



THE COMMON EXPERIENCE OF MANKIND

MORTIMER ADLER

THE DEFINITION of common experience just given involves two points, one negative, the other positive. The negative point is that it consists of all the experiences we have *without* asking a single question that calls for steps of observation especially contrived for the purpose. The positive point is that it includes experiences which are the same for all men everywhere at all times.

I did not say that everything which belongs to the common experience of a particular man is shared by all the rest of his fellow men. The ordinary day-to-day experiences of a twentieth-century Eskimo, a New Yorker, and a Hottentot are certainly not the same in all respects. The same must be said of an Athenian of the fourth century B.C, a Parisian of the thirteenth century, and a New Yorker of the twentieth.

I am contending, however, that the ordinary day-to-day experiences of these persons do not differ in *all* respects. There are a certain number of things about which they could immediately communicate with one another if they were to meet and engage in conversation: such things as some change in the seasons, the shift from day to night, living and dying, eating and sleeping, losing and finding, getting and giving, standing still and moving about in space, and so on. I am here assuming these communicators to be

persons of no special learning—persons whose minds have been untouched by science and philosophy. Ordinary persons of such widely different location in time and space, and cultural background, could, I say, immediately communicate (with the aid of an interpreter) about the things common to their ordinary experience.

These universally shared elements of ordinary experience I shall refer to as “the core of common experience.” It consists of those things about which communication is *universally possible* and with regard to which it is possible to translate certain of the statements made in any human language into equivalent statements in any other.

(I)

I should like to quote and comment on two statements which I think throw some light on the role of common experience in philosophy. The first is by Professor A. J. Ayer. It should be read in the light of the view, held by him and by other British writers, that philosophy does not discover new facts about the world, and does not test its conclusions by appealing to the data of special observation. Ayer writes:

Philosophical theories are not tested by observation. They are neutral with respect to particular matters of fact. This is not to say that philosophers are not concerned with facts, but they are in the strange position that all the evidence which bears upon their problems is already available to them.

Must we not ask Professor Ayer: What is the evidence that bears upon the problems of philosophy, evidence that is available to philosophers without investigation, without special observation, on their part? What is this evidence if it is not to be found in common experience? If there were no such thing as common experience, would philosophers be in the strange position of having all the evidence they need already available to them, where “already available” must mean “without special efforts of investigation on their part”? The only thing that is “strange” about the position of the philosopher is that, in this respect, he is unlike the scientist who does not have all the evidence he needs already available to him, but must investigate in order to obtain it. To call this “strange” reveals the prevalent modern propensity to regard the procedure of the scientist as standard and normal, and whatever differs from it as odd and somehow abnormal.

The second statement I want to quote is by George Santayana. It throws light on the elementary character of the things which con-

stitute the core of common experience—the same for all men everywhere at all times because they are all sufficiently the same, and because all live in a world that is sufficiently the same. Santayana writes:

For good or ill, I am an ignorant man, almost a poet, and I can only spread a feast of what everybody knows. Fortunately, exact science and the books of the learned are not necessary to establish my essential doctrine, nor can any of them claim a higher warrant than it has in itself: for it rests on public experience. It needs, to prove it, only the stars, the seasons, the swarm of animals, the spectacle of birth and death, of cities and wars. My philosophy is justified, and has been justified in all ages and countries, by the facts before every man's eyes. ... In the past or in the future, my language and my borrowed knowledge would have been different, but under whatever sky I had been born, since it is the same sky, I should have had the same philosophy.

Santayana refers to “public experience” as all that is needed to “prove” his philosophical views. I take it that what he means by “public experience” is what I have called “common experience,” and that he is using the word “prove” in the sense in which it means “test.” I would have added a few other things, but not many, to Santayana’s enumeration of the things that belong to the core of common experience—such things as the multiplicity of separate bodies that come to be and pass away, that move about in space and change in other respects; the multiplicity of other persons with whom we communicate by language or other means; pleasures and pains; doubts and misgivings; memories of the past and anticipations of the future; sensing and knowing; sleeping, waking, and dreaming; growing old.”

(2)

The reader may still have some unanswered questions about the meaning or reality of common experience. Guessing at what these might be, I shall try to state them in the form of objections, and append to each a reply.

Objection 1: Something as simple as the daily rising of the sun may not be the same experience for two men, one of whom sees it with Ptolemaic eyes, the other with Copernican eyes.

Reply to Objection 1: The interpretation of what they see is different, according to the theories they hold, but the experience they interpret differently is the same—the sun in different positions relative to the horizon at different times. Generally, the fact that men differ—for example, in the scientific, philosophical, or other theories that they hold—does not make it impossible for them to

share certain simple experiences not only with one another, but also with men whose minds are relatively devoid of theory.

Objection 2: Men do not have to be scientists or historians in order to investigate, and acquire special experiences. Ordinary men ask questions in the course of daily life, questions which they try to answer by special efforts of observation on their part. The experience of ordinary men is not wholly or exclusively your so-called common experience—experience obtained without any investigation whatsoever.

Reply to Objection 2: Granting the objection does not affect the two points here being made: first, that not only ordinary men, but scientists and specialists of all sorts, have a certain body of experience that is common or ordinary in the negative sense that it is had without asking questions and without getting answers by special efforts of observation; and second, that though ordinary men do have special experiences in addition to common experience, it is only to the latter that the philosopher appeals when he wants evidence to test his theories or conclusions.

Objection 3. Common experience is not the same for all men everywhere, for the experience of the ordinary man necessarily varies with his time and place, with the circumstances of his environment, with the conditions of his life, and the elements of his education; more than that, the experience of the ordinary man grows or develops in the course of life; in other words, the experience of a mature man is different from that of a young man or a child.

Reply to Objection 3: This objection has been answered in the remarks made earlier about the Eskimo, Hottentot, and New Yorker, or about men in the fourth century B.C., the thirteenth century, and the twentieth century. What the objection maintains must be acknowledged. Common experience is not the same for all men in *all* respects; nor for a given individual is it the same in childhood, youth, and maturity. However, to admit this is not equivalent to saying that there are *no* respects in which common experience is the same for all men. The respects in which it is the same for all and does remain the same for the growing individual constitute what I have called “the core of common experience.” All the evidence that the philosopher needs in order to test his theories and conclusions is to be found there.

(3)

Since the assertion that common experience exists cannot be tested empirically, by appealing to either common or special experience, and since it is a factual and existential rather than a formal and

analytical statement, the only arguments for it have to be indirect.

One form the argument might take is that of a *reductio ad absurdum*, addressed to those who assert the existence of mixed questions involving science or history as one element in the mixture and philosophy as the other. In their understanding of the matter, does the solution of the mixed question call for the combination of knowledge drawn from science or history, with

- (i) philosophical opinions conceived as having no foundation in experience whatsoever, or
- (ii) philosophical opinions conceived as having no need for any foundation in experience, or
- (iii) philosophical opinions conceived as needing and having an empirical foundation?

On the first alternative, philosophy is not knowledge even in the moderate sense of *doxa*. On the second, it would appear to be knowledge rather than opinion, transcendental knowledge, and knowledge in some sense that exceeds the claims made for *doxa*. Only on the third alternative is it empirical knowledge on the plane of *doxa*.

Now, on this third alternative, the empirical foundation which philosophy needs and has is either (a) experience obtained by investigation, as are the data of science, or (b) experience had without investigation. If there is no experience had without investigation—that is, no common experience—then philosophy, as empirical knowledge, must obtain the experience it needs by investigative processes (by specially devised means of observation, by experimentation, by data collecting, and the like). But everyone knows that philosophers do not collect data, make experiments, plan specially devised means of observation. Hence, either philosophy cannot be empirical knowledge or the experience on which it relies must be common experience.

Argument for the reality of common experience may take another form—that of questions addressed to the reader, without regard to any prior convictions about philosophy and science or about knowledge in its various senses. If the reader responds to one or more of these questions in the affirmative, he is affirming the existence of common experience. In other words, if I, as defender of the proposition that common experience exists, can elicit from the reader who may still be in doubt about it affirmative replies to the following questions, then, so far as I can see, he is sufficiently persuaded of the proposition.


Question 1: Do you have any experiences whatsoever that do not result from observations made by you purposively and deliberately in order to answer a question that you have explicitly asked? Only if you say, “No, not at all; without exception every single experience that I have ever had has been the result of an observation that I deliberately made in order to answer a question that was troubling me”—only if you say this do you deny having common experience. Otherwise, your response must be to affirm that you do have at least some experiences without any effort of investigation on your part; as, for example, when you wake up in the morning, when you dream, when you make love, when you fall downstairs, when you are eating a meal, taking a walk, and so on.

Question 2: Do you think that you would be able to communicate about at least some things with any other human being who has ever lived on earth? If, considering this question carefully, you affirm the possibility of universal communication among the members of the human species about at least a limited number of things, your affirmation is tantamount to an affirmation on your part of common experience. Only if you say, “No, there are, and have been, some human beings so widely separated in time and space and so profoundly different in culture and language from me, that we could not communicate at all if we confronted one another”—only if you say this, do you deny that common experience has a core which is the same for all men.

Question 3: Do you hold certain opinions or beliefs—assertions about that which is and happens in the world or about what men should do and seek—which you hold as an ordinary man without the benefit of historical research, scientific investigation, or philosophical thought and which you find that many other human beings share? To answer “No” would be tantamount to saying that the only opinions or beliefs you hold are those that have been promulgated by men of special learning. Even if you did answer “No” (because you have made a valiant effort to adopt no opinion or belief that is not a product of special learning), would you not have to regard yourself as quite exceptional? In other words, would you not have to admit that there are many men—a vast multitude of them, in fact—who share with you opinions and beliefs about that which is and happens in the world or about what men should do and seek, opinions and beliefs that they have formed themselves or have imbibed from other men, all of whom have been untouched by special learning? If you answer the first question above, the one about yourself, affirmatively, or if you answer affirmatively the second question about other men, then you are admitting the existence of what I shall henceforth call “common-sense opinions or beliefs.”

Let me now ask some further questions. *What is the basis of these common-sense opinions or beliefs, especially those that are widely shared by men? Whence do they arise? On what grounds do we hold them?* Unless you think (a) that they are wholly innate convictions of the human mind, (b) that they are of transcendental origin, or (c) that they are entirely arbitrary or unfounded prejudices on your part, you must attribute them to experience as somehow their source and must defend them, if they need defense, by appealing to experience as their warrant. The other alternatives being so unlikely, I am going to assume that you think these common-sense opinions or beliefs, in which you share, have some basis in experience.

What experience is their source and warrant? It cannot be the special experience acquired in the course of scientific investigation. There is nothing left for it to be, then, but the experience of ordinary men—the common experience of mankind. However, you may say: it was admitted earlier that even ordinary men may do some investigating and consequently have some special experiences. Granting this, one more question must be asked.

Is it not unlikely that the quite different special experiences of ordinary men would be the basis of the common-sense opinions or beliefs that they so widely share? To whatever extent certain common-sense opinions are shared by men, is it not likely that they are based on common experiences shared to the same extent? If you answer this last question affirmatively, you are once more affirming common experience; and, in addition, you are recognizing a core of common experience that is universal to the same extent that there are common-sense opinions shared by mankind. 

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

Post Here: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/tgioid/>

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.