Abstract: Common sense and philosophical methodology: some metaphilosophical reflections on analytic philosophy and Deleuze

On the question of precisely what role common sense (or related datum like folk psychology, trust in pre-theoretic/intuitive judgments, etc.) should have in reigning in the possible excesses of our philosophical methods, the so-called ‘continental’ answer to this question, for the vast majority, would be “as little as possible”, whereas the analytic answer for the vast majority would be “a reasonably central one”. While this difference at the level of both rhetoric and meta-philosophy is sometimes – perhaps often – problematised by the actual philosophical practices of representative philosophers of either tradition, I will argue that this norm (and its absence) nonetheless continues to play an important justificatory role in relation to the use of some rather different methodological practices. In particular, many analytic philosophers not only explicitly invoke the value of common sense, but they also implicitly value it via techniques like conceptual analysis that want to explicate folk psychology and/or lay bare what is already embedded in the linguistic norms of a given culture, the widespread use of thought experiments and the way they function as ‘intuition pumps’, as well as the general aim to achieve ‘reflective equilibrium’ between our intuitions and reflective judgments in epistemology and political philosophy. Such methods, I will argue, enshrine a conservative, or, more positively, a modest understanding of the philosophical project in that it is invested in cohering
with both a given body of knowledge and common sense. These methods are notably less perspicuous in continental philosophy. To bring some of the reasons why this might be so to the fore, this paper considers Deleuze’s sustained attack on both good and common sense, which he argues are fundamental to the prevalence of a dogmatic image of thought. If Deleuze is right about this, and if the analytic tradition distils and perfects certain methods that are closely associated with this image of thought, then we have here a rather stark methodological contrast that calls for elaboration and evaluation.
Common sense and philosophical methodology: some metaphilosophical reflections on analytic philosophy and Deleuze

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In *Discourse on Method*, Descartes famously observed that what is most evenly shared and equally distributed in the world (i.e. common) is good sense. This sense is not precisely defined by him, nor by most of those who have subsequently invoked it, but it seems to encompass our basic reasoning and inferential abilities as well as something closely related to what has come to be called ‘folk psychology’, which refers to our everyday ability to attribute desires, beliefs, and intentionality to other people despite the theoretical possibility of them being but cloaks and springs.

Indeed, Descartes argues in his *Meditations* that if we are methodologically careful enough (and with the help of God), this sense will enable us to justify many of our varied claims to knowledge. Judging by some recent accounts, however, this ‘sense’ is neither quite as common (e.g. universal) nor as good (e.g. naturally oriented to truth) as Descartes and many others would have us believe. Whether we consider large aspects of the work of the so-called ‘continental’ tradition, starting with the ‘masters of suspicion’ and phenomenology, and continued in different ways by both the structuralists and poststructuralists, or whether we consider the challenge to the analytic epistemological tradition proffered by experimental philosophers like Stephen Stich, this sense has come in for a battering in recent times. Stich and others critique old-fashioned conceptual analysis (and also its residue in the work of

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Davidson, Dennett, and others) for amounting to an ‘intuition driven romanticism’
because of the assumption that both rationality and common sense are univocal,
despite empirical studies suggesting that there are significant cultural differences
revealed in our reasoning capacities\(^3\). But even if Descartes’ descriptive claim about
the existence of this sense was shown to be empirically well-grounded in people of all
cultures, and also convincingly shown to be oriented away from falsity and towards
‘truth’\(^4\), there remains a further question as to its value and centrality to the
philosophical enterprise. Should this common sense ground and anchor our
philosophical methods, or does that commit one’s philosophy to theoretical
conservatism, to being nothing more than the shuffling of the deck of cards,
redistributing things from time to time? But what else might philosophy be? Critique,
or ‘first philosophy’? These are both live possibilities, of course, and a central part of
the self-understanding of many continental philosophers, but it is also important to
note that the critical disavowal (explicit or otherwise) of the importance of common
sense frequently leads to accusations of mysticism and obscurantism, charges that are
quite commonly levelled at many of the major continental philosophers. If
philosophers are intent to avoid the charge of mysticism, as we ought to be and as
virtually all continental philosophers would concur, is our remaining choice between
foundationalism (the desire for some indubitable starting point from which other
conclusions may be deduced) and seeing philosophy as the coherentist weighing of

\(^3\)And it is not simply that one can be called good and the other defective without very careful
attentiveness to the environment in which this reasoning occurs, something that the analytic tradition,
by and large, has not provided. See Stich, S., *The Fragmentation of Reason*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT

\(^4\)This would be a rather narrow conception of truth, one that would seem to be committed to holding
that we should not perpetuate gambler’s fallacies in which we assume that several consecutive results
of ‘heads’ makes a ‘tail’ more likely on the next throw of the coin. Empirically and psychologically
speaking, the phenomenon of belief perseverance suggests that this is improbable. More
philosophically, for Deleuze being preoccupied with the true/false distinction in this manner robs
paradox of its intrinsic role, and tacitly posits the primacy of a good sense that is originarily oriented
towards truth, whereas Deleuze’s ongoing point is that this sense is socio-culturally produced.
the balance, the sober judge of what best fits with what within a given system of
knowledge claims, beliefs, and intuitions?

Since the interesting philosophical issue will be to explore what this means
meta-philosophically and just how powerful an explanatory tool this assessment of
philosophy’s ‘divided house’ is, it is worth risking a generalisation at the outset. On
the question of what role common sense should have in reigning in the possible
excesses of our philosophical methods, the continental answer to this question, for the
vast majority of the usual suspects associated with this tradition, would be something
like ‘as little as possible’, whereas the analytic answer, for the vast majority, would be
‘a reasonably central one’. While this difference at the level of both rhetoric and
meta-philosophy is sometimes – perhaps often – problematised by the concrete
philosophy of representative philosophers of either tradition, I argue that this norm
(and its absence) nonetheless plays an important justificatory role in relation to the
use of some rather different methodological practices, thus offering a better account
of what is at stake in the ‘divide’ (explaining their respective endorsements of, and
resistances to, transcendental reasoning, as well as the paradigmatic way in which
work in analytic philosophy proceeds communally) than many of the alternatives.

Of course, it is notoriously difficult to specify any methodological unity at the
heart of ‘continental’ philosophy, which is something of a motley crew, comprised of
various different meta-reflections on philosophical method and with various diverse
methods employed in practice: phenomenological, dialectical, hermeneutic,
structuralist, psychoanalytic, and transcendental, the last two of which are perhaps
most significant in both causing and then legitimating what Michael Friedman refers
to as “the parting of the ways”\textsuperscript{5}. Nonetheless, in different ways all of these methods are designed to shed light upon what might be described as our time-embeddedness, and all are designed to exhibit something that is not simultaneously clear and distinct. They are hence sympathetic to varying degrees to Leibniz’s (and Bergson’s) riposte to Descartes that clarity and distinctness are in fact mutually exclusive\textsuperscript{6}, a philosophical objection that begins to explain some of the widely observed stylistic differences between analytic and continental philosophy. In addition, what gives continental philosophy its methodological ‘quasi-unity’ contra Simon Glendinning\textsuperscript{7}, and helps to distinguish it from much of the analytic tradition, is its thorough-going wariness of any close link between philosophical method and either common sense (or folk psychology, etc.), with the added rider that these reservations are not accompanied by either the strong naturalist or empirical functionalist turn that typifies the majority of those analytic philosophers who dispute the philosophical importance of common sense and conclude that there is no phenomenology, say, or that colour perception is illusory. Such a concern is perhaps partly presaged by Kant’s critical philosophy (noting that there is a sense in which Kant’s transcendental philosophy leaves everything as it is, and is certainly not incompatible with common sense), but it attains renewed vigour around the end of the nineteenth century and in particular with the work of those whom Paul Ricoeur called the “masters of suspicion” – Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Moreover, it seems remiss not to include others in this list, especially Bergson given the challenges his work poses to the categorising tendencies

\textsuperscript{5}Friedman, M., \textit{A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer and Heidegger}, New York: Open Court, 2000.

\textsuperscript{6}James Williams explains the Deleuzian account of this typically well in \textit{The Transversal Thought of Gilles Deleuze} (Manchester: Clinamen Press 2005). For Deleuze, analysis presupposes the discrete nature of possibilities, denies background and connectedness of all problems to one another. Analytic philosophy’s preoccupation with clear and distinct representations deprives things of their context, ignores relationality. In particular, the association of clarity and distinctness falsely abstracts from the process of genesis and the future evolutions that are always at work in the present, interrupting it.

of the intellect and the simplification that he thinks inevitably results due to its operations, along with Husserl whose phenomenological reduction was designed precisely to suspend the assumptions of the ‘natural attitude’, including even the common sense conviction that we have perceptual experience of an ‘external world’. Of course, the relationship between phenomenology and common sense is again not a simple oppositional one, in that phenomenological descriptions typically seek to remind us of pre-reflective dimensions of experience that have been both forgotten and presupposed. Nonetheless, it is important to note that phenomenology generally aims to describe levels of experience ‘beneath’ the common sense judgments of particular subjects, and which are claimed to be the conditions of possibility for such opinions and judgments. With the post-structuralist thinkers, like Deleuze, this scepticism about any close methodological relationship between philosophy and common sense is heightened.

Of course, it is easy to throw around ideas like critical philosophy as a badge of honour, and the issue of conservatism and radicality in philosophy is more complicated than it might at first glance appear. We all have to pick starting and stopping places in philosophy, and, if we agree there is no one true way, then the question becomes one of just where we draw the line in the sand on issues like the respectability or otherwise of transcendental argumentation, the centrality or otherwise of commonsense and intuition, and the nature of one’s relationship with science. While this essay is motivated by a general concern to highlight the divergent drawing of the lines that analytic and continental philosophers engage in vis-à-vis common-sense, a survey of continental philosophy cannot be attempted here. Instead, Deleuze’s direct and sustained attack on both good and common sense will be our prime focus. That is because in its provocative form it provides the most illuminating
example of some of the differences that continue to separate analytic and continental
philosophy today. After all, if it is legitimate to maintain that the vast majority of the
main figures associated with continental philosophy insist (admittedly to greater and
lesser degrees) that philosophical method ought not to be anchored to common sense
or other closely related datum, this is not the case with many of the key thinkers and
methodological practices of contemporary analytic philosophy. On the contrary, many
(perhaps most) analytic philosophers either explicitly invoke the value of common
sense, or, as I will suggest in what follows, implicitly value it via techniques like
conceptual analysis that want to explicate folk psychology and lay bare what is
already embedded in the linguistic norms of a given culture, the widespread use of
thought experiments and the way they function as ‘intuition pumps’, as well as the
general aim to achieve ‘reflective equilibrium’ between our intuitions and reflective
judgments in epistemology and political philosophy. Such methods enshrine a
conservative, or, more positively, a modest understanding of the philosophical project
in that it is invested in cohering with both a given body of knowledge and common
sense (if not of the folk variety, at least of a given paradigmatic body of experts).
After all, Neurath’s raft, the favoured epistemological metaphor of choice, would be
ripped apart by quick and radical revisions to the theoretical architectonic of a given
intellectual milieu, and also by any attempt to start philosophy from scratch (i.e. do
first philosophy) that did not consider the repercussion for some other domain of
knowledge acquisition. The boat can be safely replaced at sea only by taking apart
one piece at a time8. This accretionist or piecemeal approach to philosophy is not
something that most continental philosophers would consider to be part of
philosophy’s raison d’etre. While it might be rightly protested that all philosophers

8See Pinkard, R., “Analytics, Continentals, and Modern Skepticism”, Monist, Vol. 82, No. 2, 1999,
p191.
are masters of suspicion, wary of doxa, clichés, and thus (at least to some extent) wary of common sense⁹, we should note that the suspicion is directed in very different directions: a suspicion of first philosophy and transcendental arguments as opposed to a suspicion of understandings of philosophy as reducible to coherence within a given domain of knowledge claims or valid deductive argumentation.

If this argument regarding philosophical method is borne out in what follows, the foundation will also have been laid for an informed understanding of the limits and possibilities of the methods employed in each tradition. After all, there are particular dangers in an approach that focuses upon (or assumes) this common sense – for instance a bias toward problems of the ‘right size’, and so to necessary and sufficient condition conceptual analysis rather than more diffuse exploration. Likewise, there are different dangers to an approach to philosophy that stridently distances itself from this sense and its associated norms – mysticism, rhetoric, and verbosity, perhaps, but also a research paradigm that is splintered rather than integrated towards common projects. Of course, it is true that continental philosophers have communities and shared justificatory norms within a given ‘ism’ to some extent (e.g. existentialism), and also by association with a particular philosophical name (e.g. Heidegger). These shared norms depend upon some kind of valuation of the common sense of a community, and also result in paradigmatic forms of thinking that we might calls forms of theoretical conservatism. But my concern here is more with the original philosophers associated with the tradition, rather than the sometimes unproductive exegetical work that can be done in continental philosophy, and while one is always part of a community of some sort, the critical relation to a dead historical community and the comparative lack of attention paid to work within a

⁹We might also credibly assert the reverse – all philosophers are also conservative about some thing or another. Janna Thompson made both of these observations (separately) to me and I am inclined to agree. We also know that Hegel’s conception of philosophy is highly conservative.
synchronic dialogic community, means that norms like common sense are less prevalent in the continental self-image of the job of the philosopher. If this is so, there is reason to suspect that some kind of conversation (even if antagonistic) is necessary for philosophy to avoid some of the weaknesses that can be associated with the methods of both traditions when they become insulated from engagement with their respective philosophical ‘others’. If analytic philosophy is methodologically paradigmatic (i.e. it assumes the validity of a shared group of methods that in different ways acknowledge the importance of common sense), and large parts of contemporary continental philosophy have an a priori rejection of certain philosophical methods without being able to justify such decisions and preferences, then each needs the other. Debate might rarely yield agreement when the governing paradigm is contested, but it should help to free both traditions of a methodological insularism that can distort theorising, and this essay constitutes one effort to further this goal.

DELEUZE’S CRITIQUE OF GOOD AND COMMON SENSE

In The Logic of Sense, Difference and Repetition, and elsewhere, Deleuze repeatedly discusses two interrelated assumptions that conspire together to produce what he considers to be a false or dogmatic image of thought. These two foundational assumptions are termed good sense and common sense, although we should note that they have a more formal register rather than referring primarily to a given capacity or trait. As he states in chapter three of Difference and Repetition (hereafter DR)\textsuperscript{10}:

The implicit presupposition of philosophy may be found in the idea of a common sense as Cogitatio natura universalis. On this basis philosophy is able to begin. There is no point in multiplying the declarations of philosophers, from ‘Everybody has by nature the desire to know’ to ‘Good sense is of all things in the world the most equally distributed’… Conceptual philosophical thought has as its implicit presupposition a pre-philosophical and natural image of thought, borrowed from the pure element of common sense… We may call this image of thought a dogmatic, orthodox, or moral image (DR 131).

This is a strong claim: conceptual philosophical thought almost inevitably rests on certain unquestioned assumptions, most notably an ideal image of thought (which is also a moral image\(^\text{11}\)) that remains tethered to common sense. While Deleuze is not specifically engaging with analytic philosophy in this passage, his repeatedly expressed concerns about any too intimate alliance between philosophy, science and common sense\(^\text{12}\) suggest that he intends this more general description to apply to it. For Deleuze, however, the manner in which this image of thought is betrothed to common sense means that:

Philosophy is left without the means to realise its project of breaking with doxa. No doubt philosophy refuses every particular doxa; no doubt it upholds

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\(^{11}\)While the moral component to this image of thought may not immediately be apparent, it is worth noting that many of the more important recent reflections on analytic methodology do, at least in my view, evince a moral element to them, either explicitly as in Cohen’s and Rescher’s linking of analytic method with the practice of democracy, or implicitly in the language and metaphors that are deployed despite the feel of neutral argument for its own sake. Cohen’s *The Dialogue of Reason* (Oxford 1986), for example, argues that there is a close connection between analytic method, democracy and non-totalitarian stances. On the other hand, one possible riposte to this is John McCumber’s argument in *Time in the Ditch* (Northwestern 2001) that the rise of analytic philosophy in the US in the McCarthy era is more than a coincidence. Both claims seem overstated.

\(^{12}\)Indeed, it amounts to something like a Holy Trinity for Bertrand Russell, who cannot forgive Plato, Spinoza, and Hegel because “they remained ‘malicious’ in regard to the world of science and common sense” (Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World*, London: Routledge 1993, p48-9) and who criticises Bergson because his philosophy of intuition rests on a complete condemnation of the knowledge that is derived from science and common sense.
Deleuze’s view, then, is that much of the history of Western philosophy, as well as its contemporary manifestations in analytic philosophy and phenomenology, has abstracted from the empirical content of doxa but implicitly preserved its form (despite the attempt to ‘bracket’ the natural attitude, phenomenology is thought to nonetheless perpetuate an ur-doxa). To put it another way, methodological manifestations of good and common sense are the form of doxa that persists in various philosophical systems whatever the actual content or conclusions reached. He goes on to suggest, this “form of recognition has never sanctioned anything but the recognisable and the recognised; form will never inspire anything but conformities” (DR 134). Thinking is reduced to recognising, representing, and to calculative allocation and consistency. Of course, many objections may be raised to this analysis of Deleuze’s, not least that it presupposes his conviction that important philosophical problems do not fundamentally require, or even admit of, solutions, but rather call for creative transformations of the problem – hence philosophy is fundamentally about concept creation as he makes most clear (with Guattari) in *What is Philosophy?* In addition, it presupposes an elaborate metaphysics regarding the importance of difference – as a transcendental condition of the problem, or the Idea – despite the ongoing devaluations it receives. Notwithstanding where one stands on these issues, however, it remains the case that Deleuze’s general worries about this dogmatic image of thought are shared, at least to some extent, by continental philosophers as
otherwise different as Husserl, Heidegger, Horkheimer, Merleau-Ponty, Arendt, and Derrida, to name a few.

What, then, is Deleuze’s view of the inter-relation and distinction that obtains between good and common sense, and how are they manifested in particular philosophical methods? Common sense is said to be that which allows us to decide on the categories that will be used to determine a solution, as well as the value of those categories. Common sense thus bears directly on methodological issues, including how a problem should be divided up such that a solution might be ascertained. It functions predominantly by recognition (e.g. we recognise that this fits into that category), and is described by Deleuze as “a faculty of identification that brings diversity in general under the form of the same”13. In other words, it identifies, recognises, and subsumes various diverse singularities (or particularities) and gives them a unity. On his view the notion of a ‘subject’ is a prime example of this process.

Good sense then allocates things into the categories, puts things in their rightful place, and selects. It functions by prediction, and by choosing and preferring (DR 33, 226), and it is frequently assumed to be naturally oriented to truth. It starts from massive differentiation and then resolves, or synthesises it. When taken together, Deleuze argues that this model of recognition (including labelling, and definitional analyses) and prediction is profoundly conservative. It precludes the advent of the new; good sense and common sense are concerned with the recognition of truths rather than the production of them.

Now, many analytic philosophers might happily accept this designation of their activity as being concerned with the recognition of truths, but Deleuze says that the fundamental role accorded to something like recognition means that common

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sense finds its objects in the categories of: 1. identity with regard to concepts; 2. opposition with regard to the determination of concepts; 3. analogy with regard to judgment; 4. resemblance with regard to objects (DR 137). Under the above quadripartite fetters, “difference becomes an object of representation always in relation to a conceived identity, a judged analogy, an imagined opposition or a perceived similitude” (DR 138). It is important to be clear about how these “fetters” work. In regard to the issue of the identity of the concept, one example of this would be the tendency to maintain, without a justifying argument, that although a dog has various empirical manifestations (breeds, sizes, shapes, colours, etc.), the concept or Idea of ‘dog’ is nonetheless self-identical14. Despite the work of Wittgenstein, Austin, and others, it is arguable that something like this assumption is at play in much conceptual analysis as it explicates our language in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, and we will see that Stich makes a closely related criticism. In relation to Deleuze’s suggestion that the dogmatic image of thought functions through a reliance upon analogical judgment, it is clear that thought experiments are predicated on comparisons between cases and thus on analogical reasoning and judgment. We recognise that a particular thought experiment, for example, is like another (or not) in sufficient respects to stand as a suitable marker for some more general problem of morality, personal identity, etc. This methodological technique hence partly functions by opposition, as Deleuze suggests is typical of this image of thought. Deleuze’s fourth claim about this dogmatic image of thought is that perception resembles thought (and vice versa), which is another way of saying that it presupposes a

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harmony between self (or mind) and the world. In this respect, Deleuze seems to be getting at something closely akin to what Richard Rorty critiques as the idea of philosophy (and indeed the representational conception of the mind generally) as a mirror of nature.

According to Deleuze, these structural features of the dogmatic image of thought apply to us all (both within and outside of philosophy) to greater or lesser extents. Nonetheless, the important question for us will be whether this so-called dogmatic image of thought is not just presupposed by most analytic philosophers, but valorised as a modus operandi by some of its most regularly used methods. If the analytic tradition distils and perfects certain methods that are closely associated with this image of thought, and proclaims these features as positive virtues of thought, then we have here a rather stark contrast that calls for elaboration. While it might be protested that Deleuze and analytic philosophers are talking about very different things when they respectively critique or endorse common sense (and associated notions like folk psychology, the philosophical value of our basic intuitions/opinions/pre-theoretic beliefs, etc.), there is a genuine philosophical dispute here. Even if Deleuze is discussing common sense in a formal rather than an anthropological manner (e.g. as some trait humans possess), his argument is certainly that the latter claim still partakes in good and common sense as he defines them.

COMMON SENSE AND THEORICAL CONSERVATISM IN ANALYTIC METHODOLOGY

15This is how Deleuze characterises the co-imbrication of common and good sense in The Logic of Sense.
Notwithstanding the optimistic attempts to unify analytic philosophy as concerned with linguistic analysis (Dummett\textsuperscript{17}), or reason-giving (Cohen\textsuperscript{18}), analytic philosophy is itself typified by various internal fissures. There are, for example, significant divides between the scientifically-inclined and those who retain allegiances to linguistic or conceptual analysis, between foundationalists and pragmatists about justification and truth, and between formal and informal traditions (associated particularly with the late Wittgenstein and Oxford ordinary language philosophy). Here, however, I want to focus upon two particular methods and two overarching norms that most analytic philosophers subscribe to, even if they do not necessarily put the norms into practice; the methodological use of thought experiments and ‘reflective equilibrium’, and the norm of common sense as an important touchstone for philosophical reflection, as well as the associated stylistic norms of simplicity and clarity. These four features are usually interconnected as one might expect. Analytic appeals to clarity and simplicity underwrite the interest in conceptual analysis, which typically includes not just necessary and sufficient conditions analyses, but also the use of both thought experiments and reflective equilibrium. Although thought experiments often seek to complicate a given conceptual analysis that is purported to be complete (such as Gettier’s counter-examples to the definition of knowledge as justified true belief), suggesting that the necessity in question is overstated, it seems to me that Frank Jackson is right to suggest that in philosophy, as opposed to science, most thought experiments are best seen as devices of conceptual analysis, telling us what is conceptually possible or revealing the inferred consequence of a certain


The allegiance to an idea of something like common sense (and the assumption of its univocity and orientation to truth) often plays a significant role in justifying the maxim of simplicity, and in according intuitions an important if not constitutive role, whether it be in the use of thought experiments (and judgments of similitude) or the attempt to establish reflective equilibrium. That much analytic philosophy gives a reasonably central role to common sense is perhaps not overly surprising, given that from the outset Russell allied the emergent movement with common sense, and that others who have been labelled common sense philosophers include some of the greats of the tradition: in no particular order, Moore, Chisholm, Ayer Austin, Ryle, Malcolm, Wittgenstein, Searle, Quine, and even Lewis. Of course, these norms and methods do not exhaust the armoury of analytic philosophy, and they also quite frequently seem to be abandoned due to considerations from the sciences (e.g. there is no such thing as colour). But even the deferential relationship to science that is typical of many analytic philosophers might be brought within the purview of this argument. While common sense (understood either as some capacity that each of us innately has, or the shared opinion of the majority) and science frequently pull in radically different directions, there is another kind of common sense (understood as the opinions of a particular expert community), that is taken very seriously by many scientifically-inclined analytic philosophers who would not accept that their projects have any great indebtedness to either of the first two views of common sense. These divergent conceptions of common sense perhaps reflect the Moorean and Russellian inheritances in analytic philosophy.

19Jackson, F., “Thought experiments and possibilities”, forthcoming Analysis. Of course, Timothy Williamson and others maintain that thought experiments are best seen as investigations of what’s metaphysically possible, not of what’s conceptually possible.

20There are various methods that I cannot consider here, including the logical formalisation of arguments, semantic ascent, etc
On a more general level, it is difficult to deny that simplicity, clarity, modesty, conservatism, and common sense have been envisaged as explanatory virtues since Quine influentially gave voice to these norms in *Word and Object*. As Richard Matthews observes, “the primary constraint that we use, qua scientist (for Quine), is considerations of simplicity or conservatism. In Quine’s terminology we rely upon the maxim of Minimum Mutilation. We choose to affirm such statement as will minimise the total disturbance to the theoretical system and thereby which best enables a given scientific community to efficiently manage the flux of experience” and philosophy is held to be roughly continuous with science. But such a view is certainly not restricted to Quine. Similar views make an appearance at important moments in the work of David Lewis, despite the fact that the invocation of possible worlds is not, at least at first glance, very commonsensical. In *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Lewis says:

Common sense has no absolute authority in philosophy. It’s not that the folk know in their blood what the highfalutin’ philosophers may forget. And it’s not that common sense speaks with the voice of some infallible faculty of ‘intuition’. It’s just that theoretical conservatism is the only sensible policy for theorists of limited powers, who are duly modest about what they accomplish after a fresh start. Part of this conservatism is reluctance to accept theories that fly in the face of common sense… The proper test, I suggest, is a simple maxim of honesty: never put forward a philosophical theory that you cannot believe in your least philosophical and most commonsensical moments.

Despite the first three sentences of this quote (which runs counter to much of what follows), good sense and common sense, as Deleuze understands them, are both in

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evidence in Lewis’ comment. Recall that for Deleuze there are two kinds of judgment: a judgment about categories and their value, and a judgment that puts things in their place. The moment of good sense comes when Lewis takes a complex thing, but puts his foot down, and says: just be honest, tell the truth, be commonsensical, for this is itself an intrinsic good. Indeed, these terms – honesty, truth, theoretical conservatism, and common sense – are treated roughly as synonyms here, and the assumption is that when one is honest with oneself and seriously weighs common sense one is heading towards philosophical truth. But why think this? Few continental philosophers would, and it might also be noted that the test Lewis proposes does not sound like a very rigorous one; we cannot fail to note a certain circularity when a common sense test serves as the basis for adjudicating between different common sense opinions and intuitions. Nor can this comment be dismissed as an aberration for Lewis. In Counterfactuals, he likewise states: “One comes to philosophy already endowed with a stock of opinions. It is not the business of philosophy either to undermine or to justify these pre-existing opinions, to any great extent, but only to discover ways of expanding them into an orderly system”.

In his defence of conceptual analysis, Frank Jackson proffers a similar account of explanatory norms, at least in regard to ethics. He suggests: “we must start from somewhere in current folk morality, otherwise we start from somewhere unintuitive, and that can hardly be a good place to start”. While one can respect the desire for the philosopher to abandon efforts to attain a view from nowhere and instead start with certain commonly shared views, it is nonetheless worth noting the oppositional

\[23\] Moreover, as Williams’ observes, on Lewis’ account, “conception is restricted to the concept and to properties; judgment is associated with common sense, with restricted test-cases and with pre-set logical rules; imagination is gravely restricted in terms of prior definitions of truth and consistency; and perception is associated with exact properties rather than new variations” (p111).


logic of this formulation that shuts down a whole range of other possible responses (including ‘critique’ and ‘first philosophy’) and makes possible a clear and distinct judgment as to where one ought to start philosophy from – in this case, from the intuitions of the folk, which seems to serve an equally conservative function to the invocation of common sense or pre-theoretic beliefs.

For Nicholas Rescher, philosophy’s “coherentist methodology requires it to accomplish its question-resolving work with a maximum utilisation of, and a minimum disruption to, the materials that our other cognitive resources provide”26. If we want rationally defeasible and well-substantiated answers, “this requires that we transact our question-resolving business in a way that is harmonious with and does no damage to our pre-philosophical connections in matters of everyday life affairs and of scientific inquiry”. In other words, philosophy ought to harmonise with both common sense and the world, which seems tantamount to arguing that philosophy must mirror nature – nature as revealed by both the sciences and by our common sense, envisaged as a capacity or trait that seems to be an inevitable and largely unchanging part of humanity. Philosophy must build an overall picture of how the various knowledge domains and common sense fit together27. Rescher goes on to say that, “the impetus to economy is an inherent part of intelligent comportment… optimisation in what one thinks, does, and values, is the crux of rationality”28. Without dismissing the value of such philosophical activities, their claim to be the sole appropriate philosophical method can certainly be doubted. As Max Horkheimer suggests in Critical Theory, to take this efficient question resolution as the telos of philosophical thought seems to involve a reification of instrumental reason29. When reason is understood in Rescher’s

27Rescher, p6.
28Rescher, p11.
manner it seems almost inevitable that all that does not fit this definition becomes mysticism, obscurantism, literature, or a related term of rebuke. And, at least in Rescher’s hands, such a conception of reason also seems to directly entail a remarkable theoretical conservatism:

Questions having presuppositions whose truth status is unknown or indeterminate – yet none that are actually (known to be) false may be characterised as problematic. To raise such a question in the prevailing epistemic circumstance is inappropriate because this would be premature in that the question could well become undone by discovering the falsity of such a problematic presupposition.\(^3^0\)

One need not be a card-carrying Nietzschean to see that this idea of thought seems to be hamstrung by the fear of failure or error, thus forming something akin to an epistemological version of slave morality in which error avoidance is the prime good. While the risk of mysticism may have been assuaged by Rescher’s theoretical conservatism, such a manner of philosophising need not be one that maximises one’s chances of attaining to philosophical truth, just as, given certain conditions, a conservative strategy that focuses on avoiding mistakes will not be propitious in the stock market either.\(^3^1\)

Now, there are, of course, points that might be raised in Rescher’s defence here, but we should note that all of them seem to rely upon what Deleuze called good and common sense, the formal features of the dogmatic image of thought. Common sense, Rescher says, is said to secure his favoured methodological principle – Occam’s Razor – of trying the simple things first. As he comments: “we subscribe to the inductive presumption in favour of simplicity, uniformity, normality, etc., not

\(^{3^0}\)Rescher, p22.

\(^{3^1}\)David Coady reminded me that William James made this point forcefully in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, New York: Dover Publications, 1956.
because we are convinced that matters always stand on a basis that is simple, uniform, normal, etc. – surely we know no such thing! – but because it is on this basis alone that we can conduct our cognitive business in the most advantageous, the most economical way”. He adds that “wherever possible we analogise the present case to other similar ones” and concludes that, “in sum, we favour uniformity, analogy and the other aspects of simplicity because they ease our cognitive labours”\textsuperscript{32}. It is not difficult to note the similarities between Rescher’s inductive presumption in favour of simplicity, uniformity, and normality, and Deleuze’s view of the dogmatic image of thought, which persists in the methodological adherance to resemblance, identity, analogy, etc.

Similar tendencies are also apparent in the work of Pascal Engel, who in an essay on the ‘divide’ points to a method aligned with common sense and one that lacks it, in a manner not unlike that proposed in this essay. However, his conclusion that objective cognitive norms are enshrined in the common sense methodology of analytic philosophy rather than in its continental alternative is rather hastier than the one I will proffer\textsuperscript{33}. He says:

The standards by which we evaluate our philosophical beliefs should not be different from the standards by which we evaluate our commonsense beliefs. Common sense incorporates implicit norms which go with the very use of such notions as ‘belief’, ‘knowledge’, or ‘judgment’. One of the tasks of philosophy is to assess these norms in an explicit and reflective way, and to evaluate our commonsense beliefs in the light of these norms. The evaluation may lead to revisions of our common sense scheme, and the formation of more sophisticated and theoretical beliefs. But even when we reach these new

\textsuperscript{32}Rescher, p200-1.

beliefs, there are no other norms by which we can assess them than those
which were implicit in our ordinary practice of forming and evaluating
commonsense beliefs\textsuperscript{34}.

In such a formulation, Engel allies a process that has come to be called reflective
equilibrium very tightly with common sense (we will come back to this), but by
highlighting this connection for us Engel also points to a weakness with the method of
reflective equilibrium, as well as various other closely related techniques of
argumentation. Indeed, as Stich points out in \textit{The Fragmentation of Reason}, analytic
epistemology seeks the criteria of cognitive evaluation in the analysis or explication
of our ordinary concepts of epistemic evaluation – such as ‘knowledge’, ‘belief’, etc.
– which are said to be intuitively accessible to all of us if we care to engage in the
required conceptual reflection. But, as Stich insists, this involves a form of theoretical
chauvinism, or what Deleuze would call doxa, in that our intuitions about the right
standards for cognitive evaluation are socio-culturally produced and to use these to
legitimate the given epistemological standards seems to beg the question. Engel, for
example, claims that the norms in question come from our understanding of the
concepts of ‘belief’ and ‘judgment’ and are said to necessarily hold for cognitive
inquiry in any time and place – a form of cognitive monism that he provides no
reason for thinking is true. Moreover, on Stich’s analysis, and that of other
experimental philosophers, the concepts of knowledge and belief seem to be
structured rather differently from culture to culture\textsuperscript{35}. We will return to this, but for
the moment it is time to consider the widespread use of thought experiments, which

\textsuperscript{34}Engel, p226.
\textsuperscript{35}Brian Weatherson’s recent retort that conceptual analysis is equivalent with looking to the dictionary
doesn’t vitiate this circularity or offer a good argument for cognitive monism in regard to either
concepts or common sense. See Weatherson, B., “What Good are Counterexamples?” \textit{Philosophical
both solicit our intuitions from us and test those that we already have by comparison and analogy with other cases.

COMMON SENSE AND THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS: THE USES AND ABUSES OF THE INTUITION PUMP

Thought experiments have been part of both philosophy and science for a long time, but they are utilised with greater frequency (and precision) in contemporary analytic philosophy than ever before. Despite the ongoing protestations of figures as diverse as Daniel Dennett, Bernard Williams, and Timothy Williamson, it is difficult to dispute that they are a key methodological feature of analytic philosophy, constituting a restricted class of the more general concern with counterfactual reasoning. According to Roy Sorensen, thought experiments are the natural test “for the clarificatory practices constituting conceptual analysis… a test for which there is no substitute”\(^\text{36}\). They aim at clarifying a given position (or concept), often by overturning a given statement by disproving one of their consequences via an expedition to possible worlds. If a consequence of a given proposition might be that a particular situation should not obtain in any possible world (something is ruled out as necessarily impossible), a ‘necessity-refuting’ use of a thought experiment tries to show that the scenario is actually entirely possible/conceivable after all\(^\text{37}\). As such, thought experiments are useful for drawing out inconsistencies in our conceptual distinctions, for prompting us to clarify what we do think and why, and thus also promising to purge us of bias and inconsistency.

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\(^{37}\)Sorensen, p.153. A possibility refuting use of thought experiment is rarer according to Sorensen, but it would show that one consequence of a given view might be that p does hold in a possible world, but the thought experiment can show that this is not so.
While there are many different kinds of thought experiment, some of the most famous examples have an incredulous science-fiction edge to them, which is perhaps partly responsible for their controversial status. We might think here of Hilary Putnam’s attempt to envisage a brain that is sustained in a vat that would have no need of a body, his twin earth scenario, or Derek Parfit’s ‘teletransporter’ scenario. As devices of argumentation, these are often useful and enlightening for armchair philosophising: for example, desert island scenarios allow us to bracket away the question of social influences, and the introduction of hypnotists or Robert Nozick’s pleasure machine allow the philosopher the freedom to implant certain psychological states into an agent without worries about empirical plausibility. And clearly the production of thought experiments requires imagination and creativity, even if it is arguable that more mundane intuitions show up in the judgments and conclusions drawn from them.

It is notable that they are not, however, regularly deployed in continental philosophy, which instead typically engages with literature and the arts in greater detail, and creativity in this tradition revolves more around concept-creation and phenomenological descriptions. Of course, there are persistent uses of certain stories or fictions that at first glance look like thought experiments, like Hegel’s influential ‘master-slave’ dialectic in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (and like Nietzsche’s eternal return of difference, or Deleuze’s engagement with the Robinson Crusoe tale38), but they don’t seem to function equivalently. In a certain sense, Hegel’s account of the

38Deleuze’s essay on Michel Tournier’s rewriting of the Robinson Crusoe tale, *Friday, seems* to be a prolonged thought experiment (see *The Logic of Sense*). However, in this respect I think appearances are deceiving. The defining feature of thought experiments is that they are short and pithy, something that can’t be said of Deleuze’s essay. For Sorensen, when the thought experiment becomes a story, and one that refuses to be translated into a deductive argument, we are in the realm of literature rather than philosophy (see *Thought Experiments*, chapter one). Another way of putting this might be to say that the Deleuzian preoccupation with Crusoe isn’t a consistency test or tool of any kind. It isn’t engaged with to sharpen distinctions. Rather, it is preoccupied with broader issues: what is our place in the world? How might we think of it otherwise? What does this show us about our normal commitments? How might we exist otherwise?
development of self-consciousness via a battle for recognition is a fiction, but it also has another status, being claimed to be both historically evidenced and inferred as a transcendental condition to explain social life and the necessary co-imbrication of the ‘I-we’ relation. Is it short and pithy, and does it allow for a rigorous deductive conclusion to falsify a given statement or conceptual analysis? Is it a test for consistency or best understood as of the form: is x conceivable (or logically possible)? No. It is meant to be both grounded in experiential datum of a phenomenological and historical kind, and, at the same time, world-disclosing, allowing us to look at the world and our place in it anew. It seems clear that what is going on with continental philosophy’s preoccupation with genealogical analyses and transcendental arguments is hence rather different from the *a priori* concern with possibility of thought experiments.

Although few of the most famous continental figures explicitly explain their reluctance to use thought experiments in any sustained way, their more general reflections on methodological matters suggest they harbour the conviction that something often goes awry in philosophies that uncritically ape the use of thought experiments in science. To put it another way, there is thought to be an intrinsic problem (or at least risk) with thought experiments that stems from the manner in which they strip a problem back to its basics. In other words, the charge would be put that they appear decisive only because of their abbreviated and schematic form, which would, if filled out, lead to either inconsistency or a failure to discredit a given view. More generally, it is often argued that this abstraction belies the complexity of social life and frequently functions on the basis of certain tacit philosophical presuppositions that are either highly controversial (such as the assumption of a rational, self-
interested agent who is extricable from their past), or are merely logically possible rather than practically conceivable\textsuperscript{39}.

In distinguishing the phenomenological technique of eidetic analysis (imaginative variation) from the typical analytic use of thought experiments, J. N. Mohanty claims that the latter is based on mere logical possibility, not on what he calls eidetic possibility\textsuperscript{40}. Mohanty’s claim is that while we may be able to logically conceive of the possibility of, say body-splitting in Derek Parfit’s teletransporter device, we cannot concretely imagine this. In other words, it cannot be ‘lived’, or a ‘concrete intuition’ as Husserl might say, although an analytic philosopher might respond, in the manner of Dennett on a different issue, that this testifies to a failure of the imagination not the general value of thought experiments. But if Mohanty is right, the intuitive responses that a peculiar thought experiment evokes from us are unlikely to be very helpful in soliciting our views about personal identity, or for clarifying and rendering consistent the views that we may already have announced. To put the problem another way, it seems clear that thought experiments need to meet some kind of sufficient resemblance condition to be effective as an argument for or against a given view, and Mohanty’s view is that this condition is frequently lacking. What might such a sufficient resemblance condition be? Scientific thought experiments rely on one seeing the resemblance between the imagined scenario and an actual experiment that might be conducted, and ideally will be. In philosophy, of course, things aren’t so simple, but it seems that one needs to see either: 1. a connection to

\textsuperscript{39}This latter problem (if it is one) is particularly acute in the debates about personal identity, which revolve around some highly imaginative scenarios. See La Caze, M., \textit{The Analytic Imaginary}, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002. La Caze discusses the either/or alternatives that thought experiments in this realm usually pose, prompting us to align ourselves with either the psychological or bodily criterion of personal identity.

actual experience; or 2. to a large body of existing analytic work on the thought experiments in question. Indeed, these scenarios presuppose a shared community of experts for their meaning, familiar with the array of conceptual analyses and the pitfalls that a given thought experiment entails for particular perspectives. As such, they serve as heuristic devices against which views in their neighbourhood are sharpened as part of a testing process. The problem with 2 as a sufficient resemblance condition, however, is that it is rather uncompelling for any philosophers not already enculturated. For those unfamiliar with this background (and not assuming the validity of a given conceptual analysis), thought experiments are hence stale and deprived of depth. For those in the know, on the other hand, the experiments have depth because of the communal work on given problems. That might merely mean that continental philosophers should not dismiss what they do not adequately understand. But is this experience of philosophical depth that accompanies thought experiments genuine or illusory? It can be both.

But it is also worth highlighting that some of these problems are exacerbated when thought experiments are given an explicitly normative or action-guiding flavour. Many thought experiments cut out a time-slice wherein one is asked to imagine a situation without our past or even projected futural possibilities, and to make decisions on the basis of this determination. This highly abstract and ‘thin’ scenario is assumed to nonetheless shed light on our ‘thicker’ practical identity. In Rawls’ famous ‘veil of ignorance’ thought experiment, for example, we are limited in both of the above temporal ways, having neither knowledge of, or an affective relation to, our past abilities or interests, and having virtually no knowledge of how
any futural redistributive arrangements might affect us\textsuperscript{41}, and this also applies to the various kinds of thought experiments and rationality paradoxes that one encounters in game and decision theory. Bernard Williams generalises this point to claim that thought experiments put us in a situation but without our history, including all of the associated information and background that we require in order to make choices. As such, he suggests that they are \textit{exclusively forward thinking}; the past is only relevant in order to predict the future\textsuperscript{42}. Does this commit what James Williams calls the ‘anti-genealogical’ fallacy\textsuperscript{43}, that is, to ignore the difficult process of tracing the impact of the past within the present (and the future)? Certainly one of the key continental rejoinders to any uncritical reliance on the efficacy of thought experiments would be that that they give insufficient attention to the memorial traces (including the unconscious) that constitute (and challenge) the explicit or implicit supposition of a self-interested decision-making agent. If such characterisations can be said to be valid in regard to large classes of thought experiment, it might be objected that when temporally circumscribed in this manner no real decision is possible. After all, any injunction to start from ‘now’, must allow for the phenomena of looking forward to the future (protention and anticipation) and looking back to the past (retention) that constitute any so-called ‘now’\textsuperscript{44}. This would be another way, then, of putting the objection that thought experiments tacitly involve a view from nowhere, or what Merleau-Ponty called “high altitude thinking”\textsuperscript{45}, which ignores the conditions of possibility of a given thought; our always situated background. Given the growing


\textsuperscript{43}Williams, J., \textit{The Transversal Thought of Deleuze}.

\textsuperscript{44}As Husserl has shown us, lived time and the experience of a moment are produced by the retentional and protentional aspects of consciousness and cannot be understood without this.

acknowledgment within analytic philosophy of many of these meta-philosophical limitations, however, the key question is whether analytic philosophers are sufficiently cautious in their actual use of such experiments in their work.

In opening up this debate about the philosophical value of thought experiments it is useful to again consider Deleuze. On his view, they remain dogmatic because it is ‘common sense’ that we draw upon to ascertain whether or not the particular thought experiment in question gets a grip on a fundamental moral or political issue, or is an appropriate way of dealing with the dilemma at hand. We recognise that a particular hypothetical scenario – say Plato’s ring of Gyges which makes us invisible – stands for a broader problem, in this case the role of fear of consequences in preventing human selfishness (this fear is, of course, removed if we are invisible since crimes could be committed without worries about being caught and punished). A large part of this process depends upon our intuitive response to whether the proposed analogy holds, and whether, for example, Judith Jarvis Thomson is right in claiming that the pro-life position that women do not have a right to abortion is analogous to waking up and finding oneself tied to a famous violinist and becoming their effective life support without any possibility of freeing oneself from this arrangement. Usually, the abbreviated form of the experiment or analogy means that the information that is needed in order to make any such adjudication is not given, but we are nonetheless solicited to trust our response. If this is inconsistent with something else we have stated about, say abortion, we are then exhorted to modify our understanding of the relevant moral and epistemological distinctions in order to incorporate that which was revealed by the thought experiment. This is what Deleuze calls good sense, where we attempt to resolve a problem by selecting one set of

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alternatives over another, or at least providing criteria for such adjudication. The function of good sense is hence to resolve the question at hand by reference to our intuitions on the thought experiment at hand (and its suitability to stand as a marker for the more general problem) and to our rational principles, which we then try to adjust in order to reach reflective equilibrium. In attempting to decide in this manner, however, we run the risk of reducing complex problems to questions which admit of clear and distinct answers, something that might be said of the widely cited “prisoner’s dilemma” in which the many different social pressures and desires confronted by two bank robbers who have been caught and are faced with a bargaining situation are simplified into a grid of four possible outcomes47. Likewise, Rawls’ famous “veil of ignorance” scenario at times appears to reduce the problem of justice to a judgment between the distributive principles of utilitarianism, liberalism, and strict egalitarianism. In both of these cases problems are understood in a manner that restricts them to a determinate range of possible outcomes; we move from the past as complex and unpredictable to the future as simple, predictable, and amenable to calculation.

Now it might be the case that this is what most academic philosophy amounts to, but for Deleuze it does not involve a genuine experiment, and thus cannot result in genuine concept creation. Why not? Firstly, because the complicated genesis of the intuitions are ignored, and the function ascribed to intuition in this temporally circumscribed sense cannot possibly involve a problematisation or critique of the socio-political circumstances that have contributed to those intuitions in the first place – as such, it will be bound to the preservation of the status quo. Moreover, it is assumed that this kind of methodological approach to problems – what would you

think if confronted with this scenario? – has independent credibility. But should we really trust our responses to an unusual thought experiment, particularly as they concern moral and political life? The problem remains that our intuitions about strange and abstract cases aren’t likely to be all that reliable, either as a guide to what we really would believe (and do) if confronted with such a scenario, or in regard to what we ought to believe (and do) in concrete situations of any complexity. On the other hand, if we are familiar with the context of a thought experiment, our intuitions about the case in question may well be more forthcoming and perhaps even more reliable, but only in the sense that they agree with what we already knew.

For Deleuze, such a beginning remains pre-critical, within the dogmatic image of thought, where subjective presuppositions continue to wield a pernicious influence despite the immediate appearance of both strangeness and objectivity. Indeed, most thought experiments clearly depend upon common sense as their background. That is, they begin with a certain assumption – e.g. we all know that beating animals is bad – and then seek to institute more elaborate examples to tease out precisely what our commitment to this means and entails. For example, is beating animals still bad if they don’t feel pain? We begin from a certain common assumption and then recognise that a particular experiment challenges or fits this pre-existing assumption. In taking seriously our ordinary intuitions about these kind of non-normal cases, however, we also thereby generalise and extend the orbit and significance of convictions that were, for Deleuze, produced and moulded in certain particular situations: we subsume the singular under the universal, and thereby privilege reflection and contemplation rather than an affective and intensive relation to the problem at hand. Such a methodological beginning, with its reliance on our immediate intuitions and what

‘everybody knows’, ensures that thought can only orbit around common sense like a moon caught in a gravitational pull. For Deleuze, there is no truly critical philosophy possible from such a beginning, predicated as it is on certain doxic features, including the circumscribed temporal conditions, the reliance upon a generic neutral subject, the validity given to one’s pre-theoretic opinions (modelled on the form of recognition), and the manner in which thought experiments are condemned to analogical reasoning. Of course, they can function by revealing a disanalogy between two cases, but in this case it is still a form of analogical thought, one predicated upon bivalence and the institution of an opposition. While analogical thinking can be useful for ensuring consistency, they are no guarantee of attaining philosophical depth. Of course, thought experiments are often just the starting points for analytic philosophers, but they usually provide the starting data that is fed into a process of reflective equilibrium, and if this data and methodological starting place is faulty then so too will be the result.

Now, it goes without saying that Deleuze is rather tough on both good and common sense (doxa), and it is certainly arguable that his mildly utopian conception of philosophy that supports their denigration is itself only one part of philosophy rather than its raison d’etre. Must we treat the pragmatisms of good sense and common sense (of calculation and intuitive judgments) as harshly as Deleuze does? Good sense and common sense may well predominate in the analytic tradition, explicitly endorsed by many and implicitly enshrined in the methods of thought experiments, intuition, and reflective equilibrium, but it might be credibly argued that they are basic and inevitable aspects of thinking. Moreover, it is clear that thought experiments can raise important questions and can even provide the provocation for the institution of a new philosophical problem. The abstraction from concrete
situations can have the salutary effect of questioning our everyday assumptions and
the rigor of the distinctions that we pre-reflectively draw, but, as Deleuze’s work
suggests, it also has more pernicious possibilities attached to it, particularly when
relied upon as a prescriptive tool, or when taken to answer a question (or exhaust the
dimensions of a problem) rather than to pose one. The more difficult and important
questions then pertain to matters of degree, which must be addressed in relation to the
work of specific analytic philosophers. To what extent does a particular philosopher’s
use of thought experiments open up areas of inquiry or artificially close them down?
But let us move on to the second key method, reflective equilibrium, which often
accompanies any use of thought experiments and is also deployed in its own right.

REFLECTIVE EQUILIBRIUM: COMMON SENSE OR CONSERVATISM?

The most famous and influential formulation of reflective equilibrium is found in
Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*. Drawing on Nelson Goodman’s work49, Rawls uses the
method of reflective equilibrium in order to explain how we might adjust and perhaps
even resolve the difference between our moral/political intuitions about what is fair
and just, and the moral/political theory that is endorsed by our rational judgments
under the test of the ‘veil of ignorance’. But this technique of argumentation is now
far from unique to the Rawlsian liberal tradition. In fact, it has recently been
contended that the method of reflective equilibrium is *the* generally accepted
methodology in normative ethics, endorsed by many different kinds of philosopher,

49Goodman suggests that “a rule is amended if it yields an inference we are unwilling to accept; an
inference is rejected if it violates a rule we are unwilling to amend. The process of justification is the
delicate one of making mutual adjustments between rules and accepted inferences; and in the
agreement achieved lies the only justification needed for either” (*Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, 4th
dition, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983, p64). While it may be a fair method to
uphold in regard to epistemological justification in the philosophy of science, its importation into the
realm of political philosophy (which is about more than knowledge) is more contentious.
including both Kantians and utilitarians\textsuperscript{50}, and regardless of the philosopher’s
deliberation about metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of language\textsuperscript{51}. The
reflective equilibrium process involves the working back and forward between our
provisional judgments about particular cases (intuitions) and applicable rules
(principles), with the goal of increasing their coherence, in order to arrive at a more
reflectively justifiable – if not necessarily final – position. Goodman’s concern in his
seminal employment of the method is with what Rawls calls ‘narrow’ reflective
equilibrium – a process of coherence adjustment that concentrates on the judgments,
rules and background epistemic desiderata that one actually begins with. The intent
behind Rawls’ own ‘wide’ approach (in \textit{A Theory of Justice}) is to avoid the
conservatism inherent in the Goodmanian version of the method. To leave open the
possibility of a radical shift in our conception of justice, Rawls suggests that we must
bring into play all imaginable sets of roughly coherent judgments, rules and desiderata
in some sort of choice situation that is itself governed by such factors, until some sort
of stable equilibrium is achieved\textsuperscript{52}. To put this another way, there is a difference
between an understanding of reflective equilibrium that prioritises certain starting
intuitions or sentiments (which have \textit{independent} value or credibility), and a reflective
equilibrium that prioritises overall coherence with our other beliefs (and hence adds to
this equation \textit{dependent} credibility), which might include our theories of personal
identity, human flourishing, rationality, the findings of science, etc.

\textsuperscript{50}See Berys Gaut’s article ‘Justifying Moral Pluralism’ (p147) in \textit{Ethical Intuitionism}, ed. P. Stratton-Lake (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), and also Brad Hooker’s claim in ‘Intuitions and Moral Theorising’ in the same volume (p161) that most philosophers accept both the idea the method of reflective equilibrium and the idea that moral theories are better to the extent that they accord with moral claims that are attractive in their own right (i.e. intuitions), especially where they endorse a pluralist as opposed to a monist theory of value.

\textsuperscript{51}Hooker, B., \textit{Ideal Code, Real World}, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p10, 15. He claims this also applies to moral particularists (which we might take the poststructuralists to be) because the theoretical position that there are no overarching moral or political principles that unify our various judgments must nonetheless stand or fall as a claim in relation to the diversity (or otherwise) of our intuitive commitments. In that minimal sense reflective equilibria can still be said to obtain.

\textsuperscript{52}This formulation of Rawls’ position is indebted to James Chase.
Now it is clear enough that the narrow version is more conservative than the wide version, since certain of our initial beliefs and sentiments have independent credibility. Assuming their importance in this way arguably makes the narrow method of reflective equilibrium overly invested in the preservation of common sense and what is already thought to be known. This is not as clear with the method of wide reflective equilibrium, since it necessarily involves a process of perennial updating, back and forth adjustments between overarching philosophical views, intuitions, and empirical data provided by science. Given that the findings of science are changing all the time, it is clear that an analytic philosopher that uses something like the method of wide reflective equilibrium and gives significant attention to scientific knowledge, must consequently also be prepared to change all of the time. As such, common sense (of a given expert community) does not seem to be conservative. While this is certainly true, we should also note that often when reflective equilibrium is invoked and claimed to support a given view, no such rigorous process has actually taken place. Time, after all, is finite. While our intuitions may theoretically be subject to revision in wide reflective equilibrium, when it is recognised that we do not have an eternity for decisions and that all of our various beliefs form a part of an intricate system of interconnected cultural convictions, it seems eminently unlikely that the process will involve anything like a radical challenge to our basic convictions and intuitions. After all, even those extra elements that are added to the equation by the method of wide equilibrium (such as consistency with the background theories of science, etc.) are themselves at least partly constituted by, and inseparable from, the basic judgments and convictions of the community we are a part of. Moreover, at any particular point in the reflective equilibrium process theoretical coherence is never

53Thanks to Douglas Lackey for this point.
sufficient on its own but must also cohere with our particular judgments at that time –
without this equilibrium our considered position has no justification. The methods of
both wide and narrow reflective equilibrium are hence incoherent without according
significant value to our everyday intuitions and immediate judgments, and hence, to
common sense. It might be said that both forms of reflective equilibrium are
conservative approaches to conceptual analysis because each is an articulation of a
coherentist conception of justification, and radical transitions tend to pull Neurath’s
raft to pieces. In addition, this mode of reasoning is dependent on our possession of
some set of norms of explanatory worthiness, not unlike the Quinean ones we
considered earlier: simplicity, generality, modesty, refutability and conservatism. Yet
is this conservatism especially a problem? Among analytic philosophers, the device is
generally accepted wherever the goal of increasing local coherence (i.e. not achieving
a completely satisfactory outcome) is thought to be sensible, and even those
suspicious of coherentist approaches to justification do on occasion try for this\textsuperscript{54}.

Although the method of reflective equilibrium clearly bears a structural
relationship to the dialectic that has a long history in continental philosophy,
reflective equilibrium constitutes a particular form of the dialectic. Depending on
one’s perspective, it is either a dialectic that is anchored in existing social practice by
a common-sense conservatism that tacitly devalues the new and the different, or it
should be acclaimed for this very feature which allows it to avoid the more pernicious
forms of relativism (both ethical and epistemological) that can afflict dialectical
thinking. Indeed, many of the major continental philosophers would have problems
with the strategy of matching our basic intuitions (or initial judgment about
particulars) with a general theory, both because of the conservative implications of the

\textsuperscript{54}Thanks to James Chase for making this clear to me.
'narrow’ view, and the manner in which the ‘wide’ view supposes that through the process of reflective equilibrium we can (and ought to) purge ourselves of any bias that might be betrothed to our initial starting point (or basic intuitions, whether moral or epistemological). This seems to tacitly reinstate another variation of the rational and disinterested subject, in that it quite radically abstracts from the choices we make and the way most of us live. Indeed, Carl Knight inadvertently expresses this risk when he notes that the subject of any wide reflective equilibrium process “must undergo any experiences that may offset biases in his or her formative influences”55. This sounds like a noble ambition, but is it tenable, either in the conception of a subject that it presupposes, or in the conception of the philosopher that it advocates? Both the philosopher and the citizen are modelled on the conceptual personae of the judge – as rational, probing, impartial, devoid of affect, etc. Experiences should be undergone in order to fairly systematise one’s thoughts and get them in the broadest possible equilibrium with one another. Now scientists may do this in their experiments (but even then something provoked them to think), but to think that this is how philosophy and a good life ought to be conducted is rather more controversial.

More critically, however, there is a circularity that afflicts the various versions of reflective equilibrium. In The Fragmentation of Reason, Stich puts the following objection to Goodman’s account of justified inference, and this also applies to Rawls’s account:

What is the relation between rationality and the right test supposed to be, and why is the fact that a system of inference passes some test or other supposed to show that the system is rational? I think the most plausible answer for a Goodmanian to give is that the right test, when we discover it, will be an

analysis or explication of our ordinary concept of rationality (or some other common sense concept of epistemic valuation”56.

In other words, the test case provides necessary and sufficient conditions for rationality because it unpacks our concept of rationality. As Stich points out, however, “for this answer to be defensible our common sense concept of rationality must be univocal”57. In addition, it must be the case that the procedures used for deciding whether a system is rational must exhaust the concept in question without remainder. Stich says this cannot be a priori supposed and that it is undermined on empirical grounds. Philosophers like Deleuze and Derrida, on the other hand, would seek to contests these claims on something like a priori grounds, and through sustained analyses of particular concepts and their paradoxical logics.

A ROLE FOR COMMON SENSE (AND REFLECTIVE EQUILIBRIUM AND THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS), BUT NOT THE ROLE?

The point behind this essay, then, is that from the perspective of Deleuze a methodological reliance on common sense (in offshoots from either Moorean or Russellian forms) entails a theoretical conservatism in analytic philosophy. Now, there are, of course, many possible rejoinders, perhaps most notably, what is bad about being conservative? After all, it is clear that we are and, perhaps should be, conservative in various respects. But the important question for us is whether philosophy should be structured conservatively. Arguably it is structured conservatively, not least because academia is conservative, but whether it should be structured thus is another question, and one to which Deleuze thinks the answer is no

56 Stich, p18.
57 Stich, p19.
for reasons I have outlined. Another rejoinder might be that there are various problems with Deleuze’s philosophy and with continental philosophy writ large, including its own theoretical conservatism despite the ostensible alignment with critique and with leftist socio-political causes (discounting Heidegger and Hegel). It is undoubtedly true that there are myriad methodological concerns that might be posed to continental philosophers about their own insular practices58, but what I want to bring out in this paper, through the resources that Deleuze’s meta-philosophy provides, is an external perspective on analytic philosophy that opens up questions to do with its methodological practice. It seems to me that the critical views expressed by Deleuze about the pervasiveness of the dogmatic image of thought – and the co-imbricated assumption of good and common sense – serve as timely reminders for the practice of analytic philosophy today, which is methodologically invested in the value of common sense (sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly), and such a position only makes sense if one assumes that where one is starting from is also good (or at least better than the alternatives). In this essay, a commitment to theoretical conservatism and common sense has been shown to bound up with the particular techniques of thought experimentation and reflective equilibrium. There is a chauvinism bound up with these practices (perhaps not unlike the transcendental arguments frequently deployed in continental philosophy, but that is another story59).


59Transcendental arguments also tend to dogmatically assume conceptual unity. See Kuusela, O., “Transcendental Arguments and the Problem of Dogmatism”, International Journal of Philosophical Studies, Vol. 16, No.1, 2008, p57-75. The feel of chauvinism is mitigated in some cases of transcendental argumentation, however, where the circularity in such arguments is acknowledged. See Malpas, J., ‘The Transcendental Circle’, Australasian Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 75, No. 1, 1997, p1-
and they remain questionable and not necessarily inevitable aspects of any serious conception of thought. The uncritical and too prolific use of thought experiments can simplify problems to make them amenable for solution and can lead us to see analogies where there are really significant differences. They might also play a role in leading to a generalising and categorising conception of the task of philosophical reflection to the detriment of other possibilities. Likewise, we have seen that the technique of reflective equilibrium is a necessarily coherentist approach that depends on explanatory norms of worthiness that are indeed useful for some kinds of philosophical reflection but not necessarily all. Moreover, there is a circularity to any so-called test of reflective equilibrium: it is not a ‘neutral’ test, but involves a reinforcement of a given system provided by particular tools found within that system. The problem of conservatism in this practice remains. Another way of putting this might be to say that those engaging in reflective equilibrium almost inevitably find what they are looking for, as in Meno’s paradox.

But while vigilance about good and common sense and their methodological instantiations is undoubtedly called for, it is not clear to me that we can (or should) understand the genuine philosophical pursuit as ultimately immured of these aspects. Intuitive responses to thought experiments, for example, are undeniably useful for showing us the commitments and contradictions within our own thinking and use of concepts. And concepts are indeed our way of categorising the world, although we might, as Deleuze exhorts us, still try to create new ones that transform our apprehension of the world. Copernican revolutions in thought have happened, and analytic philosophy should not entirely absolve itself of this hope. The fundamental question then would be: is the new possible for analytic philosophy, given its

paradigmatic status and methodological commitment to forms of coherentism and theoretical conservatism? On my view it is possible, but improbable, at least without further engagement with its continental (and Asian) ‘others’ on methodological issues, as well as the value of philosophy more generally; the reverse also holds for reasons that cannot be addressed here. This does not entail that such a perspective is bankrupt, as a certain reading of Deleuze’s analysis might lead us to believe, but nor is a commitment to this kind of theoretical conservatism the only responsible way of proceeding in philosophy as at least some analytic philosophers would have us believe. There are useful roles for common sense, for the coherentist ‘best fit’ approach’ to philosophy, and for many of analytic philosophy’s key associated techniques, but to conceive of them as exhausting the essence of philosophy is to condemn one’s philosophy. A philosopher must simultaneously be judge and creator, rather than the one or the other.