The Virtues of Common Sense

BRIAN GRANT

There's always empiricism, of course, and the various schools of analysis, the realists, idealism, then reductionism more generally or, instead, the belief in essences or substance or noumena. There's the romantics and the nominalists, phenomenology and the stoics, volition theorists, epiphenomenalists and panpsychics. Or someone, some throwback, rushes in with wild eyes, arms outstretched, and cries 'It's all one.' The vitalists and the vegetarians, the far political left or dead centre and the utilitarians or bead-counters and still, sometimes, the atomists of one kind or another. There's the formal, or the Formal, bug. The ontology above all else bunch—and the somewhat thinner epistemological crowd. Pragmatists. Rationalists. Truth merchants, some of the braver ones—whether they concern themselves with real certain absolute Truth or mere truth. And then the opposition, the sceptics and the postmodernists, the nihilists and nay-sayers. And then, then the apologists for, the upholders of, the insisters on, the dictates of common sense.

What are these dictates? And who is the average, the model or exemplary individual whose dictates they are? Or, as we might put it, what sort of authority do we have to do with here?

I speak first from experience. Back in the sixties, common sense masqueraded as ordinary language. We fought, of course, over what 'ordinary' meant. And remember that this was a war—it felt like one at the time—that originated in England with the work of Wittgenstein and Austin. The public school *v*. cloth cap issue never did quite get separated off or distilled out. By contrast, it might be thought, we must all have been used to the linguistic cast that philosophy has so often taken on during this century. Ah, we were; we were indeed. But this was different. Philosophy had, all of a sudden, discovered a new method. What Wittgenstein and Austin had shown, we were told, is that certain contingent facts about how we ordinarily talk carry a great deal of philosophical or conceptual clout. How this could be, how this particular version of the 'Is/Ought' gap could be bridged, was usually left undiscussed. How much clout? If something was ordinarily said—whatever that meant and many people claimed, anyway—then it counted, just like that, as a philosophical truth. What if something was not ordinarily said?

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I sat there stunned in that near-empty classroom in California long after some now forgotten paper had been read and listened to this drivel about the lay and their absurd, their enormous veto power. Some people claimed that if something was not ordinarily said, it couldn't be philosophically said, that unless it was a technicality from science, for example, it made no sense. And they had, or they might as well have had, my mum in mind. You can't get more ordinary than my mum.[1]

I speak now of Reid. He says that the beliefs of common sense are endorsed by 'every man'—with a few obvious exceptions for which 'the laws of all civilized nations' provide. They are the beliefs of, not merely the 'vulgar', but the 'rude and unlearned vulgar'. Yet they include, for Reid, opinions on matters of 'taste'. He does say that, on these and other matters, we might not all actually agree. We can be brought to agree though. We can, that is, if we are 'candid', 'humble', upright of heart' and just plain 'good'. There might be more if one cared to press the point—Reid volunteers these qualifications quite freely—but this already looks like a pretty small percentage of the human race to me. And then again and to make things simpler, one of Reid's examples in connection with taste is that '[no] man [ever] thought it a beauty in a … face to want a nose, or an eye, or to have the mouth on one side.' It's difficult, certainly, to quarrel with that. Reid also maintains that 'a conclusion … drawn by just reasoning from true principles cannot possibly contradict any decision of common sense'—on the hardly convincing grounds that the concept of truth can contain no internal conflicts. And he recommends 'laughter' and 'ridicule' for those who doubt or deny any of a wide range of 'first principles'.[2]

We already have—apart from the overriding concern about the nature of the appeal to common sense—we already have the following to deal with. Even Wittgenstein, with 'everything' in philosophy 'lying open to view', thinks it has (in some cases?, many?, all?) 'escaped remark' and so has, presumably, not been ordinarily said.

[1] One attempt to show how the way we ordinarily talk can have philosophical import was the title essay of Stanley Cavell's 'Must We Mean What We Say?', Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969—arguably the best thing Cavell ever wrote. And Wittgenstein, especially, was not entirely misrepresented by the above. This, that or the other remark of his can perhaps be explained away—but there just was, in spite of his formidable imagination, a streak of conservatism in his make-up.

[2] Thomas Reid, *Essay on the Intellectual Powers of Man, Philosophical Works,* (ed. Sir William Hamilton), Georg Olms Verlag, 1983, pp. 438, 422, 456, 453, 437, 438, 453, 425, 438, 439.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Isn't this to allow for the professional or expert in philosophy or for someone with a nose? And while Austin is less preoccupied with such questions, one can't, surely, read an all-embracing populism into his writings. Not those of that particular Oxford don, at any rate. But how might common sense be augmented so as to constitute a philosophy? In what areas do we have first principles? How many of us do and/or would endorse them? What sort of prompting or instruction might be involved in getting us to agree? What is to be done about the hoi polloi, the great unwashed aspect of the debate? How is common sense related to argument? And what, exactly, are the proper categories of critical assessment for someone who transgresses against or fails to recognize a dictate of common sense?[3]

So where should we start? Just start anywhere. To get the ball rolling, that's all. Here goes then, here's an example. Fornication, insanity and death, I tell you, these are some of the important things.

Before considering the above questions, I want to address a partly preliminary although partly overlapping issue. One can't, it seems, argue for a common sense view; that would defeat the purpose of it. This is, it turns out on reflection, by no means unproblematic. Still and all, I am going to offer an argument for, not so much a common sense and committed view, as a precursor to a common sense view, a common sense view with no content. Some rather significant details will be left to fill in.

The first premise of the argument is: One has to start somewhere. One has to occupy some space, to say or write something or have a relatively complete thought. Anything less could not itself be a premise. Premises, moreover, are not typically supported in the arguments in which they appear. Otherwise we would never get anywhere. So there is a datum in every context. Are these data fixed in the sense that some propositions are epistemologically more fundamental than others? Yes. Statements about the present and past are routinely used as evidence for statements about the future but not vice-versa and statements about the external world are epistemologically prior—for those of us who are not telepaths, at any rate—to statements about

[3] See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (tr. G. E. M. Anscombe), Basil Blackwell, 1953, #126 and #415. Wittgenstein's views on a philosophy of common sense are, as should become clear, not always straightforward or unequivocal. His breathing life into the huge variety of categories of critical assessment that are available in philosophy, on the other hand, is one of his outstanding achievements—but that is not really the topic of this paper.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

other minds. But are some propositions just fundamental or fundamental period? Yes. Wittgenstein concedes this—in fact, his entire position depends on it—and yet he suggests, paradoxically, that nothing is epistemologically more fundamental than anything else. Examples are needed here too, examples of the epistemologically basic. Wittgenstein's writings—and Moore's and Reid's—are full of them. They include propositions about what, in 'normal circumstances' at least, is right in front of our eyes.[4]

The second premise is: There is no single starting place in epistemology. Examples again are required for this.

> A man who has once stolen his few million dollars can live honestly ever after.[5]

And thus it is that we assume the principle of the uniformity of nature as well as the existence of what's in front of our eyes, that 12 x 12 = 144, that we are not on Mars and that our words mean just what they do. Wittgenstein's first principles. These examples might be linked to one another, as Wittgenstein maintains. But they clearly don't amount to anything like a single 'Archimedean point.'[6]

The third premise is: Our basic or fundamental propositions are, indeed, interconnected. Look—and the message once more is the same—look at some examples. The principle of the uniformity of

[4] Nothing is more fundamental than anything else, it seems, because we can always reverse whatever epistemological priorities might be supposed to exist. See, for example, *On Certainty,* (trs. D. Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe), Basil Blackwell, 1969, #144, #152 and #248. And see #27, in particular, for the much less problematic notion of normal circumstances.

This is maybe the place to mention Michael Williams's *Unnatural Doubts*, Basil Blackwell, 1991, in which the diagnosis of the sceptic's mistake is a commitment to 'epistemological realism'. One of the many things that Williams means by this is the allegedly pernicious idea that statements about other minds, say, or about the past are legitimate intelligible categories. But aren't they? Minds, you know, rather than bodies; not one's own, though, not this one, just those of others. And not the present or the recent or distant past. … If epistemological realism were all that is wrong with scepticism, we'd be in pretty serious trouble. Whatever it takes—whatever it takes—to give the claim that scepticism is misguided an air of respectability.

[5] George Lichtenberg, *Aphorisms and Letters,* (trs. and eds F. Mautner and H. Hatfield), Jonathan Cape, 1969, p. 54. I have indexed Lichtenberg's remark to inflation and changed 'hundred thousand' to 'few million'. For all I know, it had already been changed, for similar reasons, by the translators.

[6] The phrase is Descartes's; it comes towards the beginning of *Meditation II*. And for Wittgenstein's holistic views, see, for example, *On Certainty*, #105, #140–42, #185, #225 and #274.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

nature presupposes, for what is perhaps its most central application, statements about the external world—although not as conclusion to evidence. Statements about the external world presuppose canons of rationality—not as conclusions to evidence again but this time for the intelligibility of the former. And then, on the other hand, mathematical propositions have no very obvious connection to, say, propositions about our own minds or propositions about the present and past as opposed to the future. It does not follow from this interconnectedness that, without it, we would, as Wittgenstein suggests, have no defence against scepticism.[7]

The fourth premise is: None of these examples, no principle or paradigm, has the epistemological status traditionally demanded of a foundation. None of them is indubitable. Not even the Cogito is indubitable. Read Nietzsche (I say this to everyone)—and compare depersonalization, a pathological condition where the victim, in extreme cases, believes that he or she does not exist and, in milder ones, might have more or less substantial doubts. And the dubitability/nonindubitability of all of the other examples can be seen only by—what?—looking at the examples. It should also be emphasized here that if we try some other mark of epistemological excellence for our first principles than indubitability—as we are bound by the present argument to do—we are going to have to place an awful lot of weight on Wittgenstein's notion of normal circumstances.[8]

The fifth premise is: Whether the dictates of common sense are or would be accepted by all/almost all of us or only by some significantly smaller group depends, in part at least, on what those dictates are taken to be. But of course.

People, she once said, are a good idea.

Then, however, we are straight into content, seriously into overlapping territory. We have been from the beginning. Every premise,

[7] *On Certainty*, #274.

[8] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil,* (tr. W. Kaufmann), Random House, 1966), #16—and compare *The Gay Science* (tr. Kaufmann), Random House, 1974, #354, and *The Will to Power* (trs. Kaufmann and R. Hollingdale), Vantage Books, 1968, #470–92 and #523–29.

And don't read *DSM-IV*, American Psychiatric Association, 1994, the bible of psychiatry in many parts of the world, on depersonalization. For reasons of its own, it downgrades the disorder, turning depersonalization, sometimes the most florid of psychoses, into a not very interesting neurosis. See my *The Condition of Madness*, University Press of America, 1999, for more on this.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with its reliance on examples, makes some commitment to what the first principles are. I will return to this in a little while. But if we pick 'Here is a pen' and 'There is a book' as first principles, we can expect that, with a few exceptions, the great majority of us, if suitably placed, will accept them. There are, nevertheless, among the vulgar or great unwashed, the devious and the thick, the grossly insensitive, the hopelessly confused, the chronically biased or predictably wrong and those who are willing to believe anything for a price or the worst of anyone in every situation. And suppose we pick 'All men are not in a conspiracy to deceive me and impose upon my credulity.' Just how much paranoia is out there? Maybe you wondered sometimes about this sort of universal conspiracy when you were growing up. I did. I have since gotten over it. But unquestioning and indiscriminate suspicion is, for some, a way of life. Or suppose we pick 'The moral individual puzzles me. I mean the one who, as far as some things are concerned, has no sense of humour.' Think of the potential for outrage among those—how many of them are there?—for whom morality serves some purpose or other, some kind of scam. We all know how difficult it can be to joke about money or personal gain. Or suppose we pick 'It is, don't you see, a jungle out there.' This is simply an alternative version of Hume's 'I have survived another day thanks to another hundred accidents.' Of course it's true. But how many are prepared to acknowledge this profound truth—and how many are not? Or suppose we pick 'There are many people who won't listen until their ears are cut off.' Those who will find fault with this include at least those many at whom it is directed.[9]

The above premises, taken together, are starting to get a bit shapeless so it is time to draw a conclusion. Let's save ourselves some trouble by tailor-making the conclusion to the premises, by not allowing it to go beyond them. Then if the conclusion is expressed by saying that a precursor to a common sense view or a common sense view with no content is correct, what this means is that there are a number of interconnected nonindubitable first principles.

This is an important result. But two not unrelated problems have arisen. The first we have already noted: How can this argument,

[9] 'All men….': Pere Buffier, as quoted by Reid in *Essay on the Intellectual Powers of Man, Philosophical Works*, p. 467. 'There are many people. …': Lichtenberg, *Aphorisms and Letters*, p. 60. And Hume doesn't actually say what I have here attributed to him. What he says is that 'place' and, more generally, all 'matters of fact' depend 'on a hundred … accidents', *A Treatise of Human Nature,* (ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge), Oxford, 1978, p. 69. But there is no reason for thinking that Hume can't, on occasion, be improved on.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with its reliance on examples, be innocent of content? The second is: A logician, or some other sufficiently anal type, will say that I have, with my wittering on, taken considerable liberties with the notion of a premise, a single premise. Can't the argument be presented in a leaner, pared-down, form?

In a way it can. So for the premises, we might try:

1. The idea of a first principle is legitimate.
2. There are a number of such principles.
3. They are interconnected.
4. They are not indubitable.

But now we run head-on into the first problem again. Is this really another form of the argument? It is, certainly—bereft as it is of examples, in particular—much less persuasive than the original.

So I think here, once again, of my other preoccupation, my project within a project. To keep up with that, the following will do as well as anything. One looks at others and sees the body or the face perhaps or the clever windows of the eyes.

And what of the fifth premise? What is its function? So far, it seems not to have shown up in the conclusion.

The problem about examples might seem relatively easy to handle. It is not merely examples that are at stake. The first premise in what we can maybe think of as the broader version of the argument contains a calculated progression of claims, two linked questions that are critical to those claims and two or three references to philosophers with similar views; the second contains more references as well as an allusion to crucial differences among competing positions; and so on. But we can set all this aside as not worthy of disagreement—or not, at least and as we used to say, among gentlemen. The examples themselves, by contrast, are essential to a series of miniarguments or arguments for the various premises—whether these secondary arguments are included in the main argument or not. All that is necessary here is to recognize that examples can, indeed, be essential to arguments. Wittgenstein again. He sometimes opposes describing examples to constructing arguments. There can, though, be no clear-cut distinction between these two sorts of philosophical activity and we all rely, from time to time, on examples in our arguments—to confirm a possibility, say, or to establish that something often happens, to provide a sense of an especially rough part of a concept or to sketch the outlines of its field of application. Then we can, it seems, retain the examples as

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

parts of the argument and go with the broader version or we can mention them separately in the directly relevant miniarguments. Maybe we shouldn't disagree about any of this either.[10]

God must get an enormous chuckle out of antiRealism.

The fifth premise, it might be felt, serves to keep the discussion clean, to keep content out of things. For it makes explicit the fact that the view argued for by the previous four premises can be given very different contents. This is, however, to ignore what should be becoming increasingly obvious. Some candidates for elements of a common sense view are less common than others. People as a nice idea, for example. And some seem to be—presumably not unconnected—epistemologically less fundamental than others. What, for example, would strike God as a joke. So the best interpretation of the surely plausible fifth premise might well be to the effect that we pretty much have to accept some minimal core of paradigmatic first principles with the only room for debate being over how much else we should accept, if anything. And the idea that we might argue with any degree of plausibility for a common sense view whose content is left entirely up in the air is surely ludicrous, a logician's dream, a nonlogician's nightmare. There are, besides, considerations other than plausibility here. Can we take seriously the suggestion that someone might employ the same argument as I have—in a narrow version, anyway—and, nevertheless, go on to identify propositions like 'The moon is made of green cheese' and 'Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus' as basic? What sense does it make to ask which of these is epistemologically more fundamental? And is it just a mistake, a straightforward and an intelligible mistake, to suppose that they are, say, indubitable? Or like 'My Aunt Sophie did too marry a half-gypsy' and 'Last night's mussels could have done with a bit more garlic'? Both of these propositions are true—or so I believe. But they are not simply friendly amendments to my view—or to my argument for it. The narrow version of the argument, then, is not only contentless and therefore sterile; it is potentially misleading and in a rather alarming way. Its only use is as a shorthand reminder of the structure of the main argument or the argument proper. So we should stick with the argument in some-

[10] Wittgenstein opposes describing examples to giving explanations. But this is because 'everything' in philosophy, once again, 'lies open to view'; it is 'always before one's eyes'. Then explanation, to be sure, is inappropriate—but so too is argument. And I offer, in my 'Example and Argument in Philosophy', under review, a much more comprehensive picture of the relation between example and argument.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

thing like its original, broader, form, a form in which it is at least halfway committed. And we can now turn our full attention to the most central, the most important, question we can ask on this topic: What is a common sense view and what, exactly, are its elements?

As for the first part of this question, a common sense view clearly can't be the exclusive preserve of the members of some small group of experts or insiders. But this still leaves us with two options. We can, with Reid, allow ourselves to be seduced by the idea that 'common' in this context means 'common as muck' and insist, accordingly, that a common sense view must be accepted by everyone or nearly everyone. There is, however, another strand to our notion of common sense. To put it negatively, common sense is nontheoretical, not at all refined or elaborate, it is available to those without special training or credentials, in short, the lay. More positively, common sense is down to earth, sane, sound, solid, in a word, sensible—with maybe a touch of bluntness or saltiness besides. And while, if one were looking for a definition, this might count as a beginning, the question of how many of us are sensible, without too many pretensions, not given, particularly, to flights of fancy, is, surely, not to be decided by any sort of verbal fiat. It might be a largish group. But not much in the way of cynicism is necessary to concede that it doesn't come close to including the entire human race.

Sex could never have been invented, let me remind you, without the prior concept of rubber.

We can, with this latter sort of understanding of common sense, still separate out a core of the most fundamental first principles for technical or, at any rate, philosophical purposes. For what is needed of such a set of paradigms is merely that they be deployable as the corner-stone of a persuasive response to scepticism. And—so—the contents of the set are determined by the requirements of that response and thus by the nature of scepticism itself.

Merely? The rejection of scepticism is one of the primary motives, perhaps the primary motive, behind a common sense view in philosophy. But we have a little more to do before we can assess the antisceptical force of common sense.

Scepticism maintains, in the first instance and on the basis of argument, that we don't and can't know the most fundamental of things, the things we all, ordinarily and unthinkingly, say we know or behave as though we know, and in certain specified areas or quite generally. The external world or the past or the future, our own minds sometimes or the minds of others, inductive or causal laws or

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the canons of reason or, once again, wholly generally. And in the first instance because the arguments for scepticism might or might not, on examination, threaten the knowledge or putative knowledge of the members of other actual or possible species and even of God. All of us, moreover, with a handful of Reid's exceptions—the seriously retarded, for example, or the profoundly mad. But the acceptance of what the sceptic claims to be subject to doubt is characteristic of all normal adult human beings. Or—let's be careful about this for the sceptic too is a human being—it is characteristic of the huge overwhelming, the great thumping, majority of normal adult human beings. We are not now talking of what is sensible, even ever so sensible. We are talking of what is definitive of a normal adult human being—apart, again, from the tiniest minority of academics. We are talking—and here, of course, is at least part of the answer to the second part of the above question about a common sense view—of what's in front of our eyes and right under our nose, whether literally or metaphorically. We are talking of what makes our lives possible.[11]

Academics love argument. Philosophers, in particular, pride themselves on their argumentative skills. Maybe there is something to this attitude. The propaganda, at any rate, has been effective. Just think of the number of times you've watched and listened, in some faculty or council meeting, as a philosopher, up on his or her hind legs, is deferred to by other academics, out of the utmost respect, out of fear almost.

Now people are trying to spread wisdom everywhere; who knows whether, in a few hundred years, there won't be universities to restore ancient ignorance?[12]

Sceptical arguments are as good as philosophical arguments ever get. So much so that, as others have noted, any sort of antisceptical view can seem downright dishonest. If one tries to match argumen-

[11] Jonathan Dancy also insists, in *Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*, Basil Blackwell, 1985, p. 7, on taking scepticism seriously only when it is based on argument. This might be nothing more than an instance of a wholly general position on philosophical views. But there is a special reason for emphasizing argument in this connection. For what scepticism competes with—what Hume calls 'dogmatism'—is, significantly, impossible to argue for or to argue for directly. See below.

I have no objection, by the way, to making an explicit exception of Cratylus here. Maybe human nature is not quite as invariable or as inflexible as Hume suggests. Then we are talking merely—merely!—of what makes our ordinary everyday lives—yours and mine, for example—possible.

[12] Lichtenberg, *Aphorisms and Letters*, p. 55.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tative wits with a sceptic, certainly, one will fail and miserably. The arguments are all on the sceptic's side. Once one has realized this, it immediately becomes clear that the only satisfactory solution to the sceptical problem is to acknowledge that the conclusion of the sceptic's argument is rational folly. Rational because argued for and, as I say, extremely well; folly because it makes a mockery of everything we think and do—or everything we think and do in some specific area. But this acknowledgement can't itself be argued for against the sceptic. It is, in the end, no more than the simple recognition, the unargued for question-begging recognition, that our lives count for something and that what some philosophers are pleased to call 'intuitions' are epistemologically indispensable. So while there is, or so it seems to me, nothing wrong with the arguments in favour of scepticism, the idea that argument is always appropriate or that everything has to be or can be settled by argument is fatally flawed. I don't know whether to say we have an internal conflict in the concept of truth here. We do, however, have such a conflict in the concept of reason or, perhaps better, that of what it is to be reasonable. For it is a mark of being reasonable that one should be moved by good argument. But it is another that there are some things from which one should not move or by or on which one should 'stand fast'—whatever the arguments to the contrary. These include, again, the plain fact that here is a pen or there a book or that the earth existed before we were born, the patent truth that 12 x 12 = 144 or that this paragraph is written in English, the knowledge, the certain, even the absolute knowledge, that squares have four sides and triangles three and that the past is the best guide we have, unreliable as it can be, to what is yet to come. To believe in all this is to abide by the most fundamental dictates of common sense. It is to have some faith—a modicum at least—it is to have some faith in ourselves.[13]

[13] See my 'Wittgenstein's Elephant and Closet Tortoise,' *Philosophy*, 1995, for a much fuller account of a question-begging response to scepticism.

And it might be thought that sceptical arguments do have flaws, that Descartes's dreaming argument, for example, mistakenly assumes the legitimacy of the question 'How do you know you're awake?' and, equally mistakenly, then demands an answer. This is, indeed, what is wrong with Descartes's argument—but it is not an alternative to what I have said. It is just another way of pointing out that 'I am awake' can't and shouldn't have to be argued for.

Finally, it is our basic propositions themselves that stand fast for Wittgenstein (see, for example, *On Certainty*, #116 and #125) rather than our standing fast by or on them. But the above thought is essentially his. And while Wittgenstein famously disapproves of using 'knowledge' and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

What do lovers talk to one another about? Their dreams, always their dreams.

We should be more cautious than philosophers often are about picking key epistemological areas or areas that contain fundamental first principles. Religion won't do, of course, and neither will astrology or even beginning cosmology. And the future and other minds—well, maybe one can know that it will rain before noon or that she's been feeling aggrieved but how much can one know, really, of what lies beyond next week or the moment-to-moment details of what goes on in someone else's mind? Then again, the external world, our own minds, the more or less recent past, rough empirical generalizations and certain canons of reason—these and similar areas are where we have to dig in. But even here, any account of basic first principles must obviously remain sketchy, at best, and Peirce's complaint against Reid and the rest of the 'Scotch philosophers' over their failure to provide a 'complete list' has very little to recommend it.[14]

We all have offensive habits, unattractive rituals, personal routines. So we are creatures who look sometimes for seclusion or the dark.

There is, though and as I have said, a further dimension to the notion of common sense—and here is the other part of the answer to the second part of our question about a common sense view. We already have the odd example that is not accepted by everyone or nearly everyone. That this paragraph—or that other one—is written in English is just such an example. But a wider notion of common sense that includes only what is available to the lay but is sensible and no-nonsense will, of course, give us a wider range of cases. Contempt, I point out to you, is more difficult to hide when its object is ill or somehow incapacitated. We have been here before. This is not particularly widely accepted. Or, you comment to me, there has to be an awful lot wrong with a world where people are, on the average, so much sleazier than average. This is, at the worst, a very thinly disguised truism but is it something that almost all of the human race would readily and happily agree with? Or, I insist to

[14] Charles Peirce, 'Six Characters of Critical Common-Sensism,' *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce,* (eds C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss), (The Belknap Press, 1960), Vol. V, pp. 293–305.

'truth'—and then why not 'fact' as well?—in connection with basic first principles, his reasons for this are quite unconvincing. They have not, certainly, found much favour among commentators.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

you with our habits and routines in mind, everyone has secrets. And if you ask me why I am impressed by this fact, perhaps I go on to say that I live at all times under the conditions of this universal secrecy. Or, you observe, some of us need sometimes to do something dangerous. Or, you wonder aloud, why is it that memory so often seems like a sense or a window into the past? Or, you say ruefully or wistfully or gleefully, sex does have its coarser side.

But we can up the ante again. Thus, for example—What have you been doing?, I said. He said: I've been covering my tracks. So I asked him what he was doing now. He said: I'm navigating.

The above truths are not common to all or nearly all of us. The first of them presupposes some understanding of the way the mind works; the second a slightly jaundiced but surely reasonable attitude towards the character of human beings; the third a rather more than minimal appreciation of the limits imposed by being a social animal; and so on. But none of them is the kind of truth on the basis of which one might want to erect an epistemology. Some of them, at least—unlike most of the examples that he himself discusses—fit Wittgenstein's prescription of having 'escaped remark'. They are not dubitable or not exactly or that, anyway, is not the problem. And yet they are—how does one put this?—too quirky, too particular, too isolated or otherwise unclassifiable to count as the foundational elements of an epistemology. They are, however, all instances of common—not especially talented, not really theoretical, nonélitist—sense. They are, as Lichtenberg has it, all 'penny truths'. Still and all, no very useful generalizations can be made about them. And no complete list, certainly, is even close to being possible. And what are we to think of 'What have you been doing?' and covering tracks and navigating? How on earth are we to categorize that? And what are we to do with your telling us that, sometimes, a new and hitherto unimagined form of punctuation is required? Or, instead, of a conversation in graffiti—and in different parts of the city?[15]

I have touched on most of what is important on the topic of common sense. And we are now in a position to provide some sort of answer to most of the questions I began with—although a little tidying up is still needed. But I am going to first make some fairly brief suggestions on two rather neglected questions in this whole debate.

[15] The major purpose of these latter examples is to indicate the difficulty—shouldn't we say, really, the impossibility?—of setting any very precise limits on even a wide notion of common sense.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

It is, in this day and age, hard not to think of common sense as folk (in the adjectival sense of that word). The notion became popular in connection with psychology but it has, inevitably, since been extrapolated to other areas and one now hears, sometimes, of folk physics, say, or folk mathematics. So common sense is—what?—folk everything, one might suppose. But the notion of folk psychology was introduced by philosophers, in these sceptical or relativistic times, precisely as the target of actual or potential abuse. Folk psychology was—merely—what folk believed or assumed about psychology. Then, however, came the folk police—occasionally from the ranks of the avant garde but mostly from the traditionalists. For if anything halfway theoretical or at all speculative was allowed to creep into folk psychology, it was that much easier, usually with the help of background and unacknowledged sceptical arguments, to undermine it. Background and unacknowledged because it is extremely difficult to restrict genuine outfront scepticism to psychology—and who wants to be known as a sceptic, especially—it would create too much of a scandal—with regard to the external world? The mission of the folk police is to maintain a level playing field, to keep folk matters strictly and determinedly folk. But what this means is that if a view takes a minute or two's conversation—and with a philosopher, in particular—to elicit, it can't then be regarded as folk. Whether right or wrong, it is not simply the product of the people. And so too, it might seem, for folk or common sense.[16]

This question needs to be faced head-on, in, as it were, the naïve manner. We have to allow that a couple of minutes of conversation with a philosopher can scramble the brain. But the question is: Must it? Must even a brief conversation with a philosopher make someone abandon the dictates of common sense or, at least, go beyond them? The question answers itself. If what is at issue is, say, whether dispositions can be given a counterfactual analysis, any definite response will betray a fatal loss of innocence—although it

[16] Paul Churchland is, of course, largely responsible—with his *Matter and Consciousness*, MIT, 1984—for this recent outbreak of hostility towards folk in the area of the mind, in particular.

And 'in these sceptical or relativistic times' followed almost immediately by 'who wants to be known as a sceptic?'? Scepticism is rampant out there but not in any open or candid way. An especially revealing case in point is Williams who spends much of his time in *Unnatural Doubts* bewailing the often sceptical tenor of philosophy these days only to concede, right at the end, that 'scepticism [should hold sway] in the study' (p. 353), that '[scepticism] is an undeniable philosophical truth' (p. 356).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

should be recognized that, even here, all that might be forthcoming is the dogged incomprehension or the less than sympathetic wariness that the query perhaps deserves. But suppose the opening philosophical sally is 'Has the earth existed for longer than five minutes or for a very very long time?' This might produce panic. The possibility of a negative response or a noncommittal one—and why would anyone ask if such responses weren't possible?—is enough to thoroughly unnerve some people. There are others, however, who are perfectly capable of taking this on board, deliberating for a while and then offering, thoughtfully but confidently, an affirmative answer. Suppose now that a philosopher asks whether we have introspective powers. Many of us believe that the view that we do, correct or otherwise, is essential to folk psychology. The technical concept involved takes time, a little time, to understand: the necessary reminders about the nature of telepathy, planting the thought that the same sort of notion might be reflexive or apply to oneself, the dawning light. But most people, I would guess, are able to grasp pretty quickly this common sense truth, the fact, as we might put it, of introspection, a fact that permeates our existence. Someone who is lay, unsophisticated, ignorant, even, or not particularly interested need not, after all, be a rube. And something that only a philosopher would ask or that can be answered only with a philosopher's help doesn't have to corrupt. Of course common sense can survive without emendation or significant addition—though it might be reformulated or formulated explicitly for the first time—whatever a philosopher might suggest.

It is a dull fact that memory is seldom as vivid as experience. But when he saw her, it sometimes occurred to him that he had forgotten her.

Or—let's try something else. I once knew a man, I tell you, who conducted all of his business from the bathtub because of his extravagant piles. It makes no difference to you, surely, whether this is true or false.

Or—let's live more dangerously. She says: I don't believe in morality. He says: Well, yes, but I would never ever hurt you. She says: People sometimes hurt one another out of necessity or kindness or irritation. He says: Certainly, but I would never hurt you without a special reason. She says: I don't believe in morality.

But to get back to the main line of argument, the second question is not unrelated to the first—and here too we can and,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

indeed, should pretty much confine ourselves to an answer in the naïve manner. The question is that of what role common sense might have in philosophy. Part of the answer, the part that has to do with a part of the question that is not neglected, is that the common sense truths of nonphilosophers might well play a considerable role—although only a fanatic would claim that such truths exhaust philosophy, that Saul Kripke and David Lewis have a lot to fear from my mum. But over and above that, what does a philosopher need with common sense? I give you some philosophical views.

Speaking of my mum, the view that everything in philosophy is obvious or always before our eyes so that no explanations or arguments are ever appropriate. And speaking of folk psychology, the view that there are no minds, no such things as beliefs or desires, sensations or feelings. The view that nothing exists apart from language, the metaphors and idioms of particular times and places. The view that something might exist all right but that we can never know it. The view that it is society that makes everything possible—language, thought, meaning, sense—and that the individual doesn't count. The view that the self is a fiction or free will only a myth. The view that common sense and so the crystallized wisdom or the savvy anyway of countless generations is always suspect and usually to be despised. The view that contradiction is the only philosophical sin worth worrying about. Avoid contradiction—anything of the form 'A and not-A'—be consistently daft if you want but avoid contradiction and achieve philosophical glory.

There might be mitigating circumstances in some of these cases for philosophers can be driven to say what they do by forces that are difficult to recognize and correspondingly difficult to resist. But the above views are, without exception, silly views. No explanations or arguments, not even a smidgen on any topic? And how much, exactly, does one have to superimpose on mere description to qualify as offering reasons or grounds? Everything, absolutely everything, that folk believe about minds, even on the most elementary level, is and must be radically and systematically mistaken? Nothing exists, no stars, no mountains, no birds, no flowers, just the talk of nonexistent astronomers, geologists and naturalists with their nonexistent vocal chords? Or we human beings know nothing or much much less than we ordinarily think? We are no more advanced, from an impartial perspective, than absurdly self-important chimpanzees or dressed-up dogs? And so on—and so on. Not sound or balanced, realistic or sensible, but silly inane ridiculous views. No wonder

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

philosophy has such a bad name in some circles. Silly self-absorbed and oddly self-satisfied views. The academic views, typically, of card-carrying members of the academy.[17]

I have, until now, mostly ignored Peirce. But one of his contributions to a philosophy of common sense is the idea that 'inferences' as well as 'propositions' can be sensible and straightforward—or not. A philosopher's way of putting the point. For the larger message behind this is that common sense need not be confined to common matters—whether or not they themselves have philosophical relevance. The thinking of the most competent rocket surgeon can, notoriously, be wild, out of focus, overly speculative or much too fanciful. Or it can avoid these pitfalls and thus be, in certain respects at least, a model of lucidity, simplicity and common sense. So any topic in any area, however arcane or esoteric, can be handled with common sense—or not. And so too for any topic in philosophy, however far removed it might be from common matters or from the truths of common sense. And wouldn't philosophy be a more comfortable place, a less bizarre and an altogether less embarrassing place, without all the silliness?[18]

I want to introduce to you a particular set of concepts. It includes that of guilt and chance and a miracle—and knowledge perhaps as well. They are concepts that God would have no use for.

And this example should be of special interest to philosophers. For concepts are what philosophy is about—and any major division among concepts is therefore philosophically significant. Then there is the idea of God itself as a kind of ultimate stopping place, this formal dim conception. But all that is another story.

So now for the tidying up—and a bit of a summary. Here I have

[17] The exception is Wittgenstein; whatever else he was, he wasn't your standard average academic. And in the view that explanation and argument are out of place in philosophy, he was trying to side with common sense. But in doing so, he was, ironically, as rigid and doctrinaire as its opponents usually are. It should also be emphasized here that none of the above views is peculiar to some lunatic fringe in philosophy. They are all, or have been in the more or less recent past, orthodox or at least fashionable views.

[18] See Peirce, 'Six Characters of Critical Common-Sensism.'

In the interests of scholarly integrity, I should mention Don Cherry in connection with the notion of a rocket surgeon. Who else should be mentioned, further back, is anyone's guess.

And being comfortable is not here opposed to innovation. It is, again, opposed to silliness, to what some of my students are wont to call 'irrelevance'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

preferred, I have leaned towards, the anal or the accounting method. Of course philosophy can go beyond common sense and in various ways—although I have hardly argued for this. It is, if you like, a question of common philosophical sense. One can't, on the other hand, give a very clear or detailed list of the areas that contain first principles. We will agree, most of us, on some areas that should be listed and on some that shouldn't—but there are areas that just do have a less determinate status. As for how many of us do or would endorse the dictates of common sense, we need to allow, if we haven't already, for a distinction between epistemological first principles and what might be generated by a broader but still eminently defensible notion of common sense. All or almost all of us normal adult human beings will buy into the former but not, not by any means, into the latter. And as for the sort of prompting that might be required to elicit a common sense view, the same distinction has to be invoked with fairly strict limits for genuine first principles, limits that are mostly exhausted in the explanation of what might well be technical concepts. The hoi polloi, once again, can, when considered as a group, be trusted on first principles though not on much else—but there is nothing new about this. The relations between common sense and argument are, again, many and various. Even first principles can, in certain respects and to some extent, be argued for—as should be evident from what has here been said in support of them. And Reid's 'laughter' and 'ridicule' will do, in many cases at least, for offences against common sense.

On the general nature of the appeal to common sense, let me just add the following. To characterize something as a common sense view is always to commend it. No one but a philosopher would suppose that 'sensible', 'simple', 'plain' and 'direct' might be neutral terms, at best. Isn't sensible good, not bad and not even indifferent? Yes, it is; of course it is. Why does one have to say this, to write it down? And neither, by the way, does common sense have to be particularly earnest or especially pedestrian. But 'common-sensical', like 'justified', is compatible with 'false'. Like 'justified', one needs a pretty substantial reason to go against it—and then there is always the worry as to whether it was deserved in the first place. Falsity, however, is a possibility. It is only with first principles that can serve as the basis of an epistemology—'Here is a hand', say, or 'Here a dressing gown, a fire and a piece of wax'—that truth is guaranteed. Wittgenstein, to be sure, would have reservations about this—another aberration, a petulant or frustrated side-swipe at Moore, from this most gifted of philosophers—but even he would concede that falsity is ruled out. So too, and equally obviously, is doubt.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Which is just another way of saying that scepticism here is completely misguided.[19]

Who can blame the sensualist after all?

Or—Were I to die at this moment, I'd regret it. Or I would rather not die right now. Or I really don't want to die. This simple truth that is, you tell me, the remark of a hysteric.

A final note on scepticism. I have said that an antisceptical response to scepticism is perhaps the most important reason for an emphasis on common sense in philosophy. And yet what I have said by way of such a response might seem less than persuasive. Let me try to make the situation clearer. None of us is a sceptic, a full-on no-holds-barred sceptic—and this because we all know that scepticism is wrong. Undergraduates, certainly, are easy to convince of scepticism and, once in a blue moon, some grown-up professional philosopher will lose it and claim to have been converted to the sceptical truth. But we all, almost all of us, know that scepticism is wrong. What I have done is, simply, to draw out the consequences of that fact. Or of that fact together with another, the fact, as I see it at any rate, that the only thing wrong with what are widely regarded as the enormously powerful arguments in favour of scepticism is that their conclusions are obviously wrong. If this were not so, we would have no choice for there would in that case be nothing amiss with scepticism, nothing at all. Here, then, is another argument for a common sense view with the above two facts as premises. A common sense view, a question-begging view as far as scepticism is concerned, follows from these two facts as the day follows the night.

We can acquire riches by saving up the penny truths too.[20]

University of Calgary

[19] The example of the fire, the dressing gown and the wax is, of course, Descartes's—as is the earlier example of squares having four sides (*Meditations I* and *II*). And Wittgenstein's mostly dreary catalogue of complaints against Moore in *On Certainty* and very little else would make the subject of a good Ph.D. thesis. I don't know why I seem to have it in for students all of a sudden—but see below for even more of this. And the thesis, or the corresponding academic monograph, has probably already been written. Avrum Stroll's *Moore and Wittgenstein on Certainty*, Oxford, 1994—which manages, somehow, to overlook all of the difficulties involved—comes pretty close anyway.

[20] Lichtenberg, *Aphorisms and Letters*, p. 52.

The shape of this paper is like that of the outline of a face in profile with the tongue sticking out—and with the tongue, moreover, severed at the root. But then, I think to myself, what of the infinitely many other shapes that a paper in philosophy might take?

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press