” Within this alternative pragmatist economy, to acknowledge uncertainty is not the price to be paid for the sad reality of our human fate – resignedly accepting the second best while secretly dreaming of indubitable certainty. In fact, as Bernstein stresses, “the very idea of epistemological or moral certainty is *incoherent*.” To recognize fallibility is not an obstacle to responsible action, but rather, on the contrary, it is “what is required”!²

In what sense is fallibility and, for that matter, uncertainty a requirement for responsible action (and therefore also for responsible thinking and judging)? The pragmatist ethos, as I understand and share it, consists in critically keeping alive the awareness of uncertainty or, in other words, awareness of one’s own permeable embeddedness, which entails a paradoxical positioning: a) knowing (until further notice) that we are part of a particular and contingent common sense with changing historical, societal, and habitual practices; such practices limit, though not completely determine our beliefs, and then we form beliefs again and again that, embodied as everyday habits, seem so natural that we temporarily take them for granted as if they were absolute truths —as Peirce put it: “[W]hat you cannot in the least help believing is not, strictly speaking, wrong belief. In other words, for you it is the absolute truth.”³ And, on the other hand, b) knowing that, because of the imperfection of our beliefs, situations will recur that will make us perceive specific aspects of our very imperfection, that is, will make us doubt, thereby presenting us something new.

Doubting is a deeply ambivalent state: comparable to feeling a sting in, say, one specific area of your back for the first time, making you notice the existence of a muscle never thought of before. Like the sting, doubt is somehow painful and a reminder of our finitude, yet it is revealing, and in that sense it is a reminder of our singularity. In doubts, something new is experienced which does not fit within our common-sense conglomerate of belief-habits.

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And because doubts reveal something new, they are not controllable or foreseeable, not to say something one can experience at will. This is why Peirce claims, against Descartes: “A proposition that could be doubted at will is certainly not *believed*.”⁴

Peirce calls this paradoxical positioning, spanning the ongoing tension between doubts and beliefs, *critical commonsensism*, a term worth being revived. Denial of this paradoxical positioning results in fundamentalism and violence, as history has repeatedly shown. Its recognition results in the never-ending task of coping with uncertainty, and in questions such as: How can critical thinking establish and apply criteria for its own judgment within the given, fallible common sense? Or, put differently: How can one take a critical self-reflective stance towards one’s own present positioning? If enduring uncertainty is to be regarded as more coherent than *phantasmatical* certainty, and fallibility is not supposed to be an obstacle but a requirement for responsible action, then the state of uncertainty and of doubting needs to be explored more deeply *in its revealing and enabling dimensions*, “in developing the proper critical habits and practices in a democratic society.”⁵ Developing these enabling dimensions of uncertainty is, I propose, best described as *exemplary doubting*, and ultimately leads to a self permeable to others, as I will outline in the following, somewhat matryoshka-doll-like manner: discussing Bernstein discussing Arendt discussing Kant in pragmatist terms.