Reply to Zoltan Majdik on "Ambiguous Weighting and Nonsensical Sense"
Derek G. Ross, Auburn University

I greatly appreciate Zoltan Majdik's thoughtful reply to my article, "Ambiguous Weighting and Nonsensical Sense." Majdik's consideration of the commonplaces I discuss, common sense in particular, offers an alternative perspective to my explanation of how these commonplaces function in the knowledge- and decision-making process. While we agree on my point that "environmentalism needs to make sense based on our held-in-common beliefs" (p. 123), Majdik notes that my view of the prevalent 'common sense' approach does not provide "an entry point for intervention and action" in relation to environmentalism (p. 4). Toward this point, and others, I offer clarification.

The concept of common sense Majdik articulates draws from Morrison (1978), Schaeffer (1996), Verene (1981), and Vico (1968), and suggests that sense-making is a communal process, "*shared* in the present as well as *developed* over time" (italics original). In this instantiation, common sense requires, "a kind of objectivity," with "an awareness of social knowledge" (p. 2), which means that 'common sense' "need not be limited to the individual" (p. 2). Thus, he notes that my use of 'common sense' as drawing upon "personal experience, personal need, and a single entity's actions on the world" (p. 132) ultimately could be problematic because it seems to leave out, or somehow discount, the process of public deliberation and social engagement. Our perspectives appear to be alternative approaches toward the same end (decision-making). In the first approach, 'common sense' is 'common' because it *engages* common knowledge; in the second, it is 'common' because it *draws* from common knowledge. Each approach ultimately informs the other, but the perspective one takes as a starting place can lead toward different outcomes.

While we share an epistemological background in the way we conceptualize 'common sense,' I find elements of the engagement view problematic because it holds decision-making as highly democratic. This certainly can (and probably should) be the case, but what I see happening in my data is personal, internalized sense-making where decision-makers draw inferences from social and political culture, but do not necessarily personally engage with cultural representatives or artifacts when it is time to make a decision. In this model, decisions based on encountered evidence are processed through the lens of one's worldview through which, as noted by Koltjo-Rivera (2004), "one reads reality" (p. 8).

Coupling Koltjo-Rivera's explanation of worldview with Fricker's (2003) uncritical-receptivity model of decision-making leads us towards what I see happening when a decision-making public is offered information framed through commonplaces like 'Balance' and 'Common Sense.' Fricker notes that "in the absence of symbols of untrustworthiness" (p. 155) we may base our decisions on information that we believe to be true. In the case of 'Balance' and 'Common Sense,' the commonplaces create trust because they are read and processed through one's worldview, ultimately obfuscating

warning signs which would cause a decision-maker to move toward critical assessment and social engagement in the decision-making process. Thus, while I agree with Majdik's point that "starting from commonplaces like 'Common Sense' (with all the heuristic benefits they carry) may yield more productive and sustainable discussions about these issues" (p. 4), I'll note that a rhetor must be very careful about how she frames argument, as a rhetor's operationalized use of 'Common Sense' may be decoded by an audience differently than expected. The audience may not realize that an opportunity for exploration has been opened because they view 'common sense' as more static than discursive, as an endgame, rather than a process.

Majdik notes that the division between 'Common Sense' as rhetorical component and decision-making heuristic should not be so cut and dried. I agree. I note on page 123 that common sense "switches" from "rhetorical component to decision-making heuristic." My intent here was not to argue that these are cleanly separable, but that an actual recursive transformation takes place. Perhaps a better example than "switching" would be that of flipping: 'Common Sense' is used as a rhetorical component by a rhetor to make an argument. An audience decodes 'common sense' from that rhetorical component, then processes the accompanying information with 'Common Sense' used as a decision-making heuristic. If that person then makes an argument to someone else, and encourages them to take a 'Common Sense' approach, the decision-making heuristic (which is internal), becomes an externalized rhetorical component. The next person then internalizes the component as a heuristic, and so on. This recursive flipping can occur between interlocutors in an extended process, or individually in shorter instances of hearing, decoding, processing, and then rhetoricizing for engagement. Either way, 'Common Sense' flips rapidly between rhetorical component and decision-making heuristic. Imagine, if you will, a thaumatrope: on one side of a disk is a picture of a bird. On the other is a picture of an empty cage. Spin the disk fast enough, and the bird appears in the cage. We can do the same with 'Common Sense' as rhetorical component (bird) and as decision-making heuristic (cage). At any given instance the commonplace may be one or the other (bird or cage, component or heuristic), but in a real-time discursive instance it flips constantly, resulting in a rhetoricized decision-making component. 'Common Sense' motivates action because of the complex narrative(s) encoded in the commonplace and decoded by the audience.

As Michael J. Shapiro notes in his essay, "The Rhetoric of Social Science: The Political Responsibilities of the Scholar," the language used to "describe and explain situations and events" (p. 363) should not be divorced from ethical responsibility and social complexity. Majdik and I agree on this concept, he when noting that "scientific facts and discoveries" need be integrated "into the broader ecology of decision-making criteria within which they need to be understood and used," me when noting that these commonplaces have the possibility to be taken up by a decision-making public who (with all good intent) does not or cannot unpack them to discover underlying bias. We converge on the same point, that as scholars of rhetoric we are obligated, as Shapiro

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The Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective
social-epistemology.com

notes, "to challenge any statement by asking about its place in the economy of power relations" (p. 378).

Majdik's alternative perspective towards the role of common sense in decision-making offers a valuable counterpoint to my own. While Majdik's view suggests a discursive decision-making environment which calls on decision-making members of a public to engage with, and objectively negotiate, cultural variables before committing to a decision, my view sees 'Balance' and 'Common Sense' as rhetorical components that become problematic decision-making heuristics in a personal, internalized capacity because a hearer infers meaning from experience. This is where rhetors have responsibility. If we want ethical, democratized decision-making, we must not only call for it, we must facilitate it through our language and our awareness of the way language is processed.

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