



America
and the Political
Philosophy of
COMMON SENSE

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Introduction

This study considers the political significance of something called common sense philosophy. Two likely reactions to the proposed topic present themselves: Those generally skeptical about the value of philosophy for political life—those who tend to see philosophy as either vicious or useless—might say, “It’s about time! Finally, a *common sense* philosophy of politics!” Those of a more philosophical bent, conversely, might well say, “What! Crude common sense is precisely what philosophy wants to transcend!” The view here is that there is some validity in both responses. The basic conviction motivating this work, in fact, is that common sense without philosophy is inadequate by itself to address assaults on the foundations of society or to reinforce foundations already cracked; while philosophy, if not anchored in common sense, tends to radicalize and ultimately to corrode social order still further. More positively, the intuition is that a robust, living, cultivated common sense is a primary source of social vitality and that a vibrant intellectual culture, if rooted in common sense, can give visionary direction to society without undermining its existential conditions.¹

The “common sense” in “common sense philosophy” indicates both a mode of philosophizing and its main object. The mode of philosophizing is to begin with and continually return to the immediate knowledge of reality as disclosed in primary experience, never letting speculation fly too far from that solid ground or, at least, never forgetting in our philosophical fancies that every object we know, material or mental, we know *through* that experience, if not always directly *in* it. The primary object, common sense, has multiple dimensions—from the faculty by which we perceive realities to the sense of things that human beings and particular human communities have in common. The political significance emerges from the “sense in common” element, but this is

grounded in the perception of real-world objects, material and mental, and of the necessary truths they indicate, so that every dimension of common sense is rolled up in the last.

The particular context in which common sense philosophy appears is important, for the essence of common sense is to stay in close contact with life as it is lived, and for body-bound human beings, life is lived in particular places and times. The common sense philosophies examined here appeared in English-speaking America and are colored by specifically American experience. Yet common sense philosophy in its specifically philosophical aspect is concerned with universals, with what is always and everywhere the same, so that “American” common sense philosophy is not simply American. American common sense philosophy may be considered both in terms of its Americanness and of the pure philosophy, if you will, that it produces. The American case may thus be taken as illustrative, especially as common sense and the form of philosophy connected with it is there highly developed.

This work is concerned with all these matters, not only with the common sense mode of philosophizing but equally with common sense itself as a human phenomenon, and with both of them together as essential ingredients in forming and preserving civilized society, in the American context and in general. In the American setting this complex of thought and experience has produced what is herein called “American common sense.” The term indicates variously, first, an American way of thinking and the corresponding sense of the American community on matters of communal interest, issuing into a unique political order; second, what American thinkers have said about a universally accessible phenomenon, the thing we call “common sense,” and its implications; and third, the actual presence of this phenomenon in the American sense and outlook and politics just mentioned.

Four larger purposes animate the book. The first is to understand American thought and experience more adequately by considering how and why common sense has been a perennial concern for American philosophy, and in particular how three paradigmatic thinkers—John Witherspoon, James McCosh, and William James—exemplify “the American mind,” or the way Americans think. The second is to understand and evaluate the compatibility of the versions of common sense philosophy these thinkers present. The third is to begin to understand common sense as a feature of human experience and understanding. The fourth is to evaluate cultivated common sense as a prerequisite for healthy moral and political life and order. This last will involve, among other things, an examination of the experiential foundations of natural right and natural law,

which are really outworkings of common sense rationality and its implications, and which are not fully intelligible or compelling apart from a deep sense of those foundations. All three of our main thinkers may be seen to unfold natural right in varying ways, not necessarily always in those terms; Witherspoon and McCosh, especially Witherspoon, address natural law directly.

Ultimately, the goal is to get at the personal and social meaning of common sense *through* American thought. These aims, clearly, are philosophical and only secondarily historical. That is, the concern here is with what is, with enduring realities of human nature; of what generally makes for decent, fulfilling human life; and of American identity, not merely what we think of ourselves and have thought of ourselves, but what we are and with substantial consistency have been. Much more is at stake here than mere historical causation. Yet this is no philosophical treatise. It is not a systematic philosophy of common sense, though it contains significant material from which to make one. Nor is it meant to be a comprehensive analysis of American thought and life. The ambition presently is more modest. It is to see what light is shed on the above matters by considering three expressions of common sense philosophy that constitute three pivotal episodes in the development of the American mind: the introduction of Scottish Common Sense to America by John Witherspoon; the culmination of that tradition in James McCosh; and the introduction of Pragmatism and other elements of his empirical philosophy to America and the world by William James.

These intellectual movements—Scottish Common Sense and Pragmatism—dominated American philosophy for most of American history (see below). As leaders of those movements, then, Witherspoon, McCosh, and James are among the best representatives of the American way of thinking, and so examining their philosophy should help fulfill the first larger purpose just mentioned, getting a surer sense of the American mind. The key features of American understanding are drawn out in the chapter on Witherspoon, and variations on those features, where they occur, noted in the McCosh and James chapters. What immediately follows here is an introduction to these three men and, touching the book's second purpose, some indications of the ways their common sense philosophies are and are not compatible. Along the way, a few hints are given as to the substance of American common sense in a brief review of the Declaration of Independence, where all the main features of the American mind are telescoped.

James is not ordinarily identified with common sense philosophy, and so first a few words about him. He is most famous as a founder of Pragmatism, though he is more justly remembered for his classic magnum opus,

The Principles of Psychology. His writings hint, however, that the “pragmatic method” of philosophizing he recommends aims at a recasting of common sense and presupposes that the common sense outlook is basically sound, though inadequate by itself (absent critical and scientific and, it turns out, religious support) for understanding the world and maximizing human fulfillment. Implicit in the opening words above is that common sense and common sense philosophy are grounded, in the first case unreflectively and in the second case intentionally, in concrete knowledge. In *The Meaning of Truth*, the compilation of essays published as “a sequel to Pragmatism,” James explains to his critics that “The whole originality of pragmatism, the whole point of it, is its use of the concrete way of seeing. It begins with concreteness, and returns and ends with it.”² Moreover, James’s own version of pragmatic philosophy, radical empiricism, is deeply rooted in common sense impressions. He points repeatedly and explicitly in his posthumously published *Essays in Radical Empiricism* to the close affinities between the radically empiricist way of seeing the world and the way of common sense.³ James has been one of the most written-about philosophers and public intellectuals in American history, yet no one, to this author’s knowledge, has until now ever systematically examined the role of common sense in his thought, much less its moral and political implications.⁴

It is not hard to see why John Witherspoon and James McCosh should be thought of as common sense philosophers, adherents as they were of the Scottish Common Sense movement, but the reader may well wonder, Why these two in particular? The answer is that Witherspoon and McCosh were the most important members of the school in America, Witherspoon during the founding period and McCosh in the post–Civil War era. The symmetry of their respective roles in the near century-long reign of Scottish Common Sense over the American academy is almost poetic. Witherspoon was the first and McCosh the last of its major proponents in the history of American philosophy. Witherspoon’s “Lectures on Moral Philosophy” at Princeton (published posthumously in 1810) and McCosh’s late *Realistic Philosophy* (republished in 1897) serve effectively as bookends of the movement. Both men emigrated from Scotland to serve as presidents of Princeton (originally, the College of New Jersey, later to become Princeton University just after McCosh’s tenure). Both played pivotal parts in making Princeton into one of America’s leading institutions of higher learning. Both taught courses in philosophy there (among other subjects), and both actively participated in the major philosophical, social, and academic debates of their times. Both were ordained Presbyterian ministers and continued preaching more or less

regularly during their years at Princeton. Witherspoon was most responsible for making Scottish Common Sense the leading philosophical movement in America, and it attained the status almost of academic orthodoxy in American philosophy (including ethical and political theory) shortly after his passing. McCosh's writings and public speeches represent its last hurrah before newer trends such as Utilitarianism, German idealism, and then Pragmatism swept it from center stage and almost from memory.

No systematic analysis of the common sense basis of Witherspoon's moral and social philosophy has yet been made, and none of McCosh's, either. Jeffry H. Morrison recently delivered a fine study of Witherspoon's underappreciated role in America's founding, and Thomas Miller gave a good general treatment of Witherspoon's thought in his introduction to an edition of the Scotsman's more important writings. Mark A. Noll wrote an excellent chapter on Witherspoon's legacy at Princeton in a 1989 study of that institution's Christian intellectual origins, Jack Scott produced an annotated edition of Witherspoon's *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* in 1982, and a number of scholarly articles on Witherspoon have been published in recent decades.⁵ But none has made a systematic textual analysis of Witherspoon's common sense political philosophy. Only one scholarly work of note has been written on McCosh in recent times, an intellectual biography by J. David Hoeveler, Jr.⁶

Our direct interest, again, is the political significance of American common sense thought, and Witherspoon, McCosh, and James speak to this in different ways. Witherspoon is the only one of the three who directly articulated a full-blown theory of politics. Neither McCosh nor James did much political theorizing, but each of them said a good deal about ethics and the moral life, and both were much concerned with the social consequences of personal morality and the moral quality of social life. McCosh was more interested than James in elucidating ethical principles. James thought that abstract principles were not much help in hard cases (McCosh actually agreed with him on this point) and therefore preferred to concentrate his energies on working out and clarifying a comprehensive moral *vision*.

What all three have in common, beyond a generally consistent common sense view of things, is a distinctive project: both to find a *via media* between skepticism and idealism and to keep philosophy anchored in direct experience of reality. The quest for a middle way was perhaps the main motivation of their theorizing; the empirical anchoring enabled them to find it. The philosophical and, by extension, the practical equilibrium desired was attainable, they thought, through a kind of balancing of consciousness and assiduous attention to and respect for all experiences and intuitions, refusing

to discount most, according to modern philosophical habit, in favor of some one or few of these.

Each thinker was worried especially about the moral and spiritual consequences of modern skepticism. The emergence of Scottish Common Sense as a self-conscious philosophical movement had been motivated in particular by the skeptical philosophy of David Hume. In the day of McCosh and James (the two were contemporaries, though McCosh was many years James's senior), the specter of materialism loomed large, as increasing numbers of Western intellectuals took the establishment of evolutionary science to imply the death of God, or at least the irrelevance of God to human affairs, and by the same token also to suggest the transience and arbitrariness of moral convictions. On the other side, idealism did not seem at all a viable solution. Berkeley's idealism, after all (or so Thomas Reid said), had only paved the way for Hume's skeptical conclusions, and the philosophy of the "Absolute" of Hegel and his successors was too far removed from common sense to win honest belief from more than a relatively small handful of hyper-intellectuals.⁷ For Witherspoon, McCosh, and James the only hope for modern man lay in some common middle ground between idealistic certitude and radical doubt.

American thought has, until recently at least, struck the right balance more successfully than its European cousins. Hume's influence in the founding period was limited to political theory, for instance; his radical distrust of reason never took root. Nor could the leading thinkers of the early republic stomach the French deification of reason that led inexorably to the Reign of Terror. Hegel had an impact on the American intelligentsia through John Dewey, but Dewey's Hegelianism was considerably tamed by his pragmatism and his rejection of a political "End of History," the idea that has inspired such degradation and bloodshed in the twentieth century as the Hitlers and Lenins of the world tried to make it happen. America may yet be undone by a creeping moral relativism, but a deep reserve of common sense realism—recognizing certain human moral intuitions and tendencies and potentialities that never seem to go away—has so far held it in check.

The classic expression of American common sense is the Declaration of Independence, in which we find indicated both the principles and the practice of the common sense realism just mentioned. The most famous part of that document begins with a pronouncement, "We hold these truths to be self-evident." In the history of philosophy, "self-evident truths" were not truths that were necessarily obvious to everyone but, rather, only to those who looked in the right place with unclouded vision.⁸ Such are those "truths" on which common sense understanding is based, as Thomas Reid, the most famous British

common sense philosopher, attested.⁹ People who lack common sense in any respect, then, have lacked certain experiences. The authors of the Declaration of Independence did not say, “These truths are self-evident,” but “*We hold* these truths to be self-evident.” The truths clearly would not have been self-evident to most of the world, as they still are not today, even in the West—indeed, even in the United States. But to those who had known the experience of liberty and self-government and the rule of law and, not to be overlooked, reverence for the Creator, these truths were too obvious to be seriously questioned. That experience is laid out in some detail in the middle portion of the Declaration, in the list of grievances against King George III. To late eighteenth-century Americans, the God-given rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (“among” others, as the text reminds us) were no mere abstractions. They were known concretely in social customs and political institutions, in the stuff of everyday life. The high principles of the Declaration were thus anchored in experience, instantiated in particular practices and procedures. The American Revolution succeeded where the French Revolution failed because the French revolutionaries lacked a common sense tradition: they lacked the prior experiences that would have given “*liberté, égalité, fraternité*” concrete meaning.

Looking back on the Declaration fifty years later, Thomas Jefferson said that the document was meant “to place before mankind the *common sense* of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to make.”¹⁰ It was hoped, apparently, that, if the truths of the Declaration were not presently self-evident to the world, they might become so in later time. In any case, in this letter to Henry Lee, Jefferson seems to corroborate the reading of the Declaration outlined above: that the truths announced there were common sense to Americans both as the sense of the American people on the matter of “rights” (the tenor of “the American mind” and “the harmonizing sentiments of the day”) and as rational awareness of self-evident truths, the kind that “command assent” when we see them squarely.¹¹ Grasping the substance of these truths, if Jefferson was right, would take us a long way toward understanding American common sense.

Americans remain committed to securing life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—albeit with considerable erosion of the founders’ sense of natural right and higher law that gave these ideals much of their moral meaning. They also remain characteristically pragmatic and realistic in their politics (relatively speaking), concerned always with “what works” and not given, excepting small radical groups at the fringes, to ideology.¹² The early American Pragmatists, heralding a new era in which we remain, continued to treat the old American ideals as sacred, although with less theoretical justification than the founders, and famously

grounded their philosophy in “what works.” James in particular, as much as Jefferson, recognized the personal and social dimensions of common sense and the importance of linking these dimensions for the health of society.

If the Declaration of Independence suggests the substance of American common sense, the style of American common sense thinking in addition to the substance appears most clearly in the Scottish Common Sense of Witherspoon and McCosh and James’s pragmatic radical empiricism. The three men may be taken again as paradigmatic—representative of three key moments in the development of the American mind. The period from Witherspoon to McCosh is the first great phase of American common sense, its Scottish realist phase; and James, with his new kind of realism, inaugurates the second phase.

“Scottish Common Sense” or Scottish realism was an outgrowth of the philosophizing of Thomas Reid, the one thinker Hume regarded as supplying a serious challenge to his skeptical philosophy, and more remotely of Francis Hutcheson, who gave Lord Shaftesbury’s moral and common sense philosophy systematic form and whose impact on the leading lights of the Scottish Enlightenment was massive.¹³ Scottish realism’s dominance of American academic philosophy for the better part of a century (from the late eighteenth century to the post–Civil War years) is *prima facie* evidence that this philosophic outlook was peculiarly congenial to the American way of thinking and that it played a disproportionately large role in American intellectual development over that period.

Indeed, the pervasiveness of Scottish Common Sense into the latter nineteenth century meant that the early Pragmatists such as James, Peirce, and Dewey had to pay at least rhetorical respect to common sense in their presentation and defense of the Pragmatist philosophy. But it is clear that the Pragmatists’ regard for common sense was more than mere lip service. James repeatedly and explicitly made common sense a key test of rationality; Peirce founded his “Pragmatism” in part on a “critical common-sensism”; and Dewey sided with “cultivated common sense” against philosophies detached from the world of primary experience, understanding common sense to be precisely the sense of things that comes of such experience.¹⁴

The seeds of Pragmatism sowed by these great originators fell on fertile soil in America, so much so that George Santayana could charge, plausibly, that Pragmatism was only making a philosophical theory of “the dawning sentiments of the age [as represented most notably by America] . . . the moods of the dumb majority.”¹⁵ Although there may be some measure of truth in Santayana’s indictment, the historical argument made here is that part, at least, of the reason Scottish realism and Pragmatism resonated so profoundly in the

American context was their mutual appeal to common sense and to common sense experience; and that this appeal was powerful because (1) America was home to a deep-rooted common sense tradition and (2) common sense was a real and even a central concern for both philosophies.

Some clarifications are necessary here to avoid misunderstanding. The argument is not that Pragmatism (whether James's version or any one else's) can somehow be assimilated to the Scottish Common Sense tradition. The claim of historical continuity is strictly limited. It is only that Scottish realism and American Pragmatism, distinct as they are, are movements within a larger, common, Western, and especially Anglo-American, common sense tradition and accordingly share a deep respect for common sense experience, and further, that this common ground inclined both movements toward a sober and moderate politics.¹⁶

The philosophical differences between Scottish realism and Pragmatism are obvious and well-known (to the extent that Scottish realism is still known). In particular, they are greatly at odds in their understanding of common sense principles: the Scottish realists understand these as derived from intuitive capacities built in to a human mental constitution essentially permanent, some of them necessary principles and others contingent but eternally valid for creatures such as we are, while the Pragmatists take them to be only inherited categories of thought that have stood the test of time.¹⁷ The Pragmatists, moreover, generally assume a more ambivalent posture toward traditional religion. These differences have sometimes been described in terms of Pragmatism's rejection of "foundationalism" and "essentialism," although to describe the differences summarily as a disagreement over the possibility of reliable foundations would be misleading in both directions (see below). But the differences that so clearly are there have distracted later philosophers and scholars from certain structural similarities in the two movements' philosophic outlooks. Both movements see their philosophizing as grounded in common sense, and both recognize certain features as essential to common sense: both affirm a direct knowledge of concrete realities external to the knower's mind, including knowledge of moral qualities; both regard Baconian induction and experimentalism as the proper method of inquiry (modified by the Pragmatists to reflect Darwinian insights);¹⁸ both take intelligent experience to be the most reliable guide in human affairs; and both insist that all matters be judged "on the whole," according to the fullest range of experience. The impact on Pragmatism of Darwinism and nineteenth-century developments in psychology, neurology, sociology, and so on was considerable, but this common core of compatibilities remained unshaken right through.

Thus, while there is some truth in understanding the historical transition from Scottish Common Sense to Pragmatism (especially in its later varieties) in terms of a “foundationalist” and “essentialist” ethics and politics struggling to hold off but finally giving way to an anti-foundationalist and relativistic version, and while this intellectual shift is profoundly significant both philosophically and politically, intellectual historians, political theorists, and students of the relevant thinkers have given almost no sustained attention to the points of overlap in this transitional process. They therefore have failed to consider precisely those points that might most illuminate the bigger picture. The most interesting point of overlap, politically, between Scottish realism and Pragmatism was a common project of finding a concrete, empirical ground that could serve as a reliable basis for moral and political reflection and action. In this sense the Pragmatists, including Dewey, were no more ready to dispense with foundations than were the Scottish realists.

The hostility to “foundationalism,” as the word itself, came later. Dewey, though more of a radical than either James or Peirce, held for empirical foundations, in particular what he called the matrix of human relations (see below), and James and Peirce, contrary to general impression, categorically rejected moral relativism. Relativistic Pragmatism came after, beginning with Dewey but not fully flowering until recent decades. True, the Pragmatists were both more skeptical about the existence or knowability of permanent foundations and substantive essentials of human well-being and more idealistic about the possibility of human progress, but they shared with the Scottish realists a rejection both of classical empiricist doubt about the intelligibility of experience and of gnostic attempts such as Berkeley’s or Hegel’s to escape uncertainty about its deeper meaning. The Scottish realists on balance were certainly more dogmatic about human nature and religion. The Pragmatists can be faulted with being, like Heraclitus, so impressed with flux as to make them nearly forget, or in some cases to deny, the deeper features of human nature and human experience that seem to have remained constant through the whole stretch of recorded history. The larger point for our purposes, however, is that what the Pragmatists and the Scottish realists have in common has been overlooked, and that this heretofore little contemplated common ground may contain clues about American character and outlook, and a few clues too, perhaps, about the nature and social significance of common sense understanding.

The common ground between the two groups is especially interesting in the case of William James. In addition to the general empirical approach and a robust conception of common sense rationality, James’s handling of the religious question showed an affinity to an older orientation toward the world

accepted by Scottish realists such as Witherspoon and McCosh and set him apart from Dewey and later Pragmatists in a decisive respect. James understood religious faith in a way later Pragmatists have not. He took the claims of religionists about their experiences much more seriously than Dewey did, for instance. In his book on religion, *A Common Faith*, Dewey takes these experiences as real, but he dismisses interpretations of those experiences that see them as inspired in some sense by a divine being. James is much less dogmatic. James recognizes (as Dewey does after him) that experiences of a religious character—involving in their mature form a unification of self within through a harmonizing of self with the larger reality of which one is part—are often brought about in ways and interpreted according to terms entirely distinct from any particular religion in the traditional sense of that term.¹⁹ But James does not (as Dewey does) privilege the interpretations of “scientific” elites. Something goes on in these experiences, both of them agree, but James is much more willing than Dewey to believe that this something, at least in some cases, might be the kind of spiritual influx envisioned by classic mystics and theologians. In any event, he does not dogmatically rule out the possibility.

This different attitude toward religious experience has profound and far-reaching philosophical consequences, of which two are especially noteworthy. The first concerns the question of existence—the “why question” classically formulated as why there is something rather than nothing, and why the something is what it is and not something else. Dewey deliberately bracketed off the why question as “insoluble” and therefore at best a distraction, a matter of idle speculation or, more insidious, an obstacle to getting on in the world.²⁰ Much better, he said, to spend our energies on solvable problems and on improving matters over which we have some human control than to waste ourselves musing about ultimate origins or final destinies. God is dead, in any case, and the old “views about the origin and constitution of the world and man . . . about the course of human history and personages and incidents in that history” traditionally identified with religion have become “onerous and even impossible for large numbers of cultivated men and women.”²¹ Brilliant trailblazer though he was for Pragmatism and modern empirical philosophy, James was, let’s admit it, a bit of a quack about the mysteries of religious experience. So Dewey seems to have thought. But it may be, the common experience of mankind in fact seems to indicate, that there is embedded deep in the race a need for some sense of a greater purpose of our existence. It may be that man really cannot live well without some consideration of first and last things; and perhaps

Dewey's contempt for those old views about what grounds us and his disdain for James's venturings into regions deemed illusory or gauche by liberal, polite society closed him off from unsuspected pathways to illumination. One cannot hope to find out, in any case, unless one is more willing than Dewey to engage seriously what serious men have thought and said on the subject of religion.

James was willing so to engage them, and the result was a much richer vision of spiritual experience and a correspondingly more profound sense of man's place in the scheme of things.²² In contrast to Dewey, he shared with classic philosophy a conviction that the why question—as James put it, “Why was there anything but nonentity; why just this universal datum and not another?”—was the most important one. “The notion of nonentity may,” James said, “be called the parent of the philosophic craving in its subtlest and profoundest sense.”²³ Even if a completely unified system of things is attained (hypothetically speaking) and all being is accounted for, there would still be cause for restlessness in the awareness of non-being beyond and in the question of why what we have is there in the shape we have it. James saw a possible solution to this restlessness in mystical experience.

Significantly, the question of existence was not for James merely an intellectual problem. He saw it as practically imperative: it is for many people at least (including James himself) a “live,” “forced,” and “momentous” matter that cannot therefore practically be set aside (*WB* 14). He perceived that human beings need to know that “the inmost nature of reality is congenial to powers which you possess” (*WB* 73). Experience suggests that it is so in some ways, in fact, and this observation, made and taken to heart, makes the question of existence a living one.²⁴ The religious feeling that “there is something wrong about us as we naturally stand” makes that question forced and momentous. The universe seems amenable to our understanding and parts of it, at least, to our control; why then are we dysfunctional and at a loss? The sense some have of being “saved from the wrongness by making proper connexion with the higher powers” (*VRE* 400) and the beneficent fruits that have followed in and through the lives of many of these persons suggests for James that religion in this living form may have something valuable to say to us about the meaning of life. Alleged insights into the structure of reality and the movement of being coming out of such experiences deserve at least respectful consideration, particularly when the persons claiming to receive these insights evince a remarkably high quality of character and life and when their words “kindle unsuspected faculties” in their hearers (*VRE* 294).

Dewey essentially accepts James's generic description of “religious” phenomena, as outlined here, but he does not accept that they constitute a special class of experience distinct from “aesthetic, scientific, moral, political” experience.²⁵

Dewey wants to divorce values that, given their concern with the whole of things, may be termed “religious” (values he recognizes are precious to human life), from any belief in the supernatural, from any purposes beyond improving our lives in the here and now, and from any notion of final human ends.²⁶ Although James is willing to consider a variety of explanations for generically “religious” phenomena and handles the relevant questions in highly innovative ways, he is clearly more inclined to give religion special status and more open to traditional understandings of God, immortality, and providence. Religious experience may indeed enable us to get at the larger purposes of existence. James thought the question of existence to be at least potentially resolvable concretely because he took religious experience seriously.

The second great philosophic consequence of the difference between Dewey and James on religious experience concerns the question of permanent metaphysical foundations for human ethics. Dewey thought that the only foundation possible and the only foundation necessary and desirable for ethics was the existing and ever-changing matrix of human relations within which we find ourselves and out of which, he claimed, our values and highest ideals emerge. Dewey continually begs the question as to the source of the best human ideals, assuming it is simply persons intelligently and imaginatively engaged with their human and material environment and suggesting new possibilities for improving the quality of life, and rules out divine inspiration as unverifiable.

But religious claims, as James saw it, prove themselves the same way all others do, by putting us in touch with and making sense of the whole range of possible experience; and he was convinced that only religion could open up and adequately illuminate the range of moral experience for us. He was certain that saintly examples, actions, and ideals have made the world a better place (see *VRE* 294). More to the point, he appreciated the relevance and the value for human flourishing of the idea of an unchanging moral order. James’s pragmatic conception of God is precisely the idea of the Agent that guarantees “an eternal moral order” and all our highest ideals (see *WB* 161; *Pragmatism* 50–62).²⁷ This eternal order of value is glimpsed, if it is directly known at all, through noetic illumination, and James refuses to dismiss the possibility that faith can make it seen.²⁸ In *The Principles of Psychology* he further intimates that the sense of obligation we feel to honor and act in accord with the ideals of “the highest judging companions” we know (our “conscience,” which he places at the core of our innermost self) points to a God of the kind just described, whose demands are imperative because God is good and has a special claim on us.²⁹

If this analysis is correct, Dewey must be credited (or charged) with turning Pragmatist philosophy from its initial posture of spiritual openness (Peirce shared James’s attitude toward existence and metaphysical foundations) to

the quasi-religious scientism and worship of democracy that has characterized many of its later manifestations and most later modern thought. James never made the scientific and corresponding anthropocentric turn.³⁰ James represents a prior moment, a more pivotal moment in American philosophical and spiritual history. In this sense he stood athwart the divide between old and new America. He was, as all Pragmatists have been, forward-looking in his general orientation. His thought was stunningly fresh, dazzlingly original and liberating. Yet he lived in and embodied a moment of tension and transition in the American mind that was pregnant with diverse possibilities. If one wished to find one person deeply American in instinct and outlook, an epitome of American genius and character, in whom all that was old in America and all that was new was seamlessly combined, a person to whom one could look to find not only the germs of what modern America has become but all of the potentialities for what it could have become and didn't—one could hardly find a better example than William James.

John Witherspoon and James McCosh represent the old America; William James represents the new America before its intellectual leadership, or much of it, had lost all faith in God and reason. A juxtaposition and comparison of their treatments of common sense will help us see more clearly what is distinctive about the American way of thinking, what it owes to older ways, what is new about it, how it has kept its original form, and how it has changed. At the same time, observing the development of the concept "common sense" in the American context will help us come to terms with the historical dimension of common sense, how the common sense mode of mind and reasoning varies with cultural context.

There is one more point to make on the relation of Scottish realism and Jamesian pragmatic empiricism, and this is that each supplies what the other lacks, so that a judicious combination of the elements would make a complete common sense philosophy. The need for this and the way it might be done are indicated in Chapters 4, 5, and 7 of the current study. In particular, Witherspoon, McCosh, and James address different elements (epistemological, moral, political) of what would have to be included in any complete common sense philosophy of politics, and James's treatment of our obligations to God and the possibility of an "eternal moral order" opens the way to wedding the Pragmatist account of vital moral experience to the Scottish realist recognition of necessary moral truths.

The third purpose of the present work—in addition to illuminating the American mind and weighing the compatibility of these three thinkers' phi-

losophies—is to understand common sense as a human, as distinguished from a merely American, phenomenon. The term “common sense,” again, has many connotations, but the whole cluster of primary meanings—good sense, good judgment, the settled sense of a community about what is right and reasonable, and the more technical philosophical notion of a perception of self-evident objects or facts or truths and the solid sense of things that comes from cultivating this capacity—all have a direct relation to a certain healthy mode of consciousness that is possible for all human beings because of some capacity, also called common sense, that is endemic to human nature. This mode of mind is the link connecting all the meanings.

This book is most deeply and most essentially a meditation on the human meaning of common sense, first for the individual but ultimately for society. It is not intended except incidentally to be a history of ideas but, rather, a study in political philosophy. That is, it is concerned not merely with concepts or with intellectual discourses and debates but with fundamental human realities, with common sense itself, and with those basic moral and political realities that become clear through the common sense way of seeing, and beyond that with the ways common sense understanding helps lay the groundwork for humane society. The following chapters progressively differentiate the compact meaning of common sense just outlined, culminating in an extended elaboration of the phenomenon in the book’s conclusion.

The fourth great purpose of this volume relates to the point about common sense as a basis for civilized society, to help restore a sense of the metaphysical foundations of moral and political order. In the contemporary philosophical context of radical uncertainty about or outright willful rejection of permanent metaphysical foundations for ethics and ethical politics (a development for which John Dewey bears a special responsibility in the American setting), analysis of common sense rationality as an empirical phenomenon provides a clarifying service. The experience of common sense rationality was, in some form, always the root of conceptions of natural right and natural law. Without an appreciation of the empirical basis of these conceptions in common sense, natural law concepts and principles seem contrived and dogmatic. Such an appreciation has been shallow, too narrowly focused, misdirected, or missing altogether in most modern moral and political philosophy, with serious consequences, most significantly a loss of conviction that private and public justice has any basis deeper than will or mere consent.

For example, Hobbes and Locke tried to ground natural right and natural law empirically, but the empirical foundation they laid, the natural drive for

self-preservation, was, in the context of the older natural law tradition, very thin, not taking account of other, equally fundamental human inclinations. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, had made the empirical foundation of natural law to consist not only of the drive for self-preservation, which he recognized, but also the tendency toward preserving the species, including affection for offspring and what might be called the herding instinct, and most important, the desire for rational sociability and knowing the truth about God and ultimate things. Thomas Reid made the connection between common sense and natural law principles, but his analysis of the link was underdeveloped and lacked historical sense. He recognized the similarity between his own formulation of common sense principles and Aristotle's treatment of first principles (indeed, as Reid intended them they were identical), but he never systematically considered the relation of his common sense philosophy to the larger Western natural law tradition.³¹ Most of Reid's followers lacked his analytical precision and his deep sense of the empirical problems. Hume and Kant had an equally keen awareness of the empirical problems but were not able to come to terms with the larger implications of the common sense rationality they understood, in some ways, very well. This was partly because they were hampered, as James points out (*ERE* 23), by an atomistic, discontinuous model of consciousness deriving from Locke, and a kind of Cartesian obsession with certainty as the criterion of all knowledge.

I will not resolve, or even try to resolve, all these issues. The following treatment of metaphysical foundations is only suggestive, pointing to the range of issues one would have to consider in order to work out a common sense theory of politics. The basic idea presented here is that a well-cultivated common sense rationality and the firm grasp of the elements of human nature and human experience it reveals provide a better, because deeper, foundation for moral and political life than either logic or sentiment (the alternative foundations most commonly put forward in the modern period), which are secondary and derivative. Logic helps determine implications, and sentiment, properly nurtured, can incline people to right living and forge the bonds of mutual goodwill; but elemental facts must be known before we can draw true logical conclusions or begin to understand what manner of beings we are that we might aim to live well. All else depends on simple awareness of our common human situation, our tendencies and problems, and the possibilities lying open to us. Logic and sentiment in the service of partial facts—or, worse, in the service of dream-world ideologies having no patience with the facts—are sure to mislead or in extreme cases destroy us. Our reasonings, our loves and hopes and fears must be grounded in deep acquaintance with ourselves and with the world we live

in, in consciousness that is itself well grounded, settled, stable, and attuned as far as possible to the whole human scene.

I have stressed that the book before the reader is a work of political philosophy. Perhaps something should be said, therefore, about the value of Scottish Common Sense and James's pragmatic radical empiricism for academic philosophy. Scholars in the discipline may reasonably ask, particularly, why they should care about Scottish Common Sense philosophy except as a curious historical phenomenon. The first reason is that Scottish realism at its best deals more adequately with the range of epistemological problems than most schools of philosophy either before or since. A number of the epistemological dilemmas upon which many so-called analytic philosophers have hung, in particular questions about justifying beliefs, are effectively addressed, for instance, by the best of the Scottish realists, notably Reid and McCosh.³² The gist is that common sense intuitions do not need justification, are incapable of being justified, and that trying to justify them undermines rationality. Beliefs may, and in many cases should, be tested to verify their status as intuitions, but genuine intuitions (as Aristotle said of first principles) are the absolute base of reasoning and therefore incapable of demonstration.

The second reason that scholars in academic philosophy should care about Scottish realism is that it may well help to forge a pathway out of the moral fog that afflicts contemporary philosophy. The substantive emptiness and aimlessness of postmodernism, beginning with Nietzsche and continuing to the contemporary movement bearing the name, have provoked a twentieth- and twenty-first-century resurgence of classic political philosophy, with which Scottish realism has a great affinity.³³ Scottish realism laid epistemological foundations for ethics compelling enough to merit reconsideration, or rather consideration for the first time, from contemporary academic philosophers haunted by the sneaking feeling that the postmodern abandonment of reality might be an overreaction.³⁴ The third reason is the reemergence of Thomas Reid's status as a major modern philosopher. The high level of scholarly, philosophical, and historical analyses of Reid's thought represented in the recent *Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid* (2004) testifies to the fact.

The philosophical relevance more particularly of Witherspoon, McCosh, and James may be described as follows. Witherspoon's *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, as supplemented by his other moral and political writings, provide a unique, and rare, distillation of Scottish Common Sense philosophy as it stood in the late eighteenth century, and of Scottish Enlightenment ethical and political thought more generally.³⁵ One gets in brief compass in those

writings the Scottish Enlightenment and its internal debates—notably between the defenders of common sense and its critics. The *Lectures* also provide an opportunity to consider the links both historical and philosophical between common sense, on the one hand, and natural right and natural law on the other. The Scottish Common Sense thinkers were very much and very directly concerned both with natural right, as seen throughout their “moral philosophy,” and with natural law, which they addressed most directly under the category of “natural jurisprudence” but which underlay their larger moral systems, in the form of conscience’s recognition of a higher law of obligation and human nature. (Natural jurisprudence itself was treated as a subset of moral philosophy.) Witherspoon did not give an unbiased account. He clearly favored mainstream Scottish thought as represented by such worthies as Hutcheson, Reid, and Kames (the defenders of common sense), with its affirmations of moral knowledge, over the maverick philosophies of David Hume and Adam Smith (the critics), and he did not give Hume or Smith the same kind of serious attention as the others. It has to be admitted further that Witherspoon himself, while a good reasoner and a man of prodigious learning, was certainly far outclassed both as technical philosopher and as scholar by the leading Scottish thinkers. Nonetheless, few if any writers of the late eighteenth century give such a comprehensive view as he does of the main currents of Scottish philosophy at that time. Reading Witherspoon immerses us in the intellectual milieu of both the Scottish Enlightenment and the late eighteenth-century American academy so that we can see the philosophical world of the period as it were from the inside. Additionally, and crucially, Witherspoon is, if not the best expositor of common sense, at least a great exemplar of it in his practical reflections and political participation. His thought and life give us a striking picture of common sense *in concreto*.

McCosh’s philosophic importance is twofold. First, his philosophical writings represent a culmination and refinement of Scottish Common Sense. He was not as original or penetrating a thinker as Reid, but he was a superb analyst of intuition and a better logician and metaphysician than Reid was. He may justly be said to have perfected Reid’s epistemology and rectified its shortcomings on key points. Second, McCosh’s writings contain some of the clearest, most compelling accounts in the English language of certain mental operations, namely, cognition, belief, judgment, and moral conviction, and of the bad consequences of disordered conscience.

James’s pragmatic radical empiricism provides a superior account of the nature, breadth, and depth of human experience, an account that has perhaps never been matched in precision and comprehensiveness. More directly rel-

evant to the present project, James also offers a brilliant analysis of the experiential meaning of common sense and of the alternative it supplies, both epistemologically and practically, to skepticism and idealism. His treatment of common sense, so little appreciated as it has been, demands closer consideration, for it constitutes a major contribution to philosophy, and to common sense philosophy in particular.

A note on scholarship and method is in order at this point. Scholars rigidly wedded to the prevailing methodologies of their particular fields might find this book frustrating, unconstrained as it is by such disciplinary strictures. Every effort has been made here to give a rigorous and meticulous treatment of the subject matter, but this subject matter is of such a nature as to require moving beyond contemporary professional boundaries. I aim to connect lived experience, philosophically examined, with the movements of society, and I try to uncover the kind of basic experiences and habits that make civilization possible. The task is formidable. No one should expect here more than a beginning and an outline of what needs working out. The basic method is that of William James, who took it from his friend Henri Bergson. In James's words:

Place yourself at a bound . . . inside of the living, moving, active thickness of the real, and all the abstractions and distinctions are given into your hand. . . . But keep outside, use your post-mortem method, try to build the philosophy up out of the single phrases, taking first one and then another and seeking to make them fit "logically," and of course you fail. You crawl over the thing like a myopic ant over a building, tumbling into every microscopic crack or fissure, finding nothing but inconsistencies, and never suspecting that a centre exists.³⁶

The method as it relates to the material examined here is immersion in the process of common sense tradition as it touches the American experience. My intuition is that a center of American life and order does in fact exist, if it can hold; that it has something to do with what is called common sense; and further, that this center is emblematic of others holding together other decent regimes. Demonstrating this is beyond the scope of the current book, but it's a first move in that direction.

The second chapter lays out a brief history of the concept of common sense, showing that common sense rationality as a foundation for philosophy and moral and political health is a long-standing Western concern and providing contextual background to American common sense. The third chapter, on Witherspoon, uncovers the basic features and philosophic underpinnings of

American common sense as it appeared at the founding. The fourth chapter, on McCosh, uncovers the farthest development and limits of Scottish Common Sense, and with it of American common sense in its first phase. The chapters on James uncover other dimensions of common sense Americans had long lived but that had until James never been philosophically articulated. The concluding chapter considers the compatibility and relevance of Scottish realist and Jamesian philosophy, concludes on common sense as a human phenomenon and basis of civilized life and order, and speculates on how by attending to common sense foundations we might fortify and sustain American common sense and that of other peoples.