Judgment, Trust, and Common Sense in American Literature

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines a number of aspects of the relation between ideas of 'common sense' and social / political processes, with specific focus on American Literature. The introductory chapters (Prologue and Introduction) juxtapose contemporary issues in which 'common sense' is invoked, followed by a selective discussion of philosophical and political history pertaining specifically to protracted debates of the role of 'common sense' in determining propositions and beliefs provisionally held to be 'valid' or 'true'—consistently followed by intense controversies that persist to the present.

The three primary examples here are the impact of Thomas Paine's pamphlet, *Common Sense,* particularly in affecting popular opinion concerning the impending war of revolution against the British, and two major literary works, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* and Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade.* Framing these two texts by way of philosophical arguments that antedate debates over deconstruction, post-modernism, and topical theories current in literary theory and the humanities—or more recent arguments that frequently have not registered significantly in the development of recent theory in literature and the humanities, offers a way to examine enduring philosophical issues of considerable interest

and pertinence. As noted in John Guillory's recent book, *Professing Literature: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), many of persisting theoretical controversies appear to have arisen as from the circumstances his book documents, that "*Literary study became a profession before it became a discipline."* (vii, italics in the original.)

Among other things, this position shifts attention to how the practices of literary study as a profession foreground debates over competing 'readings' of specific texts, usually supported by a more or less identifiable ideological position—in which a particular practical or moral point provides the key to argumentative strategy, or aligns a critic with a particular and politically inflected 'approach.' In this respect, the aim is to examine the grounds of reading as a discipline.

The two literary texts selected here are not presented for the purpose of developing a particular 'reading,' of either text. In recent decades, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* from being one of the most frequently taught American works, has become a book for a variety of reasons that appears 'too hot to handle'—on topics of language (notably the 'N' word and dialects), racism, religion, class—such that the novel Twain actually wrote has been edited, re-translated, or just not taught. The case of Melville's *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade,* is hardly identifiable as a 'novel' and only episodically as a 'narrative'—and the professional challenge this has presented is that 'readings' tend to reductive conclusions (Hershel Parker, for example, that the Confidence Man simply *is* The Devil) or Bruce Franklin's earlier annotated edition treats it as a compendium of world religion and mythology. The result is that *The Confidence-Man,* as the book Melville actually wrote, rarely gets read at all.

The main task of the dissertation is to frame the problem of reading itself as already informed by a philosophical history and political traditions that implicitly depend on commonplace notions of 'common sense,' on what may well be unfamiliar grounds.

The chapters of the dissertation, accordingly, situate debates over 'common sense'—almost always politically charged—oriented to a view of thinking as a process, not reducible to truth claims as either exclusively true or false, but requiring *reflective judgment* as treated in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment.* The dissertation examines questions surrounding the exercise of sound judgment and common sense, treated specifically as arising from *reflective* judgment. It opens with an exploration of the tensions between cultural norms and assumptions (collectively referred to as a community's *sensus communis*) and individual critical reasoning, providing an overview of historical perspectives on *sensus communis* from the ancient Greeks through the Enlightenment era, demonstrating that common sense has traditionally been framed as shared societal knowledge based on common values and principles. However, no conception of common sense as mere communal knowledge passes scrutiny. The critical turning point is in Immanuel Kant's articulation of the *reflective* or *reflecting judgment* as presented in his third Critique, which reorients the classical notion of judgment (the application of predetermined concepts to particular objects). Kant recognized this model failed to account for the contextual contingencies inherent to real-world judgments and did nothing to account for the origin of such concepts in the first place. Thus, he argues sound judgment involves assessing phenomena not just by static conceptual categories but also by their perceived purpose, conditions, and applicability to a given situation. This reflective orientation to judgment is key to exercising common sense. The second chapter emphasizes the *aesthetic turn in reasoning,* drawing on the pragmatist philosopher C.S. Peirce to argue that neither logic nor metaphysics

alone can dictate practical ethics and values; our inherent desires and aesthetic inclinations shape what ends we judge to be good. Thus the crux of our reality is fundamentally aesthetic, involving our sense perceptions and conception of relative goodness. Ethics proceeds from these aesthetic foundations, setting standards for actions most likely to realize admirable ideals. Only then does logic come into play, providing tools to achieve best the ends delineated by aesthetics and ethics. But logical reasoning serves as an instrument for desired outcomes, not an end in itself. This re-ordered understanding grounds common sense in experiential aesthetics rather than conceptual absolutes.

The second half of the dissertation applies the insights from the first two chapters to the analysis of two 19th Century American novels: Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, analyzed in chapter three, portrays an outsider questioning and rejecting the *sensus communis* (and its concomitant cruelties) embedded in the cultural assumptions of the antebellum American South. As an outsider to conventional Southern gentility, Huckleberry Finn has been spared the indoctrination of its cruelties disguised as '*sivilized'* mores. Thus, he is able to view established social conventions with a critical, common-sense eye. As Huck's relationship with Jim deepens, he increasingly recognizes Jim's full humanity despite societal commonplaces designed to prevent that very recognition. When confronted with a decision that would in part determine Jim's fate, Huck finds that he is unable to conform to the *sensus communis*, even to the point of risking his life and as--he is not infrequently reminded--his very soul.

Where chapter three explores the fraught issues that surround learning to doubt the *sensus communis* of one's own community, chapter four turns our attention to the more intricate decision-making process of learning how to decide what is, in fact, worthy of our trust. Chapter

four analyzes the delicate balance between trust and skepticism portrayed in Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man*. Set aboard a crowded riverboat filled with grifters and deceivers, the narrative dramatizes the inherent challenges of accurately judging others' credibility and intentions when surrounded by strangers in a transient setting. Yet even as it highlights the fallibility of individual reasoning among multitudes, Melville's novel affirms the pragmatic necessity of basic confidence and good faith among fellow humans. Some degree of mutual trust enables the cooperative structures and commerce that allow society to function. Thus *The Confidence-Man* explores the complex dynamics and negotiations between trust and doubt required for civilization to cohere amidst a fluid population. Though strangers' sincerity can rarely be definitively proven, at some point, one must pragmatically satisfy the desire to believe in others' stated intentions in order to act at all. The novel thus resists absolutism in either naive credulity or blanket cynicism, but explores the extent to which each encounter tests the nature and role of trust.

This dissertation demonstrates literature's power to cultivate open-mindedness, empathy, and sound judgment by engaging with complex depictions of moral dilemmas and social dynamics. It argues that exercising common sense involves questioning assumptions, reasoning toward ethical ends, and finding a livable balance between skepticism and pragmatic trust. From a pedagogical standpoint, these skills are developed through collective interpretation and discussion of common texts. A common literary work furnishes a shared frame of reference that enables exploratory discourse unhindered by factual disputes. As interlocutors wrestle with the open questions posed by an imaginative text, they flex skills essential to common sense, recognizing diverse viewpoints, tracing motivations and consequences, and clarifying foundational principles. Such sincere dialogue around a common touchstone makes space to surface and scrutinize unspoken

assumptions. It also underscores the limits of ideological purity when navigating nuanced human realities.

For Calvin, who will need to know these things.

Figure 1. "Thinking It Over" (Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Webster & Co, 1885).

Contents

List of Abbreviations

CM	Melville, *The Confidence-Man*
CP	Peirce, *Collected Papers*
CPJ	Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*
CPR	Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*
CS	Paine, *Common Sense*
HF	Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Prologue: The Information Man

In Buddy Wakefield's slam poem "The Information Man,"[1] a poet comes out of the rain into a typical rest area, where other people are milling around and generally doing much the same: extricating themselves from an unpleasant situation into one that is slightly less so. At an information booth sits a man "juggling predictable conversations with folks who look like iceberg lettuce," which both disgusts or bores the poet; he decries their intellectual lameness by declaring them people "who believe that somehow / The flat lines of small talk will give us life." He expresses contempt for their smallness of mind and soul by declaring his own superior ambitions for living, saying, "I want them to leave / Like a big deal orchestra removing itself from the stringed section / So I can fiddle with fate and make music." The poet begins to wax rhapsodic (as poets sometimes do) on his place in the universe, the distance between humans and God, the insolence of others, and other lofty considerations befitting a slam poet. Most of his ruminations center around his own sense of self-importance and disdain for those not living up to his ambitious standards of thinking or being, when eventually the rain lets up, the crowd thins out, and the poet finds himself alone with the Information Man. At this point—at which Wakefield demonstrates the height of his intensity as a slam poet —the poet turns his accusatory gaze toward the Information Man and unloads his internal rage directly at him:

> If you've never been rocked back by the presence of purpose
> This poem is too soon for you
> Return to your mediocrity

[1] Buddy Wakefield, "The Information Man," 2005. https://vimeo.com/4646593.

Plug it into an amplifier

And rethink yourself

Because some of us are on fire for the Answer

At this point in a standard rendition of "The Information Man," Wakefield has typically whipped his audience up into such a frenzy for "the Answer," as the poet calls it, with not a small amount of hostility, that we almost pity the fictional information booth attendant—almost. Our sympathy, however, if not unwarranted, turns out to be less than necessary; suddenly, at the height of this self-indulgent internal tirade, the "Info Guy pipes up like C.R. Avery on a piano box" and he says:

Listen,

If I didn't have so much of this life all wrong

I would have gotten it right by now

I talk a whole bunch, but I really know only a few things

So I'm not saying to follow along verbatim here

I'll just tell ya the things I tell myself

The things I know

And you can see what sticks

From there, the Information Man proceeds to demonstrate a few such pieces of knowledge and advice: "Our shoes are stitched from songs about highways" and "You've got to spare yourself the futility of making fun of God / Because that guy hasn't even talked in like / Ever." All this has been prefaced, though, by the Information Man's cautionary caveat that these are simply "things I tell myself / the things I know." He tells the poet that "you can see what sticks,"

as if to acknowledge that the knowledge that works for him may not be useful to someone else. Nevertheless, to the Information Man, these are "the things I know," indicating to the reader and to the poet that that he does have some degree of confidence in the truthfulness of these propositions, even if they are ultimately contextual and he can only be sure that they have worked specifically for him—he does not dare to insist that others abide by his own reckonings about the world.

By the end of the poem the Information Man has himself spun his down-to-earth musings into a fantastical monologue to rival that of the poet (see Appendix A), and while his counter to the poet's insistence on "the Answer"—which is prefaced by the qualifier "you can see what sticks"—carries with it the weight of an answer whose proponent is extremely confident in its universal rightness, he nevertheless delivers it under the caveat that it is still in some part subject to the whims of contingency. What the Information Man understands is that all judgments are contextual—in human affairs, there is no such thing as a universal maxim that applies without exception. He further understands that when the poet insists that "tonight we will get the answer, and you know what I'm talking about / The Answer / Emphasis on E, Answer," he is not only not going to find "The Answer," but is in fact asking the wrong question altogether.

Soon Wakefield's Information Man has outstripped the poet's intensity and he dramatically reorients the poet's perspective away from the idea of an externalized truth that is "out there" and situates the focus directly back on himself:

> I know troubleshooting yourself in the foot
>
> And acting as your own universe is a tricky dichotomy to deal with
>
> But, yes, you are the center of the universe
>
> If you weren't you wouldn't be here

So as the middle of space, and everything floating in it

It is your job to know that the emptiness is just emptiness

That the stars are stars

And that the flying rocks hurt

So please, stop inviting walls into wide open spaces

After this brief but celestial excoriation, the Information Man brings it back to earth, drawing the poet's attention back to what he is capable of doing and making sense of, and away from an idealized notion of truth or knowledge (the "Emphasis-on-E Answer"), the very existence of which he predicates on his own *desire* for it to exist. Rather than seeking out a real-world instantiation of an ideal notion, the Information Man instead implores the poet to recognize what he *is* capable of, and to celebrate and cultivate that:

I know there are times

When you will lay your head to rest

And have a moment of brilliance

That will grow into a perfect order of words

But you will fall asleep instead of painting it down on paper

When you wake up you will have forgotten the idea completely

And miss it like a front tooth

But at least you know how to recognize moments of brilliance

Because even at your worst you are fucking incredible

It comes honest.

The exchange between the poet and the Information Man illustrates the limitations of a viewpoint that presumes *access* to absolute truths—their existence in first place is another question altogether. The poet's insistence on uncovering The Answer blinds him to the contextual, imperfect nature of human knowledge. In contrast, the Information Man—whose job is not to prod at epistemology but to offer simple, straightforward answers—offers humble wisdom born of experience. He makes no claim to universal solutions, only personal insights that have served him, which others may freely take or leave. While the poet seeks an externally-validated certainty, the Information Man directs attention inward to cultivate self-awareness and recognize one's own potential. Rather than seeking knowledge that transcends everyday life, the Information Man finds meaning in quotidian details like songs and shoelaces. His message is to focus not on abstractions, but on skillfully navigating the concrete realities before us.

> So return to yourself even if you're already there
> Because no matter where you go
> Or how hard you try
> Or what you do
> The only person you're ever going to get to be
> And I know it
> Thank God
> Is you.

Introduction

This dissertation began as an inquiry into the concept of common sense. However, as with Augustine's famous rumination on the nature of time,[2] pressing for a clear definition quickly encounters substantial difficulties. A cursory examination of common sources (as already briefly noted) reveals unsatisfyingly vague characterizations of common sense as sound practical judgment regarding daily affairs. For instance, the standard online encyclopedia *Wikipedia* articulates it as "a basic ability to perceive, understand, and judge in a manner that is shared by nearly all people,"[3] while *Merriam-Webster* calls it "prudent judgment based on a simple perception of the situation."[4] Most problematic is the *Cambridge English Dictionar*y's notion of common sense as "the basic level of practical knowledge and judgment that we all need to help us live in a reasonable and safe way."[5]

While appearing sensible at first glance, such definitions collapse upon close inspection into nebulous concepts that only loosely hang together. Asking how precisely to exercise such judgment or establish its validity elicits only confusion—since each of them (following Descartes) presupposes that the reader already has the faculty without which readers could not even discern what the proposed 'definition' is about. What constitutes "sound" or "prudent"

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[2] "What, then, is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks me, I do not know. Yet I say with confidence that I know that if nothing passed away, there would be no past time; and if nothing were still coming, there would be no future time; and if there were nothing at all, there would be no present time." See Augustine, *Confessions*, edited by Christopher D. Hudson, J. Alan Sharrer. United States, Hendrickson Publishers, 2004, p. 244.

[3] *Wikipedia*. Online https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_sense

[4] *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, Online. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/common%20sense

[5] *Cambridge English Dictionary,* online. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/common-sense

judgment? How does one validate the "simplicity" of a perception? What defines the "basic level" of required knowledge? The very notion of a universally shared, commonsense capacity across humanity seems increasingly dubious amidst clashing cultural perspectives. Thus, prevalent attempts to delineate common sense prove frustratingly inadequate when translated into concrete practice. This dissertation therefore seeks functional clarity regarding common sense beyond vacant generalities. It interrogates what specific cognitive processes underlie sound judgment, and how individuals and communities can meaningfully cultivate this faculty.

At minimum, two definitional considerations must be emphasized at the outset, as they are integral to all subsequent discussions. First is the notion of "common" itself, connoting the communal and collective. Communal living is essential to human survival and progress and has been since long before civilization arose. As social primates, cooperation enables civilization and ensures our viability as a species. Tracing back to our earliest evolutionary stages, cooperative social behavior remains imperative despite civilizational complexities. Chief among these behaviors is possessing shared understandings of our external world, without which coordinated action would be impossible.

Second is the polysemous word "sense" itself, which extends across multiple layered meanings. Most immediately, it refers to spontaneous sensory data gathered by our faculties: these are sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell, but "sense" also denotes internal determinations of meaning and significant qualities. For instance, we speak of having a "sense of fairness" or "sense of humor." Frances Hutcheson notes a framing of the word in *An* Essay *on the* Nature *and Conduct of the Passions and Affections* that is as sufficient as any: "If we may call *every Determination of our Minds to receive Ideas independently of our Will, and to have Perceptions*

of Pleasure and Pain, a **Sense**, we shall find many other *Senses* beside those commonly explained. [6]

Thus "common sense," indicating collectively held knowledge, intrinsically integrates these dual meanings of communal experience and individual discernment. It relies upon agreed-upon interpretations developed through shared sensations, perceptions, and perspectives within a society. Yet it also depends upon personal faculties of comprehension and appraisal applied within that wider social context. This interdependence of communal and individual sense-making underpins the entire notion of "common sense" and consistently frustrates the attempt to formalize any "theory" of the term.

There are, however, workable starting points for meaningful inquiry, and I will begin with this one: There can be no doubt that making a common-sense judgment happens within the process of thinking. Too frequently, assertions of independent thought really signify unreflective acceptance of whatever ideas spontaneously occur to us. Equally dubious is dismissing disagreeable propositions outright as "absurd" under the guise of "critical thinking." In truth, thinking in good faith requires scrutiny of our own judgments, not just those of others. Unchecked confidence in our immediate capacity for infallible reasoning constitutes deeply flawed thinking, and to equate immediate, reflexive mental reaction with sound judgment and common sense demonstrates a lack of both. Thinking is not the mere occurrence of ideas, but a conscious, deliberate process that demands recognizing our inherent cognitive biases and proneness to error. Common sense and good judgment, therefore, do not stem from simply trusting whichever notions spring to mind. They require conscious reflection upon the reasoning

[6] Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections*. London, 1728, p 4.

behind an honest assessment of the grounds of the decision—good judgments are not abstract intellectual exercises, they involve making sense of the real, raw materials of experience.

Sound judgment and common sense are not matters of rote process; they are instead about asking the right questions. These questions can bring moral, empirical, and causal dimensions of a dilemma into focus. However, synthesizing this understanding into responsive action is equally essential, given the need to reach satisfactory determinations without endless calculation. Immanuel Kant outlined this deliberate yet adaptive thinking as "orienting oneself" through good judgment and critical reflection.[7] Good judgment thus involves analyzing salient facets of complex scenarios while recognizing we cannot subject each aspect to exhaustive scrutiny. Regardless of one's approach, the question of what it means to have common sense ultimately come back to the more vexing problem of how to be sure one can trust one's *own* judgment, which means extensive reflection on the process of judgment itself. This dissertation argues that while philosophy offers valuable tools for thinking, literature provides the richest material for cultivating common sense outside of direct experience. Fiction's unique capacity for eliciting empathetic judgments enables readers to rehearse the practice of evaluating material stakes and practical moves. In this case, the bulk of the analysis will center on two 19th-Century American novels set amidst the complex social dynamics of the antebellum frontier - Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade.*

Huckleberry Finn explores the tension between conforming to societal norms and forming one's own moral judgments. As his friendship with Jim deepens, Huck recognizes Jim's humanity and wonders why he has not seen it before—though of course, it would have been no accident

[7] Immanuel Kant, "What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?" *Religion and Rational Theology*. Edited and translated by Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 7–18.

that an enslaved man's full humanity would be deliberately obscured by institutional powers that benefit from his labor. This leads Huck to question the established authority and social order that condones the institution of slavery and ultimately reject it, choosing instead to "light out" for the territories.

Melville, meanwhile, explores the delicate balance between trust and skepticism necessary for a functioning society. Melville recognizes that humans are inherently interdependent social beings who rely on mutual trust and cooperation. Yet strangers are unpredictable, and intentions may be obscure and are frequently unknowable. This uncertainty leaves everyone vulnerable to manipulation or deceit. However, we also find ourselves confronted with moments and positions of vulnerability that require trust in another for safety or assurance. Thus, *The Confidence Man* suggests that confidence, not certainty, is the foundation of a livable society for vulnerable yet interdependent beings, but tacitly reminds us at length that deceivers are everywhere.

In both *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Confidence-Man,* the stakes are consistently high for the protagonists, though the nature of the risk differs substantially. Whereas Melville's characters are principally concerned with money, Huck and Jim are often running for their very lives. A misstep in judgment for the passengers aboard Melville's *Fidèle* may result in financial loss, even ruin. But for Huck and Jim, a single mistake could lead to enslavement or death at the hands of merciless slave catchers and bounty hunters. Their quest for freedom along the Mississippi River is literally life-or-death. Though the risks differ, both novels underscore how common sense and good judgment are critical faculties for navigating such high stakes. Far from mere intellectual exercises, these faculties assess situations and guide action accordingly. Twain and Melville argue such practical wisdom is what we must rely on when our decisions

carry real material consequences. Whether avoiding deceit or evading capture, sound judgment can mean the difference between success and catastrophe.

I. Between Common Sense and *Sensus Communis*

"The way called the way is not the way."

—LAOZI[8]

Everyone thinks they have common sense. Descartes, in employing the not-quite identical (but still very close counterpart) phrase "*bon sens,*" noted as much in the introduction to his *Discourse on the Method*, memorably quipping that "good sense is, of all things among men, the most equally distributed; for every one thinks himself so abundantly provided with it, that those even who are the most difficult to satisfy in everything else, do not usually desire a larger measure of this quality than they already possess."[9] It is rare that anyone hits the nail so squarely on the head as Descartes *appears* to do here, for while most of us would admit to knowing only the tiniest fraction of everything there is to know in the world, there are few who doubt that they have sufficient "good sense" to make sound judgments about the world. We do not feel the need to entertain lectures on the subject, let alone entire dissertations.

Descartes, perhaps, recognized this, skipping the subject altogether. Though he initiates his discussion of "method" with an appeal to *bon sens,* he offers no description at all of what he understands that to mean. His guiding premise in the *Discourse* is that he will follow a program of comprehensive doubt, rejecting as false every opinion that he does not know *with certainty* to

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[8] Tao, or "the Way":
Laozi's opening line to the *Tao Te Ching* has been translated in almost innumerable ways, but the basic formulation—"Tao ('the way') called Tao is not Tao"—is the same in all, e.g. "The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao." See Mitchell, *Tao Te Ching: A New English Version.* Harper Collins, 1998, p. 1.

[9] Descartes, Rene. *Discourse on the Method of rightly conducting one's reason and seeking the truth in the sciences. Selected Philosophical Writings,* translated by John Cottingham and Robert Stoothoff, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 20.

be true. Proceeding from such principles—most famously, his sure knowledge of his own existence ("*cogito egro sum*")—he carefully constructs his method with a logic as precise as geometry. Descartes' "method" (Greek *μέθοδος:* "way" or "path of transit") builds in from the very start the assumption that it is a search for exclusive and unerring truths, articulating the intention to accept as true only what is "presented to my mind so clearly and distinctly as to exclude all ground of doubt."[10]

This sets a very high bar for satisfaction that challenges every conventional means of knowledge and understanding and introduces a form of radical skepticism that is rarely, if ever, feasible to apply in most real-life situations (if it is not actively harmful). Our human faculties simply are not equipped with the necessary tool to validate our perception of reality to the degree demanded by Cartesian philosophy. Instead, our perceptions and interpretations of the world are often murky, complex, and nuanced, and it is rare that we are afforded the time to unpack and understand our situation before the steady march of time thrusts us along into the next one. It is not Descartes, but Kierkegaard, who gives it to us plainly on this point:

> "It is really true what philosophy tells us, that life must be understood backwards. But with this, one forgets the second proposition, that it must be lived forwards. A proposition which, the more it is subjected to careful thought, the more it ends up concluding precisely that life at any given moment cannot really ever be fully understood; exactly because there is no single moment where time stops completely in order for me to take position [to do this]: going backwards."[11]

[10] Ibid, p. 29.

[11] Søren Kierkegaard, *Journalen JJ*:167 (1843), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, Søren Kierkegaard Research Center, Copenhagen, 1997, vol. 18, p. 306.

Thus, there can be no doubt (to borrow Descartes' turn-of-phrase) that we struggle to definitively ascertain the nature of what we observe and subsequently, how to make sense of it. Neither can there be any doubt that this is precisely the demand that living in the world places upon us every day in order to survive its intricate complexities and innumerable dangers. In these instances, we rely heavily on what we have come to call our common sense.

Definitions of common sense are plentiful, as already above but they are hardly useful. They include such attempts as "sound, practical judgment concerning everyday matters, or a basic ability to perceive, understand, and judge in a manner that is shared by (i.e. "common to) nearly all people" (Wikipedia); "sound and prudent judgment based on a simple perception of the situation or facts" (Merriam-Webster), and "the basic level of practical knowledge and judgment that we all need to help us live in a reasonable and safe way" (Cambridge English Dictionary). But following through with any of these definitions leads to innumerable contradictions and, ultimately, dead ends. What makes a judgment sound or practical? Can established philosophical theories of judgment adequately take real-world contingencies into account? What theoretical framework can possibly be common to all people across all cultures? Is a "simple perception of the situation" enough to tell us everything we need to know to make a decision about it? These and countless other problems erupt the moment any of these "definitions," such as they are, are questioned, but who among us would admit to having no functional idea of how common sense works in practice? Thus, as things currently stand, any attempt to ask, "What does it mean to *use* your common sense?" is all but useless, given that not even the barest skeleton of a workable process is readily available—at least in terms that can be recognized as such or used to demonstrable effect.

As we proceed, we will grant special attention to two formulations of the term that have emerged over several centuries. The first (and older) of these is involves framing common sense as a kind of agreed-upon, community-contingent version of quasi-dogmatic commonplaces. This idea of common sense, which is often in common parlance referred to as "common knowledge," is called *sensus communis.* This kind of "knowledge," such as it is, are propositions describing proposed facts or ethical judgment that are commonly accepted within a community. *Sensus communis* has its formalized roots in ancient Greek and Roman public life; for the Athenians, these commonplace propositions (*endoxa*)[12] figured heavily into the discourse surrounding public affairs that were to be subject to vote, while the Romans adopted the practice of introducing such pithy, commonly accepted propositions into judicial proceedings, where they often carried legal weight.[13] The second, and more modern, framing of common sense is that coalesced between the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment. This mode of thinking privileged the role of individual reason in ascertaining truths, and its history within the Western intellectual canon is deeply intertwined with a narrative that involves rejecting the prevailing *sensus communis* at moments of critical importance. Chief among these are the studies of Copernicus and Galileo, which fundamentally rejected theologically prescribed astronomical principles in favor of their own careful work in astronomy and mathematics. By the late 18th Century, this mode of thought was distilled into what Kant was willing to style "motto" of the Enlightenment: *sapare aude*, commonly rendered in English, "dare to use your own reason."

[12] See John D. Shaeffer, "Commonplaces: *Sensus Communis*. In *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism*, edited by Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted, Blackwell, 2004, pp. 279-280.

[13] One well-known example that is still useful today is "*cui bono,*" which finds its roots in Cicero: "*L. Cassius ille, quem populus Romanus verissimum et sapientissimum iudicem putabat, identidem in causis quaerere solebat, cui bono fuisset"(*L. Cassius, whom the Roman people considered a most truthful and wise judge, used to ask frequently in such cases, *"to whose benefit is it?"* See Cicero, *Pro Roscio Amerino*, edited by St. George Stock, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1901, p. 64.

Each of these, we will see by the end of the dissertation, are integral to articulating a process of *using* one's common sense, but neither is sufficient on its own.

De Sensus Communis

While the contemporary notion of what we would call "common sense," coalesced in the 18th Century as a product of the Enlightenment, it was preceded, as noted, by the concept of the *sensus communis*. *Sensus communis* is a closely-related, but not identical, concept that is often translated to "common sense" but is better understood to mean a "communal sense" or the "sense of the community." Briefly stated, *sensus communis* refers to the collected commonplace values, assumptions, and presumed knowledge of any given community. Though "common sense" is its English cognate, it is strictly curtailed in the sense that *sensus communis* does not derive from any individual reflection but is only defined as those common propositions that everyone in a community is likely to believe (or at least have been taught to believe) are true.

Socrates and his forerunners dealt with these very issues, challenging the accepted commonplace knowledge of their time (ἔνδοξα) through a method that Socrates and Plato termed dialectic.[14] Several pre-Socratic philosophers challenged commonplace assumptions of their day, but through Plato's writings, Socrates came to embody the idea of challenging the status quo by way of dialectic as a method in and of itself. And while perhaps this practice certainly serves as an ancient forerunner to the Enlightenment motto used by Kant in his 1774 essay[15], *sapere aude*,

[14] The term "dialectic" (which stripped to its core just means "dialogue" or "conversation" between a commonplace and a challenge) was proposed as a 'scientific' procedure in the early Soctratic dialogues, the actual process of analysis of commonplaces eventually turned to dialectic itself, particularly in Platonic dialogues (where Socrates is not the central figure) such as *Parmenides, Phaedrus,* and *Sophist.* See *Collected Dialogues of Plato*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Princeton University Press, 1961.

[15] See Kant, "An answer to the question, What is Enlightenment?" *Practical Philosophy*, translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) pp. 11-22.

it also suffers from fundamental methodological assumptions that ultimately cannot be borne out to a meaningful conclusion or "truth." Plato himself, through the figure of Socrates, encountered this dead end the late dialogue *Parmenides*, in which the eponymous sage takes the young freethinker to task and challenges *his* core assumptions to the point that they can no longer hold up. In his critique of Socrates, Parmenides demonstrates something that small children everywhere already understand—that continually pressing on the foundation of *any* proposition (which is to say, interrogating its grounding) will reveal that virtually every proposition is ultimately built upon another that can itself be interrogated.[16]

In this sense, dialectic is not a methodology of critique; it is a teaching tool necessary to *start* genuine critique, which is an honest assessment of the validity and limitations of a given system. Dialectic—in Socrates' practice, anyway, directly asserted by Aristotle[17]—is the means by which the challenger directs someone's attention toward something his or her community

[16] C. S. Peirce is a notable exception in his recognizing this. In "On a New List of Categories," that what he terms a "First" is a conception that does not rely on another conception, which he connects to both the indispensable use of sensibility and the logic of 'precision,' or *prescinding*, by which we can determine what predicates can or cannot be thought independently when actual conditions of affirming a predicate are specified. In the case of colors, for example, we can think of red without thinking of *blue*—but we cannot think of red without also thinking of *color*, because red *is* a color.) In a separate essay, "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man," Peirce pointedly refutes Cartesian systems of European Idealism, which *require* the assumption of intellectual intuition, by pointing out that any attempt to demonstrate that there can be any valid notion of knowledge by introspection alone ends in contradiction or paradox. See *The Essential Peirce, Vol 1,(1867-1893)* edited by Nathan Hauser and Christian Kloesel. Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1992, pp. 1-10; 11-27.

[17] See Aristotle, *Topics*: "In the first place then let us define the nature of a dialectical proposition and dialectical problem. For not every proposition and every problem can be put down as dialectical; for no man of sense would put into a proposition that which is no one's opinion, nor into a problem that which is manifest to everyone. Now a dialectical proposition is a question which accords with the opinion held by everyone or by the majority or by the wise—either all of the wise or the majority or the most famous of them—and which is not paradoxical; for one would accept the opinion of the wise, if it is not opposed to the views of the majority. . ."

On this ground, dialectic is explicitly identified with *sensus communis,* but the mild cautions here are made much more stringent in Aristotle's extended arguments in *Posterior Analytics, Topics,* and *Sophistical Refutations,* in showing that the mere acceptance of a proposition does not in any way confirm its truth or its consistency. Indeed, Socrates' practice in most of the dialogues before *Phaedo* and *Republic*, usually proceed in the analysis of what is generally believed by the majority to show that it is either self-contradictory or paradoxical. To state the matter more plainly, dialectic arguments start from commonplaces, but never lead by such means to determinate arguments. Edited by G. P. Gould, trans E. S. Forster. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976, pp. 10-13; 295-303.

already presumes to know (the *sensus communis*) and then, often at great personal risk, points out the myriad of contradictions, shortcomings, and possible points of failure that make that worldview ultimately untenable. But neither is persisting in never-ending Socratic dialogues with everyone a tenable lifestyle, it being the one that ultimately led to Socrates being sentenced to death.

By the early 18th Century, the term *sensus communis* had become popular in European thought, particularly in the writings of Vico, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson. Using Latin terminology in *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (1708), Gimabattista Vico claimed that common sense "arises from perceptions based on verisimilitude."[18] Vico saw "verisimilitudes" as observable patterns in the world, in human behavior, and so on, but not patterns that adhere with absolute strictness to formal rules. They arise from probabilities and tendencies, not laws, and they are normative according to community standards, history, culture, and so on. These patterns, which could be distilled in to generalized propositions, provided the raw materials of what Vico is comfortable calling "common sense." Vico used the Roman sententiae as the historical basis for his educational system, believing as he did that "common sense" consisted in memorizing propositions derived from the received wisdom of the ancients. The history of the commonsense aphorism aligns with Vico's work in *De nostri temporis* and extends back to the Roman orators he revived—quick, pithy statements designed to convey generalizable facts about the world, often in the form of colloquial metaphors and regional idioms. These proverbs are often passed off under the guise common sense, but they cannot be absolute rules for living, their

[18] See Schaeffer, "Vico's Rhetorical Model of the Mind: '*Sensus Communis'* in the '*De Nostri Temporis Studiorum Ratione*.'" *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1981, pp. 152–67.

authors, and the times which produced them, being long relegated to the dimmest corners of history.

However, the contemporary notion of common sense as a universal baseline capacity for reasoning proceeded from its roots in the Scientific Revolution toward the consequential revolution in philosophy that followed—and the philosophy *did* follow the science.[19] Developments in astronomy, in particular, had demonstrated beyond little doubt that colloquial wisdom (or even recognized dogma) was *not* sufficient for correctly observing the universe. In 1543, Copernicus published *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, though he had mostly completed the work by 1532 and educated circles throughout Europe knew about his hypothesis despite his reluctance to publish in his lifetime for fear of criticism or even punishment. Galileo, who championed Copernicus' work within courts of real power and who nevertheless drew the ire of certain authorities with his stubborn insistence on correctness of the latter's heliocentric model, laid the problem bare in his apocryphal "recantation" in 1633: "*E pur si muove"* ("And yet, it moves."). Thus, the Scientific Revolution was, in many important respects, primarily about *critiquing and often rejecting* the *sensus communis* where it conflicted with the evidence that was discovered by the methods of experimentation, observation, and repetition, which slowly but surely demonstrated themselves to be more verifiable methodologies than divine revelation or customary commonplaces.

Sensus communis, however, being uncritical, unreflective, often simply dogmatic, is the collective form of what is taught. It refers to a shared set of common assumptions, principles, values, beliefs, and assumptions among a particular community. *Sensus communis* is a particular

[19] Note some critical exceptions—in theology, alchemy, spiritualist movements (e.g. Swedenborgianism, Rosicrucianism)—all of which were considerable and problematic sources well into the late 18th and through the 19th centuries. See Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography*. Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 170-171; 338-339.

kind of social consensus rooted within the historical reasonings and cultural values as they have developed within that culture's intellectual and cultural tradition. It is not infallible by any stretch of the imagination and its propositions are often demonstrated to be false; nevertheless, it is indispensably *useful* wherever it appears, for a shared understanding of the baseline operating assumptions in a given society is necessary for it exist in the first place. Challenging the *sensus communis*, while inarguably a rite of passage for students and often necessary for the healthy functioning of society, is an inherently complex social process to which contingencies are an intrinsic part of its development.

"A Star of Disaster"

> *"In the Course of this Winter appeared a Phenomenon in Philadelphia a Star of Disaster (Disastrous Meteor), I mean Thomas Paine. He came from England, and got into such company as would converse with him, and ran about picking up what Information he could, concerning our Affairs, and finding the great Question was concerning Independence, he gleaned from those he saw the common place Arguments concerning Independence: such as the Necessity of Independence, at some time or other, the peculiar fitness at this time: the Justice of it: the Provocation to it: the necessity of it: our Ability to maintain it &c. &c. Dr. Rush put him upon Writing on the Subject, furnished him with the Arguments which had been urged in Congress an hundred times, and gave him his title of common Sense. In the latter part of Winter, or early in the Spring he came out, with his Pamphlet. The*

> *Arguments in favour of Independence I liked very well: but one third of the Book was filled with Arguments from the old Testiment, to prove the Unlawfulness of Monarchy, and another Third, in planning a form of Government, for the seperate States in One Assembly, and for the United States, in a Congress. His Arguments from the old Testiment, were ridiculous, but whether they proceeded from honest Ignorance, or foolish Supersti[ti]on on one hand, or from will-full Sophistry and knavish Hypocricy on the other I know not."*
>
> —John Adams, The Autobiography[20]

An American student would likely commence any study of the "subject matter" of common sense with the text that is very nearly synonymous with the topic, which is Thomas Paine's explosively influential pamphlet *Common Sense,*[21] Consequent history (and some retroactive editorializing) cemented the term "common sense" within the textual foundations of the American experiment, and likewise gives the impression that "common sense" thinking is integral to the nation's political discourse and development. But in fact, Paine's discourse on "common sense" offers nothing resembling a definition of the term nor any nuance in the "construction," such as it is, of his arguments, which are grounded on hyperbole, anecdote, pseudo-populism, and deliberate misreading of textual sources, almost all of which are scriptural.

20 Adams' glib shorthand "&c. &c." indicates these are all common arguments, and his awareness that listing just a few examples will inspire the reader's train of thought down all the commonplace arguments associated with the colonial *sensus communis* of 1776. See *The Adams Papers, Diary and Autobiography of John Adams, vol. 3, Diary, 1782–1804; Autobiography, Part One to October 1776*, edited by L. H. Butterfield., Harvard University Press, 1961, pp. 330–335.

21 Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*. *The Life and Major Writings of Thomas Paine*, edited by Philip Foner. Citadel Press, 1948; reprint 1993, pp. 3-98.

Nevertheless, at first glance (but not first reading), *Common Sense* does trigger an aesthetic, normative reaction that by 1776 had become common in the colonies: ***why should our affairs be subject to the will of a king across the sea?***

This is the catalytic question at the center of Paine's pamphlet, which articulated "common sense" as a distinctly American intellectual value, not least of all because it was so directly tied to the idea of urgent political action. Not only did Paine contend that it was necessary to act on what was obvious to everyone (in this case, the unavoidable necessity of independence, but he introduced the terminology as critical vocabulary in the discourse surrounding the rise of liberal democracy. Democracy and republican government themselves depend upon the idea that citizens can collectively reason their way to consensus in a sufficiently efficient manner, and that depends upon the assumption that most, if not all, able-minded adults within a community can agree upon common understandings of various concepts, their definitions, and their implications across contexts. Thomas Paine, more than any other American writer, granted his audience permission to have faith in their own capacity for individual reason—their common sense.

In at least one regard, Thomas Paine anticipated the core insight of Kant's "*What is Enlightenment?* (1784) by eight years, as American colonists had become quite comfortable with their own ability to trust their own reason long before the intellectual tradition gave them explicit reasons and arguments for doing so. Outside of intensely religious populations, where deviation from proscribed belief was directly punishable, the capacity to "think for themselves," had already come to be viewed as a *right* rather than the point of entry to candid discussion with others. With *Common Sense,* Paine is writing directly to American readers—already sure that they know what is best—and giving them explicit permission to trust that feeling. More important, however, was the social, if not *viral* effects of *Common Sense*—while it has been

estimated that a substantial percentage of American colonists were familiar with Paine's work by July 1776, it must be stressed that an unknowable—but undoubtedly substantial—percentage of that figure consisted of those who had only heard the pamphlet discussed in taverns and public houses. Even if many colonists did not support independence (and many of them did not), they could be forgiven for getting the idea that everyone around them did. In this respect, the importance of Paine's pamphlet lies in capturing and exploiting a possible cultural consensus where the issue of courage was more inclined to battle than to contemplation.

Indeed, it is important to recognize that in January 1776, most colonial subjects did *not* favor war with Britain, for all the reasons that a small regional settlement might hesitate to go to war against the world's foremost imperial superpower. And while the quantitative extent to which its influence is debated, historians of the American Revolution tend to agree that Paine's pamphlet recognizably galvanized the independence movement, persuading as it did at least a sufficient number of colonists to take a chance on fighting for independence that the Declaration could materialize six months later. The speed of the turnaround is remarkable, and coincides precisely with the initial circulation of *Common Sense*, which, in insisting that everyone already knew "deep down" that the colonies could and should be independent (and that the moment to take action had arrived), may well have convinced hesitant loyalists that their friends and neighbors really would rally to the cause, and that maybe in those numbers they would stand a chance. Paine's great rhetorical accomplishment with *Common Sense*, was to instill *confidence* in the colonists' will to secede from Britain, as well as in their ability to win, which they would desperately need.[22]

[22] Here, the *sensus communis* of the late 18th century colonists was but a few generations removed from their own ancestors who had been in varying degrees involved with the British revolution that not only rebelled against King Charles I, but executed him in 1649. It is, in this respect, part of the background against which Paine's practical effectiveness in the assertions in *Common Sense* should be evaluated. Adams' stark reaction to Paine

However, if one looks to Paine' pamphlet with the aim of understanding what using one's common sense means from a practical or philosophical perspective, they will find that his account comes up surprisingly short. In fact, Paine gives no account of common sense as a faculty of mind at all, either as one rooted in communal understanding of values or in the capacity for individual reason, though he certainly implies that it must lean toward the latter. Within Thomas Paine's framework, if common sense is any kind of mental faculty, it is merely that which allows us to perceive the plain truth of a proposition that is self-evident. It is worth noting at this point that "*Common Sense*" was not Paine's intended title for the pamphlet at all—that honor goes to the comparatively dull *"Plain Truth,*" Which Paine eventually decided against at the firm suggestion of his friend Benjamin rush, himself a distinguished figure in the American Enlightenment. This improvement upon the title, while probably the correct editorial move, nevertheless may have had the unintended consequence of obscuring the suggestions about truth and reasoning that Paine intended to make. For a while the term "common sense" appears to denote a kind of reasoning, if not intuition, the phrasing "plain truth" would simply refer to a proposition's truth value. For Paine, this would be a truth value that is so self-evidently apparent that even the least sophisticated thinker could grasp the necessity of it being true. In fact, Thomas Paine's tacit emphasis on the principle of self-evidence permeates the essay and the discourse that followed it so thoroughly and effectively that Thomas Jefferson relied on it as the principal grounding of the entire Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Men [sic][23] are created equal.

reflects in part the realization of the great gulf between enthusiasm for the coming battle and it's great economic and institutional challenges for the future.

[23] This glib editorializing suggesting that Jefferson made a mistake by limiting his language solely to biological males may not fly in the format of a dissertation, but it is intended to quickly demonstrate the shortcomings of 'self-evident' propositions. See Sellars, *Empiricism and Philosophy of Mind,* Harvard University Press, 1997.

Crucially, Paine does not appeal to the western philosophical tradition to make his argument to his audience. In fact, the authority to which Paine most continually appeals is not scientific or even particularly intellectual—it is scriptural. As an adult, Paine was not a religious man, but as a child he had been brought up as such, and he knew the Bible well. Throughout the pamphlet, Paine tends to provide scriptural support for his argument where philosophical support would be tedious or ineffective, knowing full well that the Bible was the most commonly read text on the North American continent. Early in the text he puts forward an excoriation of monarchy, drawn from a reading of 1 Samuel, that frames his entire argument from that point onward. He writes:

> "Near three thousand years passed away from the Mosaic account of the creation before the Jews, under a national delusion requested a king. Till then their form of government except in extraordinary cases as where the almighty interposed was a kind of Republic administered by a judge and the elders of the tribe. Kings they had none and it was held sinful to acknowledge any being under that title but the Lord of hosts." [24]

Paine's choice of this particular scripture is clever, leading as it does to one of the few times in the Bible that God reflects on His own errors in judgment, as God instructs Samuel to anoint the impressive Saul as king of Israel. However only seven chapters later in 1 Samuel 15, God has had time to reflect upon Saul's inadequacies for this position, saying to Samuel: "it repenteth me that I have set up Saul to be king for he is turned back from following me and hath not performed my commandments"[25] Rhetorically, Paine's move in this passage is a master stroke, but as a matter of argument it is made in utter bad faith. Paine, in his typically audacious manner, refers

[24] *CS* 10-13.
[25] See Appendix B.

to pre-monarchic Israel as “a kind of Republic" wherein the law was given by God and administered by the Judges. But one would be justified in wondering how Paine might have found anything even vaguely republican about the book of judges which immediately precedes first Samuel and according to the Deuteronomistic history covers the period between Joshua's conquest of Canaan and the establishment of the monarchy. The government such as it was in this period, was hardly democratic, and instead consisted of a smattering of tribal quasi-governments each headed more often than not by a warrior Chieftain whose power was derived from wealth status and obeisance. While certainly there was no king neither was there any central authority whatsoever, and in its place was a tenuous system of competing strong men that while not fundamentally monarchial was certainly authoritarian and given to contentious violence. If this were a “kind of republic” as Paine had described it, it was undoubtedly the wrong kind.

If Paine’s disingenuousness in constructing his scriptural arguments seems overly apparent today, it should also be noted that it did not go unnoticed in his lifetime either. By his own account John Adams once told Paine as much during a meeting, writing in his autobiography:

> I told him further, that his Reasoning from the Old Testament was ridiculous and I could hardly think him sincere. At this he laughed, and said he had taken his Ideas in part from Milton: and then expressed a Contempt of the Old Testament and indeed of the Bible at large, which surprised me. He saw that I did not relish this, and soon check’d himself, with these Words “However I have some thoughts of publishing my Thoughts on Religion, but I believe it will be best to postpone it, to the latter part of Life.[26]

[26] Adams, *Autobiography.*.

The key to understanding the failure of *Common Sense* as a philosophical treatise lies in understanding that it never intended to succeed as philosophical argument in the first place. Its dozens of flourishes and devices appeal to a sense of persuasion, appealing to deep, usually unquestioned convictions that stir powerful feelings in its audience. Paine's pamphlet contains no trace of Cartesian doubt, nor Kantian principled schematism, nor Baconian method. In fact, it hardly contains any argument whatsoever—it is merely an *assertion*, and in many respects, an ill-considered one. But even if Paine did miss the mark on articulating what "common sense" means (though that was not his primary purpose), his work was more deliberately a rhetorical exercise in rabble-rousing than an exposition on sensible thinking.

Regardless of its philosophical failings, *Common Sense* accomplished exactly what its author set out to do, which was articulate revolutionary colonists' sense that the Crown had little right to influence their affairs. Compared to that of other founders, Paine's writing is punchy, persuasive, and appeals to primary instincts that its author knew will hit its audience at a gut level, appealing as it does the kind of self-righteous certainty among those outside of government and policymaking that it is their own thoughts and opinions on complex geopolitical affairs—which are neither studied nor informed—that are most valid. Though it would not be until 1784 that Kant would codify *sapere aude* (loosely, "dare to use your own reason") as the index of the *Enlightenment*, Thomas Paine—like a great many Americans—were comfortably ahead of him, at least in the sense of believing they did have that courage.[27] In secular political settings, Americans have traditionally demonstrated extraordinary confidence in their capacity for "think for themselves"—a confidence that is matched only by their reluctance to listen to others. With

[27] Kant was an early supporter of the American Revolution, as he was of the later French Revolution, though had serious reservations about subsequent events, as, for example the 'Terror' in Paris. See Kuehn, 2001, 155; 340. Kant's political views were also of importance in advocating for constitutional republics as the preferred political form for modern nations. See his 1795 pamphlet, "To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch."

Common Sense, Paine is writing directly to the American readers who are already sure that they know what is best and giving them explicit permission to trust that feeling. It provides space that invites the reader to take faith that their own judgments are reliable and trustworthy—and while there is some semblance of truth to that, it is not nearly so simple as Paine invites us to believe.

The pamphlet is so easy to agree with because it is a philosophically blank slate, so to speak. It does not force the reader to follow, consider, and then make a decision on a complex argument. Instead, it provides space that invites the reader to take faith that their own judgments are reliable and trustworthy—and while there is some semblance of truth to that, it is not nearly so simple as Paine invites us to believe. It is a triumph of *sensus communis* parading as pure reason which is, in effect, what Adams saw in this "Star of disaster." The counter-balancing irony is that it did set in train more focused and intellectually demanding enterprises—including, for example, the Jefferson's Declaration, the Federalist Papers, and the working out of a constitutional framework that in many respects sets the American case in sometimes sharp contrast other 18th and 19th century revolutions. It is, for example, of some interest that from Kant's enthusiasm for the French Revolution his later reflection on the American example was a factor in his determination to bring his entire critical project to a conclusion insistent upon the importance of freedom—and imaginative reflection—in both the philosophical and political domains.

Thomas Reid and Common Sense

Though not a philosopher, Thomas Paine he was in the milieu of extensive philosophical pursuit of an account of 'common sense' that did not expect rhetorical energy to make a case for it. The central conceit of an argument like Paine's—that it does not require one to have

advanced training or intelligence to see plain truths when immediately confronted with them—was a more widely disseminated view than his work alone could confirm. This position received a more proper philosophical treatment in the works of late-era Scottish Enlightenment figures (Reid, Beattie, Ferguson, et. al.), themselves working roughly contemporaneously alongside Paine. These Scots, rebelling against Berkeley's "immaterialism," Locke's formalized empiricism based on perception of primary and secondary qualities,[28] and Hume's skepticism, sought to reassert confidence in the idea that the mind's perceptions of external realities were reliable indicators of what is really in the world.

Chief among this argument's proponents was Thomas Reid, whose ideas formed the basis of what would become known as Scottish common-sense realism. Reid's primary critique was aimed at the notion of 'ideas,' which he largely dismissed as fallacious. Historically, the term "idea" traces its lineage to the Greek εἶδος and to Plato's transcendental forms. However, these ideas proved so problematic for Plato in *Parmenides* and other later dialogues that the eternal existence of the transcendent IDEA became increasingly problematic, as self-contradictory or inherently paradoxical. This led to Aristotle's later critique that such issues present in the late dialogues — which make them especially difficult to comprehend — culminated in the realization that Platonic Idealism, or the metaphysical assertion of transcendental Ideas, was inherently flawed and systematically prone to paradox and self-contradiction, leading Aristotle to supply what one will not find in Plato: a philosophical *organon*, or comprehensive treatment of method. The failure of many scholars to acknowledge this problematic aspect of Platonic thought may be attributed to the difficulty of the late dialogues—and the concomitant sparseness

[28] See Kuehn, pp. 188-204.

of their reception and dissemination, with even marginally reliable editions of both Plato and Aristotle were not available until the 15th and 16th centuries.[29] Their complexities, technical nature, and deeply problematic philosophical issues in turn serve to obscures the realization that even Plato himself found his theory of forms unsatisfactory.

For Reid, the notion that right-minded thinking consisted of such radical doubt about the reality of one's own world was absurd; it made no sense to presume that we can successfully live in a world that our sense perceptions tell us nothing about. But rather than seek to analyze causal, epistemological threads that run from world through perception to knowledge, Reid dispenses with that messy work, and by way of shrewd and vigorous critiques of Locke, Berkeley and Hume, made out an effective case against the British empiricists whom Reid categorized as philosophers of 'ideas,' which called into question the conception of intuition upon which Reid relied. Referring to a set of "intuitive judgments" that he calls either "*first principles, principles of common sense, common notions,* [or] *self-evident truths*,"[30] Reid insists that there is no *process* in common sense judgments; they simply follow immediately from the apprehension of what is given in ordinary perception. Countering Descartes as completely as possible, Reid asserts "that those things do really exist which we distinctly perceive by our senses, and are what we perceive them to be,"[31] arguing that these intuitive judgments are "no sooner understood than they are believed. The judgment follows the apprehension of them necessarily, and both are equally the work of nature, and the result of our original powers."[32] The capacity to make common sense judgments, in Reid's estimation is "necessary to all men for their being and preservation." Reid

[29] The first comprehensive Greek text of Plato's dialogues, by Aldus Manutius, was published in Venice in 1513. See also Jill Kraye, "The printing history of Aristotle in the fifteenth century: a bibliographical approach to Renaissance philosophy", *Renaissance Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 189-211.

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[30] Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Edinburgh University Press, 2002, p. 452.

[31] Ibid 476.

[32] Ibid 452.

estimates the stakes correctly: the capacity for common sense judgment is a matter of livelihood, even survival itself. He seems content, however, to take the continued existence of the human species as evidence that all people must necessarily have it, writing that, it being necessary to our survival, it is "therefore… unconditionally given to all men by the Author of Nature,"[33] as if the history of our time on this planet has been one in which everyone was uniformly blessed with everything they needed to survive.

There are many problems with this, including, for example, heliocentric astronomy, quantum theory,[34] or any other scientific principle that, while known to be demonstrably and reliably true (which is to say, consistently repeatable) from an experimental perspective, runs counter to natural inclination concerning the way of the things—Galileo's apocryphal quip, "*E pur si muove*" being the textbook retort to the argument from this perspective. By now it is clear on scientific grounds that the representations of the world through the apprehension of our senses are *not* accurate depictions of reality as it is. We do have to make inferences about the things we experience in the world; they are not presented plainly to our minds as they really are and any argument for such a possibility is now widely recognized as inordinately complex, and perhaps impossible.[35] From this perspective, Reid's account of common sense is not sufficient; at every turn in contemporary physics and biology, the idea that we can plainly trust the world is as it presents itself to our senses has been demonstrated to be unreliable and to compensate for this shortcoming, scientists and laboratory technicians have redoubled their efforts in refining the

[33] Ibid 412.

[34] Note especially that these accomplishments of 'theory' at every juncture incorporate inventions of instruments and the development of experimental and laboratory practices that make the theories intelligible and confirmable.

[35] Not the least of the problems is mounting *proofs* of impossibility—such as Gödel's proofs pertaining to consistency and completeness. See Ernest Nagel, James Roy Newman, and Douglas Hofstadter, eds., *Gödel's Proof*, revised edition, New York University Press, 2008.

specialized tools needed to accurately and reliably measure precisely those things that we cannot directly observe, from telescopes to electron scanning microscopes and everything in between. All of our knowledge of the physiological processes that undergird our senses and nervous systems tells us that we likely have no ability to intuit in the external world directly whatsoever, despite the fact that there can be no doubt that we inhabit it.[36]

The Professor at Königsberg

The most important philosophical work on common sense occurred in the time between the publication of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* in 1776 and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* in 1790. In 1781, the same year the American Revolution effectively ended with the Siege of Yorktown,[37] Immanuel Kant published *Critique of Pure Reason*, which came to be widely regarded as his central and most important text by most of his followers and commentators. At first look this is understandable—in its pages, Kant put forward many of the core tenets of his critical philosophy including his theory of judgment, which, at that point, was largely in keeping with the classical definition of a judgment (i.e., the subsumption of a

[39] In the mid-20th Century, Wilfrid Sellars articulated (and ultimately rejected) the idea of the "myth of the given" in his 1956 work "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind." The "myth of the given" is a critique of a foundationalist approach to knowledge that assumes that there are non-inferential, immediate data or facts given to us by perception, and that these form the foundation of all our knowledge. Sellars rejects this notion, hence referring to it as the "myth of the given". According to him, all our perceptual experiences are concept-laden or theory-laden, meaning that our perceptual experiences are not bare, immediate givens, but are always interpreted through a framework of concepts and theories that we have already learned. Kant, Coleridge, and Peirce all recognized this at one point or another as well, though Sellars' critique is distinctly recognizable as the final nail in its coffin. Kant, however, is at the head of a long sequence of arguments showing that we simply do not have 'intellectual intuition,' or the immediate capacity to cognize abstract entities without a specific means and process. See Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Volume I: The Foundations of Science and the Concepts of Psychology and Psychoanalysis*, edited by Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven. University of Minnesota Press, 1956, pp. 253-329. First presented under the title "The Myth of the Given: Three Lectures on Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," University of London Special Lectures on Philosophy for 1955-156, delivered March 1, 8, and 15, 1956.

[37] While the Treaty of Paris was not signed, and the United States not recognized as an independent nation by Great Britain, until 1783, the hostilities effectively ended with Gen. Cornwallis' surrender in 1781.

particular object of experience under a general concept).[38] In 1787, however, Kant published a revised second edition of *CPR*, having recognized fundamental errors in the earlier version of the text concerning the function of judgment within the overall schema of thinking. Here Kant explicitly shifts his focus from the **determining** to the **reflecting judgment**; his principle change in developing the second edition of CPR was to provide and comprehensive architectonic view of the "original unity of the apperception," (in other words, how a moment of conscious experience is *structured*) which shifts the focus from objective deter focus to our ability to append the qualifier "***I think***" (or, "*I judge it to be the case*") to every assertion, judgment, and qualification. Viewing the problem from this angle, Kant no longer needs a transcendental imagination that functions as a faculty for synthesizing a priori concepts (i.e. the categories) from the predicaments of logic. Instead, he now presents architectonically arranged categories that make empirical judgments of sense possible in the first place and without which we could not conceptualize our experience at all.

This realization led to the radical expansion of Kant's critical project from the planned single volume, *Critique of Pure Reason*, to the three-volume set we know today culminating in *Critique of the Power of Judgment.*[39] An unplanned treatise that only "emerged" out of Kant's

[38] Kant's acceptance of this general principle had long been evident. His removal of the need to reference a "transcendental power of the imagination" underscores the intricate nature of judgment in its absence. Specifically, the role of reflective judgment in creating new concepts, as well as the "original unity of the apperception," emphasizes our freedom in judgment as a fundamental aspect of our nature. See Pinkard and Guyer, on the issue of why the early German Idealists (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel) were convinced that Kant had introduced an unnecessary "dualism"—and set about "correcting" what they saw as Kant's error. The crucial point is that any attentive reading of the 2nd edition of *CPR* together with *CPJ* makes it clear that there is no error here. Instead, Kant formulated a conception of judgment that, while very much against the commonplaces of philosophical education in Kant's time, holds up well in the 21st Century. See Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 1-44; and Karl Ameriks, Editor. (*The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism,* 2000)—especially Guyer's essay, "Absolute Idealism and the Rejection of Kantian Dualism", 37-56.

[39] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Edited by Paul Guyer. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

efforts to recognize and repair small but fundamental errors in *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* recognized that traditional mode of making judgments about the world—i.e., that it was enough to simply identify a general, if not universal, category (or form) that any object in the world—was insufficient for explaining day-to-day decision-making.

For all the systematic opacity of Kant's language, his project in the third *Critique* has everything to do with practical, everyday judgments, which do not happen according to precise, mathematical, snap-to-grid puzzle-solving. Living in the world is not like doing geometry; there is not a precise and infinitely interchangeable formula behind every object-concept one encounters. Oftentimes (indeed, maybe even most of the time), we experience contingencies for which we do *not* have immediately applicable concepts; even more often we find that the context of a given situation does not allow for precise application of formal conceptions we think they ought to follow, and there is little we can do to force them to. What can we do in these instances? If we encounter an object or event in the world that we do not understand how to make sense of, how are we to proceed? Certainly, at some point our ancestors would have had to formulate each and every concept handed down to us; to deny this is to take Descartes' position that God simply "put" recognizable ideas in our minds that coincided with reality.[40]

Upon realizing the error of this reduction, Kant did two things: first, in 1787, he revised *Critique of Pure Reason* to discard the kind of idealism that the classical theory of judgment depended on—namely, the idea that universal concepts (or "forms" [εἶδος] in Socratic/Platonic language that even Plato critiqued in later dialogues.) He also completely rewrote the "Deduction of the Categories" in the first edition, replacing an invocation of a faculty of "Transcendental

[40] "For there can be no doubt that God possesses the power of producing all the objects I am able distinctly to conceive, and I never considered anything impossible to him, unless when I experienced a contradiction in the attempt to conceive it aright" (See Descartes, *Discourse*, VI.)

Imagination," by a longer and more empirically attuned account of the "original unity of the Apperception". In this enterprise, the most immediately salient issue is that attention to human 'apperception' as already, 'originally' unified, informing our ability to qualify an impulse for premature certainty, with the expression, 'I think,' which could be used as the preface to any assertion arising from experience. Even within the confines of a meticulously regimented life restricted almost entirely to Königsberg,[41] Kant would ultimately have to admit that making sense of real-world occurrences often requires much more than a ready-made toolkit of *a priori* (or "transcendental") concepts—and the addition of 'I think,' implicitly incorporates the possibility that one might be wrong. Real-world occurrences almost always involve innumerable contingencies that no theoretical construct can handle neatly and entirely; there are exceptions to every rule. Like Borges' map,[42] any theory—which is to say, any attempt to make sense of reality by manipulating a set of concepts according to a logically-prescribed manner—that could account for *all* possible contingencies would be a set of concepts so vast that each concept would have a one-to-one correlation with a particular object or event, thus making it useless as a guide to anything.

Thus, the second thing Kant did in recognition of this truth was to rework his theory of judgment placing a distinctive primacy on what he now calls the *reflecting* judgment, a kind of concept *formation* (as opposed to *discovery*) that considers an object or occurrence vis-à-vis its discernable purpose and attempts to consider as many relevant contextual contingencies as

[41] Though famously untraveled, Kant's reputation preceded him, with his works finding engagement in Berlin, Halle, Jena, and more generally through the emerging network of German-Prussian-Austrian universities, themselves connected to universities throughout Europe. In fact, it is no small part due to this widespread engagement with his work that Kant came to recognize the missteps that warranted the revisions of the 3rd *Critique*.

[42] See Appendix C.

possible.[43] The key word here, however, is *relevant*—it is not reasonable to ask human beings to approach every day-to-day judgment as if they were a supercomputer running statistical models. Making sense of a thing—which is to say, considering its purposiveness, thereby directly pointing to normative, evaluative considerations at the very root of thinking—requires considering it within its context, which is to consider where it has come from as well as where it could be going. In other words, judgments require narrative frameworks that focus our attention and concentration on urgent demands and do not overlook intentionality and purposiveness. This is in contrast to the classical definition of judgment, outlined above, now called *determining* judgment. Reflective judgment is at the heart of common sense.

Unpacking the role of judgment, determining or reflective, requires a firm grasp upon its relation to other faculties of thinking, including reason and understading, the latter of which is defined in Kant's schema as "The faculty of the cognition of the general (of rules)."[44] Unpacking what is meant by "common sense" requires engagement with its historical companion term—*sensus communis*—which most suitably translates to "sense of the community." *Sensus communis* refers to the kinds of immediate, non-reflective assessments we make in accordance with what we have been taught by our community and social milieu is right—in other words, *sensus communis* is often called "common knowledge." Kant describes *sensus communis* as follows:

[43] See especially the Introduction to the second edition of *CPJ*, where Kant sets the general condition that necessitates *reflecting judgment:* that in the absence of a universal or general concept, a judgment that provides it must "include the ground of the possibility of the object" by considering the purposiveness of its form (68). While this lays the ground for the concluding section of *CPJ*, "The Critique of Teleological Judgment," its general importance is as an *a priori* principle for the constitution of new concepts and judgments. That is, reflecting judgments serve as the practical ground of determining judgments. In context, the most directly accessible instances of reflecting judgment are *aesthetic.*

[44] *CPR* 278-286; *CPJ* 217-220.

> **"The common human understanding**, which, as merely healthy (not yet cultivated) understanding, is regarded as the least that can be expected from anyone who lays claim to the name of a human being, thus has the unfortunate honor of being endowed with the name of common sense (*sensus communis*), and indeed in such a way that what is understood by the word **common** (not merely in our language, which here really contains an ambiguity, but in many others as well) comes to the same as the *vulgar*, which is encountered everywhere, to possess which is certainly not an advantage or an honor."[45]

In unpacking this we must pay particular attention to the following terminology:

1. "...**merely healthy (not yet cultivated)..."**: expressing an understanding that is not fundamentally defunct, but also not yet trained, strengthened, brought forth, grown, etc - pick your verb, the idea is the understanding is not yet grown to its full potential
2. **"...the unfortunate honor…common sense**": Kant is aware of the shortcomings of this particular phrase; I don't see any other way to read this. Kant clearly does not mean "common sense" as the phrase is commonly used subsequently. He means common **understanding**, (see [**a]** below)[46]
3. " **…common…*vulgar*…encountered everywhere**": this equivalence is important - he says explicitly, that the word "common" contains "ambiguity" not just in "our language" (German) but "in many others as well), but he is willing to boil it down, so to speak, to

[45] *CPJ* 173.

[46] See also see also §20: "…a subjective principle which determines what pleases or displeases or displeases only through feelings and not through concepts, yet with a universal validity. Such a principle, however, could only be regarded as a common sense, which is essentially different from the common understanding that is sometimes also called common sense (*sensus communis*), since the latter judges not by feeling but always by concepts, although commonly only in the form of obscurely represented principles" (*CPJ* 122).

the word "vulgar," meaning "found everywhere" (*not* "rude" or "coarse" as it is often interpreted).

The "common understanding" as a faculty of mind that allows for "cognition of the general," as Kant is a set of norms, principles, values, rules, etc. shared by a community and generally presumed by all of its members to be mostly known to almost everyone else. In the latter sense, 'understanding' is grounded on *what you have been taught.* Clearly, *sensus communis* is not identical with common sense as we would likely conceive of it. *Sensus communis* as common sense is largely (maybe even entirely) passive knowledge - it is received from and refined by the cultural milieu in which one lives. Further, it is *not* something given by a supersensible power or arrived at through disciplined argument about evidence. It is something that is learned, and sorting out its sources and motives is daunting. Real common sense cannot possibly consist of passively accepting anything purported to be true by virtue of established community standards. *Sapere aude*, even if not all there is to it, is still an indispensable formative element of it.

Common Sense is Sound Judgment

Thus far, we have sketched out two broad, commonplace conceptions of "common sense," neither of which are stable. The first is the perspective that that common sense is identical to communal knowledge—which we have identified with the more specific name, *sensus communis*—of which are shared societal norms, assumptions, and values. These, to invoke Jefferson's language in the Declaration, are the "truths" that "we hold… to be self-evident." These principles are seldom the product of critical thought or experimental validation; they are usually propagated through socialization and absorbed unquestioningly. Their veracity varies:

they may come in the form of age-old practical knowledge or invaluable insights preserved in proverbs, but as often as non they take the form of irrational prejudices, entrenched misapprehensions, erroneous assumptions, religious dogma, xenophobia, racism, and more. History provides numerous examples of a widely accepted *sensus communis* subsequently revealed as fundamentally flawed, often recognized as such by contemporaries. However, challenging the *sensus communis* typically provokes resistance, sometimes with severe repercussions. Thus, it is plain that *sensus communis* is *not* identical with common sense, even though it may not always be commonsensical to antagonize it.

The second conceptualization—and this is the prevalent post-Enlightenment Western view—that common sense is grounded in personal judgment rather than collective wisdom. This view rejects the *sensus communis* for a variety of reasons, including obstinacy, skepticism, or contrarian tendencies, subscribing instead to the ideological conviction of 'independent thought.' As we have observed, there are many in figures in the history of science—Thales, Galileo, Copernicus, Darwin, and countless others—who categorically could not have accomplished what they did if not for a willful hesitancy to assent to the *sensus communis.* The pitfall of this perspective, however, is the presumption that one's *own* judgment is, by virtue of it being "independent," is therefore preferable to anything we might call collective wisdom or *sensus communis*, when this may often be an overestimation of one's critical faculties. The Enlightenment's unceasing emphasis on individual rationalism, though undeniably beneficial in in the sweep of history, ironically cultivated a culture of overconfidence in personal judgment that opens our critical faculties up to dangerous mistakes.

Descartes predicates his methodology on this very mistake. Assured of his own *'bon sens*,' Descartes believed he had 'discovered' his Method through deliberate introspection and pure

rationalism. He asserts that it was not his creation, but rather an objective system he uncovered through intellectual exploration. This forms the foundation of his argument for an objective scientific method based on his personal cognitive revelations. As a result, Descartes assumes that all individuals can follow his discourse and subsequently arrive at conclusions in harmony with his own, neglecting to question who should be the arbiter of his own *bon sens*, if he himself fails to even *think* about questioning it. Descartes' fallacy hinges on the concept of infallible introspection: if we consider ourselves in possession of such a faculty, the onus is on us to prove it.[47]

The Tripartite System of Thinking

As a process, "thinking" is not the instantiation of an idea or concept in one's mind—it is a complex mental event which we recognize by the specific result of comprehension—the *attainment* of insight and the recognition of *meaning*. It is not an automatic production of 'knowledge,' and not a reductive representation of an object which we can evaluate simple as either 'true' or 'false.' What contributes to this result are elements that are *significant*, including images, other concepts and propositions, past experience, and learning from instruction, which enables the synthesis of significant parts into an intelligible insight, which we experience as a whole *experience*. "Thinking," in this sense, is constitutive, as a gerund in progressive form that implies a thing that is in process: to repeat, it is *not* a static state. In brief, thinking is a process of discovery and decision that begins with an **apprehension** and **focus** upon of a state of affairs, and proceeds by considering what follows from that state of the affairs in a cumulative consideration of potentially applicable variables that are *significant* to a specific judgment

[47] See Peirce, "Question Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man," *Essential Peirce,* vol. 1, pp. 11-27.

pertaining to that state of affairs. While ***experience*** is decisive, there is no credible formula to guarantee that the variables actually considered are all that might be relevant. In this respect, Reid's severe critique of his trio of philosophers of "ideas," Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, is pertinent precisely because none of them could solve the fundamental problem of contingencies—except, as Reid saw it, by falling into what he regarded as a worse error, of general skepticism or absurd denials of empirical reality. But his 'solution,' of asserting the sufficiency of our powers of sense perception is no better, as it is, in fact, a reductive view that simply disallows further inquiry into problems of consistency or explanatory adequacy. Peirce's well-known aphorism, "**Do not block the way of inquiry"**[48] applies forcefully here. But Peirce arrived at this principle, in large part, from his thorough understanding of Kant's critiques.

When "thinking" is recognized as a fundamentally *dynamic* process instead of a steady state, our inner sense of *time* as a constant progression is both necessary and universal. In Kant's mature view, our sense of time and space are not concepts so much as *a priori* sensations, without which we could not sustain any coherent view of *experience.* It is not the mere occurrence of an idea or concept in one's mind; these are mental experiences encompassing images, concepts, propositions, and so forth. It is an ongoing cycle of contemplation and decision that initiates with an **understanding** of a situation, continues by **reasoning** through the various contingencies and consequences of that situation, and concludes with a judgment about the situation.

In the third *Critique*, Kant styles this the "**tripartite systemic representation of the faculty of thinking**." Kant identifies three elements in this system: understanding, reason, and judgment. Preceding all of these, however, are the faculties of sensibility, which are spontaneous and

[48] See Peirce, *Reasoning and the Logic of Things: The Cambridge Conferences Lectures of 1898*. Edited by Kenneth Laine Ketner, Harvard University Press, 1992*,* 178**.**

provide the material upon which understanding operates. Sensibility is the origin of representations and feelings, without which the concept of "experience" would be impossible. The *a priori* forms of sensibility are space (outer sense) and time (inner sense). Unlike sensibility, however, thinking is *not* spontaneous. The mind can wander aimlessly, but so too can it be consciously directed—this is what is meant by thinking. Thinking works ***on*** the materials provided by the faculties of sensibility, feeling, and emotion (which are all *aesthetic* considerations) as follows by way of three “powers" that together constitute the overall faculty of thinking. This "tripartite systemic representation of the faculty of thinking"[49] consists of the following powers:

- **Understanding**: "The faculty of the cognition of the general (of rules)."
- **Reason:** "The faculty for the determination of the particular through the general (for the derivation from principles)."
- **Judgment**: "The faculty for the subsumption of the particular under the general."

Thinking involves all three of these powers, consisting primarily in the active contemplation of how concepts meaningfully relate to one another. It begins with a particular **understanding** of how things generally are, progresses to **reasoning** about a situation and what it could mean (i.e., considering what caused the situation and what follows from it), and culminates in making a **judgment** about things.

[49] *CPJ*, First Introduction, pp. 11-22. See Editor’s Introduction, xvi-xvii. Guyer’s extensive treatment of the close connection between imagination and understanding is particularly helpful, and offers useful guidance in the extension of Kant’s view of the power of judgment in work after *CPR*.

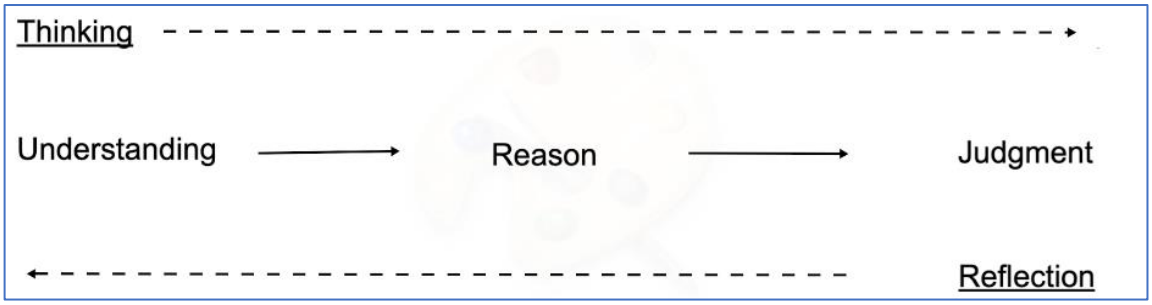


Figure 2. Thinking as Process

Understanding refers to our capacity to comprehend how things function, how they are assembled, how they affect and influence each other, and so forth. It should be perceived in its dual role as both a verb in progressive tense (the mental action of understanding) and a noun (one's understanding of how things work). This encompasses a set of judgments one has already accepted as true. In other words, understanding refers to how one perceives the situation and the rules that dictate why it is the way it is.

Reason, as Kant treated it, is "the faculty for the determination of the particular through the general (from the derivation from principles)."[50] However, this definition is not entirely satisfactory as it implies that all reasoning consists of the application of predetermined rules and contains nothing for the evaluation of the rules themselves. More accurately, within the overall schema, reasoning pertains to what follows. It considers patterns, possible casualties, various contingencies, and so on which we assess according to their relevance to intent. In this respect, the notion that one could arrive at 'value-free' judgments misses an essential recognition of judgment as *normative.*

The power of **judgment** is "the faculty for the subsumption of the particular under the general," but Kant's salient clarification of this power (contextualized below) was his clear

[50] See *CPR* 387-388, under "Reason in General". Kant's full treatment of 'Reason' requires greater detail.

recognition that it has two manifestations, *reflecting,* and *determining.* The power of judgment is the faculty that is willing to make the call, so to speak, about how best to interpret the state of affairs considered. These affairs are observed by the mind by way of the *senses* and through specific sense experiences. The mind organizes these experiences into concepts, which are understood in relation to one another and according to their purposive construction, and the moment of experiencing an array of sensory input data becomes a unified, experiential whole (unity of apperception). Up to this point, everything is spontaneous—you do not need to command your eyes to receive photons when they are open, nor instruct your ears to pick up vibrations in the air. But the spontaneity ends there. Sensible intuitions may be "given" to us, but the concepts we use to describe them and arrange them into thoughts are not.

Organizing our sensible and aesthetic experiences into conscious order involves making innumerable judgments almost instantaneously—I must have concepts for trees and skies and clouds and grass just to make sense of looking at a field, all of which must be acquired. Once learned, however, these concepts can be immediately (and **seemingly** intuitively) associated with the objects they correspond to. In other words, in familiar contexts, we are able to quickly determine what our experiences are. In Kant's notion of the "determining judgment" we do arrive at strong but relative assurance that the judgment *fits* the situation. However, while we recognize most objects around us as neatly fitting into classes we are already familiar with, we are sometimes (and not infrequently) confronted with objects or events in the world for which we do ***not*** immediately have a concept.

To settle this problem is central to Kant's distinction of the "reflecting" judgment. This judgment assigns a concept to—or forms a concept for—a phenomenon for which we do not already possess a pre-established concept. This form of judgment is fundamental as it facilitates

the formation, retention, and refinement of concepts. This realization, in fact, prompted Kant to restructure his theory of judgment, a revision so significant that it added to the urgency of going beyond the *Critique of Pure Reason* to *Practical Reason* (in the second critique), and *Aesthetic* and *Teleological* Reason in the third critique. When we bear this in mind, treating the third critique as restrictively about 'art' misses Kant's major point: Both the *aesthetic* and the *teleological* are jointly and simultaneously about reflecting judgment as **a *power pertaining directly to purposiveness.***

Reflective judgment unfolds in two pivotal stages. The first involves revisiting our existing knowledge reservoir to comprehend this novel entity. Reflection, in this context, is the process of evaluating and ultimately judging one's own thoughts, knowledge, and experiences. Kant posits that to reflect is to consider, not just what an object *IS,* but what it *DOES*—and to *WHAT END?* The second stage, accordingly, when tasked with making a reflective judgment, involves discerning the nature of the object by contemplating its potential purpose or 'purposiveness'. The principle of **purposiveness,** or the consideration of an object's appearance to us vis-à-vis what that appearance suggests the object could possibly be *for*, is the *a priori* principle according to which we form concepts by way of the power of reflective judgment. The process of conceptualizing an object also necessarily involves considering the conditions under which such an object could be created or constituted. In other words, forming a concept of a sensible object is contingent upon the concept encapsulating the foundation of the object's reality, which is its purpose or end.[51] The next chapter considers the kinds of purposiveness that inform the exercise of sound judgment and common sense.

[51] See CPJ, 68 (Cambridge edition); 5;180-181 (Academy edition).

II. *Sentio Ergo Sum*:

The Aesthetic Turn in the Order of Reasoning

You gentlemen who think you have a mission
To purge us of the seven deadly sins
Should first sort out the basic food position
Then start your preaching, that's where it begins

You lot who preach restraint and watch your waist as well
Should learn, for once, the way the world is run
However much you twist or whatever lies that you tell
Food is the first thing morals follow on.

So first, make sure that those who are now starving
Get proper helpings when we all start carving!

—BRECHT & WEILL[52]

It has been the general practice of philosophers to assume that the starting point in constructing genuine knowledge of the world is a strong theory of **metaphysics.** The word **metaphysics** itself, however, presents its own set of problems. The Byzantine Greek

[52] Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht, "What Keeps Mankind Alive?" *The Threepenny Opera*, translated by John Willett and Ralph Manheim, Bloomsbury, 2015, pp. 54-55. See Appendix D.

μεταφυσικά, itself derived from μετὰ τὰ φυσικά (*metà tà phusiká*), or "after the natural," traces its origin to a 1st Century compilation of notes by Aristotle intended to succeed *Physics*; this compilation is the treatise we now call *Metaphysics*. The implication of the editorial design is that, while the metaphysics consists of "first principles," they can only be studied *after* a relatively full understanding of the natural world as it is. As such, the term "metaphysics" would concern itself with the highest possible levels of **generalization** (the attempt being to generalize to the point of having **universal rules**). In the Western philosophical canon, the history of this idea is inseparable from Plato's theory of "forms," which, although later all but abandoned by the philosopher and further rebuked by his intellectual descendant, Aristotle, has nevertheless retained staying power through the centuries by way of Aquinas' gross misreading of the very incomplete editions of ancient Greek texts to which he had access. But the reliability of texts at Aquinas' disposal may not have ultimately made much difference in this regard. By the time of Aquinas' writing in the 13th Century, European intellectual culture was so inculcated with Catholic dogmatism that it was all but a foregone conclusion that any philosophy developed within its traditions would be built on metaphysical first principles. For Aquinas, there never was any possibility that his articulation of metaphysical causes and structures would not come back to God; and Descartes, devout Catholic that he was, likely never stood a chance of directing his philosophy of mind toward anything but the Almighty, assuming God to be the source of concepts that could be apprehended by the mind and failing to recognize that the concepts we carry in our minds can only be formed through a series of reflective judgments.

This misinterpretation traces itself back to Plato and his ideal forms, which represented his attempt map the mathematical harmony of Pythagoras' work onto the universe writ large. As has been argued elsewhere, the West's ongoing fixation on this aspect of Plato's thought stems from

a poor understanding of the chronology of Plato's work and a general lack of awareness of his own substantial self-critique in the later dialogues and in Aristotle.[53] The primacy of Plato among the scholastics, however—owed in no small part to the ease of mapping his universal oneness on to a developing Christian theology—is derived more consciously from this aspect of Greek philosophical thought than any other.[54]

Thus the traditional assumption in the order of reasoning, following early Plato and his subsequent interpreters, is that a strong *metaphysics* (which, in this context, had come to mean "theory of reality" in actual practice) must be in place for practical reasoning to occur. From a solid metaphysics, (which Aristotle's earliest editors designated 'first philosophy') one could successfully construct a logic in keeping with that reality, which could structure a successful ethical thought, which could then ensure the good: in more spartan language, this is the view in which the metaphysical is considered the grounding of the logical, the logical the grounding of the ethical, and the ethical the grounding of the aesthetic; ultimately the thought is that the metaphysical (the generalized rule structure) is the *grounding of reasoning.* It is a mistake, however, to assume that logical considerations form the foundation—which is to say, the thing that all the rest is **upon**—of thought. Others, notably including Peirce, have argued that this is not the case. To believe that logical considerations must precede or be satisfied before aesthetic considerations is to fundamentally misunderstand the role of what Peirce designated 'normative

[53] Much of Aristotle's work had been preserved for the scholastics by way of Arabic philosophers, particularly Ibn Rushd (1126–198), known in the West as Averroes, or "the Commentator," whose extensive work on Aristotle provided the corpus of his works for the European scholastics. Ironically, Ibn Rushd's actual commentaries on Aristotle, which were voluminous, indicate a clear understanding of Plato's later critique (and Aristotle's ultimate abandonment) of the forms. The "Commentator's" views, however, being those of a heathen, were mostly ignored by medieval Christendom, and the error in judgment went unnoticed for centuries more.

[54] I say "philosophical" thought because other lasting Greek intellects—such as Archimedes, Pythagoras, and certain Pre-Socratic thinkers—are less pertinent to developments in Church dogma than Plato via Aquinas, but they would be immensely useful in scientific thought.

sciences'—Logic, Ethics, and Aesthetics[55]—in what people are doing when they think through any problem.

There is a tacit assumption that one can hold oneself to the standard of "thinking logically" so as to avoid "clouding" one's judgment, as it is commonly said, with such matters as one's personal feelings when making a judgment. And while it is the case that rash decision-making in a moment of passionate intensity likely to elicit poor judgment, it is also the case that, even at our coolest and mort level-headed, our decisions are still weighed against our understanding of how it will affect the desired ends. To believe that logical considerations always precede, or must be satisfied before, aesthetic ones, is a fundamental misapprehension of what transpires when individuals tackle problems cognitively. The belief, though tacit, is that adhering strictly to the standards of "logical thinking" can somehow insulate our judgments from the perceived banality and bias of feelings, even going so far as to reject altogether the idea that feelings or emotions are pertinent at all.

Yet nothing could be more pertinent in human affairs. Placing logic at the foundation of cognitive activity neglects to acknowledge that our inherent desire for satisfaction—an inherent drive derived from the Latin 'satis' meaning "enough" or "sufficient", and 'facio' meaning "to make" or "construct"—is the motivating force behind all human affairs. Therefore, the bedrock of our conscious reality as humans is not founded on a logical metaphysical framework, but rather on an aesthetic one. The term 'aesthetic' itself stems from the Ancient Greek αἰσθητικός (*aisthētikós*), "of sense perception") from αἰσθάνομαι (*aisthánomai*), **"I feel"**. And these perceptions of feeling are not trivial—they range from base animalistic impulses, like the feeling of hunger or the fear of pain, to utterly cool-headed assessments made in the consideration of

[55] Peirce, *Collected Papers* Volume 1, edited by Charles Hartshorn and Paul Weiss. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931, 1.191.

public good, like whether or not to adjust the federal funds rate or how to zone newly-cleared. In all instances, the material decisions that follow from any scenario are fundamentally shaped by somebody's needs or wants.

Contrary to the assumption that once we possess a metaphysical framework, we can "logically" interpret the reality around us, this is not how thinking truly proceeds from our experiences to our judgments about them. Instead, the crux of our conscious reality is fundamentally shaped by our aesthetic experiences—which is to say, our sense of the world around us, our inner being, and our assessment of their relative goodness or badness. In this sense, such considerations are *normative.* not on everything we do, think, or strive for is evaluated against how they suit our needs, desires, and sense of what it right. In other words, it is not an exaggeration to say that not only do our feelings and emotions *matter* to logical intellectual discourse, they fundamentally inform the entire enterprise and provide the living rubric of success.

Here we must turn to Charles Sanders Peirce who, following Kant, developed this core reorientation of intellectual priorities as he pursued his comprehensive study on the science of logic. Peirce contends[56] in ethics, which fundamentally depend on aesthetics, underpins logic. It is this perception of what we feel that directs our thought processes and, ultimately, our actions. In this context, the conception of what is deemed "good" emerges from the feelings of pleasure and satisfaction associated with fulfilling a need or desire—an aesthetic judgment. Ethics then involves the contemplation of what is generally considered "good", which is predicated on our personal conception of a satisfying experience. Logic, in turn, represents the mathematical reasoning necessary to use our intellectual energies to either establish what we think is good, or

[56] See Peirce and Joseph Randall ed., *Logic, Considered as Semeiotic: An Overview of Charles Peirce's Philosophical Logic, Constructed from Manuscript L75*, Final Version - MS L75.358.

to work toward manifesting realities we deem good. Finally, metaphysics is conceived as the zenith because it should align with everything that precedes it; any viable metaphysics should accord with what lived reality truly is.

But the inherent and inevitable issue lies in the fact that lived experience is filled with contingencies—random, unpredictable, and uncontrolled events or factors—contradicting the assertion that metaphysics, with its generalized approach, can account for every possible situation. Therefore, grounding our thinking on a strong *a priori* metaphysics—a metaphysics assumed to be applicable before any empirical assessment—often becomes unworkable in many real-world scenarios.

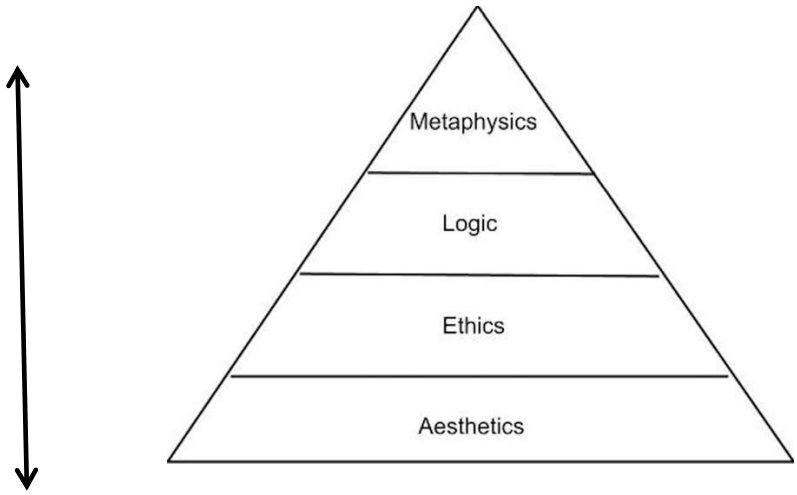
Building on Peirce's ideas about the normative sciences—ethics, aesthetics, and logic—he posited that logic is the discipline of how we **ought to think** if we are to have any possibility of assessing the truth or falsehood of any proposition (CP 5.121, 1903). Ethics, according to Peirce (CP 5.130, 1903), is the study of the ends of action we deliberately choose to adopt. Aesthetics is the exploration of what makes an ideal admirable (CP 5.36, 1902).

From this perspective, it becomes evident that aesthetics constitutes the foundational layer of the edifice of thought. It is the aesthetic judgment that decides what experiences we consider valuable or satisfying. Ethics then proceeds from aesthetics, setting the standards for actions that are most likely to realize the admirable ideals established by aesthetics. Only then does logic come into play, providing us with the tools to best achieve these ethically delineated ends—our desire being to think best in accordance with what is true, which we judge to be a virtuous desire. In this sense, the essence of our decision-making **begins and ends with the consideration of the aesthetic.**

This understanding of the normative sciences reflects that logic is not a self-contained system independent of other forms of cognition. It is contingent upon the contexts provided by an ethics that considers the aesthetic concerns of the situation at hand and what follows from them. It is guided by the standards set forth by these disciplines. The notion that logic can operate independently of these other dimensions of thought is, in light of this perspective, untenable. Logic, instead of standing alone, is deeply intertwined with and dependent on our values and our perceptions of the world.

Low contingency (Laws)

THEORY: Zero Contingencies (purely ideal, does not appear to exist in real life)



EXPERIENCE: High contingency (most of human life)

Figure 3: Dependencies of Normative Disciplines

While this discussion may seem to downplay the importance of logic in human cognition, this is not the case. Logic is undoubtedly integral to any sincere appraisal of the world; it forms the structure of rational thought and action. We understand logic as a critical examination of the

patterns that reality seems to most closely adhere to. It may not be infallible, but it continually strives for an approximation of the truth as close as possible to the actual state of things. It is crucial to dispel the notion that rational agents engage in logical reasoning for its own sake. Logic does not exist in a vacuum; its purpose is not self-contained. Instead, logical action serves to further certain ends and goals. Peirce writes in MS 75:

"Ethics depends upon esthetics; we cannot know how we are deliberately prepared to aim to behave until we know what we deliberately admire... Logic in its turn essentially depends upon ethics (as I showed, in a general and vaguer way in 1869, |162| *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, II, 207-208), but its methods of reasoning must be mathematical…"[57] And elsewhere: "Having analyzed the nature of the precise problems of the three, and given some considerations generally overlooked, I show that ethics depends essentially upon esthetics and logic upon ethics. The latter dependence I had shown less fully in 1869. (*Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. II, pp. 297 et seq.) But the methods of reasoning by which the truths of logic are established must be mathematical, such reasoning alone being evident independently of any logical doctrine."[58]

Now, what all this has to do with "common sense"—and, likewise, with the faculty of judgment—is the endlessly difficult problem of finding common satisfaction. The idea that all people in any community can be satisfied in all desires is absurd; it is plain that when a person's needs and wants are consistently met without hassle, they will soon find new and more exotic things to want. Conversely, it is not deniable that all human beings do share a few common needs: clean water, food, and reliable shelter being the most basic for our survival. Other needs such as healthy personal relationships, social acceptance, and self-actualization, are not

[57] Ibid, Draft E - MS L75.161-162.
[58] Ibid, Final Draft, MS L75.359-361.

immediately applicable to day-to-day survival and, likewise, their level of true “necessity” is debatable. Thus the challenge, particularly when contemplating a universally shared "common sense" among *homo sapiens,* lies in considering what kinds of human satisfaction we consider to be truly necessary, indispensable, and owed to one another in order for our species and civilization to carry on.

***

In the following chapters, it is critical to retain certain guiding principles. One of the most pivotal among these is the understanding that common sense is not a concept but *a practice*. This straightforward shift in perspective carries significant implications. Treating common sense as a practice foregrounds the active, reflective, and context-dependent nature of our encounters with reality. As we navigate the world, common sense serves as a dynamic toolkit for appraisal and response, rather than a fixed body of knowledge or unchanging set of precepts.

To engage in common sense is to exercise judgment regarding desirable outcomes and to take the necessary steps towards realizing them. This process demands a foundational knowledge of cause-and-effect mechanisms, along with the wherewithal to know when to abstain from action due to insufficient understanding. Unraveling what constitutes a desirable outcome involves recognizing the potential emotional implications for all parties concerned. It requires answering a series of questions: How will my decision affect the happiness or dissatisfaction of each individual involved? Does their emotional state matter to me? Who do I specifically wish to benefit from my decision? What are the repercussions of the decision? These are fundamentally aesthetic and reflective judgments. We can only hypothesize others' responses by examining our emotional reactions to similar scenarios.

While logical reasoning is an essential component of common sense, it should not be misconstrued as the exclusive consideration. Logic, devoid of personal motivations such as 'want' or 'desire', serves as a sterile tool for problem-solving and decision-making. It may guide our thought processes, planning, and execution, but the ultimate goal invariably gravitates towards satisfaction — a sentiment, not an axiom or a natural law. Thus, establishing genuine common-sense values is an exploratory undertaking that requires delving into our thoughts, reactions, and aesthetic feelings. This process, it is proposed, can be most effectively navigated through a collective engagement with a common text.

A text, in its manifold capacity, serves as a platform for shared imaginative speculation. It invites us to entertain hypothetical scenarios and possibilities, prompting questions such as "What if [a] were to happen under conditions [x, y, and z]?" prompting a collective exercise that not only facilitates the understanding of others' perspectives but also cultivates empathy and critical thought, the bedrock of common sense. Significantly, a text offers an indisputable foundation for such shared reflections. This isn't in the sense of interpretation — literature is, after all, a fertile ground for multiple, often diverging readings. However, when referring to the words themselves, their order, and the basic elements they are composed of, there can be no argument. For instance, we can endlessly debate the symbolism and implications of Shakespeare's line, "Juliet is the sun," but we cannot dispute that the characters J-U-L-I-E-T I-S T-H-E S-U-N appear precisely in that order. Nor can we deny that these letters constitute the words they do without betraying a fundamental lack of understanding of the language.

In this light, a text transcends its status as a passive collection of words and becomes a shared, objective reality — a starting point for fruitful discussions and the exchange of ideas. It provides a tangible, common ground that fosters the development of mutual understanding and

consensus-building, key facets of the practice of common sense. Consequently, exploring the mental and emotional landscapes elicited by a common text can facilitate the establishment of shared common-sense values in a community or society.

III. "All Right, Then, I'll Go to Hell!":

Common Sense v. *Sensus Communis* in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

That which is hateful to you, do not do to another.

That is the whole of the Law (Torah); the rest is explanation. Go and learn.

—HILLEL[59]

If any character in American literature demonstrates what we ordinarily take to be common sense, it would easily be Mark Twain's most beloved and iconic creation—the feral, backwoods adolescent Huckleberry Finn. Billed as "Tom Sawyer's comrade," Huck Finn was first introduced to readers in chapter six of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as "the juvenile pariah of the village… son of the town drunkard… cordially hated and dreaded by all the mothers of the town, because he was idle, and lawless, and vulgar and bad—and because all their children admired him so…"[60] Huck Finn likes to smoke and cuss; he dislikes fine clothing and Bible study and prefers his food all cooked together so that "things get mixed up, and the juice kind of swaps around, and the things go better."[61] He is a lover of nature and distrusts all things

[59] *Talmud* (b) Shabbat 31a. See Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, *Koren-Steinsmaltz Talmud*, 1965. See Appendix E.

[60] Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, edited by Beverly Lyon Clark, W.W. Norton & Co., p. 40.

[61] Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* edited by Victor Fischer, Harriet Elinor Smith, et. al. University of California Press, 2010.

"sivilized"—religion, education, money, and above all, grown-ups, particularly adult white men, who demonstrate to Huck time and time again that there are absolutely no limits on what a free man will do for money.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has rankled the sensibilities of "respectable" readers since its debut in 1885, not because of the sheer volume of cruel and depraved acts that Huck bears witness to, but because the target of its satire is precisely the polite society so offended by it. Published by a shell company operated by Twain's nephew,[62] *Huck Finn* has been enraging audiences from the very beginning, starting with the Concord Public Library famously banning the book right from the outset for its "coarse language" and "irreligious" themes. Considered crude, vulgar, and offensive in its time, *Huck Finn* was a wild success, as Twain himself predicted it would be. "They have expelled Huck from their library as 'trash and suitable only for the slums,'" he wrote the same nephew that year: "That will sell 25,000 copies for us sure."63 Of course, Twain's *magnum opus* is still considered crude, vulgar, and offensive in our time, but from an entirely upended perspective. Easily identifiable as a work of antiracist64 satire by the standards of its own time (an inflammatory achievement in its own right), many readers today find themselves deeply uncomfortable with, if not pained by, its liberal deployment of racist language and demeaning stereotypes. As such, teaching *Huckleberry Finn* to any group of

[62] See Appendix F.

[63] Ibid.

[64] [NOTE] Before engaging the accusations against Twain for his own racism—it is to the point to recognize that he was a racist in many ways. But there are other ways—ways that he was willing to stake his reputation and legacy on—that this work is deliberately and expansively antiracist – it is not a mere antislavery novel (that would be pointless anyway, slavery had been 20 years abolished by the time of publication), it was equally critical of the post-reconstruction, emerging Jim Crow South, which Twain would have seen as an immediate and pressing problem.

students in the present day is difficult—and possibly injudicious, depending on the approach taken—to the extent that many faculty and administrators find it better to just avoid it altogether.

And this is deeply regrettable, for despite the novel's problematic complexities, *Huckleberry Finn*'s general exclusion from the classroom is a huge loss to American literary education, particularly vis-à-vis the study of common sense. For, satire that it is, *Huckleberry Finn*'s entire project is to hold up the *sensus communis* of the American South [65] for sustained examination while mapping it against the day-to-day experiences of those who inhabited it, not only in 1885 but in the centuries that followed. He does so through the eyes of a dispossessed adolescent who, through the central conceit of being "accepted" into Tom Sawyer's family—his proxy "acceptance" into proper society—is able to engage in powerful criticisms of race and class simply by viewing this world from the perspective of someone as low in the social order as he is.

Another problem in dealing with *Huck Finn* is that is *messy*. It is far from a neatly categorizable narrative that can easily fit within any of its contemporaneous worldviews. This can come as a surprise to a first-time reader who, expecting a straightforward, traditionally structured children's narrative, instead finds a meandering exploration of the human condition, class, race, and society, moral responsibility, and more while veering off into both comic vignettes and tragic episodes from the perspective of a child who, while wise beyond his years, is still just a boy. To the adolescent reader, Twain's story is a knowing wink from the one adult in the room who wants to subtly signal to them that they are *not* wrong to wonder if something is

[65] The opening of the novel is set in Missouri, which can open debates regarding its classification as part of the Southern United States. While Missouri's position was and still is liminal, certain historical contexts should be acknowledged. Missouri was a slave state, occupied an important geographical at the nexus of the Mississippi River and the frontier, and was home to many Confederate sympathizers. But Missouri did not secede from the Union. Combine this with the fact that Jim and Huck's journey is predominantly downriver, the collective sentiment portrayed in the novel can be confidently characterized as quintessentially Southern.

dreadfully wrong with grown-up affairs; to the adult reader (which, within the context of Twain's contemporaneous audiences, mostly meant white American—specifically Southern—men), it is a prompt to ask oneself, in a very concrete and practical sense, how—or even *if*—one can live a life that is not fundamentally amoral while simultaneously participating in, at any level, a society whose entire economy, culture, and infrastructure is built on a foundation of brutality and violent exploitation.

Like its subject matter, *Huck Finn* is full of contradictions and is *not* intended to be taken as a clean-cut "theoretical" text with a consistent, discernable interpretation. It not only violates the Aristotelian ideals of the unified whole[66] at every turn, but it actively instructs the reader to think outside of them. At the time of writing *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain was an experienced literary figure at the height of his powers who, having already found success and fame by the time of writing his magnum opus, was unusually well-versed in the art of fielding audience expectations, reactions, and prejudices. As such, he knew perfectly well that he could not trust readers to see what he doing in such a complex satire parading as children's literature. Further, Twain knew, some readers simply have neither ear nor eye for irony. Therefore, Twain clearly communicates to his reader in the "NOTICE" that precedes the narrative by invoking a tactic that, by 1885, was very well known to the average white man in the south—he threatens them:

[66] The principles discussed pertain predominantly to tragedy, as evidenced by the extant sections of Aristotle's "Poetics." Cf. Aristotle, *XXIII Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932). It remains speculative, however, if his hypothesized treatise on comedy — which has unfortunately been lost to history — might have posited that the essence of comedy is rooted in chaos, drawing parallels to the anarchic comedy of the Marx Brothers or Bugs Bunny.

NOTICE

"Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; **persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot**."

BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR

PER G. G., CHIEF OF ORDNANCE[67]

Twain's draconian "NOTICE" is more than a mere joke to set the mood, although it does that reasonably well. Instead, by rather firmly directing the reader *not* to rely on commonplace tropes for interpreting the novel, Twain forces us to ask questions about what the purpose of the work could be in their stead. Does he mean that there is no motive, moral, or plot to be found within its pages, or is this simply another ironic wink? Does he mean that it is forbidden to seek those things on pain of punishment? In the world of Twain's upbringing, both interpretations might be equally valid: it is very difficult to articulate any workable moral theory in a social context that allows for slavery, and questioning authority or hierarchy in the antebellum South was indeed punishable by corporeal methods, regardless of race.[68] In any case, it is clear from this notice that Twain is deliberately signaling to the reader that what follows is *not* a conventional narrative and attempts to interpret it as such are not just wrong-headed, but dangerous.

So what *is* Twain's purpose in composing Huck Finn the way that he does?

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[67] It has been remarked that the martial tone of the book's "NOTICE" would have been recognizable to white southerners as reminiscent of the many such notices forbidding uncondoned activity on pain of punishment. These were usually "signed" by a military officer and were common throughout the South during Reconstruction, when northern troops still occupied much of the former Confederacy (see Victor Doyno, "Presentations of Violence in 'Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," *Mark Twain Annual*, no. 2, 2004, p. 76).

[68] The network of laws and punishments under this heading could comprise, in effect, a practical outlining of the *sensus communis* of the American antebellum South, as enforced by a pervasive system of punishments intendent to maintain the institutions of slavery.

Twain's first purpose and most immediate purpose is to construct a satire of the highest order. Satire is among the most delicate of genres, juggling as it does the subtle distinctions between parody, homage, and insult without ever crossing into either.

But this is not just any satire—it is distinctly American satire that directly confronts what was both the nation's cardinal sin and the very rock on which its outsized and overleveraged prosperity was built: the brutal practice of chattel slavery.

While a "sequel" of sorts to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,* a third-person narrative of a fairly conventional adventure story, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is not only narrated from the first-person perspective of the first novel's sidekick but *written in his voice*, with Twain capturing the cadences and particularities of Southern dialect more effectively than anyone has before or since. It is consciously written from the perspective of a barely literate child.

Another purpose Twain clearly has in mind is to imagine a space for meaningful conversation between black and white people in the antebellum South. As a thought experiment, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* postulates a scenario that would have been all but impossible in the South of Twain's upbringing: what would happen if a twelve-year-old white boy and a runaway black man were given the space to talk freely with one another? What would they talk about? How would they understand their relationship to one another without the gaze of white, slave-owning society constantly upon them, sizing them up for judgment and punishment? Outside of social expectations, each sees the other as a friend. While both are unmoored from their "place" in society with no intent of returning, Twain further equalizes Jim and Huck by drawing them nearer to one another in the social hierarchy. Jim is held in high regard among his fellow slaves for his escapades with witches to the point of pride ("Jim was monstrous proud about it, and he got so he wouldn't hardly notice the other n—rs. N—rs would come miles to

hear Jim tell about it, and he was more looked up to than any n—r in that country"[69]), while Huck, poor white trash that he is, is about as low in the social order that a white person can be—and a child, to boot. By placing Huck and Jim as close to one another in the social hierarchy as a black person and white person can be—and then allowing them the space to consciously reject that hierarchy without fear—Twain creates the space for the kinds of critical conversations that social justice advocates so often call for. The irony that Twain observed, of course, is that such critical conversations can rarely take place in the formal proceedings of a conference: they unfold on the river and beneath the stars.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is at all at once—and depending on who one asks—a picaresque coming-of-age tale, an antislavery narrative, a blistering satire, a racist screed, a sociopolitical allegory concerning the failure of Reconstruction, a blasphemous heresy, a runaway bestseller, or even a so-called "Great American Novel." First and foremost, however, it is a children's book. Like Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a work of "children's" literature that is accessible early in life and only grows richer with age and reflection. Huck's tone may be light and cavalier a good portion of the time, but his predicament is constantly one that is fraught on all sides with profound peril. "By & by I shall take a boy of twelve & run him on through life (in the first person) but not Tom Sawyer—he would not be a good character for it," Twain wrote to W.D. Howells in 1876.[70] If by "run him on through life," Twain meant to subject him to an infinite variety of horrors on a grueling and hopeless journey to nowhere, he could not have succeeded more brilliantly than he did with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Why it could not have been Tom Sawyer will become

[69] *HF* 7-8.

[70] *Mark Twain-Howells Letters: The Correspondence of Samuel L. Clemens and William D. Howells*, edited by Henry Nash Smith, Harvard University Press, 1960, vol. 1, pp. 91-92.

clear as we proceed, but it is enough at this point to say that only a child with quick wits and good judgment—which is to say, with common sense—could survive any one of life-threatening situations Huck faces throughout the novel, let alone all of them.

In the overall arc of this dissertation, however, *Huckleberry Finn* is taken as the preeminent text on what it means (and why it is important) **to *question* the *sensus communis*** up to and including the consideration of whether it must be rejected altogether.

Being "Sivilized": *Sensus Communis* in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

The core tension, as presented early in the novel, is that between the backwoods Huckleberry Finn and the fine surroundings he finds himself in at the novel's outset. Huck, who, until his recent escapades with Tom Sawyer resulted in a sudden elevation in social status, slept in a sugar-hogshead[71] and lived off the land, now finds himself almost literally trapped among the material details of fine living as he attempts to navigate life in the Widow Douglas' household. The widow has a lot of rules—many of which do not make sense to Huck, but all deriving from communal notions of what is and is not proper. Propriety is what matters in the South. Those who are proper treasure their elite status; those who are not either long for it or consign themselves to a "low-down and ornery" standard of living (see pap, Boggs, the Arkansaw chaw-swappers, the king and the duke, and more).

[71] A large barrel used for shipping raw goods. The parallel to Diogenes of Sinope cannot be overstated; the eminent pre-Socratic philosopher and principal founder of cynicism as a philosophical school was famed for his disdain of contemporary mores, arbitrary customs, material wealth, and social propriety. He was famous for taking shelter in a large clay wine jar in the Acropolis and for expressing contempt at convention. He was possibly a fugitive, as well; his father, Hicesias, was a banker who became embroiled in a currency debasement scandal that saw him and his son exiled from Sinope and stripped of their possessions. It is not known if Diogenes was an accomplice in his father's scheme, but he rejected the idea of wealth for the rest of his life. See Appendix G; see also William Desmond, *Cynics*. University of California Press, 2008, 21.

Huck, being of the "low-down and ornery" stock, has not been brought up in the ways of the upper-crust St. Petersburg society. As a foil to Tom Sawyer, who is deeply entrenched in the *sensus communis* of his upbringing, Huck is unburdened by expectations of propriety, which allows him to view societal norms with a critical eye. In material terms Huck's background is very different from Tom's—he is not just poor but impoverished. He is only barely above a free black man in terms of social standing (his youth places him even further down the social ranks that even adult white trash, but even as child, Huck's social rank outstrips Jim's simply by being a white boy).

The notion of what is and is not "proper" functions ideologically among the upper-class characters in Twain's novel to the point of absurdity. While no echelon of Southern society is exempted from his lampooning, the primary and most frequent target of Twain's barbs is the genteel white culture of the antebellum South, which predicated itself on the importance propriety, manners, religion, and, in a step above and beyond the everyday racism of the average southerner, blood lineage and property ownership. The grand irony behind all this ostensible gentility, of course, was that it was all made possible by (and made to continually function *through*) intolerable brutality. The pretense of Southern hospitality is just that- a pretense – and attempting to tear it away could be very dangerous.

But adhering to it could equally dangerous, depending on where one finds oneself. In Huck's experience, the absurdity of class obsession reaches its tragic apex in the generations-old Grangerford-Shepardson feud, which Twain at first plays for laughs but culminates in the grisly murder of a twelve-year-old boy. At one point in his travels, Huck is taken in by the well-to-do Grangerford family, which is locked in a generations-old blood-feud with another clan of nearby

aristocrats, the Shepardsons. The Grangerfords are described as the epitome of Southern gentility, Twain writing:

> "Col. Grangerford was a gentleman, you see. He was a gentleman all over; and so was his family. He was well born, as the saying is, and that's worth as much in a man as it is in a horse, so the Widow Douglas said, and nobody ever denied that she was of the first aristocracy in our town; and pap he always said it, too, though he warn't no more quality than a mud-cat, himself."[72]

However, the reader may find it hard to recognize much gentility in the Grangerfords' actions. The feud between the Grangerfords and the Shepardsons is ostensibly about honor, yet it has persisted for so long that no one remembers the original point of contention. Each family simply believes that the other has besmirched their honor. This, of course, simply reinforces the cycle of violence. The feud, fueled by a misguided sense of propriety and honor, has devastating consequences, particularly for the children of these families. Consider Emmeline Grangerford, whose story is a poignant example of the psychological damage inflicted by the constant presence of ongoing violence. Emmeline's life, cut short in her teens, was consumed by a morbid fascination with death, a theme that pervaded her poetry and artwork.

Emmeline's artwork, as described by Huck, is a testament to her morbid preoccupations. As Huck recounts her works in Chapter 17: "One was a woman in a slim black dress...leaning pensive on a tombstone on her right elbow, under a weeping willow, and her other hand hanging down her side holding a white handkerchief and a reticule, and underneath the picture it said

[72] *HF* 142. It is also imperative to observe the prevailing sentiment of *sensus communis*—the notion that an individual's worth is intrinsically tied to their lineage. This perspective was held in common by both the widow and pap, the two most influential adults in Huck's life, despite their markedly divergent backgrounds.

'Shall I Never See Thee More Alas.'"[73] Another drawing depicts a young lady crying into a handkerchief with a dead bird in her other hand, titled "I Shall Never Hear Thy Sweet Chirrup More Alas." Emmeline's poetry, too, is filled with themes of death and loss, one of frequent poetic exercises being to write verses about obituaries and accidents she found in the newspaper. As he reflects on Emmeline's story and untimely death, Huck's capacity to feel for others comes to the surface.

> "Poor Emmeline made poetry about all the dead people when she was alive, and it didn't seem right that there warn't nobody to make some about her now she was gone; so I tried to sweat out a verse or two myself, but I couldn't seem to make it go somehow."[74]

Emmeline's death also serves as an ominous foreshadowing of her brother's impending death at the hands of the Shepardsons. Buck Grangerford's death, which Huck witnesses, is another tragic consequence of the feud. Despite their different backgrounds, the two boys find common ground and develop an amicable bond, and Buck's death deeply affects Huck. Buck is described as a friendly and welcoming character. When Huck first meets Buck, he is immediately taken in by his warmth and friendliness. But their relationship is short-lived, as Buck is soon shot and killed in a skirmish with Shepardsons. Huck is witness to this horrific event, and is deeply traumatized by the experience to the point of post-traumatic stress:

> "All of a sudden, bang! bang! bang! goes three or four guns—the men had slipped around through the woods and come in from behind without their horses!

[73] *HF* 137-138.
[74] *HF* 141.

> The boys jumped for the river—both of them hurt—and as they swum down the current the men run along the bank shooting at them and singing out, 'Kill them, kill them!' It made me so sick I most fell out of the tree. I ain't a-going to tell all that happened—it would make me sick again if I was to do that. I wished I hadn't ever come ashore that night to see such things. I ain't ever going to get shut of them—lots of times I dream about them."[75]

The feud between the Grangerfords and the Shepardsons serves as a stark illustration of the lengths to which these families will go to uphold the *sensus communis*, the shared understanding of propriety and honor, at all costs. As aristocrats, their status and wealth are intrinsically tied to the preservation of these societal norms and power structures. The concept of "sacred honor" becomes a tool to justify their actions and maintain their position of power. However, this pursuit of honor and status, as embodied in the feud, reveals a tragic irony. The very structures and norms they strive to uphold lead to their own constant self-obliteration at each other's hands—a conceit that Twain easily could have made into a joke if he had decided to kill off the adults who perpetuated the violence. But that Twain chooses to have the feud result in the deaths of their children reveals the truth: that there is nothing funny in an endless cycle of killing. Instead, their wealth, power, and status are only temporarily preserved at the cost of their children's lives—the very progeny that would have extended the bloodlines they hold so very dear.

The novel's most horrifying episode of *sensus communis* asserting its dominance is in the brief, nihilistic vignette that portrays the grim resolution to an Arkansaw class skirmish. Boggs, a town drunk, is shot and killed in broad daylight by Colonel Sherburn, who then calmly returns to his home. The town's residents, incensed that someone would shoot one of their local own and

[75] *HF* 153.

walk away, trail him back to his residence with the intention of lynching him, only to find themselves, a mob of several dozen, utterly intimidated in the middle of the day by a single ill-tempered patrician sneering from his balcony:

> "The idea of you lynching anybody! It's amusing. The idea of you thinking you had pluck enough to lynch a man! Because you're brave enough to tar and feather poor friendless cast-out women that come along here, did that make you think you had grit enough to lay your hands on a man? Why, a man's safe in the hands of ten thousand of your kind—as long as it's daytime and you're not behind him."[76]

Sherburn's venomous invective, spewing from the comfort of his balcony, would have served as a chilling reality check to Twain's readers. The isolated incident, which has virtually no narrative impact on the rest of the novel, nevertheless communicates the underlying understanding—the *sensus communis*—that would have been shared by anyone who ever lived in the American South, before or after the war: you cannot take a meaningful stand against the powers that be in this world without being done away with:

> "Do I know you? I know you clear through. I was born and raised in the South, and I've lived in the North; so I know the average all around. The average man's a coward. In the North he lets anybody walk over him that wants to, and goes home and prays for a humble spirit to bear it. In the South one man all by himself, has stopped a stage full of men in the daytime, and robbed the lot. Your newspapers call you a brave people so much that you think you *are* braver than any other people—whereas you're just *as* brave, and no braver. Why don't your

[76] HF 190.

juries hang murderers? Because they're afraid the man's friends will shoot them in the back, in the dark—and it's just what they *would* do.

"So they always acquit; and then a *man* goes in the night, with a hundred masked cowards at his back and lynches the rascal. Your mistake is, that you didn't bring a man with you; that's one mistake, and the other is that you didn't come in the dark and fetch your masks. You brought *part* of a man—Buck Harkness, there—and if you hadn't had him to start you, you'd a taken it out in blowing.

"You didn't want to come. The average man don't like trouble and danger. *You* don't like trouble and danger. But if only *half* a man—like Buck Harkness, there—shouts 'Lynch him! lynch him!' you're afraid to back down—afraid you'll be found out to be what you are—*cowards*—and so you raise a yell, and hang yourselves on to that half-a-man's coat-tail, and come raging up here, swearing what big things you're going to do. The pitifulest thing out is a mob; that's what an army is—a mob; they don't fight with courage that's born in them, but with courage that's borrowed from their mass, and from their officers. But a mob without any *man* at the head of it is *beneath* pitifulness. Now the thing for *you* to do is to droop your tails and go home and crawl in a hole. If any real lynching's going to be done it will be done in the dark, Southern fashion; and when they come they'll bring their masks, and fetch a *man* along. Now *leave*—and take your half-a-man with you."[77]

[77] *HF* 190-191.

In this brief episode, which is non-cathartic to the point of profundity, vast swaths of angry, violent discontents are easily cowed back into their place by a wealthy untouchable who has already demonstrated that he is willing to shoot anyone among them in broad daylight and who knows—correctly—that he will get away with it. He reminds the mob that holding people accountable means taking the risk of running afoul of their friends, among whom there are almost certainly one or two who are willing to do violence. He ominously demonstrates through exposition his knowledge that the "right" way to kill someone of import—if there could be such a thing—is to do it surreptitiously, "in the dark," with deniability intact. Sherburn's repeated excoriation of the mob's failure to "bring a man" along, while fraught with all the baggage of 19th Century chauvinism that has been critiqued at length elsewhere, points to a more structural critique of democratic movements and structures. Sherburn, whose military honorific invokes rank and status, behaves, from the moment he appears from the last word he utters, exactly like a person who considers himself to be untouchable by those around him. Because he is.

Sherburn's repeated criticism of the mob's failure to "bring a man" along, while fraught with all the baggage of 19th Century chauvinism that has been critiqued at length elsewhere, points to a more structural critique of democratic movements and structures. By "bring a man," Sherburn is invoking a person (in the 19th century South, basically always a biological man) who is of such a position that he can direct the mob, make it effective. To Sherburn, a "man" means an operator, a person of means and influence. To invoke Tony Kushner's Roy Cohn in *Angels in America*, a "man" is someone who has "clout."[78]

[78] Tony Kushner's 1991 drama chronicling the lives of interlocking characters throughout the 1980s AIDS crisis includes a fictionalized depiction of Roy Cohn, whose megalomania as swollen beyond all reasonable proportions. Kushner's Cohn is based on the real-life lawyer who aided Joseph McCarthy's Red and Pink Scares, advocated for the death penalty for Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, and served as a de facto mentor to a young Donald Trump. Cohn is obsessed with "clout," and views everything in human affairs, including his sexuality, through that lens. Upon his diagnosis in Kushner's drama, Cohn provides a succinct but powerful summary of his worldview:

ROY: Your problem, Henry, is that you are hung up on words, on labels, that you believe they mean what they seem to mean. AIDS. Homosexual. Gay. Lesbian. You think these are names that tell you who someone sleeps with, but they don't tell you that.

HENRY: No?

ROY: No. Like all labels, they tell you one thing and one thing only: where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order? Not ideology, or sexual taste, but something much simpler: clout. Not who I fuck or who fucks me, but who will pick up the phone when I call, who owes me favors. This is what a label refers to. Now to someone who does not understand this, homosexual is what I am because I have sex with men. But really this is wrong. Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a pissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me, Henry?

HENRY: No.

ROY: No. I have clout. A lot! I can pick up this phone, punch fifteen numbers, and you know who will be on the other end in under five minutes, Henry?

HENRY: The President.

ROY: Even better, Henry. His wife.

HENRY: I'm impressed.

ROY: I don't want you to be impressed. I want you to understand. This is not sophistry. And this is not hypocrisy. This is reality. I have sex with men. But unlike nearly every other man of whom this is true, I bring the guy I'm screwing to the White House and President Reagan smiles at us and shakes his hand. Because what I am is defined entirely by who I am. Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys. See Appendix H: Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes. Part One: Millennium Approaches*, Theater Communications Group, 1992; reprint 1993, pp. 45-46.

Figure 4. "Sherburn steps out"

Sherburn's monologue is a chilling reminder of the power dynamics at play in the society of the time. He stands on his balcony, looking down at the mob, and delivers a scathing critique of their lack of courage and their dependence on the safety of numbers. He mocks their pretense of bravery, their reliance on the anonymity of the mob, reminding them if any single one of them needed to draw together all their social power to protect themselves or advance their interests, they could not do it.

Sherburn's speech is a sobering return to earth for a novel that often veers into the realm of the absurd. It demonstrates to the reader what Huck already knows—sometimes the only commonsensical thing to do is to let an absurdity pass in silence. The crowd disperses, utterly defeated, and Huck, for his part, keeps his mouth shut and stays out of things to the extent that he can. That said, he is certainly bewildered by his world. And if it rejects him as a "low-down and ornery" sort, Huck rejects it right back, at first (in the novel's early chapters) on the grounds of its absurdities and later on the grounds of its cruelties and lack of pity. Huck's moral distastes, in fact, coincide precisely with the very things that his St. Petersburg's polite society holds in the highest esteem: religion, education, and, above all, money. These all seem so far from our humanness, our connection to nature (very important to Huck who basically lives off the land). All so artificial, dangerous, cruel, ultimately pointless. The *sensus communis*, the shared understanding of the society, is revealed to be a hollow facade, a dangerous game of pretense and power that leaves no room for genuine human connection or empathy; in fact, they are often in direct opposition to them.

Religion

No cultural institution in the South is more important than the Christian religion. Likewise, landed interests in the antebellum South had to "reconcile" the teachings of Jesus with the

institution of slavery. Thus, the pulpit served as a powerful platform for the propagation of a racial hierarchy undergirded by a selective interpretation of Christian scripture. The sermons of the time sought to "reconcile" the moral dissonance between the Christian ideals of love and equality and the brutal reality of slavery; in reality, this "reconciling" simply meant constantly justifying the practice to parishioners, week after week. Certain Bible passages that "condone" the practice were emphasized, including:

- Ephesians 6:5: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ."
- Titus 2:9-10: "Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive."

These sermons, steeped in this interpretive tradition, served to assuage the moral qualms of the white populace, offering a comforting narrative that slavery was not a product of human greed or cruelty but a divine decree, a part of the natural order ordained by God Himself. This narrative was so pervasive that it seeped into the familial sphere, shaping the beliefs of generations. Huck, having not been brought up in a family of social import and, therefore, unchurched, is learning much of the scripture at an age where he has developed some critical faculties. He is also suspicious of religion, if not quite at Twain's level of cynicism on the subject. He is not interested in scripture and does not see its relevance to his own life:

> "After supper she got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers, and I was in a sweat to find out all about him; but by and by she let it out that Moses

had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn't care no more about him, because I don't take no stock in dead people."[79]

Huck's skepticism also extends to the efficacy of prayer. He retreats into the woods to contemplate the disparity between the promises of prayer and the harsh realities of life. He questions why prayer doesn't seem to solve tangible problems. The widow's explanation that prayer yields "spiritual gifts" confounds Huck further. He is told that he must help others, prioritize their needs over his own, a concept that he struggles to see the advantage in, except for the benefit of others. This does not satisfy Huck—even if, ironically, it is the very moral instruction he follows later in the novel when Huck decides he would sooner risk hellfire than betray Jim. at this point in the novel however, Huck is willing to push back, again belying his disregard for status and propriety. This scene illustrates Huck's inclination towards reflection, a trait not commonly found among southern children (or adults) of his time. A child raised in a more conventional setting might not question the concept of prayer so openly, aware of the potential repercussions of challenging adult authority. Huck, however, having endured harsher punishments from his father and feeling less attached to the widow's world, is more willing to push back. He views prayer as a transaction, questioning who benefits from each request. This act of reflection, of "looking back" on what he has been taught and applying logic and personal experience, leads him to dismiss prayer as either nonsense, useless, or both.

Education

"Don't let schooling interfere with your education."

[79] *HF* 2.

—ALLEN[80]

Huck Finn does not hold formal education in particularly high regard, though he does not openly scorn it either. He is impatient with book learning rather than outright dismissive of it, preferring instead to focus on the realities of his situation than on theoretical assumptions. For instance, help grows annoyed when Tom Sawyer concocts his convoluted schemes that he learned about books, whether that be forming a band of robbers or orchestrating Jim's escape and the novels closing chapters. Huck finds these schemes impractical and divorced from reality.

Among the "low down and ornery" class of outcasts that Huck comes from, education is often seen as a liability and pretense rather than an asset. Pap, in particular, is disdainful of Huck's education, accusing him of putting on airs and thinking himself as superior to his father and, likewise, his lineage. Pap views Huck's education as a threat and an insult that undermines his standing as patriarch of the Finn family, such as it is, among the uneducated peers who might share pap's attitudes toward social mobility. He berates what he sees as Huck's pretense of being above his station, saying he had "put on considerable many frills since [he had] ben away. I'll take you down a peg before I get done with you."[81] Demanding to know who had told Huck that he might "meddle in such hifalut'n foolishness," Huck tells his father that it was the widow Douglas who had seen to his education. Enraged at being subverted—and by a woman, no less—Pap assures Huck that he will "learn her to meddle." He then orders Huck to abandon on his education, effectively reminding him to remember his place in society and within the Finn family hierarchy.

[80] Apocryphally misattributed to Twain but first published by Grant Allen in 1894. See Matt Seybold, "The Apocryphal Twain: I Have Never Let Schooling Interfere With My Education." Center for Mark Twain Studies, 2017.

[81] *HF* 24.

Hucks disdain for schooling, however, does not belie a foolish mind. At several junctures Huck is forced to rely on his wits first and foremost in order to advance his journey or even survive his predicament. Significantly, when Huck discovers evidence of pap's return to town, he immediately puts his wits to work to protect himself and his newly acquired wealth. He quickly makes his way to Judge Thatcher's and asks him to take his entire fortune, seeking to transfer all legal ownership before pap can come to seize it for himself. While the judge initially seems puzzled by Huck's request, Huck pleads, "Please take it, and don't ask me nothing—then I won't have to tell no lies."[82] After studying him a moment, Judge Thatcher takes Huck's meaning, saying, "Oho-o! I think I see. You want to *sell* all your property to me—not give it. That's the correct idea."[83] He then writes up a contract stating that the transfer of property is in exchange for a "consideration" of $1. At this point neither Huck nor the reader has much evidence to be sure that Judge Thatcher can be trusted to sell Huck's assets back to him for the same consideration in the future, but one thing Huck can be reliably sure of is that it is preferable to take his chances with Judge Thatcher than with pap.

As such, it is Huck's quick thinking and common sense allow him to stay one step ahead of pap. He does not need a legal education in order to understand a few basics of property law, the first of which being pap cannot take from him what he does not own. And while Huck personally has no idea how to go about orchestrating such an arrangement, he does have the good sense to understand that he has access to people who do. The creative solution that he and the judge arrive at is not one that can readily be found in a textbook, but one born of the need to address a specific and immediate real world problem. What Huck lacks in traditional scholarship he more than makes up for in resourcefulness and capacity for judgment.

[82] *HF* 19.
[83] *HF* 20.

Money

"Money doesn't talk—it swears."

—DYLAN[84]

In spite his impoverished background, Huck's social standing is elevated due to his new-found wealth. At the outset of the novel, Huck has $6,000, accruing interest at a dollar per day. This wealth not only increases his potential value to society but also complicates his relationship with societal norms. Huck is not just a "good" kid in the eyes of the widow and the judge (although they have likely convinced themselves that they have correctly judged him to be one), he is valuable in the real terms of their society. His worth, like everyone else's, is measurable in dollars. Adjusted for inflation, his net worth would be about $235,000. It is little surprise that the judge is willing to buy Huck's entire fortune for the "consideration" of $1.

As a result of their escapades in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,* Huck and Tom have come into a small fortune of $6,000 in gold each as a reward, which Judge Thatcher invests at a rate that earns the boys "a dollar a day apiece all the year round—more than a body could tell what to do with."[85] But Huck, who now lives with the widow, has no expenses of his own and knows how to live off the land save for a few inexpensive necessities he cannot make himself—corn meal, bacon, bullets, and so on—offers no indication that he sees any real benefit in his new fortune.

[84] Bob Dylan, "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding). *Bringing It All Back Home*, Columbia Records, 1965.

[85] Fundamental shifts in U.S. monetary and economic policy over the centuries make it difficult to account for true inflation over one hundred years or more, but quick estimates suggest $1 in 1845 to be valued at about $39 in 2022, with $6,000 being roughly equivalent to $235,000 in present-day buying power—more than enough to entice a no-good parent to come looking for it.

Huck places a higher value on tangible items over abstract forms of wealth such as paper money or gold. The loot he collects with Jim and the fishing line he prays for hold more significance and utility to him. Interestingly, this perspective mirrors that of the wealthy class in his society, who also place greater value on tangible "items," albeit on a larger scale, referring to them as "commodities" - cotton, in particular. A significant portion of the novel unfolds in Arkansas, where the cotton industry has monopolized the majority of viable farmland. From the onset, the industry operated under a factory plantation system, effectively excluding most people from ownership. During this era, cash money was notoriously unstable, with its value often depreciating to the point where it was barely worth the paper it was printed on, and bank failures were a common occurrence. Monetary systems are designed to be fungible and transient, suitable for day-to-day transactions; they are not built in such a way that units of currency *appreciate* over time. Thus, "money," in the conventional sense, is inherently ephemeral. In contrast, assets, such as a substantial stake in a cotton enterprise, have the potential to endure for generations.

Huck Finn is disdainful of money— in fact, he views it as a liability. He is keenly aware that his newfound fortune will draw the attention of his abusive, alcoholic father. Huck knows that when pap becomes aware of his money, he will return to claim it. Unfortunately, his prediction quickly proves true when his father appears at the Widow's house to harangue his son in the novel's early chapters:

> "Looky here—mind how you talk to me; I'm a-standing about all I can stand now—so don't gimme no sass. I've been in town two days, and I hain't heard nothing but about you bein' rich. I heard about it away down the river, too. That's why I come. You git me that money to-morrow—I want it."[86]

[86] *HF* 25.

Even if Huck wanted to give pap the money, he knows that pap could not be trusted with it. Pap wants the money to feed his addiction. Were he to be successful in wresting it away from Huck, he would undoubtedly use it to drink himself to death within the first hundred dollars spent. Huck has his own interests to keep in mind to be sure, but it is also important for pap's own sake that the money be out of his hands. But while Judge Thatcher might be a reliable custodian of Huck's fortune for the time being, pap knows that, as Huck's biological father, he has a legal claim to Huckleberry Finn and his money that will prove very persuasive in court. Through Hucks narration, Twain provides an oblique overview of a legal process through which we ascertain that, while the widow Douglas sued pap for custody of Huck, the new judge, who does not know pap and is not familiar with his character, has ruled in pap's favor. We also learn that pap has sued Judge Thatcher for control of Huck's fortune, and while he admits that the judge knows all of the legal ways to draw the process out almost *ad infinitum*, he is ultimately confident that the law will come down in his favor.[87] Winning custody of Huck means winning custody of everything that belongs to Huck as well. None of this, of course, would be a problem for Huck had he not come into his $6,000 fortune. Pap might have lost interest in Huck and consequently left him alone forever, but he is instead drawn back to his take his boy into his custody – which is to say, take him as hostage – by the idea of coming into possession of a large sum of money.

[87] Ibid.

Practical Judgments Are Aesthetic Judgments

"I wish no living thing to suffer pain."

—Shelley[88]

Huck Finn may not have much in the way of formal education, but he is a thinker all the same. Having come up a single child and country outcast with no stable home life, Huck has had to spend a lot of time on his own. It being a time before the clamor of media, Huck would have spent much of his time fishing, hunting, smoking, camping, and lounging in silence, with only the subtle sounds of nature and his own thoughts to fill his mind. His upbringing, characterized by solitude and survival, has necessitated a reliance on his own judgment rather than societal norms. This is a child who has spent countless hours in silent contemplation, his mind filled not with the clamor of societal expectations but with the subtle sounds of nature and his own thoughts.

As Huck is mostly on his own without adult supervision, he is required to make sense of his world on his own quickly and efficiently. He does not adhere to societal rules unless they are immediately applicable to his own life and liberty. He does not behave this way according to any ideological dissent; it is simply a necessity born from his circumstances. Huck's world is one where decisions often carry life-or-death consequences and where they leave no room for ideology. For Huck Finn, the ability to make a reflective, common-sense judgment on the fly is literally a matter of survival. What Huck realizes that those of us who think for a living typically do not is that practical judgements, however much we dress them as logical problems, are always

[88] Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound* I.304.

aesthetic ones at their most fundamental, precisely in the normative sense that they are problems of *experience,* connected to decisions that are pervasively involved with reflective, life-affirming judgments.

When Huck is faced with his most consequential decisions, his actions are guided by a reflection on the desired outcomes. These outcomes, however, are not determined arbitrarily. They are the product of a moral decision-making process, one that requires Huck to engage in deep introspection about what he considers good, asking himself, '*What is the state of affairs I wish to bring about or maintain?'* This process of deliberation is not merely a logical exercise but a profound engagement with his own aesthetic sensibilities and moral compass.

Coincidentally, as Twain was in the final stages of writing *Huckleberry Finn* in 1883, Charles Sanders Peirce was grappling with similar concepts.[89] Peirce, after years of meticulous study, claimed to have "discovered"[90] a profound truth: the logical, which is the formal doctrine of how we ought to think if we want to arrive at the truth, is derived from the ethical. The ethical, in turn, is the study of the "ends of actions" and the "right action" we are prepared to deliberately adopt to bring about those desired ends. This ethical dimension is ultimately derived from a fundamental aesthetic judgment, a judgment concerning what is good and right based on what we generally consider to be "good," or that which we are deliberately prepared to work toward.[91] This philosophical insight illuminates the nature of Huck's critical judgments. When Huck makes decisions, he does so with desired results in mind. The framing of these desired moral ends is ultimately an aesthetic judgment of what we judge to be good." This is not to suggest that the

[89] See Peirce, *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. II, pp. 297.

[90] See Peirce, MS L75.345, version 1.

[91] *CP* 5.130, 1903.

logical or ideological should be disregarded altogether. As Peirce points out, logic is the mathematical series of rules that allow us to get from point A to point B in a consistent, non-contradictory way.

In the light of Peirce's philosophical insight, we can see that Huck's decisions, driven by a survival instinct and a desire for freedom, are not just logical or ethical choices but aesthetic judgments. These judgments, based on what Huck perceives as 'good', are made in a world that is often hostile and cruel. Cruelty is at the beating heart of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, manifesting not only in the kind of explosive, aberrant violence of an injudicious inebriate like pap but also in the more insidious, normalized forms of cruelty that are accepted as part and parcel of 'civilized' society. The institution of slavery, the casual infliction of pain on animals, and other such instances of normalized cruelty are woven into the very fabric of 19th-century American life. The characters within the novel, ancillary though they may be, reflect a community that has so thoroughly internalized this cruelty that it becomes almost invisible, except to those who are its direct victims. So pervasive is cruelty throughout the culture that it seeps into the realm of children's play; the make-believe violence that Tom Sawyer requires of his 'band of robbers', is a chilling reflection of this reality:

> So Tom got out a sheet of paper that he had wrote the oath on, and read it. It swore every boy to stick to the band, and never tell any of the secrets; and if anybody done anything to any boy in the band, whichever boy was ordered to kill that person and his family must do it, and he mustn’t eat and he mustn’t sleep till he had killed them and hacked a cross in their breasts, which was the sign of the band. And nobody that didn’t belong to the band could use that mark, and if he did he must be sued; and if he done it again he must be killed. And if anybody that belonged to the band told the secrets, he

must have his throat cut, and then have his carcass burnt up and the ashes scattered all around, and his name blotted off of the list with blood and never mentioned again by the gang, but have a curse put on it and be forgot forever.

Everybody said it was a real beautiful oath, and asked Tom if he got it out of his own head. [92]

If there were any doubt that Twain was preoccupied with human cruelty while writing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, recollections from his *Autobiography* make the point without ambiguity. In an entry dated January 23, 1906, Twain recalls "among [his] old manuscripts one which [he] perceived about twenty-two years old" that was never printed. His own dating would place the piece's writing at around 1884, the same year Twain was finishing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* Titled "The Character of Man," the piece begins:

> "Concerning Man— he is too large a subject to be treated as a whole; so I will merely discuss a detail or two of him at this time. I desire to contemplate him from this point of view—this premiss: that he was not made for any useful purpose, for the reason that he hasn't served any; that he was most likely not made *intentionally;* and that his working himself up out of the oyster bed to his present position was probably a matter of surprise and regret to the Creator. * * * * For his history, in all climes, all ages and all circumstances, furnishes oceans and continents of proof that of all the creatures that were made he is the most detestable. Of the entire brood he is the only one—the solitary one—that possesses malice. That is the basest of all instincts, passions, vices—the most hateful. That one thing puts him below the rats, the grubs, the trichinæ. He is the

[92] *HF* 9-10.

> only creature that inflicts pain for sport, knowing it to *be* pain. But if the cat knows she is inflicting pain when she plays with the frightened mouse, then we must make an exception here; we must grant that in one detail man is the moral peer of the cat. *All* creatures kill—there seems to be no exception; but of the whole list, man is the only one that kills for fun; he is the only one that kills in malice, the only one that kills for revenge. Also—in all the list he is the only creature that has a nasty mind."[93]

Twain's fixation on purposiveness in his consideration of human beings could not be more striking than it appears in this passage. The great ironic tragedy (or joke, depending on the disposition) is that the discord between human beings and the rest of nature is *precisely* in the idea that they were "not made for any useful purpose," as evidenced by the fact that "[they haven't] served any; that [they were] most likely not made *intentionally…"* This, Twain suggests, is what puts us at odds with the rest of nature, which is intricately organized such that all living things and the organic compounds they depend upon *thrive to the benefit of another.* Human beings, unsurpassed in intellect and unchecked in their power, have ascended to the point at which they need not concern themselves with the benefit of any other aspect of nature, having relegated it from a bountiful ecosystem to a merely productive dominion.

This understanding of human cruelty is shared by both Huck and Twain. Twain, having grown up amidst the horrors of slavery and racial injustice, paints a vivid picture of the normalized cruelties of his time. When Huck witnesses these injustices, his response is not one of ideological dissent, but of personal moral judgement. From a 21st Century perspective, it might be easy to label Huck as a privileged member of society due to his white skin, and to

[93] See Twain, *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, edited by Harriet Elinor Smith, et. al, vol. 1, University of California Press, 2010, p. 312.

expect him to vocally oppose the injustices he witnesses. But to do so would be extremely unpopular among other white people, some of whom have demonstrated that they are willing to do extreme and grisly violence to reinforce their power.

The following sections explore four high-stakes practical, aesthetic judgments Huck must make in the course of the novel that will fundamentally shape the trajectory of his life and which directly call upon Huck to make a judgment about what is good—and, conversely, what is *not* good. These are: permanently cutting ties with his father; placating the king and the duke; deciding to go to hell for Jim's sake, and trusting Tom Sawyer.

Dealing with Pap

One of Huck's most important judgments in all of the novel is the realization that his father, whom Twain only calls "pap," is the greatest threat in his life, further discerning that despite their familial connection, pap is irredeemable and must be excised from his life completely. This is an absolute rejection of one's patriarchal blood lineage, but one that is absolutely necessary for Huck to move forward in his life. From the outset, pap is portrayed as an existential threat to Huck, his history of violence and unpredictable nature serving as relentless sources of tension and fear. Though we learn In the novel's opening pages that pap has not been seen around town for some time, Huck is on high alert for his return all the same, constanly vigilant to spot signs of pap's presence. His paranoia, of course, is well-founded, for pap does indeed come looking for Huck's newfound fortune.

Pap's presence—both when physically present and when hovering unseen in the background—is as inescapable as the fact that Huck owes half his genetic makeup to this hateful, violent imbecile. Pap embodies the archetype of the angry, illiterate, "dirty" South, characterized

almost entirely by his irascibility, bigotry, sense of victimhood, and propensity to violence. As a representative of the disenfranchised white class, he relies on institutionalized racism—first slavery, and later Jim Crow—to maintain some semblance of superiority. In Pap, we see the manifestation of internalized victimization. His world is one of unrelenting hatred and blame directed outward at society, with the government, affluent individuals, and the Black population serving as his primary targets. His language, particularly his use of racial slurs, is loaded with palpable hatred, and his invective against a Black professor encapsulates the resentment felt by the socially and economically disadvantaged white population.

The only thing that pap fails to blame for his miserable lot in life is, ironically, the one thing he has some degree of agency over—his alcoholism. The new judge in town, who will decide the fate of Huck's fortune and whose favor pap tires to court, identifies pap as a wayward sinner whose addiction, through the lens of his Christian worldview, is the manifestation of a having fallen under the spell of one of Satan's many temptations. Pap likewise identifies the judge as a garden-variety Southern Christian and preys upon his eagerness to see himself as a generous, forgiving soul after the heart of the Lord. Pap's tearful confession elicits the pity of the judge and his wife, and soon they all sob together as pap pledges to be "a man that's started a new life." [94] But of course, as soon as pap is tucked into his stately guestroom for the night, he develops a thirst and slips out the window and into town, where he trades his new clothes—the symbol of the judge's beneficence reduced to a barter item in pap's hands—for a jug of whiskey and returns to have a "good old time" on the judge's premises. After finding the drunkard the next day, having destroyed the guestroom, rolled off the roof, and broken his arm in two places, the judge

[94] *HF* 26.

concludes that "body could reform the old man with a shotgun, maybe, but he didn't know no other way."[95]

Huck himself never makes any mention of attempting to "reform the old man" and does not belie any indication that he believes it could be done; his lack of comment on the matter, besides, does not indicate that he even has any desire to. Huck is ultimately faced with the judgment (in this case, a decision [96]) of what to do when he makes the grim realization that without a dramatic change in circumstances, Pap's deteriorating alcoholism will lead to continued violence against the boy, even up to the point of killing him. Pap's addiction reaches that very inflection point in Chapter VI, when, still holding Huck hostage in his remote woodland cabin, Pap reaches a state of alcoholic hallucinosis, an extremely dangerous condition similar to delirium tremens but brought on much more quickly upon sudden cessation of heavy drinking. Alcoholic hallucinosis can bring about intense, primarily auditory, hallucinations that have been found to resemble the symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia; in pap's case, he comes to believe that Huck is "the Angel of Death," having come to take him. Taking a knife, he tries to kill Huck, but Huck manages to evade his attacks until Pap passes out.

From this point forward Huck makes the decision to abandon his father and, by extension, his lineage. Unlike the Grangerfords, a genteel Southern family who pride themselves on their ancestry, Huck has no attachment to his past or family heritage. His only known relatives are his abusive father and his late mother, rendering his lineage far from prestigious. In sharp contrast to societal expectations of a peer like Tom Sawyer, Huck adopts a pragmatic approach, prioritizing his safety and well-being over familial obligations. Thus, Huck abandons his father forever,

[95] *HF* 28.

[96] Note the distinction between judgment as object-concept or scenario judgment (i.e. "this is x," or "x is happening here") vs. judgment as decision (i.e. "I judge that the right thing to do is x").

giving no indication of remorse or regret. To well-bred Southern gentility like the Grangerfords, abandoning one's lineage would be unthinkable. But Huck, a mongrel of the South who likely does not know much of his family history at all, probably reckons he is better off not getting too hung up on it.

"Making Allowances"

The novel takes a pivotal turn at the beginning of Chapter XIX when Twain introduces a pair of dastardly ne'er-do-wells who will soon emerge as the closest thing to traditional, embodied antagonists as the novel has. As Huck and Jim are slipping back onto the raft in the aftermath of the Shepardson-Grangerford massacre, Huck spies "a couple of men tearing up the path as tight as they could foot it."[97] Huck, who immediately assumes the worst of intentions, tries to set off in the raft before the two can get near; but his inclination toward compassion over hard-heartedness gets the better of him as they "sung out and begged [Huck] to save their lives—said they hadn't been doing nothing, and was being chased for it—said there was men and dogs a-coming."[98] This unceremonious entrance does not befit the titles (and the tragic backstories) that these two soon bestow upon themselves—the "rightful Duke of Bridgewater… forlorn, torn from [his] high estate, despised by the cold world, ragged, worn, heart-broken, and degraded to the companionship of felons on a raft,"[99] and "the pore disappeared Dauphin, Looy the Seventeen, son of Looy the Sixteen and Marry Antonette… in blue jeans and misery, the wanderin', exiled, trampled-on, and sufferin' rightful King of France."[100] All parties feign

[97] *HF* 158
[98] *HF* 159
[99] *HF* 162
[100] *HF* 163.

astonishment at these dramatic revelations, but Huck quickly realizes that these two are not who they claim to be, but he decides just as quickly to play along anyway:

> "It didn't take me long to make up my mind that these liars warn't no kings nor dukes at all, but just low-down humbugs and frauds. But I never said nothing, never let on; kept it to myself; it's the best way; then you don't have no quarrels, and don't get into no trouble. If they wanted us to call them kings and dukes, I hadn't no objections, 'long as it would keep peace in the family; and it warn't no use to tell Jim, so I didn't tell him. If I never learnt nothing else out of pap, I learnt that the best way to get along with his kind of people is to let them have their own way."[101]

Thus Huck and Jim go through the motions of making "allowances" for the king and the duke, a process which largely involves serving their meals, making their stay on the raft comfortable, and acting as accomplices to their illicit schemes. Huck and Jim placate the scoundrels to avoid conflict, recognizing their selfish and dangerous nature. Their difference is merely an act of self preservation against violent, unscrupulous men. In private discussion, however, and Jim unpack the two swindlers and their motivations when discussing how best to make sense of them:

> "Don't it s'prise you de way dem kings carries on, Huck?"
>
> "No," I says, "it don't."
>
> "Why don't it, Huck?"
>
> "Well, it don't, because it's in the breed. I reckon they're all alike."

[101] *HF* 165.

> "But, Huck, dese kings o' ourn is reglar rapscallions; dat's jist what dey is; dey's reglar rapscallions."
>
> "Well, that's what I'm a-saying; all kings is mostly rapscallions, as fur as I can make out."
>
> "Is dat so?"
>
> "You read about them once—you'll see… All I say is, kings is kings, and you got to make allowances. Take them all around, they're a mighty ornery lot. It's the way they're raised." [102]

As he goes on to unpack various examples of this "mighty ornery lot," as he calls them, Huck explains that what these two "deposed aristocrats" on the Mississippi and the mightiest kings in European history have in common is their proclivity to simply claim authority that does not necessarily belong to them by rights in the first place. Their sense of entitlement, as well as the violent means to which they are willing to resort in order to enforce it, recalls Paine's jab at William the Conqueror and, by extension, the whole English monarchy, in *Common Sense:* "A French bastard landing with an armed banditti, and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original.—It certainly hath no divinity in it."[103]

Huck and Jim placate the two not out of respect, but as an act of simple self-preservation, each aware that they could easily be met with violence for resisting or, in Jim's case, returned to captivity. Of course, Twain demonstrates the ultimate irony involved in making the decisions to "make allowances" for self-proclaimed kings when, despite their best efforts to appease them, the king and duke turn Jim in for the reward money anyway, the modest sum of "forty dirty

[102] *HF* 199.
[103] *CS* 14.

dollars."[104] In this sly commentary, which Twain could easily have imagined applying to an underclass of complicit, poor white southerners who idolized their aristocratic overlords' romanticized way of life, Twain demonstrates the ultimate danger of this style of self-preservation—that tyrants treat their subjects as a means to their own ends. This, Twain suggests is the grim reality that southerners needed to understand of their societal betters—that to "make allowances" for a tyrant is to expose oneself to almost certain betrayal. What seems at first to be a practical decision geared toward survival demonstrates itself to be a grave error in judgment as Huck and Jim fail to rid themselves of the two in time to avoid the ill consequences of their acquaintance.

Trusting Tom Sawyer

Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer come from vastly different social backgrounds. Tom, a member of a respectable middle-class family, enjoys a level of social security and privilege that Huck, the son of the town drunkard, can only dream of. This disparity in their social statuses creates an underlying tension in their relationship, as Huck often finds himself deferring to Tom's judgment, not necessarily because he agrees with him, but because he recognizes the social capital that Tom possesses. They find a common purpose, however, in their willingness, even need, to oppose the *sensus communis:* Huck, being an outsider, was not brought up within the trappings of Southern gentility and finds much of it opposed to his needs and wants, and Tom seeks to indulge in his need to rebel and explore the boundaries of what he can get aways with. Thus it was inevitable that they would become fast friends: "Tom was like the rest of the

[104] *HF* 268.

respectable boys, in that he envied Huckleberry his gaudy outcast condition, and was under strict orders not to play with him. So he played with him every time he got a chance."[105]

Unpacking Huck's friendship with Tom requires simultaneously holding two competing interpretations of its dynamics in one's mind. On the one hand—and in the more immediate sense—Twain paints[106] Tom and Huck's friendship as a genuine one that is rooted in shared interests and experiences. On the cusp of adolescence, Huck and Tom are only just arriving at a point in life in which the petty concerns of adulthood are theirs to worry about; at this age, they are more concerned with adventure and rebelliousness than money, property, and other units of status.

Tom, a member of a respectable middle-class family, is drawn to Huck's company, in part, due to his own rebellious nature. However, this rebellion is inextricably linked to his social position in relation to Huck. In a sense Tom is slumming when hangs around with Huck; he is willing to engage in distasteful behavior by Aunt Sally' standards, but as a child in a well-to-do family, Tom always a reliable social support net to fall back on.Tom's rebellious acts are a form of exploration, a testing of boundaries that his privileged status allows him to undertake without serious consequences. For Huck, though, an outsider and the son of the town drunkard, these acts of rebellion are not just games or adventures but a necessary means of survival. As Huck's connection to society, Tom has social capital that Huck never could never have imagined as a backwoods nobody, "low-down and ornery" as he is. He may have gained a foothold for his own good standing in the community, but ultimately it is Tom and Tom's family vouching for his character that gives Huck refuge within the community of St. Petersburg.

[105] Twain, *Tom Sawyer,* 40.
[106] Or "whitewashes," if the reader will pardon the pun.

However, we know from early in the novel that Huck does not take Tom Sawyer seriously as an individual, having sized him up as a liar and a bit of a con man, and one that is perhaps too caught up in his own elaborate artifices. While he is a fairly constant companion, there are moments at which Huck beings to grow weary of Tom's fanciful tales and elaborate games, which he sees as pointless and unproductive. Huck resigns from their game of "robbers" because they never actually rob anyone or do anything of substance. He finds no value in their pretend adventures, stating, "But I couldn't see no profit in it." The point is reinforced when Tom concocts a game about treasure-laden caravan of Arabs, Spaniards, elephants: Huck is skeptical but decides to tag along anyway, giving Tom Sawyer the benefit yet again though he knows to expect no different. When it turns out to be nothing more than a Sunday-school picnic, Huck's skepticism is confirmed, seeing that "it warn't anything but a Sunday-school picnic, and only a primer-class at that." When Huck confronts Tom about the disappointing find, saying "I didn't see no di'monds," Tom Sawyer resorts to one of the con man's favorite tactics—he gaslights:

> "He said there was loads of them there, anyway; and he said there was A-rabs there, too, and elephants and things. I said, why couldn't we see them, then? He said if I warn't so ignorant, but had read a book called Don Quixote, I would know without asking. He said it was all done by enchantment. He said there was hundreds of soldiers there, and elephants and treasure, and so on, but we had enemies which he called magicians; and they had turned the whole thing into an infant Sunday-school, just out of spite. I said, all right; then the thing for us to do was to go for the magicians. Tom Sawyer said I was a numskull."[107]

[107] *HF* 15-16.

By the end of the novel, however, after Huck and Jim have arrived at the Phelps' family farm—as a guest and a prisoner, respectively—Huck's acquaintance with Tom Sawyer literally saves them, as the Phelpses turn out to be Tom's not-so-distant kin in a twist that is pretty far-fetched, even for Twain. The Phelps, who are Tom's distant relatives, unknowingly provide a gateway for Huck and Jim back into society. The irony is not lost on Huck, who has spent the majority of the novel rejecting societal norms and expectations. However, he recognizes that Tom's social standing and influence could be their saving grace.

Twain's portrayal of Jim's reaction to Tom's escape plan is particularly noteworthy. While it he depicts Jim as being genuinely impressed by Tom's elaborate scheme, it's crucial to consider that Jim also understands that being in Tom's good graces increases his chances of survival. As such, Jim knows better than to openly express any disdain or skepticism he might feel towards a white person's position, even if if he is just a boy. What might initially be interpreted as a descent into minstrelsy and submissive capitulation is not merely the deployment of a racist trope. Instead, Twain is illustrating a survival mechanism, a strategy employed by Jim to navigate the treacherous waters of a the antebellum South. Jim's apparent admiration for Tom's plan, then, can be seen as a calculated move, a performance designed to placate those in power as long as is necessary to increase his chances of survival and, eventually, freedom.

The climax of their grand escape plan unfolds as a grand farce. When the trio finally puts their plan into action, it immediately descends into chaos. Tom ends up shot in the leg, and Jim is recaptured, ironically as a result of his decision to turn back and help the wounded Tom. This incident provides a stark illustration of Jim's inherent worth and humanity, which is ironically acknowledged by the doctor who tends to Tom's wounds, saying "a " n—r like that is worth a

thousand dollars — and kind treatment, too."[108] This statement, while seemingly a compliment, underscores the dehumanizing reality of Jim's existence as a slave, where his worth is quantified in monetary terms, and his deservingness of kindness is seen as exceptional rather than a basic human right.

Twain, however, spares us the heart-wrenching spectacle of Jim's tragic re-enslavement or sale down the river. Instead, he delivers a surprising revelation: Jim had been a free man for months, ever since Miss Watson's death. This twist in the tale is as shocking as it is infuriating. Tom, it turns out, had been aware of Jim's freedom all along. Yet, he chose to keep this crucial piece of information to himself, orchestrating an elaborate and dangerous escape plan for his own amusement. To Tom, the entire ordeal was nothing more than a game, a grand adventure to be enjoyed, savored, and recollected later on. This revelation underscores the stark contrast between Tom's privileged position and Jim's precarious existence. For Tom, the stakes were never real; he was merely playing a role in his own romanticized narrative. For Jim, however, the stakes were his life and freedom. The disparity between their experiences serves as a chilling reminder of the power dynamics at play, and the cruel indifference of those who, like Tom, can afford to treat life-altering circumstances as mere child's play.

Huck's decision to go along with Tom's plan, despite its absurdity, is not born out of trust in Tom's *judgment* but rather out of a recognition of the power dynamics at play. Huck understands that Tom, with his social standing and charm, can likely get away with just about anything. More importantly, Huck further bets that Tom's word will protect him, so he understands that it is in his better interest not to alienate him. Jim, too, understands this dynamic and chooses to endure

[108] *HF* 353.

further indignity for the chance at freedom. Huck, too, makes a similar concession. He sets aside his common sense, his instinct for practical and straightforward solutions, in favor of the *sensus communis*. This is not a rejection of his own judgment but another strategic decision to ingratiate Tom Sawyer and ensure that he will vouch for them if necessary.

Saving Jim

> "Your damnation don't slumber; it will come swiftly and, in all probability, very suddenly upon many of you. You have reason to wonder that you are not already in hell."
>
> —EDWARDS[109]

The most substantial and pivotal judgment Huck makes is his decision to commit himself to aiding in Jim's escape. Being the ethical crux of the novel, this decision forces Huck to confront, head-on, what it means for a white person to act as a moral agent in the 1850s American South. Being of the status that he is—not to mention a child—Huck's ability to influence the workings of society are virtually nil; he has some money at his disposal, but he is not rich by any real standard.110 Still, there are several points at which Huck's decisions directly affect Jim's wellbeing, with none being more important than his decision to risk eternal damnation to advance Jim's escape.

[109] Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*: *A Sermon Preached at Enfield, July 8th, 1741*. *Selected Sermons of Jonathan Edwards*, edited by Harry Norman Gardiner, Macmillan, 1904, 95.

[110] Having access to $6,000 liquid cash in 1850 would yield roughly the equivalent of $230,000 in purchasing power in 2021—enough to buy a home in the country and get started on some sensible investments, but far from world-moving money. See CPI Inflation center: https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1850/

In Chapter 31, Huck makes the decision, once and for all and after agonizing reflection, that he would rather go to hell than turn Jim in. Though he has furthered Jim's running away consistently up to this point, and at times has fretted over the morality of it, he has been able to brush aside the ultimate moral question until this point in the novel. Until now, assisting Jim has largely coincided with furthering Huck's own journey; here, however, he has arrived at a decision which, if he *does* decide to act in Jim's favor, he is almost certainly acting against his own well-being. Assessing Huck's decisions regarding Jim's wellbeing are brought into sharp focus at this point in the novel because Twain finally forces Huck to consider the fullness of the stakes of his decision.

Understanding the fact that this is a moral quandary at all for Huck is central to understanding the novel and the culture it so insistently excoriates. From a present-day perspective, being one that, even though it is still mired in racial injustice, nevertheless considers chattel slavery unequivocally abhorrent, no moral judgment could seem more natural than to believe that helping a man to freedom is good and right. But nothing could be further from the 19th Century white southern perspective that Huck is working through. As we have been reminded several times to this point, aiding the escape of a runaway slave is defined as theft in Huck's culture. Though still a child, Huck's world has shown itself time and again to be a pitiless and unforgiving one—whoever the arbiter may be, someone will see to it that Huck is punished for his crimes (his harrowing recollections of what had become of Buck Grangerford for the sin of having the wrong name may well trouble him as well). And soon, Huck considers not just the earthly implications of what he's done, but the eternal ones as well.

> "And at last, when it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was

> being watched all the time from up there in heaven, whilst I was stealing a poor old woman's n—r that hadn't ever done me no harm, and now was showing me there's One that's always on the lookout, and ain't a-going to allow no such miserable doings to go only just so fur and no further, I most dropped in my tracks I was so scared. Well, I tried the best I could to kinder soften it up somehow for myself by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I warn't so much to blame; but something inside of me kept saying, 'there was the Sunday-school, you could a gone to it; and if you'd a done it they'd a learnt you there that people that acts as I'd been acting about that n—r goes to everlasting fire.'"[111]

Southern Protestantism, the foundational *sensus communis* throughout the South in Huck's time and our own, is deeply concerned with both the immortality and the soul and the conditions under which it will spend eternity. The God of the American South is the God of Edwards' *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, who is quick to anger and generous in His dispensation of punishment. Southern preachers borrowed liberally from Edwards' theology (minus his abolitionism), especially Baptists and Presbyterians. Among the many marks he left on Southern Protestantism is its preoccupation with hell, and how easy it can be to end up there.

Hell, it must be remembered, was not (and still is not) an abstract, metaphorical concept in the minds of most white southern Christians in the mid-19th Century. These people believe that hell is very real—it is not a lamentable, metaphysical separation from God; it is a tangible, physical place where sinners go to suffer infinitely at the hands of demons. Consisting mostly of Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians, (plus some Lutherans, Catholics, Episcopalians, and a small smattering of Mormons and Jews), most Southern Protestants traced their conceptions of

[111] *HF* 269.

hell to the old Puritans and their sermons on the subject. “The misery of the wicked in hell will be absolutely eternal” Edwards wrote in 1739: “That eternal death, or punishment, which God threatens to the wicked, is not annihilation, but an abiding sensible punishment or misery.”[112]

For the faithful in Huck's community, hell is not merely a spiritual or metaphysical state of existence, but a realm of physical torment. Edwards, in his writings, offers a vivid, albeit nonspecific, portrayal of the experience of hell. His words conjure an image of a place of ceaseless suffering, a place as real and tangible as the physical world we inhabit. Edwards writes, in terms that are nonspecific yet nonetheless palpable, about the experience of hell:

> “It is the wrath of the infinite God. If it were only the wrath of man, though it were of the most potent prince, it would be comparatively little to be regarded. The wrath of kings is very much dreaded, especially of absolute monarchs, that have the possessions and lives of their subjects wholly in their power, to be disposed of at their mere will… The subject that very much enrages an arbitrary prince is liable to suffer the most extreme torments that human art can invent, or human power can inflict. But the greatest earthly potentates, in their greatest majesty and strength, and when clothed in their greatest terrors, are but feeble, despicable worms of the dust, in comparison of the great and almighty Creator and King of heaven and earth…”[113]

In other words, imagining hell for a white fundamentalist Christian is to imagine the worst kinds of physical torture imaginable. It would involve imagining being *conscious* of the pain

[112] See Edwards, *The Eternity of Hell’s Torments [A Sermon on Matt. Xxv. 46.]*, edited by Charles Edward De Coetlogon, 1788, p. 9.

[113] Edwards, *Sinners*, 89.

from this torture, as the body will never succumb to numbness or pass out from the pain. It can only be conceived as pain that is beyond unendurable but must be endured for eternity without end. Forever.

> "It is *everlasting* wrath. It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity there will be no end to this exquisite, horrible misery. When you look forward, shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all; you will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty, merciless vengeance; and then when you have so done, when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but a point to what remains. So that your punishment will indeed be infinite. Oh, who can express what the state of a soul in such circumstances is! All that we can possibly say about it give but a very feeble, faint representation of it; it is inexpressible and inconceivable: for 'who knows the power of God's anger?'
>
> How dreadful is the state of those that are daily and hourly in danger of this great wrath and infinite misery!"[114]

That is what white Christian Southerners believe hell is. To Christian Southerners of Huck's time, hell was not a mere abstraction or metaphor. It was a vivid, tangible reality, a place of ceaseless physical torment. This belief plays a critical role in shaping their moral and ethical

[114] Ibid, 93-94.

decision-making of Huck's community—namely, that challenging the *sensus communis* in virtually any way might be considered an act of such onerous transgression that it offends God to the point of exercising His ultimate punitive authority. Every week, congregations were sternly reminded from the pulpits of the presumed consequences of challenging the established order, which they claimed was "ordained by God." In practice, what Southern aristocrats sought to uphold was not the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus, but rather a power structure that ensured their continued prosperity and dominance. They papered over this grotesque reality with a theology that not only justified their actions but also placed them at the top of a hierarchy that directed its lowest members to treat their oppressors "with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ." (Ephesians 6:5). The God they worshiped not only condoned but actively encouraged their dominion over the earth, capital, labor, animals, natural resources, and everything else they could bring under their dominion. Like all strongmen, they maintained their exploitative order through the constant threat—and frequent demonstration—of violence. They extorted the people around them by forceful means, using their theology as a tool to legitimize their actions and maintain their grip on power.

Undoubtedly many of these grim ruminations would have rushed cascaded through Huck's mind in a flash. "It made me shiver," Huck writes, reflecting on the possibility of such a fate, before engaging in the only activity he would have been consciously aware of as a tool for wrestling through such problems: he prays. Recall that Huck is thoroughly grounded in the idea that it is categorically sinful to advance a runaway slave's escape. Doing so is immediately intuitable as theft in Huck's *sensus communis*, and theft is unambiguously forbidden by God.115 Huck prays for deliverance from his "sinful" temptations—which is to say, the "temptation" to

115 Ex. 20:15

assist Jim—as the widow has instructed him, but runs into unavoidable trouble by recognizing that he simply *cannot do that*:

> "I about made up my mind to pray, and see if I couldn't try to quit being the kind of a boy I was and be better. So I kneeled down. But the words wouldn't come. Why wouldn't they? It warn't no use to try and hide it from Him. Nor from *me*, neither. I knowed very well why they wouldn't come. It was because my heart warn't right; it was because I warn't square; it was because I was playing double. I was letting *on* to give up sin, but away inside of me I was holding on to the biggest one of all. I was trying to make my mouth *say* I would do the right thing and the clean thing, and go and write to that n—r's owner and tell where he was; but deep down in me I knowed it was a lie, and He knowed it. You can't pray a lie—I found that out."[116]

Now Huck finds himself in a remarkable predicament concerning his moral decision-making process. Convinced as he is that act of aiding a runaway is inherently wrong, he likewise is convinced that his *actual* moral feeling—i.e., that it is *wrong* that Jim should suffer by going back into slavery—is itself the morally abhorrent one. Huck's heretofore internalization of his own "orneriness," exacerbated by his outcast state and wretched family history, paves the way for him to see himself as the inherent sinner that he has been taught he is. Doing the "right thing," as his community standards would have it, would mean turning Jim in, despite the knowledge that Miss Watson might be so enraged by Jim's "ungratefulness" as to sell him down the river. But his "gut" feeling (which is to say, his *aesthetic* consideration) is that it would not

[116] *HF* 269.

be good or right to do this because it would cause suffering to Jim, and Huck is the only person in the novel to recognize that *Jim's feelings matter*.

Huck gives up on his prayer, but not on thinking through what to do next. He writes out the confessional note intended for Miss Watson, but considers Jim again, this time in the context of their time spent together, and not through the lens of the *sensus communis.* Huck say that he:

> "…went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me all the time: in the day and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him…

If Huck had not taken the time to reflect on this moral judgment, he easily might have dismissed the matter altogether. Anyone in Huck's position would have been taught from childhood that Jim is property first and last, and we see in Huck's wrestling with the subject that he has a lot of trouble thinking around that concept as well, feeling guilt as he does for "stealing a poor old woman's n—r that hadn't ever done [him] no harm."[117] Undoubtedly, any of Huck's white contemporaries would not think twice about turning in a runaway if given the opportunity; not only would it be criminal not to do so, but there would often be a monetary reward on offer, as well. Fortunately, since Huck does not place much stock in money (and since he not in want of it), the latter consideration never crosses his mind. But even Instead, Huck finds himself

[117] The syntax of this sentence is interesting, containing unclear relationship between the direct object of who exactly "hadn't ever done [him] no harm." Contextually, Huck clearly means Miss Watson, this being the point at which he wrestles with her victim hood. However, Huck's poor grammar creates a slick double-meaning here: syntactically, he is saying it is the "old woman's n—r" who had never wronged him.

unable to "harden"[118] himself against Jim, who by this point has openly confessed that he considers Huck to be his only friend in the world.

> "Pooty soon I'll be a-shout'n' for joy, en I'll say, it's all on accounts o' Huck; I's a free man, en I couldn't ever ben free ef it hadn' ben for Huck; Huck done it. Jim won't ever forgit you, Huck; you's de bes' fren' Jim's ever had; en you's de only fren' ole Jim's got now." (ch 16)

Initially, Huck is inclined to believe that the morally correct course of action would be to turn Jim in—not to mention the fact that he is terrified by the prospect of eternal damnation. Motivated by fears associated with violating these societal norms, Huck write a letter to Miss Watson revealing Jim's location. For a moment, Huck feels a sense of pride, a belief that he has done the 'right' thing. But the feeling is brief; having "resolved" his moral quandary, Huck forgets to return to his prayer and instead lets his mind wander, first toward the satisfaction of "thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell" but soon meandering into more important matters:

> "And [I]went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me all the time: in the day and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against

[118] A turn of phrase clearly invoking Huck's protestant upbringing, the notion of a "hardened heart" appears numerous times throughout the Old and New Testaments, often in reference to figures in power refusing to have (which is to say, *feel*) pity for those suffering. See Exod. 4:21, 7:3-4, 14:8; Deut. 2:30; Isa. 6:10, 42:25; Matt. 3:15 (and Acts 28:17, same verse appears in both books), Rom. 2:5; Rev. 16:9. Twain's ironic invocation of just those passages of scripture that emphasize the sinfulness of refusing to accept as valid the pain of others is among his more subtle indicators of the ever-present moral hypocrisy of the adults in Huck's society, not to mention Twain's own command of scripture.

> him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now; and then I happened to look around and see that paper.[119]

Here in this moment, as Huck cycles through a series of vivid memories of the man who is every way his best and most-loved friend, Huck's common sense kicks in just in time. He recognizes this as *the* pivotal moment in his life, a moment that will determine each of their fates—not in any hypothetical afterlife, but in *this* one. Huck takes the letter "a-trembling, because [he]'d got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and [he] knowed it." Finally, after a brief but decisive moment, Huck says aloud, "All right, then, I'll *go* to hell," and tears the letter up.

This is the point of no return, the point at which Huck fully commits to rejecting the societal norms of his community by fully committing his actions toward the ultimate end of aiding Jim's escape to freedom. He also understands the supposed consequences for doing so—aiding a runaway slave was not only illegal; it was considered deviant, morally abhorrent behavior in the mid-19th Century South. Moreover, the odds of successfully escaping together without injury or

[119] *HF* 270.

death were slim—the novel *began* just a hair's breadth from the Illinois border (which would have been dotted with slave-catchers),[120] and Twain's central conceit of casting his placing his protagonists on an engineless *raft* that keeps taking them *deeper south*, makes their prospects for success very unlikely. Huck's willingness to risk such a fate for the sake of Jim, whom he has been taught to view as nothing more than property, rides entirely on the fact that Huck has come to recognize Jim's *humanity* understanding that, whether this white southern God approves or not, the only moral option for Huck is to aid in Jim's escape. As such, he commits himself to doing so, "and never thought no more about reforming."

The Trouble with *Huck Finn*

If teaching *Huck Finn* seems difficult, that is because *Huck Finn* is a difficult text. A satire of stunning dexterity, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is so masterfully objectionable[121] that it could find the most vociferous critics in any century, let alone one so rife with pedants as our own. It is a children's book by careful design, but that design is not to soften or excuse the horrors of the antebellum South; it is to introduce children to them in such a way that provides a foothold for thinking critically about not only the societal infrastructures that dominate their lives but also about how to navigate them with humanity and conscientiousness.

[120] See James Tackach, "Why Does Jim Not Escape to Illinois in Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society,* vol. 97, no. 3, pp 216 – 225.

[121] Consider this joke from Chapter 32, in which Huck elaborated upon his lie to Aunt Sally about why the steamboat he allegedly arrived on was so delayed (in reality there was no such steamboat, but Huck, seizing upon the realization that this is his chance to pass himself off as a family member, almost unconsciously lies):

> "It wasn't the grounding—that didn't keep us back but a little. We blowed out a cylinder-head."
> "Good gracious! anybody hurt?"
> "No'm. Killed a n—r."
> "Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt." (230)

While it was a success on publication and found its way into virtually every English classroom in the United States by the early to mid-20th Century, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has dramatically fallen out of favor in recent decades. While the demographics and political orientations of its detractors have morphed, critics have always most vocally taken issue with its language as a matter of ideological principle. Though its immediate critics thought the novel "vulgar," with its belligerent disregard for grammar and heretical tone toward religion, today's readers view the novel's relentless use of the n-word as its cardinal sin, often to the point of refusing to engage with the text whatsoever, considering the presence of such language enough to render the text irredeemable. In the kind of ironic twist that Twain himself might have conjured up, the reasons for outrage over his *magnum opus* have completely turned themselves upside-down in the century-and-a-half since its publishing. While readers in Twain's own time were aghast at his unapologetically antiracist views, readers in our own are shocked by his racist ones. Today, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is all but absent from English classrooms nationwide.

As a satire of the highest order, *Huck Finn* lampoons every level of Huck's sociocultural order, scrutinizing and ultimately subverting societal attitudes towards religion, wealth, and education. Of all the conventional attitudes, societal norms, and power dynamics that Twain critiques, none are more prominently or relentlessly explored than those surrounding race, which, as a child coming of age, Huck is learning to scrutinize according to his own judgment in real time as he ventures down the Mississippi. Set the mid-1840s but published in 1885, *Huck Finn* was an obvious excoriation of the entrenched attitudes inherited from antebellum South which, by the time the novel was published, had reverted to codifying white supremacy into law despite the War and Reconstruction. By conventional moral standards of "polite" society, Huck Finn's

attitudes and behaviors are unacceptable in both Twain's century *and* our own, in with the issue of race as their inflection points.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is not a novel that is problematized by race. It is a novel that is *about* race. Nothing makes this point more firmly than in the novel's liberal dispensation of the dreaded n-word, now widely considered the most vulgar and offensive word in American English.[122] It appears 212 times in the novel, with the relatively tame—albeit still cruelly clinical— word "slave" appearing only eleven times by contrast.[123] It has been argued about at length whether or not this was necessary for Twain to do this; undoubtedly he would have thought so, his attention to authentic representation of southern language patterns being among his chief concerns. In the 21st Century, Mark Twain—as well as Huck Finn—may be considered unapologetic racists. But by the standards of the 19th Century, this is simply not a sufficient characterization of the novel's attitudes toward and treatment of race.

The crux of the matter is that, barring the word "slave," the n-word was the *only* general term to describe a black person in Huck's environment. As Aunt Sally shows, if in a steamboat accident "some people" get killed, the one who was killed was *not a person,* but a "n—r." There is no way around that, and this being a 19th Century novel, it cannot reasonably be argued that Twain could not have used another word in its place without the novel reading very strangely. While there is no use tapdancing around this most difficult of subjects, that has not stopped people from trying. One extreme approach removed the "n" word from the text altogether,

[122] I make this claim from the perspective of both a 21st Century *sensus communis* as well as a reflective, common-sense judgment. The final judgment is the same from either approach.

[123] David Sloane, "The N-Word in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Reconsidered." *The Mark Twain Annual*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2014, 71.

replacing it where necessary with the more clinical "slave"[124] While the "slave Jim" edition of *Huck Finn* (and the "robot Jim"[125] edition that parodied it), might have been well-intentioned, it missed the point altogether and replaced the offending noun with an arguably worse one, for whatever the relative demerits of each term have when compared to one another may be, this much is certain: *Jim is not a slave*.

Not at his core, anyway, and not within the text of the novel. He is at times held captive and is always a fugitive, but, barring a few expository incidents in the novel's early chapters, the reader hardly sees Jim in the context of his life as an enslaved person. We see him as an impromptu runaway companion, as a compassionate elder figure, as a loving and remorseful father, and even as man reduced to humiliation by minstrelsy. But we do not see a slave. We may see a man enslaved by a vicious system of capital, and even if Jim understands where he stands in that system, he does not capitulate his agency. "'Yes; en I's rich now, come to look at it,'" Jim says to Huck. "I owns mysef, en I's wuth eight hund'd dollars."[126]

What can be said is this: if readers find themselves uncomfortable with the language and themes within the book's pages, it is because that is precisely Twains intent. As a satire exploring society's normalized cruelties, *Huckleberry Finn* deliberately provokes moral outrage, disbelief, and visceral reactions in its own readers. Ideological approaches that primarily judge the text against asset of moral standards associated with contemporary literary criticism fundamentally misinterpret the literary strategy at play. Twain's project is to ruthlessly scrutinize

[124] See Alan Gribben, ed., *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: The NewSouth Edition*, NewSouth Books, 2011. The issues here are difficult since neither the customary language nor the law allowed for a black person to be a legal person, and that still applies with the substitution 'slave.' Slaves were *property,* not 'persons.'

[125] After the "Slave Jim" edition was released, a parody edit was released that replaced the n-word with the word "robot" to highlight the unworkability of the exercise in the first place. See Etta Devine and Gabriel Diani, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: Robotic Edition*, Diani and Devine Press, 2011.

[126] In Twain's typically wry style, Jim immediately proceeds to consider the practical, if ironic, implications of his view: "'I wisht I had de money, I wouldn' want no mo'." (*HF* 57).

a complex nexus of social conventions, attitudes, institutions, and power dynamics that shaped the human experience in the South, black and white. His master stroke—as well as his gravest transgression, as it were—consists in confronting us with the everyday inhumanities that otherwise passed without notice.

Therefore, while it can be admitted that Huck's attitudes are racist by conditioning, engaging as he does in more than a few commonplace racist tropes within novel's pages, it cannot be overlooked that the racist worldview in the South was the default one. Any antiracism in this environment would not only be of foreign sociocultural influence, but it would put one in direct confrontation with the *sensus communis* in ways that could land oneself in real trouble, if not physical danger. Huck plainly does, however, come to recognize the injustices embedded in his society and consciously places himself in danger, risking damnation itself, to advance the ultimate cause of Jim's freedom, but we cannot make the mistake of thinking that the received racial attitudes of a boy in Huck's position is something that can be sluffed off like a spare coat.

The novel has also been condemned for its rather extraordinary ending, which has drawn the ire of critics everywhere and earned the scorn of even some of the novel's greatest defenders. Between Tom Sawyer's miraculous reappearance, the revelation of Jim's freedom, and the cockamamie nature of Tom's "escape" plan to free Jim, *Huckleberry Finn* takes something of a turn into outlandish farce in the last few chapters, an opinion that is echoed throughout the body of literature on the novel.[127] Twain has been accused of appending a haphazard *deus ex machina* to the conclusion of "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." The improbable reunion of Huck and Tom Sawyer, facilitated by a chance encounter at Tom's extended family's farm, has been a point

[127] Most of the examples hinge on Tom Sawyer insisting that they must do it (whatever it is) according to 'the book.' Here is the principle in Chapter II: "Why, blame it all, we've g*ot* to do it. Don't I tell you it's in the books? Do you want to go to doing different from what's in the books, and get things all muddled up?" (11).

of contention for many critics. Esteemed voices like Ernest Hemingway and Leo Marx have expressed their disdain for the novel's ending. Hemingway, in particular, was so incensed that he advised readers to stop at the point where Jim is kidnapped and turned in by the king and the duke, declaring, "That is the real end. The rest is just cheating."[128]

The novel's "happy" ending revolves around two broad conceits and both are beyond implausible. The first, of course, is the astronomical coincidence that, after drifting "all the way down the river, eleven hundred mile,"[129] [ch 42] Jim and Huck end up on a farmstead owned by Tom Sawyer's distant family, which allows Tom himself to make an appearance in the novels final chapters. The other is Miss Watson's sudden, seemingly inexplicable decision to free Jim in her will. Throughout the novel, Jim's monetary "value" fluctuates between $800 and $1,000—not an insignificant sum in the context of the era. The notion that a wealthy individual like Miss Watson would suddenly feel more deeply for Jim's humanity than for the state of her holdings is utterly implausible without Miss Watson having undergone some variety of profound moral episode.

According to Tom Sawyer's account, however, this is exactly what happened. His account is brief but pivotal: "Old Miss Watson died two months ago, and she was **ashamed** she ever was going to sell him down the river, **and said so**; and she set him free in her will."[130] We have no further explication of the extent of Miss Watson's shame, but it was substantial enough for Tom to have taken notice. But regardless of Miss Watson's moral reflection, Twain is pointing out the fundamental (and legal) truth of the matter: that *only* Miss Watson can free Jim. Whatever brought about Miss Watson's change of heart is not germane—what is necessary is that she have

[128] See Hemingway, *Green Hills of Africa*, Scribner, 2002, p. 23.
[129] *HF* 358.
[130] *HF* 357.

it, and that we see its necessity for Jim's freedom: in the eyes of the social order, Jim can never be free until Miss Watson says he is.

Despite its presentation as a children's novel, Twain's extraordinary decision to introduce as runaway slave as the protagonist's companion character almost dooms Huck's adventures to tragedy from the very beginning. The likelihood for Jim's successful escape is low from the beginning, and the fact that Twain chose a raft floating downstream on the Mississippi River—deeper and deeper into slave country—as Huck and Jim's means of conveyance only lessens the chances that Jim will ever make it to freedom. Twain just as easily could have avoided the fog at Cairo altogether, had Huck and Jim turn north at the Ohio River, and carry on their adventures toward Pennsylvania. But instead, he put them on a raft and plunged them further into danger, so deep in fact that it became virtually impossible for them to escape.

The reason for this, I believe, is that Twain wants to draw our attention to the contemporaneous hopelessness of a satisfactory resolution to the institutionalized racism in the South. *Huckleberry Finn* is a lamentation of the fact that there *is* no way out of danger for the likes of Huck *or* Jim. What Miss Watson's decision to free Jim demonstrates is an ultimate truth, as Twain saw it, regarding race relations in the South, which was this: in order for there to be a peaceful transition to a more just and equitable future, it would require on the part of white people everywhere a complete and utter reversal in character, behavior, and attitude toward black Americans.

In other words, it would take a miracle.[131] The idea that the rights of black people in 19th Century America ultimately *depended* on the willful capitulation of whites is anathema to

[131] Latin *mīrāculum* ("object of wonder"), from *mīror* ("to wonder at"), ifrom *mīrus* ("wonderful"), from Proto-Indo-European *(s)meyh-* ("to smile, to be astonished"). It might be suggested that this "miracle" was what reflective judgment, when an actual narrative is imagined, can bring about—something incredible to behold.

contemporary academic liberalism, with echoes of the kind of white saviorism that just will not do in our current century. This is irrelevant to Twain's material. The axes of power, capital, and sheer brute force all aligned in the favor of white people in such a way that the notion that it could be "overcome" entirely against its will was, in his own estimation, absurd. Instead, it underscores the immense challenges faced by those who dared to defy the status quo in pursuit of justice and equality and the hopelessness of trying to move against it. Like its central motif and metaphor—the Mississippi River—it is a mighty and insurmountable force that can be navigated only very carefully. In terms of the role of reflective judgment, however, the point is that the effect is not in the nature of empirical force, but a freedom of choice, no matter how rare it is.

Though Miss Watson's freeing of Jim in her will is convenient plot device that spares the reader the unbearable thought of an ending in which Jim is returned to slavery, it is not merely that. It is also uncomfortable commentary on the societal transformation required in 19th-century America, particularly in the South, and for that matter, continues to this day Twain is suggesting here that for Black people to be treated with fairness, equality, and respect in the United States there had to be a seismic shift in the moral consciousness—and the *sensus communis*—of white people everywhere. This kind of change of heart would require nothing less than a conversion of Pauline proportions in the hearts and minds of every power broker in the South, and indeed, anyone with a stake in the plantation economy. By 1885 Twain saw that beating the South into oblivion was not enough to alter their entrenched prejudices. They were going to have to do some serious work *on themselves* to heal their culture and society—until then, all their pretenses toward respectability, gentility, and piousness ring as hollow as those priests who "dress the

wounds of my people as though it were not serious, saying 'Peace, peace!' when there is no peace."[132]

> You got to go to the lonesome valley
> You got to go there by yourself
> Nobody else can go for you
> You got to go there by yourself
>
> Oh, you got to ask the Lord's forgiveness
> Nobody else can ask Him for you
>
> You got to go to the lonesome valley
> You got to go there by yourself
> Nobody else, nobody else can go for you
> You got to go there by yourself.[133]

Twain's project in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is not to prescribe definitive solutions to the societal issues he critiques. However, he does propose a starting point for addressing the racial problems that beleaguer the South, which is to strip away the pretense of societal roles in order to engage with one another as human beings. Huck and Jim are never happier than when they are left alone, drifting down the river, talking under the stars:

> "Sometimes we'd have that whole river all to ourselves for the longest time. Yonder was the banks and the islands, across the water; and maybe a spark—

[132] *Jeremiah* 6:14; 8:11.
[133] Anonymous, "Lonesome Valley," American folk song. Recorded by Fairfield Four, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Original Motion Picture Soundtrack (2000). First recorded 1927 by David Miller.

> which was a candle in a cabin window; and sometimes on the water you could see a spark or two—on a raft or a scow, you know; and maybe you could hear a fiddle or a song coming over from one of them crafts. It's lovely to live on a raft."[134]

Concluding Remarks

The central conflict in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn lies in the tension between Huck's capacity for reasoned, reflective judgment—his common sense—and the societal norms that surround him. As an educational tool, the novel is fundamentally about this tension between one's ability to critically assess a situation and the societal narratives one has been taught. When faced with decisions of significant consequence, Huck often finds that his best judgment is at odds with the prevailing societal consensus, making it an exceptional educational tool for demonstrating "thinking for oneself" contra *sensus communis* without getting lost in solipsisms. Narrated in the first person and replete with introspective monologues, Huckleberry Finn is primarily a narrative of personal reflection in the face of outlandish events and cruel societal conventions. Spared the burden of overly ideological upbringing, Huck's decisions are grounded in practicality, empathy, and mercy. He makes practical, aesthetic judgments based on who is harmed by the events unfolding around him and what the nature and extent of that harm might be. His ethical decisions are not dictated by conventional standards of behavior but are derived from his ability to imagine himself in another's position.

Huck Finn's success as a coming-age-story cannot be understated; though the novel's action takes place over the course of just a few months in Huck's early adolescence, he does more

[134] *HF* 158.

growing and reflecting in that short period than most of us manage in a lifetime. This is owed in part to the material conditions of Huck's life, but to the fact that Huck really does not have much of a choice but to face head-on the most explosive issues of his century and of the century since. In fact, children of about Huck's age are the ideal audience for Twain's message. They are in a formative period, often internally questioning authority and societal norms but frequently unable to voice such questions freely. Children in the South, especially, would have witnessed all manners of horrors committed in the name of upholding the status quo while still attending church on Sundays. These readers, more than any, would have needed a signal that the daily horrors they observed *were*, in fact, horrors, that they *were* absurd, and we are *not* wrong to interrogate them.

IV. Lest Ye Be Judged: Money, Trust, and Character in Melville's *The Confidence-Man*

> *"With much communication he will tempt thee; he will smile upon thee, and speak thee fair, and say What wantest thou? If thou be for his profit he will use thee; he will make thee bare, and will not be sorry for it. Observe and take good heed. When thou hearest these things, awake in thy sleep."*
>
> Sirach 13: 1-14[135]

At the outset of Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man*, an apparent deaf-mute sets foot aboard the *Fidèle*, a Mississippi steamboat preparing to disembark downriver from St. Louis, Missouri. The man carries no luggage with him, nor is he accompanied by any traveling companions. He demonstrates no sense of belonging whatsoever: "From the shrugged shoulders, titters, whispers, wonderings of the crowd, it was plain that he was, in the extremest sense of the word, a stranger." Carrying nothing but a blank slate, the stranger moves throughout the ship until he happens upon a notice warning of a "mysterious imposter, supposed to have recently arrived from the East," besides which he decides to take his place. Then, writing on his slate while standing right beside the "wanted" placard, the deaf-mute turns his slate to the crowd to reveal the words:

[135] Melville presents an editorialized version of this text in Chapter 45 through the voice of Frank Goodman, the Cosmopolitan, who, reading from the old man's Bible, not only cherry-picks lines but rearranges them without explanation.

"Charity thinketh no evil."[136]

With this juxtaposition between the report of a known swindler's possible presence and the reminder that—at least from St. Paul's perspective—a moral spirit is a trusting one, Melville practically dares us at the outset to trust his innocuous but suspicious stranger in spite of ourselves, if indeed it is his purpose to play the swindler. He seems harmless enough, and being entirely noncommunicative, the passersby are allowed to project whatever attitudes they like toward the sincerity of his evangelism. He cannot hear anyone judging him, nor can he engage in any conversation, honest or not. Melville provides no additional context for interpreting his message except to allude to the man in cream-colors' own sense of trust in the world around him, no small amount of which would be required to fall asleep soundly on the deck of a busy steamboat, as Melville's stranger does before the first chapter concludes.

After introducing this stranger, Melville immediately seizes upon the reader's sense of irony as he shifts focus to the boat's barber, who is setting up shop for the day and among whose various pieces of signage hangs the particularly stern message to the public:

"No trust."[137]

[136] Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade. The Writings of Herman Melville: The Northwestern-Newberry Edition*, edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, Northwestern University Press, 1984.

[137] *CM* 5.

"Trust," in this context, refers to credit in a financial sense, [138] the message being the barber will not serve customers on promise to pay later.[139] There being no way of ascertaining a customer's creditworthiness in real time on a riverboat full of strangers coming and going in the mid-19th Century, the barber has done the prudent thing. Its presence here belies the private history of a professional tradesman whose trust had been abused in the past by honest-looking customers promising to pay for his services the next day, only to disappear into obscurity immediately upon their exit.[140] Charity may thinketh no evil, says the barber's sign, but his shop is no charity.

The dual meanings of the word "trust"[141] being so immediately thrust before us, Melville invites us (à la Dylan's ruminations on the word "house," [142]) to reflect extensively on what it means to trust in something, be it an idea, a person, an institution, or any other suitable concept. He offers few signals to indicate a correct "way" of interpreting the subject except to present us

[138] In practice, credit is probably the first and oldest incarnation of what eventually become the more "civilized" monetary systems used in more recent centuries. The practice of "borrowing" goods or services in return for payment received in the future extends to the earliest records of agricultural civilization—in much of Mesopotamia, for example, a balance on most goods or services could be paid in barley or wheat at the end of each harvest season. Keeping track of who owed what to whom, however, required formal, agreed-upon records of the deal and a standard unit of exchange to measure everything in. Financial instruments, in their infancy, did not depend on gold or silver or barter economies. They ran on *writing* (i.e., on intricate records of perishable goods of real value—barley, wheat, beer, and so on), as they still do today (see William N. Goetzmann, "Finance and Writing" in *Money Changes Everything: How Finance Made Civilization Possible*, Princeton, 2016, pp. 19-30.

[139] Itself an extraordinary irony, considering that all U.S. banknotes are little more than promissory notes themselves—in 1857, they would have been dubious slips of "cash" issued by private, remote banks that were "redeemable" for gold or silver that may not have really been there.

[140] Indeed, Melville confirms as much in chapter 42: "'Now you speak a little in my line, sir,' said the barber, not unrelieved at this return to plain talk; 'that notification I find very useful, sparing me much work which would not pay. Yes, I lost a good deal, off and on, before putting that up,' gratefully glancing towards it" (227).

[141] Etymologically speaking, "trust" derives from the Old Norse *traust* (confidence, faith, trust), from the Proto-Germanic *traustą* ("firm, strong") itself from Proto-Indo-European *deru-*, *drew-*, *drū-* ("to be firm, hard, solid). Its theorized common usage in PIE, *dóru*, means "tree." To trust something means to understand it to be solid, even rooted.

[142] "Bob Dylan Gives Press Conference in San Francisco, Part II: The second half of the interview Dylan gave in 1965 at KQED." *Rolling Stone*, January 1965. See Appendix I.

in the first chapter with these two attitudes at polar ends of the field—the one who suggests we "thinketh no evil" versus the one who does so under no circumstance. The barber's motivations in this context are clear: he is there to make a living by providing a service, and he does not play games in doing so. As to this strange traveler, however, we are left to wonder at his purpose. It is possible that he is soliciting alms, but if so, he does so only implicitly and in the reserved style of Theravada[143] mendicancy. He may be a wayward proselytizer, but not a very effective one, being mostly noncommunicative. Soon he drifts of into a relatively peaceful sleep "in a retired spot on the forecastle," which he does, as Melville's narrator points out, at great personal risk, "by stealing into retirement, and there going asleep and continuing so, he seemed to have courted oblivion, a boon not often withheld from so humble an applicant as he." After a few "epitaphic comments, conflictingly spoken or thought, of a miscellaneous company" concerning his oddness, Melville leaves this stranger to slumber in utter ignorance of his surroundings before moving from him entirely.

If we take the juxtaposition of the stranger and the barber's respective attitudes toward trust as a barometer of what such attitudes can be in their absolutes, there emerges a startling spectrum between certainty and ambiguity: the barber's policy, "No Trust," is absolute in its refutation. No trust means no trust; as a policy, he does not make exceptions. The stranger's meaning, however, is full of ambiguities, his chief motive being a mystery—without a sense of what his purpose is within this context, we can only speculate as to who he might be. Invoking St. Paul's exhortations of "charity" in 1 Corinthians 13, the stranger's purpose may first appear to be that of a panhandler, but we never see him take a dime, nor even hold out his hat. Further, though the standard King James Bible (undoubtedly the text with which Melville would have been most

[143] "The way of the elders": one of the two main schools of Buddhism.

familiar) presents this concept as "charity," this translation has been the subject of profound contention. Laden as it is with the connotation of alms, the original Greek, ἀγάπη *(agápē)*, is not limited to the contemporary sense of charity but, more broadly, refers to a sense of love for humankind, or a love for God that manifests itself in performing acts of goodwill toward one's neighbor.

But as the deaf-mute slips into slumber and the barber sets up shop, Melville shifts the focus away from these two polar ends of the spectrum of trust and toward another figure who, though his motives remain shrouded throughout the text, will test the capacity for faith of every character he crosses.

* * *

The Confidence-Man takes place on on April Fools' Day, 1857—the very day the book was published—aboard a riverboat steaming down the Mississippi River from St. Louis to New Orleans, onboarding and offboarding countless passengers at every stop along the way. Set between the hours of dawn and midnight, the "narrative," such as it is, follows an ambiguous, possibly shapeshifting figure circulating throughout the corridors of the ship and engaging in provocative dialogues with its various passengers. In the simplest cases, he merely wants money and works his loquacious charm to part fools from theirs; in more serious exchanges, however, he eagerly engages in lofty, semi-philosophical dialogues on the virtues of "confidence." Its setting on April Fool's Day on a boat drifting from town to town is appropriate—the central conceit of the "holiday" is that everyone is at least low-key aware that anyone around could be playing a trick on them at any time, but, it nevertheless being necessary to venture out into the world to conduct the day's business, everyone still goes along for the ride.

The plotless action of *The Confidence-Man* revolves around a central figure, a shapeshifting "confidence-man" of unclear motives—but with an obsessive fixation on the notion of "confidence" in fellow human beings—who flits from scene to scene aboard the riverboat engaging other passengers in lengthy discussions in which he attempts to demonstrate, from countless perspectives, that having confidence in one another is of unsurpassed importance in all social affairs. Often, but not always, the conversation culminates in the confidence-man asking for money, whether in the form of alms,[144] or a loan,[145] or an investment,[146] but always under the presumption of "confidence" that the money is really going toward that which the confidence-man claims it is. He appears under various guises—a philanthropist, a herb-doctor, a stockbroker, and more.

At a glance, the eponymous confidence-man occupying Melville's attention would appear to be a standard grifter operating aboard a ship of strangers, all of whom will soon disembark at their respective destinations and then be seen no more. Melville practically dares us to assume as much, providing his text as he does with a singular proper noun as a title and the ambiguous "*His Masquerade*" as a subtitle, placing the presumption of disguise and false pretense immediately at the fore of the novel. At least one standard reading of the text is that the various avatars of the so-called "confidence-man" are the assorted disguises of a single character undergoing a "masquerade," and indeed there are a number of signals that Melville employs to prime the reader to suspect this very conceit: from the very word "masquerade" in the title to the description of a wanted poster advertising the reward for "a mysterious imposter, supposed to

[144] See *CM,* Chapter 7 "A gentleman with gold sleeve-buttons," pp. 35-42.

[145] See *CM*, Chapter 12, "Story of the unfortunate man, from which may be gathered whether or no he has been justly so entitled," pp. 60-63.

[146] See *CM*, Chapter 9, "Two businessmen transact a little business," pp. 46-51.

have recently arrived from the East"[147] on the first page. However, if it is substantial textual evidence that this is indeed the same imposter in series of disguises that we are seeking, Melville's text leaves quite a lot to be desired. The sheer logistical challenge of making the necessary wardrobe changes without being detected would require a Sisyphean suspension of disbelief, and, with only minor exceptions,[148] there is virtually no textual evidence that this is what is consistently happening throughout the book. Indeed, the only real evidence that these figures may be the same person, beyond their propensity for ornate, Melvillian syntax, is their bizarre obsession with the notion of confidence.

The Confidence-Man is a perplexing work of fiction and one that requires extensive reflective judgment to make sense of. Not exactly a novel (or even a story, for that matter), Melville's non-narrative fiction defies categorization at every turn, as does its parade of characters who, at any given point, may or may not be the same figure in various disguises. Its complex syntax, stagnant "plot" structure, wayward philosophizing, and inscrutable characters make it inherently resistant to neat, easily interpretable readings. But that has not stopped critics from trying. However, many of these readings, while insightful in their own right, fail to provide a comprehensive understanding of the text. This is to say, they are inconsistent with the entirety of the novel, often focusing too narrowly on certain aspects while neglecting others. One common pitfall is the tendency to oversimplify the character of the confidence-man himself. One common interpretation—made popular by Herschel Parker in his notes on the *Norton Critical*

[147] *CM* 3.

[148] The black guinea snagging Mr Robert's business card and John Ringman "somehow" having it immediately after is really the most telling episode; it suggests cooperation between the two but not identicality. In fact, given that these episodes happen in fairly quick succession of events, it is far more plausible that these are two people working together and not the same figure changing disguises. See *CM* 17.

Edition[149]—is that he is a straightforward embodiment of the Devil, and that his quest for "confidence" is an allegorical appeal for the passengers' souls. Bruce Franklin, like Parker, also leans towards a theological interpretation of the Confidence-Man, albeit with a broader scope. Franklin incorporating global myth and faith traditions into his analysis, presenting the Confidence-Man as a mythical, cross-cultural religious archetype à la Lévi-Straussian "deep structures" and suggesting that the Confidence-Man represents a universal figure found across cultural narratives. Cornell West, for his part, offers a unique interpretation of the confidence-man's "black guinea" persona by characterizing him as a "jazz-like figure," suggesting a sense of improvisation and spontaneity. According to West, this character is constantly "on the ropes," navigating a precarious existence through the use of "smoke and mirrors," not just to survive, but to maintain his sanity, dignity, compassion, and hope amidst catastrophe. While West's interpretation is novel and evocative, it is too abstract and detached from the text. His equivocation of the black guinea's worldview with jazz can be viewed as a metaphorical embellishment that strays from a grounded analysis of the character within the context of the novel and more towards West's preferred rhetorical style.

While these interpretations capture one aspect of the character or another, they fail to account for his role as a catalyst for the exploration of trust, deception, and ultimately character. The Confidence-Man is not merely a deceiver; he is also a truth-teller—his point about the necessity of confidence is not overblown, even if his language is. However, it does no one any favors, least of all students of literature *or* philosophy, to shoehorn the particulars of difficult

[149] Hershel Parker's work on the second Norton critical edition of *The Confidence-Man* is the most consistent and egregious offender, stating plainly in the back matter: "As the Mississippi steamboat Fidele (Faith) goes downriver on April Fool's Day, the Devil, appealing for confidence, engages passengers in dizzying philosophical, social, and religious disquisitions" (Hershel Parker and Mark Niemeyer, eds., *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, W.W. Norton and Co., 2006, back matter. See also Parker, "The Confidence Man's Masquerade," Norton, 2006.

texts into a prescribed system (or theory) of reading. Therefore, it is crucial to approach "The Confidence-Man" without a “template” for making sense of it, instead appreciating its complexity and resisting the temptation to oversimplify or force it into a predetermined interpretive framework.

We can say, however, that it is interested in at least two things: The first, as the novel asserts time and again, is that the importance of trust in the functioning of society cannot be overstated. Civilization is built on the bedrock of confidence that each individual will fulfill their obligations. It underpins transactions, fuels investments, and allows for the development of commerce, infrastructure, and public works. It provides the footing for cooperation, promotes social cohesion, and facilitates peaceful coexistence. It is the lubricant that smooths social interactions and the bond that ties individuals together into a collective whole. It is also delicate, easily shattered, and difficult to repair once broken. That leads directly to the novel’s second core theme. This is problem of dealing with breaches of trust, which happen frequently enough to call the whole idea of trust itself into question. The confidence-man represents both an affirmation of and a challenge to this trust. He exploits it for his own gain, and his success depends on the willingness of his victims to trust him. The reader’s uncertainty regarding his motivations and identity serves as a reminder that living in any society means maintaining a constant balance between our need to trust our fellow human beings while also acknowledging that no one we meet can immediately be trusted.

Thus, while the “protagonist” of Melville's "The Confidence-Man" implores us to absolute “confidence” in all things, the novel itself must not be misinterpreted as a pseudo-inspirational text in the grand tradition of the American self-help book. Instead, the novel presents a nuanced exploration of these concepts, juxtaposing them against their counterparts: fear, suspicion, and

doubt. It probes the practical implications of trust and confidence, not just as abstract ideals, but as complex constructs that operate within the realities of human interaction and societal dynamics. The Confidence-Man, as a character, operates at the intersection of these tensions. The novel, therefore, offers a critical examination of how trust functions in society, and the potential consequences when it is manipulated or broken (see the Ch XL: "The Story of China Aster"). It is a reflection on the delicate balance between faith and skepticism, and the constant negotiation between trust and doubt that underpins human relationships and societal structures. Maintaining this balance, we shall see, is a constant and conscious balance that requires real effort to maintain—a key point to bear in mind at the novel's close, in which the confidence man, now in the guise of "the cosmopolitan," engages in his final dialogue with an old man desperately in need of some rest.

The Confidence-Man is also deeply concerned with money, which frequently emerges as the central object of the protagonist's eloquent solicitations—the very representation, as it were, of confidence, quantified and made fungible. The confidence man's manipulations and deceptions often revolve around money, underscoring its role as a core unit of trust. For this reason, the novel is not infrequently cited in works on 19th Century American capitalism—historian Stephen Mihm, for example, offers his own limited interpretation of the novel as "a parable of the market economy and the paradoxical forces that kept it alive."[150] And while The Confidence-Man can easily be seen as a critique of the emergent free-wheeling financial system of its time, it is far more interesting to view the novel's economic complexities as the backdrop against which Melville explores something more deeply human.

[150] See Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States,* Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 4-5.

Contrary to what Melville's protagonist insists, "confidence" is not something one can simply conjure up and give away. It is not a gift freely given but a responsibility earned. As social primates, humans have evolved over millennia to thrive in groups—divvying up essential labors, contributing according to our abilities, and caring for those in need of care, and so on. However, for most of our history as a species, homo sapiens lived in groups small enough for each member to know one another and understand one another's roles with the community. That trust, however, is only upheld insofar as those entrusted with its responsibilities are willing to execute upon them. In other words, trust only functions as long as trusted actors can demonstrate the ability to do those things that they are trusted to do.

Civilization, however, necessitates the coexistence of thousands of individuals, mostly strangers, operating in tandem with one another within the same social, economic, and legal structures. People may constantly circulate in and out of other people's lives within the context of a civilization; whereas for much of our history human beings may only have had to interact with a few hundred others over the course of their entire lives, civilization requires that we place all of the critical tasks associated with keeping us alive into the hands of strangers. The riverboat setting of "The Confidence-Man" serves as an apt metaphor for this dynamic, with its passengers, constantly circulating on and off board as the *Fidèle* steams from port to port, functioning as a microcosm of the infinite variety of peoples now coming to populate the heart of the continent. This constant flux creates an environment where, like the developing businesses and economies of the American West in 1857, trust among the ever-changing set of strangers is scarce. The riverboat, with its transient population adrift in one of North America's mightiest natural resources—the Mississippi River—mirrors a broader society where anyone could be anyone, and where those who vouch for others could themselves be anyone.

Confidence Games

Set in 1857, *The Confidence-Man* takes place in the heart of the American Free Banking Era, the period from 1837 to 1863 during which time the U.S. had no national central bank. By this point both the First and Second Banks of the United States had come and gone, each brought about by the growing nation's demand for capital and brought down by partisan politics.[151] Still, the demand for money (and the continual lack of it) had been a near-constant problem in the United States since the early colonial era. Gold and silver, still the preferred "hard money" of the day,[152] were always in short supply, but the appetite for cultivating all manners of business, industry, and agricultural investments required capital to match demand. Furthermore, many founders and early statesmen—particularly those of the northern business class—saw a powerful financial system as a safeguard against foreign hostility in the global economy.[153] If the United States could prove itself as a valuable business partner to its old-world predecessors, it could further ensure its own national security.

The necessity of a viable monetary policy, then, was upmost importance in the early republic. War debts notwithstanding, "settling" the nation's newly acquired lands by filling them

[151] See Sharon Ann Murphy, *Other People's Money: How Banking Worked in the Early American Republic,* The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017, 17-20.

[152] "Hard money" is differentiated from bills of credit and refers to fixed, tangible units of value, typically precious metals—gold, silver, and so on. Melville previously evoked the allure of so-called hard money in Chapter 36 of *Moby-Dick*, in which Ahab appeals to his men by promising a "sixteen dollar piece" of gold to "whosoever of [them] raises me that same white whale, he shall have this gold ounce," which he then nails to the mast. The sturdiness of the coin, emphasized by its steadfast ability to stay in place throughout the *Pequod*'s voyage without deteriorating—something that could never be expected of a banknote, which would hardly last an hour in a storm. In Chapter 99 Melville provides a lengthy description of the coin that has allowed numismatists to identify it as an Ecuadorian 8 escudos doubloon, which were minted in Quito between 1838 and 1843. $16 being worth between $570 and $600 in2023, the reward would have been substantial for petty sailors, but Melville could have only speculated at the longevity of the coin's value: in today's market, the 1838 Ecuadorian 8 escudos doubloon can fetch between $30,000 and $45,000. Imagine a banknote doing the same.

[153] Murphy, 29-37.

with farms, financing them with newly formed domestic banks, and supplying them through the production of newly built industries, all required a reliable, easily accessible, and, above all, a relatively stable medium of exchange. However, the means for producing such a financial instrument was hardly encoded in U.S. policy, even if the framers did anticipate the need for the federal government to hold some sway over the money supply. Constitutional constraints strictly reserved the right to "coin" money to the federal government,[154] but without a national bank, the government's ability to extend credit was strictly curtailed. Further complicating the matter was a provision in Article 10 of the Constitution that forbade the states from issuing money of any kind, either metal specie or bills of credit: "No state shall… coin Money; emit Bills of Credit; make any Thing but gold and silver Coin a Tender in Payment of Debts…"[155] But booming markets abhor a vacuum as much as nature ever did. As the central banking system had already failed (twice) and the states effectively sat with their hands tied, the private sector soon did what it does best, and found a reasonable workaround.

The breakthrough came in the form of state-chartered banks, private financial institutions that obtained permission from their state to incorporate but otherwise effectively had free reign to issue credit as they saw fit. These banks were *technically* free to issue their own notes, which were effectively bills of credit that promised a certain redemption in gold or silver to the bearer. Oversight was lax, however, and notes were usually only fractionally reserved at best, meaning redeeming them for specie could be a cumbersome, if not impossible, procedure. In Michigan, for example, banks issued notes that could only be redeemed at remote, rural locations, and

[154] Note the difference: "bullion" refers to bulk units of highly-refined precious metals; "specie" refers specifically to coins minted from such metals, although typically at lower levels of purity.

[155] Article I, Section 10, Clause 1.

attempting to do so was a gamble on the best of days. State bank commissioner (and future governor and senator) Alpheus Felch is said to have inspected one such bank only to find that its "cash reserves" consisted of several boxes of nails and glass, lightly dusted with handfuls of silver coins for show.[156]

The tumultuous economic landscape of the mid-19th century was further complicated by President Andrew Jackson's Specie Circular of 1836, an executive order that mandated public lands be purchased with gold or silver. This decree sent shockwaves through the markets, casting doubt on the real value of paper money and triggering a series of bank defaults in the 1840s. The precariousness of this financial system was underscored by the lack of coordinated oversight and the slow pace of communication, with messages often taking days or even weeks to reach their intended recipients. However, the discovery of gold in California in 1848 brought about a significant increase in the hard money supply, easing the shortage of fungible gold in U.S. financial markets and allowing more paper cash to circulate against it. The wildcat banking system, characterized by its state-chartered banks free to issue their own fractionally-reserved notes, continued to operate with relative impunity.

Melville's novel, in a sense, predicted the financial turmoil that would wreak havoc on the markets later that year. On the morning of August 24, 1857, the president of the Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company announced the suspension of payments from its New York branch. The company, an Ohio-based bank with a secondary main office in New York City, held substantial mortgage holdings and served as a liaison to other Ohio investment banks; its sudden insolvency, brought on by internal embezzlement and the failed investments that brought it to

[156] See William Graham Sumner, "A History of Banking in all the Leading Nations", vol. 1 (The United States). *The Journal of Commerce and Commercial Bulletin,* 1896.

light. The sudden failures sent shockwaves through the financial system, with the recent installation of telegraph infrastructure amplifying the crisis to an unprecedented degree. News that would have days or weeks to spread just a few years earlier was now instantly communicable. Consequently, the Panic of 1857 is considered the first "global" financial panic. News of redemption refusals, insolvencies, and bankruptcies could reach the ears of other financial institutions, investors, and traders within hours. The damage was swift and the recovery long—the United States economy did not fully recover until it began mobilizing for war in 1860.

Like any other set of interlocking social institutions, markets operate according to their own *sensus communis,* with the whole enterprise built upon assumptions about how this abstract, semi-conscious collective entity called “the market” will process news, events, or rumors. All trades in a market economy happen under some auspices of confidence that they will yield the desired (or at least intended) results for all parties involved, which requires some foresight on all fronts to ascertain how other parties are likely to behave going into a fundamentally unknowable future. When all is well, a market behaves according to how its participants believe it will behave. All contracts specifying future commitments function this way, and the successful execution of a market economy depends on a general faith that the rest of the market will honor its commitments. This provides a framework for some modicum of predictability over reasonably long periods of time.[157]

However, when things go awry, the delicate balance of trust and confidence that underpins the market can quickly unravel. This is particularly true in times of economic crisis, when the

[157] These only functions properly in the “normal” course of business, however. Black swan events are an ever-present threat, and mitigating against them would become a hallmark of 20th Century American financial legislation, including the Federal Reserve Act of 1913, the Securities Act of 1933, and the Securities Exchange Act of 1934.

assumptions that guide market behavior are suddenly called into question. In such situations, the *sensus communis* of the market can shift dramatically, and the collective understanding of what constitutes 'normal' market behavior can change overnight, depending on context and circumstances. This particularly true in the American economy, in which the monetary system is not backed by precious metals or any other tangible commodity—it is backed by returns on capital investment.[158] In this system, the value of money is essentially a reflection of the collective faith in the ability of the market to generate future wealth—an easy sell in the 19th Century with Manifest Destiny in mind. When that faith is shaken, as it is during a financial crisis, the value of money itself can become unstable. This can lead to a cascade of negative effects, including inflation, defaults, margin calls on bad investments, or even the complete collapse of the monetary system. Therefore, maintaining confidence in the market is not just about ensuring smooth economic transactions, but also about preserving the very value of the currency we use to feed and house ourselves. This underscores the profound importance of trust and confidence in the functioning of a market economy, and the potentially catastrophic consequences when that trust is broken.

Confidence Men

"Make money. Honestly if you can—but, by all means, make money."

—American Proverb[159]

[158] Worth unpacking what I mean by this, which that fiat money in the U.S. is only backed by the interest on the loan that creates it in the first place—this is how the Federal Reserve System explicitly works today.

[159] Traces its origins to Horace: "*Isne tibi melius suadet, Rem facias rem, Recte si possis, si non, quocumque modo rem*" ("Does he advise you better who says, "Do the thing—morally, if possible, but if not, by all means do it!") *Epistles* I, 65-66.

On July 8, 1849, the *New-York Herald*[160] reported in its "Police Intelligence" section reported that "a man… traveling about the city, known as the 'Confidence Man'" had been arrested after running a series of scams on passersby that involved persuading his marks that he was a forgotten acquaintance and, he being smooth talker, convincing them to entrust him with an item of value until a future date. To an outside observer, the trick is obvious—the "Confidence Man" is lying, and he will soon abscond with whatever he is entrusted with. Still, he struck again and again, apparently with such efficacy that his grift became known as a hallmark hustle of the New York City streets. Taken together, the illicit career of William Thompson—though he was known by half a dozen aliases as well—and the newspaper article that reported his arrest coalesced into the distinctly American concept of the "confidence man."

Melville was aware of the Thompson affair, and while he clearly had the real-world figure from the newspapers somewhere in his mind, the multiplicity of personalities we find among the *Fidèle's* operators suggest that Melville is exploring a much older trope that than any uniquely American phenomenon. While fraudulently abusing a victim's trust for gain is as old a trick as there is, confidence man took on a distinctively American flair in the rapidly expanding nation of the mid-1800s, due largely to hyper-optimistic investment practices that abounded in a continent teeming with natural resources and abundant with arable land. The abundance of productive capacity on the continent would have made it relatively easy to inspire confidence in potential investors (or marks) in any enterprise that offered to take advantage of America's productive capacity. Demand for capital and currency dramatically outstripped hard money supplies, leading banks to issue notes with fractional reserves—a confidence trick built directly into the monetary system at a retail level. To fund westward expansion, credit was extended liberally, and personal

[160] See Appendix K.

liability was limited by corporate protections, so risk-taking abounded. Essentially, the entire system relied heavily on confidence that obligations would be repaid.

Further, Melville's confidence-man is not a simple operator running grifts on strangers. Far from a straight knave, Melville's confidence man calls to mind the "trickster" character type common to American indigenous oral traditions, who, being bound by (or even aware of) no particular moral agenda, is able to exist more comfortably alongside the world's nuances, complexities, and ambiguities than his European counterparts, who typically are constructed existed within rigid and predictable normative structures.[161] This approach to character type much more adequately maps onto Melville's characters than most standard readings, which usually contend that the various con men populating the *Fidèle* are all one and the same. However, there is precious little textual evidence to firmly support this reading. Instead, Melville gives us a bustling riverboat setting, floating through the rural heart of the United States, constantly exchanging passengers as it steams from one major cosmopolitan center to another—a setting that would draw con men like a lightning rod. The *Fidèle*, therefore, has no shortage of them—some of them may be the same figure in different disguises; some may be disparate figures surreptitiously working together, and some of them may be exactly who they say they are. But it would be beyond implausible to assume there is only one on board, and Melville is clearly interested in exploring their many overlaps and distinctions—in some ways, all of these men are exactly the same, but in other ways they could not be more distinct from one another.

Varieties abound, but there is but one necessary and sufficient condition for a monetary arrangement to be considered a confidence trick—or "con," to use the American vernacular—

[161] Franchot Ballinger, "Ambigere: The Euro-American Picaro and the Native American Trickster." *MELUS*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1991, pp. 21–38.

and that is to win the trust of a mark in order to take advantage of it. The operator wins the confidence of the mark to persuade them to divest themselves of money or some other item of value, virtually always on the promise of a return that the operator promises to deliver in the future. The crux of the grift, of course, is the operator has no intention of delivering on any such promise, and, if they have any skill, they will likely disappear from the mark's life forever. The notion of being entirely unable to track down a stranger is alien from a 21st perspective, but in the vast Middle American landscape of the 19th Century, disappearing forever was not only plausible but rather easy.

While the core con is always the same, the variety of its manifestation, especially in the freewheeling business environment of the 19th Century United States is extensive. These "manifestations" of Melville's confidence-man do not imply that these are all the same person. Instead, this is a demonstration that a riverboat floating through the rural heart of the United States, constantly exchanging passengers as it steams from one major cosmopolitan center to another would draw con men like a lightning rod. The *Fidèle*, therefore, has no shortage of them. Through these manifestations runs a thread of resemblance, but they are each of their own kind as well. Some may be more ill-intentioned than others, some are likely harmless, but they all call our trust into question.

Abandoning the popular assumption that these various personas represent one archetypal figure in disguise—trickster, devil, or otherwise—allows for richer interpretations of the text that are more consistent with human experience. Each avatar shares similarities, it is true, but can be appraised distinctly. Some may harbor sinister intents, while others be relatively harmless; some may be telling the truth about where the money is going, and some are likely lying. Rather than embodiments of a single deceptive archetype, the confidence men represent the spectrum of

motives and morals found in any setting where strangers intersect and where trust is negotiable. The riverboat's transient population provides the proscenium through which the reader may examine how deception and credibility function when personal history is unknowable. By resisting the simplicity of a unifying theory, the diverse "masquerade" on the Fidèle opens avenues to explore the complex dynamics of truth, lies, vulnerability, and exploitation, which lurk around every corner. Unpacking the many con men circulating about the *Fidele* would require its own book, so this section will only consider a few. It would be easy to say that they are all the same, and indeed a cynic might do just that, but to do so would be to neglect the subtle distinctions—or "minute particulars," to use Blake's language—that distinguish them from one another.

Above all, the problem with reading Melville's confidence man as an archetype risks oversimplifying his entire project in the novel. While recurring character types occur across literature, thinking of them as archetypes implies a kind of ideal form that precedes the lived experience of the various types that embody it. In more practical terms, such types emerge from the recurrence of certain traits and behaviors across cultures and eras which then coalesce into patterns that are discernible, and which can be learned from, imitated, even improved upon. These patterns are not static archetypes but are flexible aggregates shaped by human environments and desires. They gravitate around loose patterns while preserving distinct motives and methods. Some may tell the truth, others may lie; Some may be seeking profit some may be seeking to take advantage some may be seeking alms, and some may be seeking simple debate. In any of these cases, blanket categorization obscures minute but important differences that are distinctly material to evaluating each character. Therefore, much of the critical analysis that aims to squeeze Melville's characters into an archetypal mold this misses the opportunity of to read his

various confidence men as nuanced depictions of human complexity. The confidence men aboard the *Fidèle* resist simple categorization, just as real people do.

Rather than archetypes, the confidence men are better understood as "tautegorical" figures. The "tautegorical," a portmanteau of "tautology" and "category" originally found in Coleridge 's writings,[162] indicates a relationship of similarity *and* difference between representations that hinges upon overlapping concepts, figures, or scenarios. Unlike archetypes, which imply a static ideal form under which various characters can be categorized, tautegories allow us to analyze recurrences while preserving distinctions. A tautegorical approach to literature involves identifying patterns across texts characters and genres while remaining attentive to the minute variations that make each unique to its context. The confidence men evoke prior literary tricksters, but each operates according to his own unique rules. A tautegorical literary analysis explores how representations echo and diverge, occupying a liminal conceptual space between rigid archetypes and strict adherence to form. This enables the critic to parse general types like Melville's confidence men while recognizing each as a distinct literary occurrence.

Common definitions of the tautegorical tend to distill the term down to the state of being "similar but with the difference."[163] While this is something of an oversimplification, it is nevertheless a useful framework for structuring all kinds of patterns both in literature and in the world, human behavior not least of all. To compare two concepts under a tautegorical framework is to consider, with equal attention to each, the meaningful ways in which they are the same as well as the meaningful ways in which they are different. This exercise allows for the consideration of general patterns across contexts: we might easily conceive of a tautegorical

[162] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Statesman's Manual; or the Bible the Best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight: A Lay Sermon, Addressed to the Higher Classes of Society. The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Reginald James White, vol. 6, Princeton University Press, 1972, 30-31.

[163] Ibid.

treatment of Huck Finn's travels against those of Voltaire's Candide, each being an episodic picaresque tracing a young man's adventures, albeit across wildly different environments. The multiplicity of Melville's confidence men illustrate the idea as well as any literary example; far from insisting on the kind of magical realism that would be required in order to presume the capital letter confidence man is literally the devil in disguise what Melville presents is an array of characters who follow similar patterns but each work according to their own rule books and in their own comfort zones.

Having introduced the concept of the tautegorical as a useful framework for examining recurrences with difference according to context, we will now consider how this applies to several the confidence men novel depicts on the Fidel examining these characters individually while identifying shared threads between them. This will illustrate how Melville people's his riverboat with tricksters who evoke familiar patterns but operate based on their own unique codes.

The Man in Cream Colors

The first confidence man we encounter on the *Fidèle* is the apparently deaf-mute man in cream colors who solicits charity through silent appeals to passersby. He engages in no interaction with the crowd except to write upon a slate he carries in hand, which he continually fills with scriptural invocations to charity. His passivity contrasts him sharply with the other operators we will come to see above the *Fidèle* as the novel unfolds, all of whom actively engage other passengers and somewhat intensely solicit their confidence. The man in cream colors however speaks no dialogue and communicate solely through the verses on his slate, thus

endorsing almsgiving as a Christian virtue Without aggressively demanding donations. His silence Allows passengers to offer aid of their own volition.

Rather than pressuring victims like the various confidence men to come, the man in cream colors projects a kind of dignified resignation that coexists with his visible poverty. He does not beg and does not portend to suffer intense misery, leaving the passersby to be the judge of his authentic need. While Melville primes the reader to be distrustful of the man in cream colors by introducing him alongside the wanted poster of the mysterious impostor, he provides no textual evidence that the man's sincerity is feigned. The man's unimposing nature, his physical infirmity, and his appeals to scripture imply harmlessness, but even these subtle cues, which themselves may be merely performative, are enough to stir weariness both in the Fidele's passengers and in the reader alike.

"Black Guinea"

As the man in cream colors falls into his slumbers, Melville shifts his narrative toward the first instantiation of a confidence man who actively solicits money from other passengers. This character whom Melville only styles, in typically racist 19th century fashion, "black Guinea." This figure, whom Melville describes as much more wretchedly disabled than the man in cream colors, suffering as he does from Paraplegia, is further disenfranchised by being a black man in 1857 Saint Louis. He solicits his livelihood through musical and acrobatic performances, his preferred trick being to catch coins tossed by the crowd in his open mouth. The entire episode paints an uncompromising picture of the kind of minstrelsy that black people might deign to partake in if it meant ingratiating themselves to their white contemporaries, but soon enough,

despite his submissive performativity, the crowd of mostly white strangers calls his authenticity into question.

What begins as an argument between an irascible wooden legged man and a highly vocal Methodist minister eventually descends into mass distrust for the poor beggar. But again, Melville gives us precious little textual evidence to ground our mistrust of him. The racial implications of the crowd's mistrust are deeply ironic, given that the man with the wooden leg insists that the black Guinea is in fact a white con man merely posing as a disable black pauper to garner pity from the crowd. This however merely reflects the ingrained prejudices the crowd undoubtedly has against black people, free or otherwise. Genuinely believing that Melville black Guinea is a white scam artist in disguise would require both the reader and the crowd to believe two things. First, it would have to be capable of believing that a white man who darkens his skin in burnt cork black face could realistically pass for an actual black man when seen up close, in person, and in broad daylight. Second it would require the crowd's concession that a white scam artist might, for some reason, believe that he could successfully solicit charity from a crowd of mostly white Missourians in 1857. To quote Huck Finn "Goodness sakes! would a runaway n—r run *south*?"[164]

Nevertheless, once the crowd has lost its confidence in the idea that the black Guinea might be sincere, it proves impossible for him to regain their trust. The poor man insists that there are several reputable men aboard the riverboat who would vouch for his character but much of the crowd is unconvinced, its skepticism has already aroused and now actively at work. They are not long prepared to accept credibility on convention. We are primed by convention, education, and even our own judgment to attune ourselves to certain indicators of trustworthiness and reliability.

[164] *HF* 168.

Because we cannot constantly evaluate trust, we must have standards of evaluation that often include offloading some of our trust onto the judgment of others. This allows us to make real time judgments in the world as much of the reflective rumination on the nature of trust has already been done for us. We might trust our money with a registered broker dealer because we know whether or not they are themselves personally trustworthy they are nonetheless licensed registered overseen mitigated against risk insured and subject to severe punishment for breaching that trust. The black Guinea has only his word that he is trustworthy until his proclaimed friends arrive to vouch for him, and given his wretched state, the crowd is left to wonder how reputable his friends, if they even exist, must themselves be.

The Good Merchant

Of all of the many confidence men aboard the *Fidèle*, the so-called good merchant is arguably the most sinister. This person, who appears to be operating an outright Ponzi scheme, actively preys on those in dire financial straits with the promises of outsized returns on an investment of a less-than-clear nature. Like the grift that he runs, his appearance is brief but his impact substantial. Appearing to an ailing old man in the corridor the good merchant offers the chance to triple a $100 investment, if only the miser would grant him his confidence. He is eventually successful though not without earning the old man suspicion as well:

> From an old buckskin pouch, tremulously dragged forth, ten hoarded eagles, tarnished into the appearance of ten old horn-buttons, were taken, and half-eagerly, half-reluctantly, offered.
>
> "I know not whether I should accept this slack confidence," said the other coldly, receiving the gold, "but an eleventh-hour confidence, a sick-bed

> confidence, a distempered, death-bed confidence, after all. Give me the healthy confidence of healthy men, with their healthy wits about them. But let that pass. All right. Good-bye!"
>
> "Nay, back, back—receipt, my receipt! Ugh, ugh, ugh! Who are you? What have I done? Where go you? My gold, my gold! Ugh, ugh, ugh!"
>
> But, unluckily for this final flicker of reason, the stranger was now beyond ear-shot, nor was any one else within hearing of so feeble a call.[165]

There is no honest reason to take investment capital without a written contract and receipt. The fact that this man does so before slipping away into the crowd indicates that he is working an outright scam. Investment capital, by its very nature, involves a significant transfer of money, often in anticipation of future returns or profit. In legitimate business transactions, especially those involving substantial amounts of money, it is a standard and expected practice to have a written contract with receipt. The receipt provides the grounding for *recourse*, which is what backs a guarantee. A "guarantee," inasmuch as it refers to a promise of future delivery, is by nature nebulous as the future cannot be known. The "guarantee" refers to what will be offered *in place* of the thing that is promised in the event that the promise cannot be delivered. In financial markets this guarantee is what collateralizes a financial instrument, and the receipt is proof of this arrangement. Without it, there can be no good faith contract.

[165] *CM* 76.

Frank Goodman, The Cosmopolitan

There are the garden-variety con men who populate the boat, and then there is Frank Goodman, or, the "cosmopolitan," as he calls himself. Dressed in a garish patchwork of styles crowned by a smoking cap, the Cosmopolitan is not concerned with subtlety or passing unnoticed. He is also far less given to running confidence tricks than the other confidence men thus far; his true obsession is not money itself but the concept of money's bedrock—confidence. He has confidence in abundance – in himself, the world, and the people around him. The most insistently argumentative and philosophical of all the *Fidèle*'s confidence men, the cosmopolitan seems to operate entirely out in the open. If surreptitiousness were a preferred characteristic of a good confidence man, the Cosmopolitan could not fail more spectacularly, being: " a liberalist, in dress… the stranger sported a vesture barred with various hues, that of the cochineal predominating, in style participating of a Highland plaid, Emir's robe, and French blouse; from its plaited sort of front peeped glimpses of a flowered regatta-shirt, while, for the rest, white trowsers of ample duck flowed over maroon-colored slippers, and a jaunty smoking-cap of regal purple crowned him off at top…"[166]

Of all the confidence men on the Fidèle, only the Cosmopolitan seems to engage in philosophical debate as an end unto itself. Not content with duping passengers out of pocket change, he seems genuinely intent on convincing his fellow passengers that his creed of universal confidence holds the key to a good life. Whether sophist or true believer, the enigmatic Cosmopolitan compels attention through his colorful bearing and force of argument. While Melville does suggest Frank Goodman is the mysterious imposter from the "wanted" poster at the novel's outset—the barber and his friends agreeing at the end of the penultimate chapter that

[166] *CM* 131.

the curious passenger who'd drawn up a meaningless contract in lieu of cash was "quite an original" and invoking the language from the poster—but, as is the case throughout the novel, there is room for doubt.

The core of the cosmopolitan 's personal doctrine emerges as an extreme form of optimism regarding human nature. Frank Goodman insists that people are inherently worthy of trust and inclined to good will. Financial systems, governments, and everyday commerce all rely on mutual faith, and the cosmopolitan is more than happy to extend this maxim ubiquitously. He appears to be driven by loftier philosophical aims, genuinely committed to convincing the entire ship that his personal view of confidence in humankind it is both necessary and correct. In this sense he is purely ideological, and the novel's latter third is almost entirely consumed by him impressing his creed upon others.

The novel culminates in the cosmopolitan's chance meeting of an old man in the ships gentleman's cabin as the action of the novel nears midnight. A single solar lamp casts a dim light[167] on the scene,, for as a steward admonishes, the captain has decreed it must remain lit until dawn, as an elemental safeguard against nefarious deeds cloaked under cover of darkness :

> "the remaining lamp would have been extinguished as well, had not a steward forbade, saying that the commands of the captain required it to be kept burning till the natural light of day should come to relieve it. This steward, who, like many in his vocation, was apt to be a little free-spoken at times, had been provoked by the man's pertinacity to remind him, not only of the sad consequences which might,

[167] It is worth at least a brief mention that this light is provided a more than usual description, which Melville does not submit to comment. The lamp, producing only a dim light, is fashioned with a "shade of ground glass was all round fancifully variegated, in transparency, with the image of a horned altar, from which flames rose, alternate with the figure of a robed man, his head encircled by a halo" (240). At the very least, it provides an intriguing link to the opening scene of Melville's narrative, and leads into perhaps the most recurrent but ambiguous theme of the book, the demands of reading.

> upon occasion, ensue from the cabin being left in darkness, but, also, of the circumstance that, in a place full of strangers, to show one's self anxious to produce darkness there, such an anxiety was, to say the least, not becoming."[168]

Under its light an old man sits alone, poring over a Bible. As the cosmopolitan passes through, he sees the old man alone in the dark and takes the moment as an invitation to join him. Recalling a chat with the barber in a previous chapter, the cosmopolitan admits to feeling doubt for the first and only time in the novel, saying:

> "I was told that I would find it written—'Believe not his many words—an enemy speaketh sweetly with his lips'—and also I was told that I would find a good deal more to the same effect, and all in this book. I could not think it; and, coming here to look for myself, what do I read? Not only just what was quoted, but also, as was engaged, more to the same purpose, such as this: With much communication he will tempt thee; he will smile upon thee, and speak thee fair, and say What wantest thou? If thou be for his profit he will use thee; he will make thee bear, and will not be sorry for it. Observe and take good heed. When thou hearest these things, awake in thy sleep.'"[169]

Right on cue and with the kind of ironic serendipity only made possible by fiction, a stranger dozing in the corridor cries, "Who's that describing the confidence-man?" The irony is not lost on the cosmopolitan, who wryly responds, "Awake in his sleep, sure enough, ain't he?"[170]

The conversation quickly returns to the scripture at hand, which the two quickly identify as belonging to the Book of Jesus, Son of Sirach.[171] Learning that this troubling passage comes

[168] *CM* 240-241.
[169] Ibid.
[170] Ibid.
[171] See Appendix L - Sirach

from Sirach comes as a great comfort to the cosmopolitan, for being part of the apocrypha, Sirach's veracity if canonically doubtful. This allows the cosmopolitan to parry aside the wise words of caution from Sirach Chapter 13, which are the total reverse of those in 1 Corinthians 13, the man in cream colors' preferred scripture.

Their conversation is soon interrupted by a young boy selling various wares to the passengers. After engaging in some loose banter with the cosmopolitan and the old man, the boy is able to work his charms on the latter well enough to sell him a new patent lock and money belt, each of which he assures will protect the old man's money from any would-be thieves in the dark of night. As a bonus, the boy also gives the old man a counterfeit detector, a kind of periodical common in the mid-19th Century which helped readers identify the tell-tale signs of counterfeit banknotes. These volumes were often highly detailed and included dozens, if not hundreds of possible details that could be used to identify a counterfeit. However, the old man, who begins by casually perusing the detector, soon becomes consumed by doubt as he attempts to discern if his own money is good or not. Here Melville brings the novel's various financial and monetary concerns to bear on the old man's attempt at this moment to reassure himself, a task at which he finds himself failing. The cosmopolitan steps in to save him from further despair. He advises the old man to throw away the counterfeit detector entirely, its entire purpose being to ruminate on fraud and deceit. The cosmopolitan sees that what the old man needs instead of fretting late into the night is to get some rest.

Amidst the boundless uncertainty that permeates human affairs, Melville identifies one invariant truth that we all must participate in—that the fundamental needs of our mortal flesh must be met. The drive for sustenance, shelter, companionship - these arise from a biology more

primal than our very species, not customs or norms. Among such universal needs, Melville sees, is rest. Even the Almighty, with all His infinite power, took time to rest (Gen. 2:2)

> I have heard, that if you pull a bent breath
> Through the second hole of a harmonica
> Tuned to the key of Georgia
> While a train moves by on the tail end of dusk
> There is a good chance you will finally know what it means to rest.
> I have not yet rested.[172]

As a cosmopolitan leads the old man away from the gentleman's cabin and toward his stateroom, he extinguishes the solar lamp that the stewards so strongly admonishes passengers not to extinguish, casting the entire place Into Darkness and doubt. A cynical reading of *The Confidence-Man* leaves the reader with an uneasy feeling as the cosmopolitan leads the old man into the darkness, leaving us to wonder if his intent is to rob the old man in the dark. There is an overlay of doubt that permeates the novel right up until its final scene, leaving the reader to wonder as to the cosmopolitan 's true intentions. But in his assessments of the old man's needs, he is entirely correct—interminable fretting without rest can be nothing but destructive to oneself.

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In the previous chapter we explored what it means to buck against the *sensus communis* after coming to see that it does not always (or even often) hold up to scrutiny. While critiquing

[172] Wakefield, "The Information Man."

collective assumptions and norms remains a vital exercise, rejecting *sensus communis* outright has limited utility as a philosophical project. We have to trust others for everything - to grow food, secure our money, administer enterprises and bureaucracies, and more. The simple truth is that the individual does not have the mental capacity to worry or care for every single thing that needs to be worried about or cared for. That is not how we are structured as a species, and therefore not how we are structured as a civilization. Absolute skepticism—indeed, absolutism in anything—inevitably confronts the pragmatic realities of human interdependence. One may suspect that all water is poisoned, but will sooner or later have to drink.

Thus while Huck Finn is very much a novel about doubting the *sensus communis*, Melville's novel addresses the more perplexing, immediately crucial problem of learning how to know what is good enough to trust in a world where anything could be a deception. Twain's project in teaching adolescents (especially boys in the 19th century South) how to recognize that their social order is deliberately manipulating them at their own expense and the expense of others, and this is a very important thing that educated citizens must be able to do. But Huck Finn is still a children's book that resonates strongly with rebellious, marginalized youth because this is a youthful preoccupation.

What Melville is concerned with is, at what point do you concede that things are good enough? And what does that mean - good enough to rest, to lay your head down and be at peace, at least for a time. This requires greater maturity of thought than rebellion and criticism. It demonstrates the limits of constantly "interrogating institutional structures of power." No single human being has the cognitive capacity to independently worry about or care for every facet of their own existence. We are not built for such hyper-vigilance as a species, and so we are not built for it as a society. We must rely on the competence and good faith of countless others who

grow food, secure money, administer bureaucracies, and more. Ultimately, we must be able to sleep at night, secure in the knowledge that, as we let our guards down to rest, we are safe.

> And each man will sit under his own vine
> and under his own fig tree,
> with no one to frighten him."[173]

The balance of trust and risk is central to any civilization, particularly in its economic structure. The challenge lies in fostering trust among strangers, a microcosm of which is perfectly depicted in the ever-changing setting of the river, with its constant flux of strangers coming and going. This setting, with its lack of grounding or stability, mirrors the inherent uncertainty and risk in economic transactions. To mitigate such risk, societies have developed mechanisms such as insurance and legal systems. These structures offload much of the 'trust' onto pre-vetted, 'trustworthy' actors, who are presumed to operate honestly under the threat of punishment. At some level, however, we will need to feel secure in the knowledge that those who hold bad actors accountable will themselves be held accountable, and so on. Deciding to trust someone or something is ultimately an aesthetic judgment, one in which we feel “satisfied,” either by logically understanding the relevant risk-mitigating factors to be a sufficient hedge against any possible loss at stake, or purely emotionally on the strength of rhetoric. In either case, it is “enough.”

Good judgment often lies in conceding that something is "good enough," and rarely does it involve adhering to absolutes. What makes that interdependence tranquil enough to live in is our willingness to make concessions in skepticism—which, as we have discussed, involves externalizing risks into mitigation practices. Still, we recognize that these mitigation practices,

[173] Micah 4:4.

like insurance policies or security systems, themselves can only do so much to account for every possible disaster. The desire for absolute certainty may only spiral into an endless abyss of doubt, keeping us from ever feeling secure enough to lay down our heads in peace. But the fatigue of the old man symbolizes the need to balance virtue and pragmatism to create a world livable for vulnerable, finite beings who nevertheless are ends-in-themselves.

Conclusion: Can Common Sense Be Taught?

This too is vanity and a chasing after wind.

—ECCLESIASTES 4:4

This dissertation began as an inquiry into the idea of common sense—what it means to have it as well as what it means to teach others how to use it. In the surprising scarcity of historical philosophical sources that directly address the term's phraseology, two dominant, yet opposing, colloquial perspectives have emerged, both of which fall short in comprehensively explaining the subject. The first is that common sense means thinking independently (*sapere aude*), while the second is that common sense means absorbing practical knowledge from one's culture or community. Neither, of course, is universally applicable, nor can either be properly calibrated in the absence of the other.

What all approaches to common sense do have in common, however, is this—no matter which way the problem is ultimately approached, the eventual question that must be confronted by anyone undertaking any examination of their own common sense is this: how can I be sure that I can trust my own judgment? For whether we arrive at a judgment “on our own” or simply receive one that is common knowledge, we still must decide if the judgment is valid. It is a matter of choosing whose judgment we trust to make the judgment at hand. The process of judgment, as we have established, necessitates both an understanding of the context and the ability to view an object or event through the lens of the a priori principle of purposiveness.

However, for any judgment to hold significance, we must be able to validate its credibility. This validation will necessarily require one's trust at some point. This is not to suggest that we should abandon skepticism or doubt, nor does it imply that we should blindly accept everything we encounter, regardless of whatever silver-tongued deceivers like Frank Goodman might say. Rather, it emphasizes that in all judgments—which form the basis of our understanding of the world and its constituents—we must reach a point of self-agreement in which we consider the evidence, reasoning, and grounding of judgments that structure the very framing of our worldview to be sound. In short, for us to consider our judgments valid and thus believe them to be true, we must be able to assert that they meet a reliable standard of trust.

Trust, as we have seen, is a matter of judgment, and ultimately it is an aesthetic one. Aesthetics refers to that which is felt. We must feel that our standards of trust have been satisfied in order to truly extend it to a counterparty. However, this is a delicate balance. My argument may seem to privilege judgment based on feeling at the expense of logic, but this is not at all the case. Logic plays a crucial role in breaking down concepts and propositions into precise, discrete elements and is instrumental in applying mathematical theory to physical reality, thus enabling a level of precision and predictability that aesthetics alone cannot manage. But, recalling Peirce's movement from the aesthetic to the ethical to the logical (and finally the metaphysical, the "after physics"), logical propositions are privileged or disregarded based on their relative "goodness," which has every bearing on the end to which they are meant to satisfy. If a programmer asks themselves if the code they have written is "good," what are they asking? If it is logically sound? Code has to be logically sound to function, but to ask if it is good is to ask something more. For contrary to any Platonic misconception of idealized value systems, asking "What is good?" can only be answered with "Good for what?"

From the initial question of whether something is good and what it might be good for proceeds a cascade of further inquiries regarding the specific purpose it serves as well as whose benefit it serves. For, contrary to the idea that “the Good” is an ideal form whose various instantiations populate the real world, the notion of goodness is always indexed against desired outcomes and intended beneficiaries. In human affairs the central question is ultimately what we both as individual moral agents and as collective entities, deem good through reflection on aesthetic experience and ethical concerns. Further, discerning goodness amidst complex human realities inherently necessitates careful consideration of multiple situated perspectives of multiple participants in any given situation--stakeholders to use the parlance of our times. This cannot be done through the application of pure logic or the appeal to rigid doctrine. It invariably depends upon reflective engagement with genuine contingencies, and not ideological presumptions. This is not to say that there is no room for idealism in our reflection on the contingencies at hand; it is simply to assert that we must not get lost in them.

Articulating the Idea of Common Sense

Articulating common sense requires avoiding the temptation to "define" the concept in absolute theoretical terms. Rather than a fixed theory, common sense is more concerned with contingency and navigating situations when strict theories fail to provide clear answers. It focuses precisely on scenarios where reliable solutions do not readily present themselves. Ideological thinking can be at odds with common sense if it is not calibrated to align with the nuances of the circumstances at hand. Acting solely based on ideological principles, without accounting for contextual factors, can often backfire in practice. This is not to say one must abandon ideological systems entirely. Rather, it cautions against letting predetermined

ideological positions supersede pragmatic considerations of possible outcomes. In most situations, we cannot let abstract calculus derived from ideology alone dictate our actions. Instead, exercising common sense involves deliberating on what the tangible consequences of a particular decision should be for the specific situation, beyond just ideological consistency. We must be guided by contextual contingencies and desired ends, not absolute fidelity to a doctrine.

Therefore, the first core conceit behind exercising common sense is this: *pay attention*. The particular details of the situation must always be taken into consideration first and last; It is unwise to approach any circumstance requiring prudent judgment with a rigid adherence to preconceived notions of the ideal solution. The second conceit to bear in mind is this: *that aesthetics—that is, our feelings—matter*. Feelings and emotions (which are not voluntary but nonetheless ground us to our lived reality within the world) should not be dismissed as clouding judgment; on the contrary, these provide the very metrics by which we evaluate whether our logical deliberations have yielded desired outcomes. Sound common sense involves first comprehending the aesthetic landscape of a context to discern what ends are sought. With desired outcomes as guideposts, practical reason can strategize solutions. But persistent reflection remains imperative— we must continuously re-evaluate if our thinking still applies to evolving realities and aligns with our purposes.

In any situation involving collective existence, open discourse is imperative. As social beings, we must find ways to negotiate the question of what constitutes a society we are willing to peacefully coinhabit. Ideological frameworks can inform these deliberations but often fall short in accounting for real-world complexities. That said, much of human history has been dominated by autocratic systems of government in which normative rules and values were for the most part dictatorially prescribed for most people – the reticence to embrace the normative is

undoubtedly a substantiated concern., Yet some shared ethical substrate remains necessary for meaningful cooperation. This can only be accomplished through active communication and most successfully through immediate conversation. Through sincere, inclusive, and good faith dialogue, communities can identify baseline norms that do enable successful cohesion amid irrepressible complexities. The alternative, polarization and dissolution, inures to no one's benefit.

Peirce's movement from the aesthetic, to the ethical, and finally to the logical provides a pragmatic framework for developing communal ethics. What merely feels correct must be interrogated against what engenders objective good in the world. This requires the precise, quantitative reasoning of logic to translate sentiment into action. We discover our common sentiments through communication; despite a multitude of perspectives, certain shared values do emerge. As a species, humans beings intrinsically seek to survive and propagate; as individuals, we desire to live flourishing lives unencumbered by hardship or suffering. While societal structures may seem indifferent to these feelings, the entire project of civilization itself is to accommodate them, striving as it does to render existence more bearable through order and cooperation. Thus, the need for rules and norms in the first place is not arbitrary, for they are the very thing that allow communities to cohere through codes of conduct. Logic alone cannot dictate these practical ethics. Pure mathematics lacks intent, being indifferent to human needs. But our aesthetic inclinations and emotional experiences provide the phenomenological foundation for conceptualizing moral ends.

Common Texts, Common Considerations

The establishment of true common-sense values necessitates an exploration of thoughts, reactions, and feelings (aesthetics) elicited through the consideration of a common text. Such texts provides a shared space for imaginative contemplation, allowing for collective consideration and discussion of the implications, stakes, dynamics, and more in the text. This is reliably possible in part because there can be no dispute over the actual words of a given text. While we can endlessly debate the intended meaning of a phrase like Shakespeare's "Juliet is the sun," we cannot deny that the characters J-U-L-I-E-T I-S T-H-E S-U-N appear in that order within the text. Nor can we dispute that these letters spell the words they do without betraying a complete ignorance of the English language. In an almost infinitely deniable world, a common text is the thing that can provide us a solid foothold for discussion. Therefore, a common text serves an indispensable function by providing a shared frame of reference for discussion, debate, and discourse. In fact, if there has ever been a “good” reason to ensure that students study literature in any context, this is it.

The great resource behind the Western liberal tradition lies in its attitudes toward reading, fostered by a political tradition that privileges freedoms of press and expression over the impulse to control information through state apparatuses. The availability of texts spanning myriad genres, authors, and perspectives has provided invaluable fodder for reflection while unconstrained readership, coupled with the freedom to discuss sensitive matters candidly, enables the productive intellectual discourse essential to sound judgment at a communal level. In particular, imaginative literature presents concepts and subjects that may be difficult to engage with in lower-stakes environments. Fiction invites speculative consideration of hypothetical scenarios and their implications through prompting readers to ask "What if [x]?" This allows a

collective sounding-board for wrestling with complex interpersonal dynamics and ethical quandaries. A common text thus serves an indispensable function by providing a shared frame of reference to ground exploratory discourse and debate. It gives diverse minds a substantive foothold for unpacking thorny issues from multiple angles while maintaining its constancy.

Of course, free dialogue has risks, including confusion, offense, or manipulation. But these are outweighed by gains in mutual comprehension and empathy; further, these are complex challenges that simply demand nuanced, open-ended discussion. Literature, mathematics, history, science, and the arts provide the tools of comprehension; but continuous, good-faith dialogue hones their application for human flourishing. Thus free societies depend upon cultivating a responsible, yet exploratory, rhetorical culture built around its works of art and literature. This is why we place this particular profession in a privileged position–to remind ourselves and our social order that the practice of reading and discussing literature is an indispensable boon to society that we have come to recognize is worth preserving.

A common text serves an indispensable function by furnishing a shared frame of reference to anchor exploratory discourse and debate. Imaginative literature in particular provides fertile ground for grappling with ethically complex scenarios and social dynamics that may feel threatening to confront when stakes are high. Fictional narratives allow collective speculation regarding hypothetical situations and their implications. Readers are prompted to ask "What if [x]?" and there are invited to envision contingent outcomes given imagined conditions. Engaging fiction and literature as a group—which is to say, reading together, analyzing jointly, and discussing various interpretations—develops competencies essential to sound communal judgment and to our capacity for coexistence amid complexity. Collectively wrestling with the open questions posed by literary texts hones skills for recognizing viewpoints, understanding

motivation, tracing consequences, and deliberating principles that ought to guide individual and collective conduct when societal conventions are corrupt or inadequate. Such sustained dialogue around shared touchstones makes space for the assumptions embedded in disparate interpretations to rise to the surface where they can be identified and scrutinized and if necessary justified.

This speculative space is especially valuable in educational settings, where discourse can be bounded, moderated, and made useful through best practices and mandatory mutual respect. When disagreements emerge through engaging a common text, each side's foundational reasoning is questioned as the text introduces contingencies that cannot easily be dealt with or ignored. Students are thus compelled to examine and articulate core principles underpinning their interpretations and positions. This process of reflective clarification forges mutual understanding and cultivates sound judgment. Rather than forcing rigid consensus, quality texts expand the realm of possible meanings. They also crucially provide common frames of reference that serve as an anchor of conversation while opening avenues for pluralistic interpretation.

This dissertation has endeavored to participate in this exercise by considering questions of common sense and good judgment as they appear as thematic concerns within two 19th century American novels. Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* offers a powerful example of fictions' ability to articulate a need for deep collective reckoning with entrenched societal injustice and normalized cruelty. Through the satirical first-person narration of its dispossessed adolescent protagonist, Twain ferociously critiques the manifold of hypocrisies and arbitrary cruelties endemic to the *sensus communists* of the antebellum American South. The hollow pious religiosity used to excuse atrocities, its codes of so-called "honor" designed primarily to reinforce existing hierarchies of race gender and class, and, above all, its assumptions of white

supremacy used to justify the brutal dehumanizing institution of channel slavery, are all subject to Twain's criticism. Over the course of his journey down the Mississippi River, Huck is repeatedly confronted with the need to act in response to the injustices and inhumanities embedded in the social order into which he was born at the same time that he was required to tailor his actions towards survival itself. As he comes to see Jim's full humanity and to empathize deeply with his friend, Huck also undergoes profound moral development, taking it upon himself to assume tremendous personal risks in order to aid Jim's escape. As a moral agent, Huck takes his cues not from the imposed dogma of his culture but from his own capacity for sound practical judgment and empathy.

Huckleberry Finn illustrates the maturation of sound, practical judgment by questioning and ultimately rejecting cruelties embedded in the Southern *sensus communis*. Huck prioritizes empathy over convention, guided by ethical intuitions honed through harsh experience. His calculated decisions privilege real-world outcomes over ideological purity. When faced with pivotal decisions, Huck consistently prioritizes real-world outcomes and regard for others' dignity over loyalty to prevailing social conventions or ideological abstractions. His pragmatic calculus reflects deep reserves of empathy, leading him to risk grave censure and danger by rejecting complicity in chattel slavery. Huck's reflective trajectory illustrates the cultivation of moral courage and sound judgment in resisting an unjust status quo. Twain's novel also provides a vivid literary sandbox for rehearsing the timeless skill of perspective-taking. By considering how we would respond when placed in Huck's precarious societal position, readers can flex their moral imagination. We are prompted to inquire into characters' motives and accountability, trace the origins and impacts of their fateful choices, and reflect on what first principles truly guide ethical action when norms prove untenable. Such sustained, open-ended discourse around a

shared text forces assumptions to the surface and underscores the limits of ideological rigidity when navigating complex human realities.

As an equally masterful if more obscure example, Herman Melville 's *The Confidence-Man* crafts and intricately layered inquiry into the problems surrounding trust, perception, and credibility that permeate both interpersonal exchanges and institutional frameworks when definitive evidence is not readily available. Set aboard a crowded riverboat making its way down the Mississippi River on April fool's day, Melville 's novel presents a microcosm of the mid-19th century American frontier, which was undergoing rapid development under relatively little government supervision. It is into this fluid milieu of transient strangers that Melville introduces his array of rogues, grifters, con men, pan handlers, philanthropists, and solicitors, as well as their potential victims and marks. By tracing the confidence men's diverse ruses and machinations aboard the riverboat, Melville dramatizes the constant negotiation between trust and circumspection demanded by life among everchanging multitudes. Like Huck Finn, Melville resists reduction to simplistic maxims or formulas through richly layered scenarios that force persistent re-evaluation as circumstances evolve. His cast illustrates the spectrum of motives underlying interpersonal exchanges, highlighting the need for balanced perspective attuned to nuance. Thus, *The Confidence-Man* provides fertile ground for collective deliberation on the problem of trust in institutions and individuals when certainty is elusive.

While Melville suggests that unconditional confidence opens oneself up to exploitation, his perplexing narrative forces the reader to reflect on the intrinsic necessity of trust for the society to function at all. Given that imperfect information and limited means to conclusively verify identities or intentions either within Melville’s novel or within the real world, a delicate equilibrium between prudent skepticism and pragmatic faith institutions must be maintained.

Melville dramatizes the constant active tension between doubt and openness that dominates our interactions with others. His masquerade of confidence men underscores the epistemic limits inherent to judgment and reason, especially when making snap judgements amid multitudes of strangers whose personal histories are unknowable. Yet even as he highlights these limits, Melville nevertheless affirms the need to eventually assess evidence to the point of satisfaction and, as such, avoid paralysis in both action and decision making. Whereas *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is in many ways about learning how to withhold one's trust, Melville's text takes up the more difficult question of how to judiciously extend one's trust to someone or something. Each of these are critically important tasks, and each is equally important to the exercise of sound judgment and the practice of common sense.

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Cultivating common sense requires sincere inclusive communication in a safe environment in which the stakes are low and the discussion free to roam where it will. In other words, cultivating common sense in the classroom is effectively done through the study and discussion of literature. This facilitates sustained discussion, grounded on common texts, of what passes for acceptable—as well as unacceptable—normative principles. Divergent views and overlapping values may coalesce into meaningful progress when all voices are allowed to contribute equally under fair discursive rules, with all venturing to discuss the matter of stakes, consequences, and desired outcomes. Logic and the reason may work to implement agreed upon goals, but it is the aesthetic considerations of the collective and the individuals that it consists of that are the raw materials to consider.

Ultimately the teaching of common sense resists any attempt at foolproof transmission; it is instead an ongoing intellectual exercise honed through lifelong practice. It is in the humanities,

and especially in literary studies, that we find the most vital methods for its cultivation. Studying the diverse artistic perspectives and histories that inform all aspects of world literature expands our capacity for reflection while granting space to scrutinize ethical complexities that defy schemas, dogmas, religions, and ideologies. Above all, literature provides the invaluable shared frameworks upon which we may exercise judgment through open-ended speculation, wrestling with contingencies, unsettling assumptions, and clarifying disagreements. If engaged sincerely, quality texts foster the habits of mind conducive to good judgment and common sense: intellectual humility, adaptability, empathy, critical reason, doubt, and at some level, faith. While complete definitive instruction in these areas is impossible within the confines of a formal curriculum, humanities education nevertheless stands to benefit from directly and explicitly invoking the role common sense within its various disciplines. Although the idea itself resists distillation to pedagogical formulas, it stands as an admirable aim of a conscientious curriculum and is undeniably worth cultivating as an object of inquiry within the larger liberal arts tradition.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: "The Information Man" by Buddy Wakefield

After over 300,000 miles

Twelve dozen breakdowns nervous

One too many midnights

And a bunch of broken laws later

I have come here from out of the rain and into this rest area

Caught twenty-two miles between you and me

Watching the Information Man behind his information booth

Juggling predictable conversation with folks who look like iceberg lettuce

And who believe that somehow

The flat lines of small talk will give us life.

I want them to leave.

Like a big deal orchestra removing itself from the stringed section

So I can fiddle with fate and make music.

There is a distance the size of bravery

It forms like words in the mouth of a baby

Reaching out for the point where all things meet;

On one end of it sits an Information Man

Who I imagine holds down his second job as church bartender

Behind locked doors, leading to the bell tower we are not allowed see

(sinners!)

On the other end of this space

I am standing like shoe polish on an overstocked shelf

Hoping that one day someone will pick me to make things better.

This is not a showdown or a shootout, we are not facing off

But I can feel the rumble between dusk and dawn

As if the chance to come clean with myself will be outlawed unless I relax

I have heard, that if you pull a bent breath

Through the second hole of a harmonica

Tuned to the key of Georgia

While a train moves by on the tail end of dusk

There is a good chance you will finally know what it means to rest

I have not yet rested.

It takes a long time to make love with someone who hates themselves

It feels like I've been standing here for exactly that long

When at last, the rain outside drops off

And takes everyone in the rest area with it

Except for me and the Information Man.

If we were created in God's image, then when God was a child

He smushed fire ants with his finger tips and avoided tough questions

There are ways around being the go-to person, even for ourselves

But tonight we will get the answer, and you know what I'm talking about

The Answer

Emphasis on *E*, Answer

So I put my best foot forward

And take the kind of deep breath that gives me away

As someone who deals with anxiety and odd numbers

Every other

Other every minute

In between it, the Info Guy's eyes grab me then shift

Back and forth

Like mopping floors with the sweat I sweat in battles against myself

He's got me locked in and is smiling

If you've never been rocked back by the presence of purpose

This poem is too soon for you

Return to your mediocrity

Plug it into an amplifier

And rethink yourself

Because some of us are on fire for the answer

I am ready for rejection and rebirthing balance in my stutter steps

When the Info Guy finally pipes up

Like C.R. Avery on a piano box

And says to me:

Listen,

If I didn’t have so much of this life all wrong

I would have gotten it right by now.

I talk a whole bunch, but I really know only a few things

So I'm not saying to follow along verbatim here.

I'll just tell ya the things I tell myself,

The things I know,

And you can see what sticks.

I know our shoes were stitched from songs about highways

The best songs are the ones about Georgia

Even though I've never been there it's the only place I still believe in Jesus

I know that no matter what it is you believe in

You've got to spare yourself the futility of making fun of God

Because that guy hasn't even talked

Ever

I know troubleshooting yourself in the foot

And acting as your own universe is a tricky dichotomy to deal with

But, yes, you are the center of the universe

If you weren't you wouldn't be here

So as the middle of space, and everything floating in it

It is your job to know that the emptiness is just emptiness

That the stars are stars

And that the flying rocks hurt

So please, stop inviting walls into wide open spaces

I know everything is out there

It's why they call it everything

I know there are times

When you will lay your head to rest

And have a moment of brilliance

That will grow into a perfect order of words

But you will fall asleep instead of painting it down on paper

When you wake up you will have forgotten the idea completely

And miss it like a front tooth

But at least you know how to recognize moments of brilliance

Because even at your worst you are fucking incredible

It comes honest

So return to yourself even if you're already there

Because no matter where you go

Or how hard you try

Or what you do

The only person you're ever going get to be

And I know it

Thank God

Is you.

Appendix B: 1 Samuel 8 (New Revised Standard Version).

1 When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. 2 The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beer-sheba. 3 Yet his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice.

4 Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, 5 and said to him, 'You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.' 6 But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, 'Give us a king to govern us.' Samuel prayed to the Lord, 7 and the Lord said to Samuel, 'Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. 8 Just as they have done to me,[a] from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. 9 Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.'

10 So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. 11 He said, 'These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; 12 and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. 13 He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. 14 He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his

courtiers. 15 He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. 16 He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle[b] and donkeys, and put them to his work. 17 He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. 18 And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.'

19 But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, 'No! but we are determined to have a king over us, 20 so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.' 21 When Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. 22 The Lord said to Samuel, 'Listen to their voice and set a king over them.' Samuel then said to the people of Israel, 'Each of you return home.'

Appendix C: Borges, Jorge Luis. "On Exactitude in Science." ***Collected Fictions,*** **translated by Andrew Hurley, Penguin Books, 1999.**

…In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.

—Suarez Miranda,Viajes devarones prudentes, Libro IV,Cap. XLV, Lerida, 1658

Appendix D: "What Keeps Mankind Alive?" (1928), Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill. *The Threepenny Opera*, translated by John Willett and Ralph Manheim, Bloomsbury, 2015.

You gentlemen who think you have a mission
To purge us of the seven deadly sins
Should first sort out the basic food position
Then start your preaching, that's where it begins
You lot who preach restraint and watch your waist as well
Should learn, for once, the way the world is run
However much you twist or whatever lies that you tell
Food is the first thing, morals follow on
So first make sure that those who are now starving
Get proper helpings when we all start carving!

What keeps mankind alive?
What keeps mankind alive?
The fact that millions are daily tortured
Stifled, punished, silenced and oppressed
Mankind can keep alive thanks to its brilliance
In keeping its humanity repressed
And for once you must try not to shrink the facts
Mankind is kept alive by bestial acts!

Appendix E: Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a, sec. 6. *Koren-Steinsmaltz Talmud*, edited by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, 1965--.

שׁוּב מַעֲשֶׂה בְּגוֹי אֶחָד שֶׁבָּא לִפְנֵי שַׁמַּאי. אָמַר לוֹ: גַּיְּירֵנִי עַל מְנָת שֶׁתְּלַמְּדֵנִי כָּל הַתּוֹרָה כּוּלָּהּ כְּשֶׁאֲנִי עוֹמֵד עַל רֶגֶל אַחַת! דְּחָפוֹ בְּאַמַּת הַבִּנְיָן שֶׁבְּיָדוֹ. בָּא לִפְנֵי הִלֵּל, גַּיְּירֵיהּ. אָמַר לוֹ: דַּעֲלָךְ סְנֵי לְחַבְרָךְ לָא תַּעֲבֵיד — זוֹ הִיא כָּל הַתּוֹרָה כּוּלָּהּ,

וְאִידַּךְ פֵּירוּשָׁהּ הוּא, זִיל גְּמוֹר.

[There was another incident involving one gentile who came before Shammai and said to Shammai: Convert me on condition that you teach me the entirety of Law while I am standing on one foot. Shammai pushed him away with the builder's cubit in his hand. This was a common measuring stick and Shammai was a builder by trade. The same gentile came before Hillel. He converted him and said to him: That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the whole of the Torah; the rest is its interpretation. Go and learn.]

Appendix F: *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, volume 2, edited by Harriet E. Smith and Victor Fischer, et. al. University of California Press, 2013, pp. 57-59.

Mr. Clemens becomes his own publisher and makes Webster general agent in the firm of Webster and Company, Publishers—Webster publishes "Huckleberry Finn" successfully — Whitford of firm Alexander and Green draws the contract—lecture tour with George Cable—Farewell address on 19th of April.

As I have already remarked, I had imported my nephew in law, Webster, from the village of Dunkirk, New York, to conduct that original first patent right business for me, at a salary of fifteen hundred dollars. That enterprise had lost forty-two thousand dollars for me, so I thought this a favorable time to close it up. I proposed to be my own publisher now, and let young Webster do the work. He thought he ought to have twenty-five hundred dollars a year while he was learning the trade. I took a day or two to consider the matter and study it out searchingly. So far as I could see, this was a new idea. I remembered that printers' apprentices got no salary. Upon inquiry I found that this was the case with stone masons, brick masons, tinners, and the rest. I found that not even lawyers or apprenticed doctors got any salary for learning the trade. I remembered that on the river an apprentice pilot not only got nothing in the way of a salary but he also had to pay some pilot a sum of cash which he didn't have—a large sum. It was what I had done myself. I had paid Bixby a hundred dollars, and it was borrowed money. I was told by a person who said he was studying for the ministry that even Noah got no salary for the first six months—partly on account of the weather and partly because he was learning navigation.

The upshot of these thinkings and searchings of mine was that I believed I had secured something entirely new to history in Webster. And also I believed that a young backwoodsman who was starting life in New York without any equipment of any kind, without proved value of any kind, without prospective value of any kind, yet able without blinking an eye to propose to learn a trade at another man's expense and charge for this benefaction at annual sum greater than any President of the United States had ever been able to save out of his pay for running the most difficult country on the planet, after Ireland, must surely be worth securing—and instantly—lest he get away. I believed that if some of his gigantic interest in No. 1 could be diverted to the protection of No. 2, the result would be fortunate enough for me.

I erected Webster into a firm—affirm entitled Webster and Company, Publishers—and installed him in a couple of offices at a modest rental, on the second floor of a building somewhere below Union Square, I don't remember where. For assistance he had a girl, and perhaps a masculine clerk of about eight-hundred-dollar size. For a while Webster had another helper. This was a man who had long been in the subscription-book business, knew all about it, and was able to teach it to Webster—which he did—I paying the cost of tuition. I am talking about the early part of 1884 now. I handed Webster a competent capital and along with it I handed him the manuscript of “Huckleberry Finn.” Webster 's function was general agent. It was his business to appoint sub-agents throughout the country. At that time there were sixteen of these sub-agencies. They had canvassers under them who did the canvassing. In New York City webster was his own sub-agent.

Before ever any of these minor details that I am talking about had entered into being, the careful Webster had suggested that a contract be drawn and signed and sealed before we made any real move. That seemed sane, though I should not have thought of it myself—I mean it was

sane because I had not thought of it myself. So Webster got his friend Whitford to draw the contract. I was coming to admire Webster very much, and at this point in the proceedings I had one of those gushing generosities surge up in my system; and before I had thought, I had tried to confer upon Webster a tenth interest in the business in addition to his salary, free of charge. Webster declined promptly—with thanks, of course, the usual kind. That raised him up another step in my admiration. I knew perfectly well that I was offering him a partnership interest which would pay him two or three times his salary within the next nine months, but he didn't know that. He was coldly and wisely discounting all my prophecies about “Huckleberry Finn’s” high commercial value. And here was this new evidence that in Webster I had found a jewel, a man who would not get excited; a man who would not lose his head; a cautious man; a man who would not take a risk of any kind in fields unknown to him. Except at somebody else's expense, I mean…

The first contract was alright. There was nothing the matter with it. It placed all obligations, all expenses, all liabilities, all responsibilities upon me, where they belonged.

It was a happy combination, Webster and Whitford. The amount that the two together didn't know about anything was to me a much more awful and paralyzing spectacle than it would be to see the Milky Way get wrecked and drift off in rags and patches through the sky. When it came to courage, moral or physical, they hadn't any. Webster was afraid to venture anything in the way of business without first getting a lawyer 's assurance that there was nothing jailable about it. Whitford was consulted so nearly constantly that he was about as much a member of the staff as was the girl and the subscription expert. But as neither Webster nor Whitford had had any personal experience of money, Whitford was not an expensive incumbent, though he probably thought he was.

At the break of autumn I went off with George W. Cable on the four months' reading campaign in the East and West—the last platform work which I was ever to do and this life in my own country. I resolved at the time that I would never rob the public from the platform again unless driven to it by pecuniary compulsions. After eleven years the pecuniary compulsions came, and I lectured all around the globe…

I seem to be getting pretty far away from Webster and Whitford, but it's no matter. It is one of those cases where distance lends enchantment to the view. Webster was successful with "Huckleberry Finn," and a year later handed me the firm's check for $54,500, which included the $15,000 capital which I had originally handed to him.

Once more I experienced a new birth. I have been born more times than anybody except Krishna, I suppose.

Appendix G: Plutarch, The Life of Alexander. Loeb Classical Library, volume 7, 1919.

14. 1 And now a general assembly of the Greeks was held at the Isthmus,25 where a vote was passed to make an expedition against Persia with Alexander, and he was proclaimed their leader. 2 Thereupon many statesmen and philosophers came to him with their congratulations, and he expected that Diogenes of Sinope also, who was tarrying in Corinth, would do likewise. 3 But since that philosopher took not the slightest notice of Alexander, and continued to enjoy his leisure in the suburb Craneion, Alexander went in person to see him; and he found him lying in the sun. 4 Diogenes raised himself up a little when he saw so many persons coming towards him, and fixed his eyes upon Alexander. And when that monarch addressed him with greetings, and asked if he wanted anything, "Yes," said Diogenes, "stand a little out of my sun." 5 It is said that Alexander was so struck by this, and admired so much the haughtiness and grandeur of the man who had nothing but scorn for him, that he said to his followers, who were laughing and jesting about the philosopher as they went away, "But verily, if I were not Alexander, I would be Diogenes."

Appendix H: Excerpted from Tony Kushner, *Angels in America, Part One: Millenium Approaches*. Theater Communications Group, 1992; reprint 1993. The following passage is excerpted from Scene 9, in which Roy is diagnosed with AIDS by his doctor, Henry.

ROY: ...What are you implying, Henry?

HENRY: I don't...

ROY: I'm not a drug addict.

HENRY: Oh come on, Roy.

ROY: What, what, come on Roy what? Do you think I'm a junkie, Henry, do you see tracks?

HENRY: This is absurd.

ROY: Say it.

HENRY: Say what?

ROY: Say, "Roy Cohn, you are a..."

HENRY: Roy.

ROY: "You are a..." Go on. Not "Roy Cohn you are a drug fiend." "Roy Marcus Cohn, you are a..." Go on, Henry, it starts with an "H."

HENRY: Oh I'm not going to...

ROY: With an 'H,' Henry, and it isn't "Hemophiliac." Come on...

HENRY: What are you doing, Roy?

ROY: No, say it. I mean it. Say: "Roy Cohn, you are a homosexual."

(Pause)

And I will proceed, systematically, to destroy your reputation and your practice and your career in New York State, Henry. Which you know I can do.

(Pause.)

HENRY: Roy, you have been seeing me since 1958. Apart from the facelifts I have treated you for everything from syphilis...

ROY: From a whore in Dallas.

HENRY: From syphilis to venereal warts. In your rectum. Which you may have gotten from a whore in Dallas, but it wasn't a female whore.

(Pause.)

ROY: So say it.

HENRY: Roy Cohn, you are... You have had sex with men many, many times, Roy, and one of them, or any number of them, has made you very sick. You have AIDS.

ROY: AIDS.

Your problem, Henry, is that you are hung up on words, on labels, that you believe they mean what they seem to mean. AIDS. Homosexual. Gay. Lesbian. You think these are names that tell you who someone sleeps with, but they don't tell you that.

HENRY: No?

ROY: No. Like all labels, they tell you one thing and one thing only: where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order? Not ideology, or sexual taste, but something much simpler: clout. Not who I fuck or who fucks me, but who will pick up the phone when I call, who owes me favors. This is what a label refers to. Now to someone who does not understand this, homosexual is what I am because I have sex with men. But really this is wrong. Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a pissant antidiscrimination bill through City

Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me, Henry?

HENRY: No.

ROY: No. I have clout. A lot. I can pick up this phone, punch fifteen numbers, and you know who will be on the other end in under five minutes, Henry?

HENRY: The President.

ROY: Even better, Henry. His wife.

HENRY: I'm impressed.

ROY: I don't want you to be impressed. I want you to understand. This is not sophistry. And this is not hypocrisy. This is reality. I have sex with men. But unlike nearly every other man of whom this is true, I bring the guy I'm screwing to the White House and President Reagan smiles at us and shakes his hand. Because what I am is defined entirely by who I am. Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys.

HENRY: OK, Roy.

ROY: And what is my diagnosis, Henry?

HENRY: You have AIDS, Roy.

ROY: No, Henry, no. AIDS is what homosexuals have, I have liver cancer…

Appendix I: Excerpted from "Bob Dylan Gives Press Conference in San Francisco, Part II." *Rolling Stone*, January 20, 1968.

JOURNALIST: What do you feel about the meaning of this kind of question-and-answer session?

DYLAN: I just know in my own mind that we all have a different idea of all the words we're using, y'know… I really can't take it too seriously because everything—like if I say the word "house," we're both going to see a different house. If I just say the word, right? So, we're using all these other words like "mass production" and "movie magazine" and we all have a different idea of these words too, so I don't even know what we're saying…

JOURNALIST: What do you bother to write the poetry for if we all get different images? If we don't know what you're talking about.

DYLAN: Because I got nothing else to do, man.

Appendix J: 1 Corinthians 13, New Revised Standard Version.

13 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong
or a clanging cymbal. **2** And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all
knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am
nothing. **3** If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may
boast,[a] but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant **5** or rude. It does
not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; **6** it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but
rejoices in the truth. **7** It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will
cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. **9** For we know only in part, and we prophesy
only in part; **10** but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. **11** When I was a
child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult,
I put an end to childish ways. **12** For now we see in a mirror, dimly,[b] but then we will see face to
face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. **13** And
now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Appendix K: Staff, "Arrest of the Confidence Man." ***New-York Herald*****, July 8, 1849.**

Arrest of the Confidence Man.—For the last few months a man has been traveling about the city, known as the "Confidence Man," that is, he would go up to a perfect stranger in the street, and being a man of genteel appearance, would easily command an interview. Upon this interview he would say after some little conversation, "have you confidence in me to trust me with your watch until to-morrow;" the stranger at this novel request, supposing him to be some old acquaintance not at that moment recollected, allows him to take the watch, thus placing "confidence" in the honesty of the stranger, who walks off laughing and the other supposing it to be a joke allows him so to do. In this way many have been duped, and the last that we recollect was a Mr. Thomas McDonald, of No. 276 Madison street, who, on the 12th of May last, was met by this "Confidence Man" in William Street, who, in the manner as above described, took from him a gold lever watch valued at $110; and yesterday, singularly enough, Mr. McDonald was passing along Liberty street, when who should he meet but the "Confidence Man" who had stolen his watch. Officer Swayse, of the Third Ward, being near at hand, took the accused into custody on the charge made by Mr. McDonald. The accused at first refused to go with the officer; but after finding the officer determined to take him, he walked along for a short distance, when he showed desperate fight, and it was not until the officer had tied his hands together that he was able to convey him to the police office. On the prisoner being taken before Justice McGrath, he was recognized as an old offender by the name of Wm. Thompson, and is said to be a graduate of the college at Sing Sing. The magistrate committed him to prison for a further hearing. It will be well for all those persons who have been defrauded by the "Confidence Man" to call at the police court Tombs and take a view of him.

Appendix L: The Book of Jesus, Son of Sirach, Chapter 13 (KJV)

[1] He that toucheth pitch shall be defiled therewith; and he that hath fellowship with a proud man shall be like unto him.

[2] Burden not thyself above thy power while thou livest; and have no fellowship with one that is mightier and richer than thyself: for how agree the kettle and the earthen pot together? for if the one be smitten against the other, it shall be broken.

[3] The rich man hath done wrong, and yet he threateneth withal: the poor is wronged, and he must intreat also.

[4] **If thou be for his profit, he will use thee**: but if thou have nothing, he will forsake thee.

[5] If thou have any thing, he will live with thee: yea, **he will make thee bare, and will not be sorry for it.**

[6] If he have need of thee, he will deceive thee, and smile upon thee, and put thee in hope; **he will speak thee fair, and say, What wantest thou?**

[7] And he will shame thee by his meats, until he have drawn thee dry twice or thrice, and at the last he will laugh thee to scorn afterward, when he seeth thee, he will forsake thee, and shake his head at thee.

[8] Beware that thou be not deceived and brought down in thy jollity.

[9] If thou be invited of a mighty man, withdraw thyself, and so much the more will he invite thee.

[10] Press thou not upon him, lest thou be put back; stand not far off, lest thou be forgotten.

[11] Affect not to be made equal unto him in talk, and believe not his many words: for **with much communication will he tempt thee, and smiling upon thee** will get out thy secrets:

[12] But cruelly he will lay up thy words, and will not spare to do thee hurt, and to put thee in prison.

[13] Observe, and take good heed, for thou walkest in peril of thy overthrowing: when thou hearest these things, awake in thy sleep.

[14] Love the Lord all thy life, and call upon him for thy salvation.