

“The Mother-tongue of Thought”: James and Wittgenstein on Common Sense

“A Língua materna do Pensamento”: James e Wittgenstein sobre o senso comum

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Abstract: “Our later and more critical philosophies are mere fads and fancies compared with this natural mother-tongue of thought”, says William James in his lecture on common sense. The deep bond connecting language, common sense and nature is also one of the main concerns of the later Wittgenstein. The aim of this paper is to compare the two philosophers in this respect, particularly focusing on James’ *Pragmatism* and on Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*. Similarities, but also differences, will be highlighted. A further element will be offered by the analysis of a fragment of Wittgenstein’s *Nachlass*, which anticipates his image of the river-bed of thought through the critique of James’ stream of thought. By means of this comparison, I will question Wittgenstein’s explicit refusal of pragmatism. I will argue that his late philosophy can be said to be even more pragmatist than James’, in that it delineates a conception of the common sense certainties which shape our *Weltbild* (world-picture) as practically, and not merely epistemically, connected to our life.

Key words: Common sense. *Weltbild*. Certainty. Beliefs. James. Wittgenstein.

Resumo: “Nossas filosofias recentes e mais críticas são meros modismos e fantasias comparados com essa língua materna natural do pensamento”, disse William James em sua conferência sobre o senso comum. A ligação profunda que conecta a linguagem e o senso comum é também uma das principais preocupações do Wittgenstein tardio. O objetivo deste artigo é comparar os dois filósofos a este respeito, focando particularmente em *Pragmatismo*, de James, e *Sobre Certeza*, de Wittgenstein. Similaridades, mas também diferenças serão ressaltadas. Um elemento adicional será oferecido pela análise de um fragmento de *Nachlass*, de Wittgenstein, que antecipa sua imagem do leito do rio do pensamento através da crítica do fluxo do pensamento de James. Por meio desta comparação, questionarei a recusa explícita de Wittgenstein ao pragmatismo. Argumentarei que sua filosofia tardia pode ser dita como sendo ainda mais pragmatista do que a de James, na medida em que delineia uma concepção das certezas do senso comum que formam nossa *Weltbild* (mundo-imagem) como praticamente, e não simplesmente epistemicamente, conectada a nossa vida.

Palavras-chave: Senso comum. *Weltbild*. Certeza. Crenças. James. Wittgenstein.

1. Introduction

Common sense has been an important topic of interest for William James, especially after 1903; in 1907 he devoted to it a lecture, and affirmed that “our later and more critical philosophies are mere fads and fancies compared with this natural mother-tongue of thought”¹. He therefore connected common sense to language, nature and thought. This same bond is relevant in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concern with common sense, which started in the Thirties and came to prominence in his later philosophy. Wittgenstein was an assiduous reader of James, and, though he probably did not read directly the lecture on common sense, in many aspects his own treatment of the subject resembles James’ ideas. But differences are equally relevant. The aim of this paper is to compare the two philosophers in this respect, and, by means of this comparison, to question Wittgenstein’s explicit refusal of pragmatism.

My objective is, then, neither to deal with the pragmatists’ views on common sense in general², nor to examine Wittgenstein’s relation to pragmatism in general³, but to restrict the analysis to the comparison between James and Wittgenstein on this issue. Indeed, the importance of actions and practices and the presence of a pragmatic, if not pragmatist, vein in Wittgenstein’s late philosophy have often been stressed by commentators, but a detailed confrontation with the pragmatist philosopher with whom he was more familiar, on a single but crucial theme such as that of common sense, can add textual evidence to support this idea.

My argument will proceed as follows. I will first examine James’ ideas on common sense as expressed in Lecture V of *Pragmatism*, “Pragmatism and Common Sense”, and in other passages mostly from the same book. Secondly, I will examine Wittgenstein’s ideas, particularly focusing on the notion of *Weltbild* developed in *On Certainty*⁴.

2. James on common sense

James was not concerned directly with the issue of common sense until quite late in his life and it is only in *Pragmatism*⁵, first published in 1907, that he dedicated

1 JAMES (1975, Lecture V).

2 For those interested in a further inquiry, the most important historical reference for the pragmatists is the Scottish philosophy of common sense, especially Thomas Reid, who plays a relevant role in Charles Sanders Peirce’s “critical common-sensism” (see in particular “Issues of Pragmaticism”, in PEIRCE (1934), paragraphs 438-463). For specific analysis, see SANTUCCI (1969), NESHER (1994), MADDALENA (2010). See WOLTERSTORFF (2000) for a comparison between Reid and Wittgenstein. Common sense is also relevant for Dewey, particularly in connection with science; see “Logic: The Theory of Inquiry” (Ch. IV) and “Knowing and the Known” (Ch. X), both in DEWEY (1981-1991), respectively voll. 12 and 16.

3 Among the vast literature on Wittgenstein and pragmatism, I recommend RORTY (1979), HAACK (1982), PUTNAM (1995, Ch. 2), GOODMAN (1998), GOODMAN (2002), MOYAL-SHARROCK (2003), CRARY (2003), BERNSTEIN (2010, Prologue and Ch. 6). See FABBRICHESI (2004) for a comparison between Peirce and Wittgenstein on common sense.

4 WITTGENSTEIN (1975)

5 JAMES (1975a).

a chapter to it. Ideas related to common sense can be found also in his previous work, but rather than focusing on them, he used them to deal with other subjects. In *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) he adopted as a general rule that of using the language of common sense and not abandoning it, though philosophy can and in some cases must go beyond it: for example, he went against common sense when opposing to essentialism⁶ and when explaining the relation between emotions and bodily manifestations⁷. In *The Will to Believe* (1896), he wrote that we are ordinarily unable to doubt common sense propositions such as "that I now exist before you, that two is less than three, that if all men are mortal then I'm mortal too"⁸, but that it is only for a scholastic inheritance⁹ that we do believe them so undoubtedly and are so "absolutists by instinct"¹⁰; this instinct, he adds, is to be treated as "a weakness of our nature from which we must free ourselves"¹¹. In *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), again, he wrote that "common-sense prejudices and instincts are themselves the fruit of an empirical evolution"¹², while discussing how common sense can judge the value of saintliness.

But the thought of the significance of common sense, as a new topic of interest, occurred to him only in 1903. Traces of it can be found in letters that date back that summer (in a letter to Schiller for example he wrote that "from the pragmatistic point of view an ode has yet to be written to common sense"¹³), and in a draft of the introduction for his projected, but never published, book *The Many and the One* (dated 1903)¹⁴, several lines of which will be used, almost identical, in Lecture V of *Pragmatism*. His somehow double attitude towards common sense, on the one hand willing to criticize it, on the other willing to save and praise it, is already evident in these lines (coming after the realization that intellect often destroys the work of "The God of Common Sense" that "brings the world into any kind of a genuine inner unity"): "There must be a way of criticizing common sense intellectually – he writes – without landing in such desperate results. There must be an intellect that is reconstructive, not destructive"¹⁵. In *The Essence of Humanism* (1905), common sense is defined as "a stage", that is "a perfectly definite halting-place of thought, primarily for purposes of action"¹⁶, and similarly in *The place of affectional facts in a world of pure experience* (published in the same year) it is said to be "a perfectly definite halting-place, the place where we ourselves can proceed to act unhesitatingly"¹⁷.

Though they can be read independently, the lectures composing *Pragmatism* often refer to one another, and this is the case of Lecture V on "Pragmatism and

6 JAMES (1890, II, Ch. XXII).

7 *Ivi*, Ch. XXV.

8 JAMES (1979, p. 21)

9 Scholasticism was defined in JAMES (1890, II, p. 334), as "common sense grown articulate".

10 JAMES (1979, p. 22).

11 *Ibidem*.

12 JAMES (1985, p. 264).

13 PERRY (1935, p. 501).

14 JAMES (1988, Ch. I, pp. 6 ff.).

15 *Ivi*, pp. 9 and 11.

16 In JAMES (1975b, p. 73) and in JAMES (1976, p. 100).

17 In JAMES (1976, p. 73).

Common Sense”, our main object of interest. It opens, indeed, referring to the previous chapter on “The One and the Many”, concerned with completeness and incompleteness. Since in respect to knowledge our universe is certainly incomplete and variable – James argues – we may start considering how our knowledge changes and in what ways it grows. It is clear from the very beginning, then, that common sense will be considered from the standpoint of knowledge. But let us read James’ words:

To begin with, our knowledge grows *in spots*. The spots may be large or small, but the knowledge never grows all over: some old knowledge always remains what it was [...]. Like grease-spots, the spots spread. But we let them spread as little as possible: we keep unaltered as much of our old knowledge, as many of our old prejudices and beliefs, as we can. We patch and tinker more than we renew. The novelty soaks in; it stains the ancient mass; but it is also tinged by what absorbs it. Our past apperceives and co-operates; and in the new equilibrium in which each step forward in the process of learning terminates, it happens relatively seldom that the new fact is added *raw*. More usually it is embedded cooked, as one might say, or stewed down in the sauce of the old.¹⁸

Two features must have our attention in these lines: first, when knowledge grows, there is always a deeper or older part of knowledge that (so it seems) does not alter; second, when knowledge changes, it changes in two directions: the novelty changes what is older, but consolidated knowledge also changes the novelty, as it is through the lenses of what we already know that we read the new facts. The growing or changing of knowledge, James adds, may be painful, because it involves a reconsideration of previous beliefs that were taken for granted; the reciprocal accommodation of old and new, so that the mass of previous opinions is affected in the slightest degree, is our way of dealing with this special, epistemic, kind of suffering.

If we consider that for no reasons we could assume that in old times things went differently, we must conclude that probably very ancient beliefs and ways of thinking may have survived until today: “The most primitive ways of thinking may not yet be wholly expunged – writes James –. Like our five fingers, our ear-bones, our rudimentary caudal appendage, or our other ‘vestigial’ peculiarities, they may remain as indelible tokens of events in our race-history”¹⁹. Ancient beliefs are significantly compared to residues of the evolution processes, which belong to our history and to what we are today, as a Darwinian approach to the evolution of human knowledge cannot fail to point out. But how has it happened that we grew up with exactly these beliefs and ways of thinking? Again, James’ evolutionary approach emerges: “Our ancestors – he states – may at certain moments have struck into ways of thinking which they might conceivably not have found. But once they did so, and after the fact, the inheritance continues”²⁰. It is for casual reasons that our ancestor began to think in certain ways and to believe in certain facts, and if these modes of thought have proven to fit and to improve human adaptation to the environment, then a sort of natural and, we may say, historical selection will reward and reinforce those ways of thinking. Following James, we arrive to what he calls his “thesis”:

18 JAMES (1975a, pp. 82-83). Author’s italics.

19 *Ivi*, p. 83.

20 *Ibidem*.

*Our fundamental ways of thinking about things are discoveries of exceedingly remote ancestors, which have been able to preserve themselves throughout the experience of all subsequent time. They form one great stage of equilibrium in the human mind's development, the stage of common sense. Other stages have grafted themselves upon this stage, but have never succeeded in displacing it.*²¹

The word that must be stressed, here, is “discoveries”. The human mind is implicitly identified with knowledge and it is described as subject to development, its content being organized in stages, some of which are older and more resistant than others: these constitute common sense. Other cultural stages can “graft upon” common sense, they can so to speak grow upon it and partly mix with it, as if their roots were inside it; but cannot substitute it. What is deeper cannot be displaced, though it can slowly change, just like species in nature. As examples James cites (a few pages after) the conceptions of Democritus, Berkeley and, as it happens, Darwin. Like these geniuses' conceptions were once discovered, so in ancient times unknown geniuses may have discovered what we now consider obvious. These discoveries, here called “common sense categories”, are the product of individuals who have understood prior to anyone else the usefulness and adaptive value of their ideas²².

The basic stage of our knowledge, according to James, has spread to such an extent that language itself rests on it, and “we are now incapable of thinking naturally in any other terms”²³. In language we can find deposited and crystallized the whole knowledge of our ancestors, at least the whole knowledge that has survived through time, and it is now part of our ordinary and natural way of thinking, because it is ingrained with the *means* of our thinking. Language and thought are shaped by common sense. Language, as an expression of our nature, carries our natural history in every word we say and in the very way in which we say it, because its structure and content come from common sense. Nature and culture are so intertwined in language, which is both what connects us with our past and what projects us into our future. This also means that it is difficult, almost impossible for us to imagine, within our language, a totally different form of life (borrowing a Wittgensteinian expression that seems to be the most appropriate in this contest)²⁴.

Common sense, so conceived, is a sort of frame of useful concepts that we developed through evolution and it depends on our biology, on our “organization”. To describe these concepts James uses the German word “*Denkmittel*”, that is to say, he explains, “means by which we handle facts by thinking them”²⁵. Here we are facing the classical problem of the relation between experience and thought: James indeed cites Kant and speaks of categories. To handle experience, we use

21 *Ibidem*. Author's italics.

22 The importance of individuals is a constant element of James' philosophy and goes hand in hand with his Darwinian approach, for which geniuses are like spontaneous variations that the environment preserves and selects or, in unfavorable conditions, destroys. See JAMES (1979, Ch. VII and VIII).

23 JAMES (1975a, p. 89).

24 See for example the description of the concept of permanent existing things as “one of the foundations of our life”, in JAMES (1975b, pp. 42-43).

25 JAMES (1975a, p. 84).

a set of concepts “connected in some intellectual way”²⁶, so that impressions of experience are “understood” when they are referred to a possible place in this conceptual system. Thinking about categories as *Denkmittel*, James proposes an instrumental view of Kant’s system and, what is more striking, an evolutionary view, one for which categories are not transcendental features through which the mind, uniformly in space and time, understands phenomena, but concrete and changeable tools shaped by natural history. Common sense categories, then, are the means by which we rationalize the impressions that come from experience, and James also provides a list of the most important of them: thing; the same or different; kinds; minds; bodies; one time; one space; subjects and attributes; causal influences; the fancied; the real²⁷.

The standpoint of the evolutionary approach is reaffirmed once more:

There is not a category, among those enumerated, of which we may not imagine the use to have thus originated historically and only gradually spread [...]. Cosmic space and cosmic time, so far from being the intuitions that Kant said they were, are constructions as patently artificial as any that science can show.²⁸

Since they guided us for centuries and millennia, common sense categories have proved to be victorious; they still work today, because it is through them, and not through complicated scientific conceptions, that we practically live and make our plans²⁹. But between the old categories of common sense and the new categories that more recent systems offer to us, no definite border can be drawn. Moreover, common sense categories are not always the best means that we have. Sometimes the abstract and seemingly distant concepts of science may turn out to be more useful than common sense, as the scientific method and its powerful results show. And the philosophical stage of criticism, too, may yield to its disciples a deeper intellectual satisfaction. In James’ vision, these three systems, common sense, science and critical philosophy, form the three stages of knowledge, none of them owning the “truth” of anything, but each presenting some advantage in one sphere of life. The very idea of truth gets transformed:

The whole notion of truth, which naturally and without reflection we assume to mean the simple duplication by the mind of a ready-made and given reality, proves hard to understand clearly. There is no simple test available for adjudicating offhand between the divers types of thought that claim to possess it.³⁰

Common sense is the more “consolidated” system of categories but it cannot claim to possess the truth. On the contrary, at the end of his lecture, James seems much more cautious than he was at the beginning. His conclusion is in fact a sort of warning:

26 *Ibidem*.

27 *Ivi*, p. 85.

28 *Ivi*, p. 87.

29 *Ivi*, p. 88.

30 *Ivi*, p. 93.

We have seen reason to suspect it, to suspect that in spite of their being so venerable, of their being so universally used and built into the very structure of language, its categories may after all be only a collection of extraordinarily successful hypotheses [...]. Retain, I pray you, this suspicion about common sense.³¹

Some other pieces of information on James' idea of common sense can be found in three other lectures from *Pragmatism*. At the beginning of Lecture I, “The Present Dilemma in Philosophy”, addressing his audience James affirms that every one owns a philosophy, and that it “is not a technical matter” but simply “our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos”³². In “What Pragmatism Means” (Lecture II), giving his account of the growth of truth, James lists some elements that “remain untouched” even in “the most violent revolutions in an individual's beliefs”; these elements are “Time and space, cause and effect, nature and history, and one's own biography”³³ (a list that appears not too far from what we will find in Moore and, consequently, in Wittgenstein). The influence of older truths on the process of truth acquisition, adds James, is “absolutely controlling”, but nevertheless “to a certain degree everything here is plastic”³⁴. A new opinion “must both lean on old truth and grasp new fact”, and truth itself means “to perform this marriage-function” between previous and new parts of experience, so that pure objective and independent truth is nowhere to be found, and, as famously stated, “the trail of the human serpent is thus over everything”³⁵. This idea is confirmed and explained in Lecture VI, “Pragmatic Conception of Truth” where common sense “things” and “relations” are considered to be the basis of mental leadings that conduct, through verification, to truth. What is interesting here – especially if we consider today's debate on social ontology – is that James already pointed out the “credit system” on which truth lives: “Truth lives, in fact, for the most part on a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs ‘pass’, so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them”³⁶. And we can say that the same works for common sense: it “passes”, so long as nothing challenges it, so long as we do not suspect it.

We could conclude, then, that what first were discoveries or inventions, and were continuously in need of verification, with the passing of time and of confirming experiences have become obvious and have begun to “pass” as truths. But this practical satisfaction does not cancel James' intellectual dissatisfaction towards common sense; conversely, he invites us not to trust everything with total confidence, and, remembering the continuity among the three stages of knowledge, to suspect of the truths of common sense, that is, to suspect their functionality and usefulness for our life, and to be ready to accept new scientific and philosophical truths as they prove to be more appropriate.

31 *Ivi*, p. 94.

32 *Ivi*, p. 9.

33 *Ivi*, p. 35.

34 *Ibidem*.

35 *Ivi*, p. 36-37.

36 *Ivi*, p. 100.

3. Wittgenstein on common sense

My main object of concern here is *On Certainty*. Although in it Wittgenstein never explicitly writes about common sense, his starting point and constant interlocutor is G. E. Moore and particularly his essays “A Defence of Common Sense” and “Proofs of an External World”³⁷. When he writes about the *Weltbild*, the world-picture, what he has in mind are Moore’s propositions of common sense.

In examining his work, we must keep in mind that Wittgenstein does not make a *defense* of common sense, in Moore’s terms; he does think that there is nothing wrong with common sense, and also that it is a sort of home towards which the philosopher aims to go back, but he also believes, as he states already in some lectures given in Cambridge during the Thirties, that common sense cannot by itself provide answers to philosophical problems. It has to be philosophically described and understood, so that its nature and also the way it may lead us astray are made clear, but we cannot rely upon common sense to solve our problems. On the opposite, we must solve philosophical problems so that we can, after that, rely upon common sense. In the *Blue Book*, he writes, probably already having in mind Moore’s claims³⁸, that “There is no common sense answer to a philosophical problem. One can defend common sense against the attacks of philosophers only by solving their puzzles, i.e., by curing them of the temptation to attack common sense; not by restating the views of common sense”³⁹. In a lecture given in 1934 he explained:

Philosophy can be said to consist of three activities: to see the commonsense answer, to get yourself so deeply into the problem that the commonsense answer is unbearable, and to get from that situation back to the commonsense answer. But the commonsense answer in itself is no solution; everyone knows it. One must not in philosophy attempt to short-circuit problems.⁴⁰

Although there is nothing wrong with common sense men, there is something wrong with common sense philosophers, as they do not realize that philosophical difficulties are *grammatical* difficulties and it is on this terrain that they have to work. In so doing, they can gain their right, once cured from their intellectual illness, to go back to common sense: “a philosopher is one who must heal in himself many diseases of the understanding, before he can arrive at the notions of common sense”⁴¹.

It is on the controversial notion of knowledge when connected to common sense, that Wittgenstein’s critical remarks on Moore focus in *On Certainty*. Moore’s aim is to refute skepticism by asserting the absolute certainty of some of our common sense beliefs about ourselves and the world; these beliefs are truisms, such as “I am a human being”, “Here is one hand”, “The earth existed for a long time before my

37 In MOORE (1959).

38 “A Defence of Common Sense” was published in 1925; consider also that Moore himself attended Wittgenstein’s classes in Cambridge from 1930 to 1933.

39 WITTGENSTEIN (1958, pp. 58-59).

40 WITTGENSTEIN (1979, p. 109).

41 WITTGENSTEIN (1998, p. 50), remark dated 1944. It might be worth noticing, that the German expression for common sense, *gesunder Menschenverstand*, implicitly links common sense to health, as *gesund* means healthy.

birth” and the like; in Moore’s opinion, we know these propositions for certain, even if we cannot prove them or give grounds for them. Wittgenstein acknowledges Moore with the merit of having identified a special class of propositions, but he denies that we have an epistemic relation with what these propositions assert. Of course one can know a truism, in the sense of being familiar with it and in the sense of knowing that it is a truism; but for Wittgenstein one does not properly “know” *what the truism says*.

When Moore says he *knows* such and such, he is really enumerating a lot of empirical propositions which we affirm without special testing; propositions, that is, which have a peculiar logical role in the system of our empirical propositions.

One says “I know” when one is ready to give compelling grounds. “I know” relates to a possibility of demonstrating the truth. Whether someone knows something can come to light, assuming that he is convinced of it.

But if what he believes is of such a kind that the grounds that he can give are no surer than his assertion, then he cannot say that he knows what he believes.⁴²

What sort of grounds can I give for my knowing that “this is my hand”? This kind of certainty is not grounded in something else, it is itself a ground, because if we were not certain about it, then we would not be certain of anything at all. In a sense, Moore-type propositions are not descriptive but *normative*⁴³, and show common sense certainties to be spontaneous, unaware and doubtless⁴⁴. Moore-type propositions, even when they look like empirical propositions, are in fact grammatical, logical; they are what Wittgenstein calls hinges:

That is to say, the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *indeed* not doubted.

But it isn’t that the situation is like this: We just *can’t* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.⁴⁵

What Moore claims to know, are in facts basis for our living, certainties without which we would not be able to move a single more step in our lives, because we would not be able to distinguish between sense and nonsense anymore. If suddenly I were to doubt my own identity, the fact that I live where I live, or elementary obvious things such as that objects do not disappear when I put them in a drawer, people would not say that I affirm false propositions (unless we are doing philosophy, of course), but that I became insane (or, which is not that different, that I became a philosopher). *Affirming* hinge propositions in ordinary contests is, indeed, a sign that something is

42 WITTGENSTEIN (1975, §§ 136 and 243, pp. 20 and 32). Authors italics.

43 I agree here with COLIVA (2010, pp. 82-83).

44 On the features of this kind of propositions see MOYAL-SHARROCK (2005, Ch. IV).

45 WITTGENSTEIN (1975, §§ 341, 342, 343, p. 44). Author’s italics.

wrong, as they usually *go without saying*⁴⁶: to say them, means to drive our attention on them as if for some obscure reason they couldn't work anymore.

There is, then, a *categorical* difference between hinges and empirical propositions. But this does not mean that the relation between them is fixed once for all, nor that the whole of hinge propositions present the same level of fixity. There are hinges that stand almost completely fast, and others that may slowly change; and there are propositions that serve as hinges that may, in other circumstances, serve as empirical descriptions. Even a sentence like "This is my hand", given the appropriate contest, can be an empirical remark. As Wittgenstein puts it, it is wrong to say that logic is an empirical science, yet it is right to say that "the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule for testing"⁴⁷.

Interestingly, Wittgenstein uses the image of a river to show the nature of logical and empirical propositions. Like the water flows following the river-bed, so empirical propositions flow following the logical ones; and like the bank of the river consists partly of hard rock, partly of sand that here gets deposited, and there gets washed away, so our common sense *Weltbild* consists partly of inalterable convictions, partly of certainties that, in different degrees, may change or be "washed away" as time passes⁴⁸. As we shall see, Wittgenstein's *Nachlass* contains evidence that let us think that it was James' stream of thought that he was, critically, thinking about, when he invented the image of the river-bed.

I mentioned the concept of *Weltbild* and it's time to devote some words to it. What the word *Weltbild* tries to convey, is that Moore-type propositions are not separate from each other but form a coherent system, a *Bild*, a picture, the widest picture that we have, though we are scarcely aware of it. This totality is kept together by the mutual support of all its parts, so that "one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house"⁴⁹. A common sense proposition works not by itself, not by being somehow self-evident, but because "it fits into the rest of my convictions", and nothing speaks against it wherever we let our thoughts turn⁵⁰. But the *Weltbild* is not an arbitrary system that we can build, choose or invent: we inherit it by belonging "to a community which is bound together by science and education"⁵¹. The *Weltbild* is not a set of hypothesis, not even in a scientific contest like the activity of experimenting in a laboratory:

It is clear that our empirical propositions do not all have the same status, since one can lay down such a proposition and turn it from an empirical proposition into a norm of description.

Think of chemical investigations. Lavoisier makes experiments with substances in his laboratory and now he concludes that this and that takes place when there is burning. He does not say that it might happen otherwise another time. He

46 Cf. MOYAL-SHARROCK (2005, pp. 94 ff).

47 WITTGENSTEIN (1975, § 98, p. 15).

48 *Ibidem*, §§ 96, 97, 99.

49 *Ivi*, § 248, p. 33.

50 *Ivi*, §§ 102, 421, pp. 15 and 54.

51 *Ivi*, § 298, p. 38.

has got hold of a definite world-picture - not of course one that he invented: he learned it as a child. I say world-picture and not hypothesis, because it is the matter-of-course foundation for his research and as such also does unmentioned.⁵²

The difference and connection between empirical propositions and norms of description is particularly clear in the scientific context, where empirical hypotheses are deliberately tested and tests are possible only in virtue of a frame of reference that remains untouched and is taken for granted. This frame is our tacit trust in the fact that objects do not disappear, that they do not change their features without a cause, that substances have the same behavior under the same circumstances. The *Weltbild* concerns our “matter-of-course foundation” (which is deeper than a scientific foundation), and we learn it or *swallow* it⁵³ when we are children, in our everyday activities and in our parents teachings and examples. We do not explicitly learn its contents and rules: we learn by doing, we are thought judgments and their connections with other judgments⁵⁴, and we begin following rules without being aware of following rules, to hold beliefs and certainties without being aware of possessing them. The *Weltbild* becomes natural, as natural as body movements or, on the other hand, linguistic behavior. This is the reason why to describe an encounter between two different world-pictures Wittgenstein does not use the words of rational argumentation, but those of persuasion, conversion, even combativity⁵⁵: when the bottom of beliefs is reached, no argumentative strategy is possible anymore, and to convince another person of our *Weltbild*, or conversely to change our own picture, means to change the way he or we see the world, to change perspective, ultimately to change the form of life (hence the ethical dimension of Wittgenstein’s thought on *Weltbild* and forms of life).

But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.

The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules.⁵⁶

The world-picture is thus a sort of mythology that lies in the background and that gives meaning to our words, sense to our propositions, direction to our actions. This background has always been central in Wittgenstein’s interest; a remark dated 1931⁵⁷, reminding what he previously called the ineffable, is perfectly attuned to these later reflections: “The inexpressible (what I find enigmatic & cannot express) – he writes – perhaps provides the background, against which whatever I was able to express acquires meaning”. The mythological background is, at the same time,

52 *Ivi*, § 167, p. 24.

53 *Ivi*, § 143, p. 21.

54 *Ibidem*, § 140.

55 *Ivi*, §§ 609-612, pp. 80-81.

56 *Ivi*, §§ 94, 95, p. 15.

57 In WITTGENSTEIN (1998, p. 23).

intimately bound to language and inexpressible in language. As, in the early Wittgenstein, the ineffable showed itself, so in the late Wittgenstein the background, the *Weltbild*, shows itself and cannot be properly said. But where does the *Weltbild* manifest its nature? Where is it that we reach the bottom of our certainties? “Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end – Wittgenstein says –; but the end is not certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game”⁵⁸. Our relation to common sense propositions lying in the background of our picture of the world, is not epistemic, it is practical: our certainties are in actions, not in words; they are *embedded*, *enacted*, to use two very fashionable words for today’s philosophical debate. And it is precisely this practical character that enables them to defuse the skeptical objection: the skeptic’s doubt is an epistemic doubt, it deals with knowledge, not with this instinctive and thoughtless sureness. It is by separating certainty from knowledge, that Wittgenstein is able, unlike Moore, to dissolve the skeptical problem⁵⁹. The end of all our testing and giving grounds “is not an ungrounded presupposition” (which could itself be doubted by the skeptic): “it is an ungrounded way of acting”⁶⁰. And to learn beliefs, is primarily to learn to act according to these beliefs⁶¹. It is by forming the basis of action, that a belief can then form the basis of thought⁶², and it is by our acting that we learn what is then reflected in common sense. So, “children do not learn that books exist, that armchairs exist, etc. etc – they learn to fetch books, sit in armchairs, etc. etc”⁶³; children “learn to react in such-and-such a way; and in so reacting it doesn’t so far know anything. Knowledge only begins at a later level”⁶⁴.

4. Similarities

In analyzing the similarities between Wittgenstein and James, I do not mean to suggest that Wittgenstein read James’ *Pragmatism* and was directly influenced by it; we do not have any evidence in this sense, though it may be that Wittgenstein read some reviews of James’ work or heard about it, since both Russell and Moore were concerned with the debate around pragmatism. They both wrote articles and reviews of *Pragmatism* as soon as it was published, but they were primarily interested in contrasting the pragmatist conception of truth. Moore in his review⁶⁵ never mentions at all what James wrote about common sense, while Russell⁶⁶ did mention the lecture on common sense, but only to assert that it exemplarily shows James’ “insinuating” (Russell’s expression) method to support the idea that we do not have a clear con-

58 WITTGENSTEIN (1975, § 204, p. 28). Author’s italics.

59 Cf. MCGINN (1989), particularly p. 112 and Ch. VIII.

60 WITTGENSTEIN (1975, § 110, p. 17).

61 *Ivi*, § 144, p.21.

62 *Ivi*, §§ 411-412, pp. 52-53.

63 *Ivi*, § 476, p. 62.

64 *Ivi*, § 538, p. 71.

65 Cf. MOORE (1970).

66 Cf. the two essays on pragmatism and on James in RUSSELL (1910), and James’ reply in JAMES (1975b, Ch. XIV).

cept of truth. We know, of course, that Wittgenstein read other books by William James, that he was particularly impressed by *Varieties* and once thought of using the *Principles* as a text book for his classes. But my aim here is to confront the two philosophers on this issue, regardless of the question concerning direct influences.

The foundational character of common sense or *Weltbild* strikes us as one affinity between the two. Although we have to be careful in indicating Wittgenstein (and James as well) as a foundationalist, it is a fact that *On Certainty* is full of foundational metaphors and words – the most used is probably “ground”⁶⁷. Both Wittgenstein and James talk of levels or layers to portray the composite nature of our beliefs and certainties, and identify our actions, based on the *Weltbild*, and our common sense beliefs as the deepest, the first, the basic level, either using metaphorical spatial image or referring to a temporal dimension: Wittgenstein speaks of the bedrock, where the spade is turned⁶⁸, and, as we have seen, of the bank of the river consisting partly of hard rock, partly of sand⁶⁹. James, on the other hand, affirms that common sense constitutes the first stage of our whole knowledge⁷⁰. Both of them think about this foundation in non-absolute terms, but for different reasons: in James’ case, it is the mutable nature of common sense that prevents him from asserting that it constitutes an absolute and unchangeable ground; in Wittgenstein’s case, the foundational role of actions and practices goes hand in hand with their *ungrounded* nature, so that a linguistic game is “something unpredictable”, “not based on grounds”, not reasonable (or unreasonable): “it is there – like our life”⁷¹, a conception that cannot be said to be foundationalist in the traditional sense.

One plainer similarity between James’ and Wittgenstein’s notions is the holistic nature of our system of beliefs. The word “system” appears indeed very often in both the texts that we are considering. Our basic certainties are intertwined with one another in such a way that none of them can be self-sufficient, and all of them imply the whole system; they compose a sort of web, the strength of which comes from how each single element is linked with the others. This is also the reason why it can only change slowly: in a net of beliefs each sustaining each other, a minimum change tends to be absorbed through slight movements of the neighboring elements, while an unprecedented big novelty risks not being even noticed, as it does not fit at all in the net. In James’ words:

This new idea is then adopted as the true one. It preserves the older stock of truths with a minimum of modification, stretching them just enough to make them admit the novelty, but conceiving that in ways as familiar as the case leaves possible. An outrée explanation, violating all our preconceptions, would never pass for a true account of a novelty.⁷²

In Wittgenstein’s:

67 Cf. STROLL (2004).

68 WITTGENSTEIN (2001, part I, § 217, p. 72).

69 WITTGENSTEIN (1975, § 99, p. 15).

70 JAMES (1975a, Lecture V).

71 WITTGENSTEIN (1975, § 599, p.79).

72 JAMES (1975a, p. 35)

Might I not believe that once, without knowing it, perhaps is a state of unconsciousness, I was taken far away from the earth - that other people even know this, but do not mention it to me? But this would not fit into the rest of my convictions at all. Not that I could describe the system of these convictions. Yet my convictions do form a system, a structure.⁷³

This system of beliefs, for both philosophers, is deeply connected to language, because it shapes our categories and ways of thinking: it is deposited in our syntax and semantics. James calls it “the mother tongue of thought”, and Wittgenstein sees it as a mythology stored within our language⁷⁴. It is interesting to note that this consideration leads both philosophers to a comparison between human nature, so characterized by language, and the nature of other animals, which highlights both common features and incommensurable distances. Indeed, they both invite us to imagine different forms of life; such a device makes us aware of the most obvious and, at the same time, hidden (hidden due to being permanently under our eyes) features of our own identity. James, just before his list of categories, writes:

Were we lobsters, or bees, it might be that our organization would have led to our using quite different modes from these of apprehending our experiences. It *might* be too (we cannot dogmatically deny this) that such categories, unimaginable by us to-day, would have proved on the whole as serviceable for handling our experiences mentally as those which we actually use.⁷⁵

And Wittgenstein remarked:

I want to regard man here as an animal; as a primitive being to which one grants instinct but not ratiocination. As a creature in a primitive state. Any logic good enough for a primitive means of communication needs no apology from us. Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination.⁷⁶

If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.⁷⁷

It is at once proximity to and distance from animals that interests the two philosophers, because they underline the animal nature of man, and contemporaneously stress the fact that it is almost impossible to imagine a different form of life from within this form of life, which blends into one with language.

To conclude with respect to similarities, we can sum them up in these points: foundational role (with the distinctions we have seen); holism and systematic nature; different levels; slowness of change; connection with language; reference to the lives of other animals.⁷⁸

73 WITTGENSTEIN (1975, § 102, p. 15).

74 WITTGENSTEIN (1993, p. 133); cf. also WITTGENSTEIN (1975, §§ 95-97, p. 15).

75 JAMES (1975a, p. 84). Author's italics.

76 WITTGENSTEIN (1975, § 475, p. 62).

77 WITTGENSTEIN (2001, part II, p. 190).

78 There are also other concepts connected to common sense that are important for both philosophers; two of them are vagueness and religion. I leave them out only because

5. Differences

In analyzing the differences between the two approaches to common sense, I will first refer to three main topics highlighted by Russell Goodman, and then add what in my opinion is the deepest difference, namely the epistemic or not epistemic relation that we have to common sense hinges.

Goodman⁷⁹ underlines that (first point) Wittgenstein, differently from James, is committed to the idea that his inquiry has a intrinsic logical, and not empirical, nature: this entails a diverse notion of certainty with respect to that of ordinary, empirical certainty. Besides which (second point), James, differently from Wittgenstein, is committed to idea that philosophy must be scientific, and thus that at the end any justification is empirical: there are hypothesis and tests, and certainties are ultimately founded on what science verifies. Finally (third point), Wittgenstein criticizes pragmatism for its intellectualization and over-simplification of the way in which we arrive at our common sense beliefs. In pointing out the instinctive nature of certainties like "I shall get burnt if I put my hand in the fire"⁸⁰, Wittgenstein, in Goodman's opinion, is implicitly and ironically referring to how James himself characterizes some basic behaviors of mankind in the *Principles of Psychology*:

Why do men always lie down, when they can, on soft beds rather than on hard floors? Why do they sit round the stove on a cold day? Why, in a room, do they place themselves, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, with their faces toward its middle rather than to the wall? [...] Nothing more can be said than that these are human ways, and that every creature *likes* its own ways, and takes to the following them as a matter of course. Science may come and consider these ways, and find that most of them are useful. But it is not for the sake of their utility that they are followed [...]⁸¹

Seen in this perspective, Wittgenstein would have reproached James for not having maintained, in *Pragmatism*, his previous way of describing basic behavior and beliefs of mankind, referring much more to an instinctive way of acting than to the direct utility of this acting. In other words, Wittgenstein's critique of James is that of not having been faithful to himself (we shall see shortly another example of this attitude).

Though the roles of logic, science and instinct are important aspects that help us to grasp the differences between James and Wittgenstein, I think that the most important concept that marks the distance is another one: knowledge. Goodman refers to it too, especially in treating the theme of logic, but maybe without acknowledging it the centrality it deserves. Two important words that James uses in his lecture are directly opposed by Wittgenstein, and both of them have to do with knowledge: hypothesis and opinions. With respect to hypothesis, Wittgenstein writes: "This situ-

James, in the lecture that I am considering, which expresses his main views on common sense and its relevance for pragmatism, does not explicitly mention them. I am particularly indebted to Vincent Colapietro for the suggestion about the importance of religion in this context, a theme surely worth developing with much more attention.

79 GOODMAN (2002, pp. 25-35).

80 Cf. WITTGENSTEIN (2001, part I, §§ 472-474, p. 114).

81 JAMES (1890, II, p. 386)

ation is thus not the same for a proposition like ‘At this distance from the sun there is a planet’ and ‘Here is a hand’ (namely my own hand). The second can’t be called a hypothesis. But there isn’t a sharp boundary line between them”⁸². With respect to opinions: “My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul”⁸³.

In having to deal with primary certainties like that “here is a hand” or that “he has a soul” (he is a man, not an automaton), we are not concerned with an epistemic but with a practical certainty; which means that we are not concerned with knowledge in the strict sense of the word (at best, we are concerned with “knowing-how”). What matters to Wittgenstein is to disentangle the concepts of certainty and knowledge⁸⁴, and to let us see that our relation to common sense hinges is not an epistemic relation, in spite of all appearances. In fact, since we are facing propositions and what seem to be propositional attitudes (opinions, beliefs, certainties), we easily fall prone to implicitly asserting that our common sense background is a set of propositions that we *know* for sure. Wittgenstein himself, indeed, is not always so definite in refusing this implication; for example he says that “our *knowledge* forms an enormous system”⁸⁵. But the core of his strategy in *On Certainty* – which, we must remember, is a collection of not revised remarks – is that “knowledge and certainty belong to different *categories*”, because “not everything that has the form of an empirical proposition *is one*”⁸⁶.

This has led some critics⁸⁷ to uphold the idea that Wittgenstein’s certainties are not only non-epistemic, but even non-propositional, though this seems hard to defend if we consider that these certainties are expressed by propositions: Wittgenstein’s words probably do not mean that what seem to be empirical propositions are not *propositions*, but that they are not *empirical*, that is, that they are logical, or grammatical, as they reflect the limits of our form of life. Thus, like Annalisa Coliva⁸⁸ points out, the sort of relation that we have with hinge propositions is of a normative kind, including in this normative nature the ethical as well as the practical aspect. Propositions concerning the background and the limits of our forms of life are propositions concerning, simultaneously, normality and normativity. This is what James’ account of common sense, in the Wittgensteinian perspective, fails to acknowledge.

A corollary of this difference is the way in which the two describe the nature of changes of common sense/*Weltbild*. In James’ terms, there is not a categorical distinction between what is fixed and what flows, between grammatical and empirical, as everything is evolutionarily subject to change: the nature of common sense *Denkmittel* is not *qualitatively* different from the nature of a scientific hypothesis. In Wittgenstein’s terms instead, although it is admitted that one and the same proposition can serve on one occasion as a logical determination, and on another as an empirical description, the qualitative difference between the two roles is repeatedly stressed and remarked.

82 WITTGENSTEIN (1975, § 52, p. 9).

83 WITTGENSTEIN (2001, Part II, p. 152).

84 Cf. MCGINN (1989) and STROLL (1994).

85 WITTGENSTEIN (1975, § 410, p. 52), my italics.

86 *Ivi*, § 308, p. 39, author’s italics.

87 Cf. MOYAL-SHARROCK (2005).

88 COLIVA (2010, pp. 82-83, 86, 184).

What are the reasons that led to these two different standpoints? An analysis of the main objectives of James' and Wittgenstein's texts may help to clarify at least one of them. It has to do with the “implicit reader”, or “listener”, of their remarks. James is primarily interested in *categories* and *beliefs*, and one of his goals is to deny the transcendental nature of categories as postulated by Kant. It is in opposition with the Kantian philosopher that James highlights how categories themselves have a natural and historical origin and may vary through the times. In Lecture VII of *Pragmatism*, on “Pragmatism and Humanism”, exposing F. C. S. Schiller's idea of humanism, James indeed stresses the distance between Kantian categories “fulminated before nature began”, and the idea of categories “gradually forming themselves in nature's presence”⁸⁹, where it is clear from these very words to which of the two position he feels nearer. Although there are authors, Hilary Putnam among them⁹⁰, who conversely underline the belonging of James to the Kantian tradition, and although James himself in the cited passage on Schiller acknowledges that this sort of humanism may seem to have a Kantian flavor, I think that it is evident in his way of characterizing categories that it is precisely against the Kantian tradition that James is working in these lines (independently from any consideration regarding Kant's conception of common sense, and from any general claim about the relation between pragmatism and transcendentalism). His assimilation of what Wittgenstein calls logical and empirical propositions is thus also a consequence of this anti-Kantian refusal of the distinction between phenomena and noumena, implied by the idea of absolute categories of knowledge⁹¹.

With regards to Wittgenstein's implicit reader, he is much easier to identify: Moore's name appears in no less than 40 remarks of *On Certainty*. It is, patently, against Moore's assimilation of common sense to knowledge that Wittgenstein's identification of the peculiar nature of hinges is directed. And in Moore we can see an example of what in the *Blue Book* Wittgenstein called the “common sense philosopher”, the philosophers who tries to defend common sense from “idealists” (idealism in this sense includes solipsism and skepticism) only by reasserting common sense, without being able to see that his work should be done on the grammatical, and not on the empirical, level. This is what makes the common sense philosopher a victim of idealism, solipsism, skepticism: in insisting on the “truth” of common sense, Moore only deepens his troubles⁹².

5. James' stream and Wittgenstein's river-bed

I have said that Wittgenstein would have reproached James for his not remaining faithful to himself. It is to the early James, that of the *Principles of Psychology* (besides that of *Varieties*), that Wittgenstein felt more akin, in spite of the many critical remarks that he dedicated to his work. And it is in the *Principles* that Wittgenstein could even have found ideas and images for the development of his thought on common

89 JAMES (1975a, p. 120).

90 Cf. PUTNAM & PUTNAM (1990). See also PIHLSTRÖM (2003), especially Ch. II “Pragmatists as Transcendental Philosophers, and Wittgenstein as a Pragmatist”.

91 Cf. MADDALENA (2010); PERRY (1935, volume I, Ch. XLIV).

92 Cf. MCGINN (1989, Ch. III and VIII).

sense and *Weltbild*. The chapter on the stream of thought (but not exclusively that chapter) is particularly full of cues that we can read, of course in a different form (for example without the emphasis on introspection and without the turning to scientific explanations), in Wittgenstein's writings. The importance of vagueness, the inutility of precise definitions, the continuous nature of thoughts, the nameless feelings and expectations surrounding experiences, are only some examples. Whereas James did not make much use of these previous themes when concerned with common sense, Wittgenstein did; but he dismissed the psychological and physiological sides of the matter, and by opposite connected habit, background, vagueness to actions, practices and the *Weltbild*, and, more notably, focused on the distinction between the grammatical and the empirical level.

In Wittgenstein's *Nachlass* we can find an interesting example, which allows us to connect directly James' stream of thought and Wittgenstein's river-bed of thought⁹³: on the basis of these few lines one could say that in proposing the image of the river-bed Wittgenstein was probably thinking of James' stream, both for its virtue and for its defects as an image of thought. In Manuscript 165, dated between 1941 and 1944, we can read:

I'm waiting for two people A and B. I say: "When will he come!" Someone asks me: "Who do you mean?" I say, "I thought about A". And these very words have built a bridge. Or he asks "Who do you mean?" I say, "I thought about...", a poem in which there is this sentence. I make these connections among what I say in the course of my thoughts and actions. (This remark is in relation with what W. James calls "the stream of thought". The mistake in his picture is that a priori and a posteriori, grammatical and experiential, are mixed, not distinguished. So he speaks about the continuity of the stream of thought and he compares it with that of spaces, not with that of a sort of jet of water.)⁹⁴

A similar statement occurs in Manuscript 129, dated 1944-1945, where Wittgenstein writes: "I think that this remark is in relation with what W. James calls 'the stream of thought'. Even though he certainly does not distinguish a priori and a posteriori, empirical and grammatical propositions"⁹⁵. It is then precisely the lack of distinction between what is grammatical and what is experiential, empirical, which is the "mistake" of James' picture of the stream, in Wittgenstein's opinion⁹⁶. Or, better said: it is because he does not distinguish between what is grammatical and what is experiential, that he ought not have used the image of the stream, because he is actually comparing the continuity of thought to the continuity of spaces, which have no boundaries at all, and *not* to the continuity of a stream. Conversely, the picture

93 A more complete analysis of this connection is proposed in BONCOMPAGNI (2012).

94 WITTGENSTEIN (2000, item 165, p. 25). My translation, with orthographic adjustments.

95 *Ivi*, item 129, p. 107.

96 It must be said, however, that James did actually make that distinction, as the entire Ch. XXVIII of JAMES (1981) is dedicated to the difference between "necessary truths" and "effects of experience", the former being identified with "rational propositions" due to the structure of the brain and the latter with "empirical propositions" due to experience. But Wittgenstein surely could not be satisfied with such a physiological, and not grammatical, account.

of the stream, or of the river, is the right one if we do want to distinguish between grammatical and empirical, and this is exactly what Wittgenstein does with his own picture of the river-bed of thought. In other words, thanks to *his imagination* on the one hand, and to (what Wittgenstein thought were) *his mistakes* on the other, James can be said to be one great inspirer of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy.

6. Conclusion

We have seen how James and Wittgenstein respectively describe common sense and *Weltbild*, how their ideas share some common features (holism, levels, slowness of change, connection with language, reference to animals) but also present important differences (with respect to logic, science, instinct and, most relevantly, knowledge). It is particularly by denying an epistemic commitment, and affirming instead a practical commitment, to our hinge common sense propositions, that Wittgenstein puts on the foreground the primacy of action. In his continuously drawing our attention from words to actions⁹⁷, in his linking language to practice, Wittgenstein can be said to be even *more of a pragmatist* than James, in spite of his explicit denial of being a pragmatist (“But aren’t you a pragmatist? No. For I am not saying that a proposition is true if it is useful”⁹⁸) and of his nuisance in realizing that the *Weltanschauung* of pragmatism is thwarting him (“So I’m trying to say something that sounds like pragmatism. Here I am being thwarted by a kind of *Weltanschauung*”⁹⁹). Wittgenstein’s opinion about pragmatism was evidently not accurate, since it reflects how it was commonly seen and misinterpreted in the early analytic context¹⁰⁰. But it is precisely by opposing to an alleged pragmatist *Weltanschauung*, that he reveals himself to share, at a deeper level, some of the most important pragmatist issues – remember Peirce’s famous declaration that pragmatism was not a *Weltanschauung* –; just like, it is in his opposition to James and in his reproaching him, that he reveals to owe so much to James himself, as we have seen in the case of the river-bed vs. stream of thought.

Wittgenstein’s concept of *Weltbild*, we can conclude, is even more pragmatist than James’ concept of common sense, as the former is interested in showing that *Weltbild* rests on actions rather than on opinions. Besides, this impression is supported by a surprising assonance between what Wittgenstein affirms about the “real meaning” of a proposition of the kind “I know...”, and the principle of pragmatism that James, citing – and maybe misunderstanding – Peirce, presents in Lecture II of *Pragmatism*¹⁰¹. Let us start by reminding us the well-known Jamesian (Peircean) principle:

97 In WITTGENSTEIN (1975) we can find indeed at least thirty remarks in which Wittgenstein discusses acting, practice, doing, behaving; cf. KRKAC (2003, pp. 45 and 49-50), according to whom, after what Quine had called “semantic ascent”, Wittgenstein made in *On Certainty* a “pragmatic descent”.

98 WITTGENSTEIN (1980, volume I, § 266, p. 54).

99 WITTGENSTEIN (1975, § 422, p. 54).

100 For a historical and conceptual analysis of the relation between analytic philosophy and pragmatism, see CALCATERRA (2011, Introduction).

101 He had already quoted these words by Peirce before, see his 1884 article on “The Function of Cognition”, in JAMES (1975b, Chapter 1).

[...] Mr. Peirce, after pointing out that our beliefs are really rules for action, said that to develop a thought's meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance. (...) To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve – what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all.¹⁰²

And here is Wittgenstein on knowledge, certainty and consequences:

If I say "I know that that's a foot" - what am I really saying? Isn't the whole point that I am certain of the consequences - that if someone else had been in doubt I might say to him "you see - I told you so"? Would my knowledge still be worth anything if it let me down as a clue in action? And *can't* it let me down?¹⁰³

The similarity is indeed striking. Again, we must conclude that Wittgenstein, in developing his ideas on the importance of actions and practices, and particularly in the last years of his life when he worked on *Weltbild* and dissolved the concept of knowledge into the net of our background convictions and automatic reactions, has gone further than James on the road of pragmatism; again, he would probably have reproached James for not remaining faithful to his own ideas. Not that James did not apply the pragmatic principle when concerned with common sense: he did see the practical aspect of our beliefs, and this is probably what he meant to underline using the expression *Denkmittel*, which catches the instrumental role of categories. But he probably did not see that he could go further and realize that a narrow concept of knowledge, that concept that words such as "discovery", "opinions", "hypothesis" entail, finds no application in the domain of common sense.

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102 JAMES (1975a, pp. 28-29).

103 WITTGENSTEIN (1975, § 409, p. 52).

104 The date of the first publication is indicated in brackets.

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