

10. After the Fact: Common Sense, Paradoxical Structures, and the Retroactive Logic of Fictional Reality

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Abstract: This paper investigates the conceptual relationship between common sense, paradox, and the retroactive formation of reality, arguing that what appears as the most immediate form of sense (the “obvious”) is itself an effect of a retroactive logic that stabilizes fiction as reality. Common sense typically presents itself as an unproblematic givenness: the naturalized horizon from within which objects, meanings, and social practices are encountered as self-evidently real. This horizon reveals its dependence on prior processes of symbolic articulation and temporal synthesis. Far from being a neutral medium, common sense conceals the constructive operations by which meaning is retrospectively secured. The paper argues that paradox is not an anomaly within this horizon but a structural signal of its internal limits. In the Kantian sense, paradox emerges whenever reason confronts the conditions of its own possibility, exposing the contingency of the principles common sense treats as unquestionable. Such paradoxes do not simply disrupt the coherence of common sense, they disclose the retroactive mechanisms through which coherence is first produced. Drawing on the logic of fictional positing (Vaihinger) and the notion of fictitious entities (Bentham), I show how the real is often constituted only once a symbolic form is imposed that retrospectively determines what will count as given. Lacan’s account of *après-coup* further illuminates this temporal structure. An event or signifier does not acquire its decisive meaning at the moment of its occurrence but only through a subsequent re-inscription that reorganizes its place within a symbolic network. The “origin” of sense is thus continually displaced forward, constituted only from a later standpoint that confers coherence upon what was previously indeterminate. In this way, *après-coup* exemplifies how the real is never

simply found but produced through a looping temporality in which the present reconfigures the meaning of the past.

Keywords: Common Sense, Paradox, Limit-Concepts, Retroactivity, Fictional Positing, Structural Logic of the Real.

Introduction: The Obvious as a Philosophical Problem

Common sense ordinarily presents itself as the most reliable starting point for thought. It names what is obvious, immediately intelligible, and seemingly beyond dispute—the domain of what “anyone can see” without further justification. In everyday life as well as in much theoretical discourse, common sense functions as an ontological guarantee. It reassures us that reality is already there, already structured, and already meaningful prior to reflection. Precisely because of this self-evidence, common sense rarely becomes an explicit philosophical problem. It operates as the silent background against which problems arise, rather than as something requiring justification itself.

This paper begins from the claim that such self-evidence is philosophically misleading. The immediacy attributed to common sense conceals a complex set of constitutive operations through which reality comes to appear as given in the first place. Contemporary phenomenology has repeatedly emphasized that what appears as “natural” or “obvious” is the outcome of sedimented processes of sense-formation rather than an originary datum. Common sense is therefore not simply a passive reception of reality but an active mode of world-disclosure that effaces its own genesis. Crowell asserts that phenomenology is not merely descriptive, but normative, as it uncovers the “ought” (rational constraints) that guides how objects and experiences are intended. This normativity however is not restricted only to its traditional domains and precedes all intentional experiences.¹

The central thesis of this paper is that common sense functions as a *retroactively stabilized fiction*: reality appears self-evident only after symbolic, temporal, and conceptual operations have succeeded in fixing its meaning and concealing their own activity. What emerges is a *retroactive temporality of the real* in which reality is not prior to fiction but crystallizes through it. The guiding question of this paper is therefore

¹ Steven Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

not whether reality contains fictional elements, but how reality itself is constituted through retroactive sense-formation, and why this process is experienced as non-fictional within common sense. To articulate this claim, the paper develops three interrelated arguments. First, common sense is analyzed phenomenologically as a horizon of obviousness that naturalizes historically and symbolically constituted meanings. Drawing on Edmund Husserl's analyses of the natural attitude and sedimentation, I argue that common sense operates by suspending the question of constitution, thereby presenting the world as simply "there". Second, the paper argues that paradox is not an external disruption of common sense but a structural expression of its own limits. When sense turns reflexive—when it encounters the conditions of its own possibility—contradictions emerge that cannot be resolved within the framework of obviousness. In Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy, such paradoxes take the form of antinomies, which arise necessarily from reason's demand for totality.² Third, the paper argues that the resolution of paradox does not occur through a return to a pre-symbolic reality but through *fictional positing*. Building on Hans Vaihinger's theory of the *as if*, fiction is treated not as error or illusion but as a necessary operation that allows sense to persist where strict consistency fails.³ Fiction, therefore, stabilizes sense by reorganizing contradictions into functional structures that can be lived with. However, the temporal dimension of this stabilization is crucial. Fiction does not simply overlay an already given reality; it reorganizes the field of meaning retroactively. This logic is articulated most sharply in Jacques Lacan's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (*après-coup*), according to which events acquire their meaning only through later symbolic inscription.⁴ *Après-coup* is not simply a psychological mechanism but a structural temporality in which the present reconfigures the past, producing the illusion that meaning was always already there. Reality, on this view, is not discovered but produced through tem-

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Originally published 1781.

³ Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of "As If": A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*. Translated by C. K. Ogden. 2nd ed (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1935).

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English. The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 213.

poral loops of signification.

The concept of *fictional reality* developed in this paper is therefore does not refer to deception, simulation, or ideological distortion in the first instance. Rather, it names the ordinary condition under which reality becomes intelligible at all. Following Jeremy Bentham's notion of fictitious entities, the paper shows how symbolic constructs—once stabilized—acquire real normative and practical force, even as their fictional origin recedes from view.⁵ Common sense is the everyday name for this success: the point at which fiction has become so effective that it no longer appears as fiction. By reconceptualizing common sense, paradox, and fiction within a unified framework of retroactive constitution, the paper shifts philosophical critique away from the exposure of illusion and toward an analysis of the temporal and symbolic mechanisms through which reality itself is produced. To think reality *after the fact* is not to abandon truth, but to recognize the conditions under which truth becomes possible.

Common Sense and the Naturalization of Meaning **Common Sense as the Natural Attitude**

A phenomenological approach allows common sense to be understood not primarily as a set of beliefs, but as a *mode of being-in-the-world*. What common sense provides is not theoretical knowledge, but an orientation in which the world already makes sense prior to reflection. In this respect, common sense closely corresponds to what Edmund Husserl famously calls the *natural attitude*: the pre-philosophical stance in which the existence of the world and its meaningful structure are taken for granted.⁶ Within this attitude, reality is not questioned but presupposed as self-evident. Contemporary phenomenology has emphasized that the natural attitude is not a naïve error to be corrected by philosophy, but a necessary condition for practical and social life. As Zahavi argues, the natural attitude provides the background certainty that allows agents to navigate the world without being paralyzed by constant reflection. Zahavi distin-

⁵ Jeremy Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*. Edited by John Bowring. Vol. 8. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962). Originally published London: William Tait, 1843.

⁶ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

guishes phenomenological reflection from psychological introspection. Psychological reflection is therefore constrained by what is pre-reflectively lived through.⁷ Reflection is not a closed gaze into oneself, but a tool for analyzing the “invariant structures” of experience. Common sense thus operates as a *horizon of intelligibility* - it “silently” structures what can appear as relevant, normal, or real, without itself becoming thematic. Its authority lies precisely in the fact that it does not present itself as an interpretation among others.

However, phenomenological analysis also reveals that this horizon is *constituted*. Husserl’s concept of sedimentation is crucial here. Meanings are not given once and for all, but are formed through acts of perception, judgment, and social interaction that gradually withdraw from active awareness while continuing to shape experience.⁸ Husserl attacks the naive belief in a world that exists on its own, which can only be understood through mathematical methods. The transcendental motif is on the other hand the questioning back to the ultimate source of all knowledge-formations, the reflection of the knowing subject upon himself and his knowing life, meaning that the world is always a world presented to someone.⁹ This argument culminates in the “paradox of subjectivity”, which shows that man is simultaneously an object in the world (body) and a subject for the world (consciousness).¹⁰

What common sense treats as obvious is therefore the result of historical and symbolic processes whose constructive character has been obscured over time. The world of common sense is not the world as such, but the world as stabilized through inherited sense-formations. Recent work in phenomenological social ontology reinforces this point. Crowell emphasizes that normativity and meaning are embedded in shared practices long before they are thematized as explicit rules or concepts, showing how these “sedimented” (settled) practices and meanings function as invisible rules that guide our daily lives without us actively thinking of them as “laws”.¹¹ Common sense emerges at the intersection of these practices, functioning as an implicit normativity that governs

⁷ Dan Zahavi, *Husserl’s Legacy: Phenomenology, Metaphysics, and Transcendental Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 20.

⁸ Husserl, *Crisis*, 52-72.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 95-99.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹¹ Steven Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology*, 200-205.

what counts as reasonable, intelligible, or real. Far from being neutral, common sense embodies a historically contingent organization of sense that presents itself as natural necessity. From this perspective, common sense already exhibits a subtle tension. On the one hand, it depends on constituted meanings; on the other, it presents those meanings as unconstituted. It relies on symbolic mediation while concealing mediation itself. This tension does not usually manifest as contradiction, because common sense operates by suspending reflexive questioning. Only when this suspension is disturbed does the constructed character of obviousness come into view.

The Illusion of Immediacy and the Suppression of Paradox

The defining claim of common sense is immediacy. Objects appear as simply present; meanings as self-evident; social norms as naturally binding. This immediacy, however, is not a phenomenological datum but an *effect*. It is produced through the successful stabilization of sense and the systematic suppression of paradox. What common sense excludes is not contradiction as such, but the visibility of contradiction as a structural feature of meaning. Philosophically, paradox arises whenever sense turns back upon its own conditions—when the question of *how* meaning is possible interrupts the experience of *what* is meaningful. Common sense avoids such interruptions by treating meaning as already settled. As long as sense functions smoothly, paradox remains latent. When paradox does surface, it appears as disruption: confusion, absurdity, or irrationality. Common sense responds by either dismissing paradox as error or by reabsorbing it into familiar interpretive frameworks. This response is revealing. It indicates that paradox is not external to common sense, but internal to its functioning. Paradox marks the points at which the illusion of immediacy breaks down—where the gap between meaning and its conditions becomes visible. Rather than eliminating this gap, common sense manages it by narrative and symbolic means. It restores coherence by redescribing what has occurred as if its meaning had always been present.

In both phenomenology and hermeneutics, it has been argued that meaning is not contemporaneous with events but emerges through processes of temporal reconfiguration. In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur develops the concept of *emplotment* (*mise en intrigue*) precisely to demonstrate that events acquire intelligibility only when configured within a

narrative structure that organizes them into a coherent whole.¹² Crucially, this configuration is not additive but retroactive, where the ending of a narrative “gives the story a sense of completion” and thereby determines how earlier episodes are to be understood.¹³ Ricoeur speaks in this context of a “discordant concordance” (*concordance discordante*), emphasizing that narrative unity does not eliminate rupture but integrates it retrospectively into a meaningful sequence.¹⁴ Events, in isolation, are episodic - only through *emplotment* do they become intelligible as parts of a structured whole.¹⁵ Meaning thus arises not at the moment of occurrence, but through subsequent reconfiguration. As Zahavi notes, the retentional modification is not a process that simply occurs once and for all, every new now entails a new retentional modification of the preceding phases of the flow.¹⁶ Temporal experience therefore includes an intrinsic openness to revision. The past is not simply preserved but dynamically modulated within an ongoing horizon of sense.

Common sense nevertheless presents temporal continuity as self-evident. Causes are assumed to precede effects in a straightforward linear order; intentions are presumed to determine actions contemporaneously; meanings are thought to accompany events at the moment of their occurrence. When this linearity is disrupted—when later developments radically alter the sense of earlier occurrences—common sense resolves the tension retroactively. It reconstructs the past as if it had always already contained the seeds of the present outcome, thereby converting temporal reconfiguration into apparent necessity. What Ricoeur describes as narrative “refiguration” becomes, at the level of common sense, an unnoticed projection of coherence backward in time. The retroactive constitution of meaning is thus concealed under the guise of temporal continuity.¹⁷

This retroactive reconstruction is a key mechanism by which paradox is suppressed. Contradictions are not erased, but re-narrated. What initially

¹² Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 65-71.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 157-161.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 65-67.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 71-76.

¹⁶ Dan Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 82-84.

¹⁷ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 76-77.

resisted sense is redescribed in terms that restore continuity. The resulting coherence is then projected backward as a condition that was always already in place. In this way, common sense converts contingency into necessity and interpretation into fact. The suppression of paradox thus has ontological consequences. It stabilizes a reality that appears non-fictional precisely because the work of fiction has already succeeded. The everyday world is experienced as free of paradox not because it lacks contradictions, but because those contradictions have been neutralized through symbolic and temporal operations that remain invisible. Common sense is the name for this invisibility. Understanding common sense in this way prepares the transition to the analysis of paradox and retroactivity in the following sections. Paradox is not a marginal phenomenon to be eliminated, but a diagnostic indicator of the processes by which sense is stabilized. When paradox becomes visible, it reveals that reality is not simply given, but continuously constituted through mechanisms that operate *after the fact*.

Paradox as a Structural Feature of Common Sense Kantian Paradox and the Limits of the Obvious

Paradox becomes philosophically significant at the point where common sense can no longer sustain the appearance of immediacy. While common sense presupposes that reality is already coherently ordered and non-contradictory, philosophical reflection repeatedly encounters situations in which this presupposition breaks down. In the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant, this breakdown is articulated with systematic clarity in the form of the antinomies of pure reason. Kant insists that these antinomies do not arise from careless reasoning or empirical error, but from reason's own lawful activity when it seeks unconditional explanation.¹⁸ Importantly, Kant does not resolve paradox by simply eliminating one side of the contradiction. Instead, he transforms the problem by restricting the legitimate use of reason, thereby preserving coherence at the cost of acknowledging the limits of what can be known. From the standpoint of the present paper, this move exemplifies that paradox does not disappear through correction, but through *reconfiguration*. Sense is stabilized not by removing contradiction as such, but by reorganizing the framework within which contradiction appears.

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A405/B432.

Contemporary Kant scholarship has emphasized that the antinomies should not be read merely as logical curiosities, but as expressions of a deep structural tension within rational cognition. Allison emphasizes the difference between mathematical and dynamic antinomies in Kant's system. In the mathematical (1st and 2nd) both statements are false because they both assume that the world is a finished entity that is given to us. In the dynamic (3rd and 4th) both statements can be true, but in different sense (one for the phenomenal world, the other for the noumenal world).¹⁹ Reason generates contradiction precisely because it cannot relinquish either demand. Paradox is therefore not an anomaly but an index of reason's constitutive limits. Béatrice Longuenesse deepens this structural reading by arguing that the antinomies arise from the "transcendental demand for totality" internal to the activity of reason itself. For Longuenesse, reason does not arbitrarily exceed experience, but rather, it extends the logical function of seeking conditions—already operative within the understanding—to the idea of the *unconditioned totality* of those conditions.²⁰ In doing so, reason projects the form of systematic unity beyond the domain in which it can legitimately apply. The antinomies thus result from the unavoidable transition from the logical demand for completeness in judgment to a transcendental claim about the totality of the world as object.²¹ What generates paradox is not a misuse of concepts, but the very structure of discursive cognition, as our capacity to judge presupposes the search for sufficient grounds, and this search, when absolutized, yields mutually incompatible yet rationally motivated conclusions. The antinomies reveal a constitutive tension between the finite standpoint of human cognition and the regulative ideal of systematic unity that reason cannot renounce. Paradox, therefore, is not merely a limit encountered at the margins of thought; it emerges from the internal dynamic of judgment itself. The "obviousness" presupposed by common sense depends upon the tacit containment of this demand for totality within empirical bounds. When that containment fails—when reason insists on viewing the world as a completed whole—the coherence of common sense collapses into contradiction. The an-

¹⁹ Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense*, rev. ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 357-396.

²⁰ Béatrice Longuenesse, *Kant on the Human Standpoint* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 213-217.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 218-224.

tinomies thus disclose not a defect of reasoning, but the structural instability of any worldview that assumes reality to be transparently and fully given.

This insight has direct consequences for the status of common sense. From the perspective of everyday intelligibility, contradiction appears intolerable: if reality is to be obvious, it must be consistent. Kant's analysis undermines this assumption by demonstrating that contradiction arises not from an external disturbance of sense, but from the internal logic of explanation itself. Whenever reason attempts to grasp totality, it produces mutually incompatible yet equally justified claims. The coherence presupposed by common sense thus rests on a selective blindness to the conditions under which sense is produced.

Fictional Positing as a Response to Paradox

If paradox reveals the limits of common sense, the persistence of coherent sense requires a mediating strategy. One such strategy is fictional positing. Rather than resolving contradiction through direct correspondence with reality, fictional positing allows reason to proceed *as if* certain conditions were satisfied—even when those conditions cannot be coherently affirmed within the bounds of strict logic or empirical verification. This logic receives its most systematic articulation in the philosophy of Hans Vaihinger, whose theory of the *as if* treats fiction not as a deviation from truth, but as a constitutive feature of rational cognition.²² Two pairs of distinctions in his theory are of crucial importance for the current argument: (1) between hypothesis and fiction; and (2) between semi-fictions and real fictions. In the first distinction the main difference lies in whether the mental construct claims to correspond to “objective reality”. A hypothesis is directed towards reality. It is an assumption that strives to be “true” and to describe the actual state of affairs. It is a “preparatory step toward discovering truth”. Fiction is a conscious deviation from reality. It does not claim to be true – on the contrary, it is a “conscious false assumption”. In fiction, we think “as if” something exists, knowing fully well it does not exist, but it is retained because of its “practical utility” in organizing thought. The falsity of fiction is not

²² Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of 'As If': A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, trans. C. K. Ogden, 2nd ed. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1935).

accidental but essential – fictions may even contradict empirical reality or logical consistency, but they are preserved because they enable systematic coherence where direct representation fails.²³ Therefore, a hypothesis requires verification, proven through empirical criteria of truth – if data contradicts the hypothesis, it must be rejected or corrected. Fiction on the other hand requires justification solely by its practical usefulness to thought. From a logical standpoint, it is crucial to say that fiction does not conceal contradiction, it acknowledges it while operationally suspending its disruptive force.

Vaihinger's distinction between *semi-fictions* and *real* (or complete) fictions clarifies this mediating role. Semi-fictions are simplifications or idealizations that deviate from reality but remain approximately consistent with it – thought operates with real elements, but arranges or isolates them in a way that does not exist in nature. They are deviations from reality, but not from logical possibility. Semi-fictions are those in which the contradiction is not an internal one, but only a contradiction of reality. Real fictions, by contrast, may involve internally contradictory or logically impossible constructs, but they are retained because they permit the construction of a unified system of thought. They contradict not only empirical reality, but often are internally contradictory. Real fictions are not only in contradiction with reality, but are also self-contradictory in themselves.²⁴

The *as if* structure thereby stabilizes sense without requiring metaphysical commitment. It suspends contradiction without denying its presence. Importantly, such fictions often become naturalized. What begins as a consciously adopted construct may gradually be treated as an ontological commitment once its functional role has solidified. The fiction's heuristic origin fades, and it comes to appear as a feature of reality itself. From the standpoint of common sense, this disappearance is decisive. Once a fiction has successfully stabilized a field of sense, it no longer appears as fiction. The *as if* is forgotten, and the resulting configuration is treated as self-evident.

²³ Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of 'As If'*, 85-91.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 91-95.

Paradox, Retroactivity, and the Reconstitution of Sense

Paradox does more than motivate fictional positing - it also reveals the temporal structure of sense-formation. When paradox emerges, sense appears to lag behind itself. What was assumed to be settled is suddenly called into question, and coherence must be restored through reinterpretation. This restoration rarely takes the form of radical revision. Instead, it proceeds through retroactive reorganization: earlier elements are re-described in light of new symbolic constructions, such that the outcome of sense-formation is projected backward as its own condition. From this perspective, paradox is generative rather than destructive - it identifies the points at which sense must be reorganized if it is to persist. Fictional positing provides the means for such reorganization, while retroactivity explaining how the resulting coherence comes to appear as original. For common sense, this process remains largely invisible. Retroactive stabilization transforms contingency into necessity and interpretation into fact. Once paradox has been neutralized and a new configuration of sense has taken hold, the history of its formation is effaced. The resulting reality appears as if it had always been coherent, masking the temporal and symbolic operations that produced it. Paradox thus serves as a diagnostic indicator: it reveals moments in which the retroactive logic of sense becomes visible before being reabsorbed into the horizon of the obvious. Paradox, therefore, occupies a central place in the constitution of fictional reality. It marks the limits of common sense, motivates fictional stabilization, and discloses the retroactive temporality through which sense is reconstituted. Far from undermining reality, paradox is one of the primary mechanisms through which reality is continually produced and renewed.

Retroactivity and the Constitution of the Real Fictitious Entities and After-the-Fact Reality

The retroactive constitution of reality can be approached with greater clarity through the concept of *fictitious entities*. Classical philosophy often treats fictitious entities as merely linguistic or heuristic devices—terms that lack referents in reality but facilitate discourse. The concept of “common sense” can be analyzed through Bentham's Theory of Fictions, since it has no material correspondence in the sensory world and functions as a fictitious entity, whose existence is simulated by the

imagination for the purposes of discourse.²⁵ Although language treats common sense as an existing object or shared capacity, it is rather a linguistic construct that requires the method of paraphrasis in order to be understood. According to Bentham, the meaning of such abstractions is not found in isolated definitions, but in whole sentences translated into the language of “real entities”. Thus, in order to demystify “common sense”, we must apply archetypation, examining the physical images of agreement or sensation that underlie it.²⁶ Their reality is not antecedent to discourse but emerges through its stabilization. Recent work in social ontology has reinforced this insight. Ultimately, Bentham's logic reveals that common sense often serves as a rhetorical tool to conceal subjective judgments, transforming an abstract fiction into an indisputable social reality. What distinguishes Bentham's approach and makes it explicitly relevant to the current argument is its explicit emphasis on retroactivity. A fictitious entity becomes real only *after* it has been successfully integrated into a network of judgments and actions. Once this integration occurs, its fictional origin recedes from view, replaced by the appearance of ontological immediacy. This “after-the-fact” logic challenges the common-sense assumption that reality precedes symbolization. Instead, it suggests that symbolization plays a constitutive role in determining what will count as real. Legal persons, obligations, rights, and abstract values exemplify this structure. Their effects are undeniably real, even though their existence depends on symbolic articulation rather than empirical givenness. Such entities are grounded not in physical facts alone but in complex grounding relations that unfold over time, allowing for retroactivity to be viewed simply as an epistemic illusion but a fundamental feature of social reality. For common sense, however, this temporal structure is largely invisible. Once fictitious entities have stabilized social practices, they are experienced as part of the natural order of things. Their contingency is forgotten, and their existence is treated as self-evident. This forgetting is not accidental but functional: common sense requires a stable reality in order to operate. Retroactivity is therefore concealed at the very moment it succeeds. Fiction becomes reality precisely when its fictional character is no longer thematized.

²⁵ Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, 325.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 322.

Après-coup and the Temporal Loop of Meaning

While Bentham and contemporary social ontology clarify the discursive and institutional dimensions of retroactivity, psychoanalytic theory radicalizes the temporal logic at stake. In the work of Jacques Lacan, retroactivity is conceptualized through the notion of *Nachträglichkeit* (*après-coup*), which designates a non-linear temporality in which meaning is constituted retrospectively rather than contemporaneously.²⁷ An event does not carry its full meaning at the moment it occurs; instead, its significance emerges only through subsequent symbolic inscription. *Après-coup* should not be understood as a psychological mechanism of delayed interpretation, but as a structural feature of signification itself and therefore, retroactivity should be viewed as intrinsic to symbolic causality: effects precede their causes insofar as later signifiers determine what earlier events will have meant. The past, on this view, is not a fixed sequence of determinate facts but a field continually reorganized by new symbolic frameworks. This temporal loop directly challenges the linear temporality presupposed by common sense. In everyday understanding, meaning is assumed to accompany events as they unfold. Interpretation merely uncovers what was already there. *Après-coup* undermines this assumption by showing that meaning is produced through temporal dislocation. What appears as an origin is often an effect of later structuration. The present does not simply follow the past; it actively reshapes it. The implications of this insight for fictional reality are profound. If meaning is constituted retroactively, then reality itself cannot be fully determined prior to symbolic articulation. Fiction does not merely overlay an already given real; it participates in the production of the real by reorganizing the temporal field of sense. Paradox plays a crucial role in this process. Events that initially resist sense generate tensions that cannot be resolved within existing frameworks. Retroactive inscription resolves these tensions by redescribing the past in a way that renders the present coherent. Paradox thus functions as a catalyst for retroactive sense-formation.

²⁷ Lacan's concept of *après-coup* (*Nachträglichkeit*) should be understood as a structural temporality of signification rather than as a theory of memory or interpretation. It designates a logic in which symbolic causality operates retroactively, such that later inscriptions determine the meaning and status of earlier events (Lacan, 1966/2006).

Retroactivity as the Logic of Fictional Reality

Taken together, fictitious entities and *après-coup* reveal retroactivity as a general logic of fictional reality. Reality becomes intelligible not through immediate correspondence with facts, but through processes that confer meaning and stability retrospectively. Fiction supplies the symbolic forms through which paradox is neutralized and sense is reorganized. Once these forms have succeeded, their fictional status disappears, replaced by the appearance of necessity and obviousness. This account allows fictional reality to be reconceptualized as the ordinary mode of reality-constitution rather than as an exceptional deviation. Many of the structures that organize social life—norms, institutions, identities—exist only insofar as they are retroactively stabilized through symbolic practices. Common sense is the experiential correlate of this stabilization: it is the point at which retroactivity has become invisible. Understanding fictional reality in this way also clarifies the role of critique. To expose fiction is not yet to undermine reality, since reality itself depends on fiction. Critique must instead address the *conditions* under which certain fictions stabilize reality and others fail to do so. Retroactivity is thus not merely a descriptive feature of sense-formation, but a site of political, ethical, and epistemic contestation. Which realities come to appear as obvious is inseparable from the symbolic and temporal mechanisms through which they are constituted. The analysis of retroactivity therefore completes the transition from paradox to common sense. Paradox reveals the limits of existing sense; fiction provides the means of stabilization; retroactivity explains how stabilization comes to appear as original. The real is not what precedes these operations, but what emerges through them. Reality, in this strict sense, is always reality *after the fact*.

Fictional Reality and the Logic of Common Sense

The analyses developed in the preceding sections allow for a decisive reformulation of the status of common sense. Rather than functioning as a pre-theoretical access to an independently given reality, common sense emerges as the *successful outcome of retroactive sense-formation*. What common sense presents as obvious, natural, and self-evident is not the absence of fiction, but the point at which fiction has fully accomplished its work and withdrawn from view. From a phenomenological standpoint,

common sense operates as a horizon of intelligibility that presupposes coherence without interrogating its genesis. As shown through Edmund Husserl's analyses of the natural attitude and sedimentation, meanings that were once actively constituted become passively inherited, appearing as features of the world itself rather than as results of sense-bestowing acts. What has been added by the present analysis is the claim that this invisibility is secured through *retroactivity*. Common sense stabilizes reality by projecting the results of symbolic and fictional operations backward as if they had always been in place. Once paradox has been neutralized and coherence restored, the process by which this restoration occurred is erased. Contingent solutions to structural tensions are reinterpreted as natural necessities. In this way, common sense transforms fiction into fact by forgetting the temporal operations that produced it.

This mechanism explains why common sense is experienced as non-fictional. Fiction becomes perceptible only when it fails—when paradox persists, when symbolic structures lose their binding force, or when competing narratives destabilize established meanings. When fiction succeeds, it disappears. The “real” that common sense encounters is therefore always a reality that has already been fictionalized and retroactively stabilized. The opposition between common sense and fiction is thus misleading: common sense is the experiential form taken by successful fiction. To question what is obvious is not merely to dispute a belief, but to unsettle a reality whose coherence depends on the suppression of its own contingency.

