Anna Maria Lorusso*

The good sense of Umberto Eco and the common sense of the Echian Encyclopaedia

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Abstract: The aim of my contribution is to analyse the role that common sense has played in Umberto Eco's work. After making clear the distinction between good sense and common sense, and highlighting a number of differences with the Scottish philosophy of common sense, I will consider the uses and functions that common sense assumes in Eco's philosophy: namely, a phenomenological function, a regulatory function and a communicative function. I will demonstrate how the characterisation of common sense in Eco emphasises the importance of the *historical* dimension of Sens, the importance of the *public and social* dimension of semiosis, and how common sense plays a fundamental, pragmatic role in the disposition to act, whilst revealing the importance of the Peircian lesson and Eco's consonance with Peirce's positions.

Keywords: semiotics, Umberto Eco, common sense, encyclopaedia, negotiation, Peirce

The focus of my article will be the role of common sense in Umberto Eco's thought.

However, as is suggested in the title, I want to explore a twofold problem, dealing with both *common sense* and *good sense*; the former as a crucial component of Eco's theory, the latter as a fundamental trait of his personality. I am in no way interested in biography, though I do believe it is important to point out how good sense was a constant in Umberto Eco's attitude with respect to any topics in his whole theoretical, analytical and teaching work, as well as in any form of argumentation he questioned. For this reason, we could say that good sense is a style of thinking that runs through his work. This reliance on good sense was his way of keeping in touch with reality, i. e. to avoid getting lost in abstractions of logic or theory, and not contradicting the plane of experience.

It is the connection with *experience*, in various ways, that motivates the good sense of his attitude and nourishes the theoretical legitimacy of common sense in

***Corresponding author: Anna Maria Lorusso,** Philosophy and Communication, university of Bologna, Via Azzo Gardino 23, Bologna 20123, Italy, E-mail: annamaria.lorusso@unibo.it
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2813-6511

his theory. If good sense was his attitude, common sense was its translation in theoretical activity, or rather its theoretical preliminary assumption.

1 Philosophies of common sense and Peircian theory

That common sense has a philosophical legitimacy is certainly not a point born out only in Eco's work. We know, having considered the thought of various philosophy masters (from Aristotle to Montaigne), that common sense inspired a true philosophical school that found some of his best formulations in Scottish scholars, Thomas Reid, Adam Ferguson and Dugald Stewart. This tradition continued from the 1700s to the last century, finding in G.E. Moore's text, "A Defense of Common Sense" (1925), one of its most important studies. Compared to such acquisitions, Umberto Eco's position has several points of originality and this originality is largely mediated by Charles Sanders Peirce's lesson, a constant point of reference of Echian thought, at least since the second half of the 1970s.

In fact, if in the philosophies of common sense, unlike ontological metaphysics, Hume's scepticism or Berkeley's idealism, the important point is to go back to *senses*, in Umberto Eco's theory the point is to return to a *form of knowledge*, a knowledge that is not disciplinary, that has nothing to do with specialised knowledge, but deals instead with widespread knowledge, that of ordinary man.

The Scottish philosophy of common sense finds in the senses the guarantee of knowing, because they succeed in capturing the qualities of external reality. Sensism is thus linked to a strong idea of reality and a presumed confidence in the genuineness and reliability of the "information" of senses. Perception provides a guarantee of knowledge, because through perception there is direct contact with reality.

I would like to clarify immediately, as it is a central point in my argument, that in Eco's philosophy, the guarantee of knowledge lies in something cultural, not in the senses.

Finally, if in the Scottish philosophy of common sense, sensism implies the reconnection of truth to the subject (who through his senses has the possibility of a direct contact with reality), in Echian theory truth is social, shared and, because of that, *cultural* (in a non-intellectual sense).

As I have already mentioned, a fundamental step in the consolidation of this Echian position is represented by the influence of Peirce, who explicitly reflects

on common sensism. In particular, he deals with the school of Critical Common Sensism in "Issues of pragmaticism", 1905 (CP 5.438 et seq.), prompting the ambiguity at the heart of this position: on the one hand, this essay is "critical", intent on examining any kind of idea or knowledge, on the other hand, it is based on common sense, thus existing on a level that seems unquestionable, guaranteed, beyond doubt.

Here Peirce (the same Peirce who had written the anti-Cartesian essays, and who had firmly asserted that there is no intuitive knowledge that does not derive from previous knowledge) is admitting that some "original" knowledge does exist. It is knowledge whose past we cannot trace ("one cannot 'go behind' them", CP 5.440), knowledge that we use as a starting point from which to move forwards and not backwards.

> There are, besides perceptual judgements, original (i.e. indubitable because uncriticized) beliefs of a general and recurrent kind, as well as indubitable acritical inferences. (CP 5.442)

This knowledge is not "indubitable" in an absolute way (on the contrary everything in the frame of Peirce's fallibilism is revisable) but from a point of view that I would like to define as "functional", in the sense that this knowledge (at certain times and in certain contexts for certain individuals) as *operates* a mass of unquestionable assumptions of one's reasoning, presuppositions that somehow precede and follow them: before and beyond the individual with their personal inferential activity.

The cognitive status of this "original knowledge" is *sui generis*. They belong to us *habitualiter*.

According to Peirce (on the basis of the Scolastica lesson) there is knowledge that we effectively and deliberately elaborate in full consciousness, and knowledge that lies in our consciousness but is yet to be developed: *it might* produce knowledge, it is a sort of repository of knowledge that, at certain moments, may become active and become the starting point for other reasoning. This knowledge, which is not entirely conscious, is the result of associative knowledge, not directly related to perceptual experience.

> There are two ways in which a thing may be in the mind – *habitualiter* and *actualiter*. A notion is in the mind *actualiter* when it is actually conceived; it is in the mind habitualiter when it can directly produce a conception. It is by virtue of mental association (we modern should say) that things are in the mind *habitualiter*. (CP 8.18)

The knowledge that "works" *habitualiter*, with its original beliefs, is in no way unmotivated or natural, but is termed *original* because it is not deliberately assumed but somehow "already there" in the depths of our consciousness, as Peirce says, and only later can it be subject to interpretative revision.

It is a knowledge that has a different temporality. It is "original" because it is ahead of us and for us it is almost immemorial; its origins are lost in time; and in this long life, it is as if it were always "already there", from person to person, and from generation to generation. It is a knowledge that changes very slowly, that "varies a little and but a little under varying circumstances and in distant ages" (CP 5.444); "the changes are so slight from generation to generation, though not imperceptible even in that short period, that they seem constant, fixed" (CP 5.513).

Precisely because it seems or it *is* always already there and we cannot go beyond it, *habitualiter* knowledge somehow gets naturalised: the consciousness of its origin and its historicity is lost and one attributes to it a status that is independent of time. It thus forms a basis of shared knowledge – common sense – which as such is almost never explicitly stated but constitutes the premise of explicit reasoning and knowledge, subjective acts, daily semiosis.

> When I first wrote, we were hardly orientated in the new ideas, and my impression was that the indubitable propositions changed with a thinking man from year to year. I made some studies preparatory to an investigation of the rapidity of these changes [...] and a provisional inquiry shows me that the changes are so slight from generation to generation, though not imperceptible even in that short period ... (CP 5.444)

> NOTE: I wish I might hope to be able to resume this study and to go to the bottom of the subject, which needs the qualities of ages and does not call upon the powers of youth: A great range of reading is necessary; for it is the belief men *betray* and not that which they *parade* which has to be studied (No such study has been found)

It is therefore a matter of seeing the extent of validity of such indubitable beliefs, to track down the limits and jurisdiction of indubitableness (and this is what Pierce criticises the Scottish philosophers of common sense for not doing).[1]

In my opinion, Umberto Eco's position is very close to this approach, and when I speak of a central role of common sense in Echian philosophy, I refer, as I have said from the beginning, to a position that sees in common sense not a reference to the senses but a reference to *knowledge*; a knowledge of a particular species that is indubitable, which is taken for granted and of which somehow one tends to lose consciousness.

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1 On *habitualiter* knowledge, and in particular on his relation to cognitive habits, cf. also Lorusso 2015.

2 Eco and common sense

For Eco, common sense is, over the years, increasingly linked to his theory of encyclopaedia. In fact, in his semantic reflection in the 1970s, Eco developed a model that articulates and overcomes semantics based on necessary and sufficient conditions that dominated studies (from Pottier's semantics to the theory of Katz and Fodor). In *A Theory of Semiotics* (Eco 1976), Eco introduces contextual and circumstantial selections as a constituent part of the meanings and thus he shows how we cannot define the meaning of a sign outside of the context in which it is used. One of the examples offered by Eco is a skull, whose meaning changes completely depending on whether it is placed on a bottle or on the door of an electrical cabinet.

Meanings therefore become sensitive to contexts, varying their senses according to their uses. Such variations are not entirely variable; they have regularity. Such regularity has nothing to do with the presence of necessary and sufficient traits in signs, but they have instead a "statistical" characterisation: certain sense associations are more frequent than others; certain perceptions are more consistent and thus become more normal than others.

Such context-sensitive semantics is the first step to an approach that, rather than identifying stable and unmodified structures, sees patterns that change over time and space. It is also a significant step in the direction of a semantics where meaning is not the result of the sum of traits but the result of *connections*, or relations of elements: meaning is not given by the sum of trait1 + trait2 + trait3 etc., but by the *relationship* of x with y, which gives different results to the relationship of x with z.

Semantics, in short, becomes *topological* and *stratified*: topological because it is based on "*regions* of relationships", and stratified because it is based on repetition and regularisation over time of certain associations.

The best metaphor which expresses this reticular and multidirectional concept of meaning, in which the most frequent and regular associations take a central role, is that of the *encyclopaedia*. Unlike dictionaries, encyclopaedias provide historical descriptions of meanings. They have no universal claims but are often regional (encyclopaedias are mostly thematic and map only certain regions of meaning). So they describe the knowledge that some culture has with respect to certain topics and, as such, change over time.

It is important to keep all this in mind, when we consider common sense: common sense is linked to what can be assumed as regular with respect to certain topics.

If, for Eco, the encyclopaedia is the form taken by the knowledge of a certain culture, on the one hand it is the background which cannot be ignored (one

cannot "go behind" it, paraphrasing Peirce), on the other hand in its multiversity it shows a medium level, a level that is more stable than others, more regular than others, which it is precisely what constitutes the common sense, a collection of such recurring knowledge to be perceived as "natural": "original" (to quote Peirce), not because it is justified by the "senses" (as in common sense philosophy) but because it is motivated by regularity and established patterns.

Having this general convergence between common sense and the encyclopaedia, it is possible to identify some different articulations of the category of common sense within the Echian system, or, rather, some different uses that Eco makes of this category. In Echian theory, common sense is a real resource, and as such he uses it in many different ways. I will try to distinguish between:

- *phenomenological use* (for the history of concepts)
- *regulatory use* (for regulating interpretations and translations)
- *communicative use* (in telling stories)

In what I call its phenomenological use, Eco uses common sense to define the perimeter of some crucial concepts of his theory. To think critically about a certain category, the first thing to do (the common sense choice) is to start from the "catalogue" of its recurring meanings in order to reconstruct its evolution, to develop its phenomenology, to see how a given word has manifested itself in time and in society.

For example, in 1971, in a study devoted to the sign (*Il segno*), before defining its characteristics according to its own perspective, Eco proceeds with a long list of its different uses:

> We must start from this review of the results of common sense (ordinary or intellectual), both to have a basis for discussion and because by retracing history and listing these classifications allows us to make a true phenomenology of the signs. (Eco 1971, Premessa, § II)

Eco often overlaps good sense, common sense and current usage. Still, in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1992) he explicitly states: "One of the ways to understand philosophical concepts is often to get back to the common sense of the dictionaries".

In his view there is no semiotic reflection that can be carried out without considering the recurring meanings of the words examined. Starting from common uses means *exercising* common sense (as strategic intelligence: starting from the right point) and *analysing* common sense (i. e. the list – the phenomenology – of the common, recurring, normalised uses of the concepts considered).

In the use I define as *regulative*, common sense intervenes in defining the limits of interpretation. This is a crucial point in Eco's theory and it is no

coincidence that he devoted a book to this problem in 1990: *The limits of Interpretation*. I will now give two examples made by Eco himself, that, although they are first given in *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990) and later in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1992), return continuously in speeches, lectures and the many reflections of Eco.

Let's take deconstruction. In *Limits*, Eco takes Derrida very seriously, criticising those who dismiss him as a confused or wandering philosopher. On the contrary, according to Eco, Derrida sees and poses crucial semio-linguistic issues. The only problem is that he does not take into account the pragmatic dimension of living and communicating, where the principle of *différance* and the progressive and unlimited transposition of meaning would prevent any interaction. Let us look at a specfic case: Eco says (1990, § 1.3) that when Derrida sent him a letter making a specific request, he expected him to understand what he was asking for, to take his signature as a guarantee that he wrote it and that he took his affirmations seriously. He did not expect Eco to submit his invitation letter to the deconstructive exercise that he explains in "Signature, annéement, contexte" (Derrida 1972) speaking precisely about letters and signatures.

Good sense made it possible for them to understand, to agree, and because of this they managed to have a social exchange. There is a level of meaning – coinciding with the most obvious, sometimes – that we cannot ignore: it is the literal meaning of words. Words, speech, linguistic acts have a common sense: if you sign something, you assume that that signature is authentic (although in specific circumstances you can deviate from normality and falsify, lie – a theme Eco is mindful of).

In the containment of deconstructive interpretative drifts, common sense and literal sense almost coincide.

Here, I would like to point out that, in my view, the two categories cannot be superimposed, or not completely at least: if the *literal meaning* of a term (assuming we can legitimately affirm its existence[2]) is the shared and basic

2 Personally I have many doubts about the fact that we can talk about literal meaning. Precisely on the assumption of Eco's encyclopaedic semantic theory, I am convinced that it is more appropriate to speak only of a more stable nucleus of meaning, which is regularised and that functions as a basis for further senses and contextual selections – a meaning that is historical, and therefore has nothing essential about it, potentially being totally different in 100 years' time.

However, over the years Eco has increasingly claimed the need to consider a literal core. For example, in the Introduction to the *Limits of Interpretation* (Eco 1990) he states: "I continue to think that, within the boundaries of a given language, there is a literal sense of the lexical voices, which is the first one listed by the dictionaries, that is what every man in the street would define first when asked what a given word means".

meaning of the word, in my opinion *common sense* is a dimension of the encyclopaedia, the dimension (often also unaware) in which the semiotic stabilisation of historical practices precipitates and settles. We may perhaps more correctly say that common sense is also made up of literal meanings, but it does not coincide with them, because a recurring figuration (I mean: a rethorcial strategy that goes beyond literality) can also be part of common sense (in figurative but stereotyped expressions such as "it's raining cats and dogs", to which we will soon return) or a disposition to act quite automated (that is a semiotic action not attributable to a problem of literalness).

Certainly, however, literal sense and common sense, in the way Eco speaks about them in *Limits*, for example, share a crucial aspect: they are what makes social consensus and social coordination possible. By setting limits, guardrails (to use the word Eco himself uses in *Limits*) against interpretative drift, common sense and literal sense guarantee social agreement in ways that are often not way intentional but that come about as a sort of spontaneous attunement, in the sense that components (in this case, social components) combine with each other appropriately without having to think about it.

The other example Eco makes about common sense as a regulative-constraining element of interpretation emerges in his dialogue with Rorty. If, in one case, the controversy was with deconstruction, here it is with a certain American pragmatism, which has been greatly influenced by deconstruction. To Rorty, who observes that a screwdriver can have many uses, Eco responds that OK, a screwdriver certainly can be used in many different ways, such as being used to open an envelope. However, it is difficult to use it to scratch behind an ear, as it is a bulky object that can be dangerous. Good sense, again, serves Eco to underline the proper nature of common sense: *normally*, we do not even think of using a certain tool in a certain way; that is, we do not attribute certain meanings to it.

Things, words, texts, in short, have their *intentio*, their vocation, their inscribed meaning, which does not depend neither on the pragmatic intentions of those who created them (I would like to make a screwdriver that marks the history of functional design, as happened with the Stark's juicer) nor the equally pragmatic intentions of those who use them (it is my intention to use a screwdriver to scratch behind my ear at the cost of hurting myself).

Intentio operis manifests itself to readers/users who resort to common sense. There is a common sense reading that must always be the starting point of interpretation, which one cannot ignore and that cannot be contradicted. I can become the critical reader of a text, and deepen its philological history, but I cannot deny the meanings that it holds for the common sense reader.

This regulatory function of common sense appears clearly in the theory and in the practice of translating.

Translation represents an extremely interesting semiotic experience for Eco, an opportunity for many observations and verifications. Eco has a multiform relationship with translation because he has practiced it (he was a translator for Gerard de Nerval's *Sylvie*, for example), he often controlled it (in two ways: when he was working in a publishing house, translation editing was one of his recurring tasks, but later, as the author of successful novels and essays translated around the world he found himself verifying the translations of his own works) and he studied it from a theoretical point of view (in the 1990s he coordinated seminars for PhD students at the University of Bologna on these topics and wrote several essays on it, see Eco 1999, Eco 2000). On all fronts, where he encountered translation problems, Eco discovered the centrality of negotiating logic.

Translation is not an automatic job (so all translations made by automated systems are unsatisfactory), nor is it a job based on word-to-word correspondence (literal translations). Translation is a complex work of interpretation that must find the solution that best returns the effects of the *intentio operis*, negotiating between the reasons of the text and the reasons of the interpreter. The translator must compare the system of the starting language with the system of the target language and find in the latter that which produces the same effect as that produced by the starting text. If I come across the expression "it's raining cats and dogs" in English, I could not carry out a literal translation. I will have to find an expression in the target language that has the same effect as in English, relying, of course, on my skills and common sense. It is common sense that prevents me from saying "Piovono gatti e cani"[3] and pushes me to find other, more sensible solutions.

Commenting on a scheme (drawn by Nida 1975) that compares the verbs to run, to walk, to hop, to skip, to jump, to dance, to crawl, and noting that in Italian there's no acceptable literal synonym for to hop, Eco writes: "Once again, starting from the best known to the lesser known, we proceed through adjustment after adjustment, so it will be possible to say in Italian what's happening when John hops" (Eco 1993: 376–377).

In *Dire quasi la stessa cosa* (Eco 2003: § 14.3.) he specifies:

> However semiotics, cultural anthropology and philosophy can solve these problems, a translator always faces them, and in solving them usually he does not have ontological, metaphysical or ethical problems unless he is translating a philosophical text. It's just a

3 This is the literal translation of the words "it's raining cats and dogs" in Italian.

> matter of comparing languages, and negotiating solutions that do not offend common sense (and if there are subtle ties between common sense and ontology, this is another problem).

It is clear that what is at stake in these forms of negotiation is a common sense enriched by encyclopaedic knowledge; the more encyclopaedic competencies the translator has, the greater the ability to "match" with common sense. Against any abstract intellectualism (in these as in many other cases), it was Eco's belief that culture and common sense should always be linked. They should intervene in particular on the level of the plan of action, of the dispositions to act (to use a Peircian lexicon). In doing so, common sense can establish criteria of certainty (on common sense and certainty, see Fabbrichesi Leo 2004). If, on a theoretical level, some issues seem unsolvable, when the time to act comes, common sense can discriminate and prepare us to act:

> Although a theorist can assert that there are no rules to determine that a translation is better than another, editorial practice teaches us that, at least in the case of obvious and unquestionable errors, it is quite easy to determine if a translation is incorrect and goes right. It will only be a matter of common sense, but the common sense of a regular editorial editor allows him to summon the translator, pencil in hand, and to point out cases where his work is unacceptable. Naturally, it is necessary to be persuaded that "common sense" is not a bad word, and that it is indeed a phenomenon that many philosophies have taken very seriously. (Eco 2003: Introduction)

This brings us to a *communicative* use of common sense. I refer here to the moments when Eco narrates something (stories, even jokes) within complex philosophical arguments. The case of *Kant and the Platypus* is the most striking example, but is not the only one. For Eco, narrating stories is a resource that has at least two functions: on the one hand it simplifies, makes more concrete analysis that would otherwise be abstract; on the other hand, he brings the semiotic observations to their original, natural space of circulation: the concreteness of social coexistence. Signs are used to communicate; they live in a dimension that is public and social (not by coincidence Eco prefers to speak of *cultural units* rather than signs, meaning units that circulate in the culture that we are considering). Moreover, once again in the wake of Peirce, Eco's view is radically pragmatic: signs are used to do things, produce courses of action, signs are actions *tout court*, and as such have an intrinsic narrative dimension. For this reason, for Eco any theoretical concept may be narrated; each concept in its nucleus contains, is, a story. And when it is narrated, it is brought back to its common, everyday, practical dimension: the level of *experience* (that I already mentioned at the very beginning of this paper).

As we know, the reference to experience is not a reference to the truth of the senses; it is rather a reference to the pragmatic concreteness of living, a concreteness in which common sense, action and narration intertwine. The introduction to *Kant and the Platypus* is, from this point of view, quite explicit:

> In questioning how we perceive (but also name) cats, mice or elephants, it seemed to me useful not to analyse modelling expressions like a cat on the carpet or look at what our neurons do when we see a cat on the carpet (not to mention what cat neurons do when he sees us sitting on the carpet – as I explain, I try not to put my nose in the black box, leaving this difficult profession to those who know it), but putting back in the scene a character that is often neglected, which is common sense. And to understand how common sense works, there is nothing better than to imagine "stories" where people behave according to common sense. It turns out that normality is narratively surprising. (Eco 1997: Introduction, p. 5 English version)

The role of stories is, after all, an element of great interest in Echian theory (cf. Paolucci 2017a and 2017b). As is well known, Eco has developed two branches of activity over many years: theoretical activity and narrative activity. He has almost always preferred to keep these two practices separate, but it is evident that novels deal with the same issues that he tackles theoretically (lies, conspiracy, secret, memory, etc.). But beyond this dual track, what I am most interested in here is the *narrative mode* of his theory, that is, the fact that he often uses concrete cases, examples, stories, jokes, in order to explain his own theoretical arguments. The tale is a figure of his theoretical style and plays a fundamental role in the "translation" of meaning, bringing the articulations of theory into concrete practical life, the typical scenarios in which we find ourselves on a daily basis. Through narrating, Eco shows how theory is connected to common sense, that it is not apart, and even how it proceeds from common sense. He shows the continuity that exists between theory and everyday situations: semiotics is not an abstract discipline, but a form of knowledge that explains concrete communicative practices and often highlights that which is not evident, the implicit, ideological turns of everyday life. Therefore, resorting to common sense is essential in order not to lose contact with reality and its common knowledge, but it is also necessary to de-automate, de-naturalise what appears to be "original".

For Eco, semiotics and common sense are therefore in a relationship of absolute continuity. Semiotics must be a critical understanding of common sense.

3 Common sense and reasonableness

From the examination of these three articulations of common sense in Eco's work, it becomes clear how common sense, whether it is used as a starting point for historical-critical awareness of the forms of meaning (phenomenological use), as a criterion for establishing the limits of the interpretative drifts (regulative use), or to exemplify the logic of semiosis (communicative use), is always that which guarantees the reasonableness of Eco's epistemic, analytical and critical attitude.

As Polidoro noted in "The Reasonable's The Limit" (Polidoro 2017), Echian reasonableness is a trait that not only characterises his thinking but has precise theoretical justifications. Polidoro identifies them in three nodes of his semiotic theory:

- An idea of weak realism, the recognition that there is a dullness of reality, a "hard core" of being, but one which humans can only access through interpretations, as they never have direct access to reality. Eco spoke in recent years of "negative realism": reality is manifested mainly through the limits it poses, not what it says (that "hard nucleus" beyond which we cannot go). Reason therefore requires us to accept these limits, without having a strong and metaphysical idea of reality.
- The encyclopaedic idea of meaning, so that humans can always and only move in a certain portion of the encyclopaedia network unable to control the whole – a portion that is not ordered and predictable (like a dictionary) but disordered, multidirectional and modifiable. Against a background that is only partially known and sensitive to context, reasonableness is essential to the seizing of appropriate features and adapting to circumstances without knowing the whole or the certainty of indisputable rules.
- The indeterminacy of interpretation, due to which there is never automatism in comprehension nor complete determination, however, there is, when interpreting always a flexible space, a free space consisting in correct interpretations, aberrant interpretations, critical interpretations, elementary interpretations … To adequately manage this flexible space reasonableness is essential, being a capacity that allows one to develop the most appropriate interpretation of the signs in question.

Polidoro's reflection on reasonableness has many points in common with the thoughts on common sense that I have presented so far. I too have referred to the encyclopaedia theory, to the question of limits, to the dialectic of freedom and interpretation.

However, I believe that the idea of common sense, though intertwined with that of reasonableness, incorporates certain elements of specificity that allow us to focus on a number of further points in Eco's theoretical system.

First, common sense has a *historical specificity*: it manifests a temporal stratification and changes through the ages in which it is given.

Secondly, it has a *pragmatic characterisation*: common sense serves to act, to escape the impasse of reflection.

Thirdly, it has a *social characterisation*: common sense is a shared and public dimension.

The importance of the historical dimension in Eco's semiotic theory is an aspect that emerges in many moments of his theoretical discourse. Outside his specifically historical studies (studies of history of semiotics that are mostly medieval, starting with his thesis on St Thomas Aquinas), Eco continues to refer to the importance of history in semiotics, stressing, for example (see, in particular, Eco 1984: Introduction § 2), the importance of engaging in *conceptual archaeology* whenever a new theoretical reflection is undertaken. Performing an archaeological study of a concept means examining its evolution over the centuries, in the belief that useful interpretations can be found (if not to develop, than to aid an understanding of how we have arrived at the point where we are) and that only through this work can the conceptual perimeters of a category be defined: the dimensions it presents, the fields in which it can be put into play, the strategic uses to which it may be subjected ...

Such sensitivity to history (which in recent years has inspired Eco to engage in a series of studies on the history of culture: History of Beauty, History of Ugliness, History of Legendary Places, see Eco 2004, Eco 2007, Eco 2013) is not so obvious in semiotics. Let us not forget that two of the poles between which semiotics have moved and continue to move are those of structuralism (which, at least in its original and more orthodox forms in the 60s and 70s, assumed an over-temporal and abstract perspective) and the analytical philosophy of language (which has always expressed a programmatic disinterest for any form of history).

Sensitivity to history is therefore a feature specific to Eco's semiotics (together with the Tartu school of semiotics), which leeds him to a phenomenology of historical life, of what has been done in the past. Common sense is a kind of manifestation, almost a synthesis, of the historical stratifications of meaning. What stabilises in the middle level of the encyclopaedia in which common sense is placed is what has been normalised throughout the course of history.

There is no common sense outside the filtering of time.

The pragmatic vocation of Echian theory is another of its crucial dimensions, directly derived from its Peircian heritage. For Peirce, interpretation is given through beliefs, and beliefs stabilise themselves in habits that are dispositions to act. For Peirce reasoning is never pure speculation, but even when it is abstract it manifests itself in practical belief. Every day it is about choosing and doing (Peirce speaks of "crossing the Rubicon"), this is what makes semiotics operational.

And this is why, at some point, common sense comes into play. As Eco recalls, and as I have already mentioned above, whether we actually have to set an appointment to have coffee or decide whether to correct a translation that is be published, we stop the flight of the interpretants, block the drift of doubts and revisions we could take and decide what to do, with a capacity for discernment that is not only *based on* common sense but *is* common sense: to dispose yourself to act and not to lose yourself in the drift of interpretation, to recognise limits, is what common sense requires and how common sense expresses itself.

Common sense is disposition to act, in continuity with the forms of meaning that have already been settled in our portion of the encyclopaedia.

The continuous reference I make to the notion of encyclopaedia clearly places any reflection on the background of a shared knowledge. The dimension in which semiosis is given (even when it manifests itself in an individual and solitary act) is always social. As Grigoriev in his study about normativity and common sense notes about Peirce (but which we could equally extend to Eco): "Reality, as an ideal, is not only characterized by reasonableness, but also by sharedness, i. e. by its public character; hence, the consequences that we consider are always, at least in part, social consequences" (Grigoriev 2014: 15).

It is no coincidence, as I have already mentioned, that from 1975 onwards Eco prefers to speak of *cultural units* rather than signs, to highlight the social and cultural dimension of the instruments through which we communicate, that are not abstractions or subjective resources, but elements that are defined through time and societies. If common sense is the precipitate, the deposit of semiotic acts over time, it can only be shared as social resource rather than individual capacity. *Common sense (even in his personal articulation of good sense) is not a form of individual acumen or wisdom*. On the contrary, it is just how much the individual can derive from the collective dimension of the semiotic, it is precisely the result of the filtering the time, the repository that the social level makes available to the person. *Common* sense is not just the most

frequent, *ordinary* meaning that is given to experience; it is also and above all the *shared* meaning that we find in experience.

By placing emphasis on common sense, then, Eco urges us to come out of a purely individual dimension in order to anchor instead to the social. In my opinion, this anchoring function of the social dimension is very pronounced in Echian theory. The encyclopaedic network, or the network of stabilised interpretations of culture that each one "controls" within his own boundaries, functions as an anchor for semiotic practices: with its forms of normalisation it establishes preferential paths, makes other interpretations marginal, discourages some uses by marking them as eccentric, places some solutions out of the ordinary. In this way, the encyclopaedia provides a solid foundation to those interpretations and beliefs that constitute common sense: a meaning that is not only stable, regular, but shared.

For these reasons, common sense is a *guardrail* (for containing interpretative drifts), a *parameter* (of adequacy to other members of the social consortium), and a *starting point* (with respect to a background that is always already full of meaning, already dense with discourse, and never empty and open to original acts and foundations). A dimension in which individual action is always a social outcome and a public gesture.

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