



PHILOSOPHY AND COMMON SENSE

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Empirical science and historical research—both investigative modes of inquiry—add to what we know by common sense about the world in which we live and about its past. The reason this is so should be obvious at once. Both empirical science and historical research, being modes of inquiry that are investigative in their methods, appeal to special experience—the observed data that these modes of inquiry use for the development of scientific and historical knowledge.

Commonsense knowledge does not arise in that way. It develops out of the core of our common human experience. Hence commonsense knowledge is inadequate and imperfect knowledge of the knowable reality. Not only do science and history give us a much more extensive and elaborate knowledge of that same reality, but they also correct the errors in some of the opinions held by common sense.

In antiquity and the Middle Ages, man's observation of the movement of the heavenly bodies led to false opinions widely held. Investigative astronomy, with the aid of telescopic instruments, later corrected these mistakes. The same fate befell the widely held opinion that the earth was flat. Here, too, investigation, going beyond common experience, corrected the error. One other commonsense error that investigative biology corrected was the opinion that living organisms were produced from putrefying matter by spontaneous generation.

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The relation of philosophy to common sense is different from the relation to it of the investigative modes of inquiry.

In the first place, like commonsense knowledge, philosophical knowledge (i.e., *doxa*, opinions supported by evidence and reasons) is attained without investigation of any sort, mainly by intellectual insights and rational processes that have their empirical basis in our common human experience. As we have seen, it is corrigible and amendable, always in the realm of doubt, never with certitude beyond the shadow of a doubt.

But where empirical science and historical research go beyond commonsense knowledge and correct it when it is at fault, philosophy goes beyond it by refining, enlightening, and elaborating the truths known by common sense in the light of common experience. Hence, it might be said that philosophy is continuous with common sense, as empirical science and historical research are not.

Philosophical thought, when it is properly conducted (which has, for the most part, not been the case in modern times), never repudiates common sense, even when it may correct or refine some few particulars. When philosophy judges commonsense opinions to be sound, its rational and analytical processes contribute an understanding of the known facts that common sense rarely has.

Commonsense knowledge never serves as a test of the truth to be found in the conclusions of scientific investigation and of historical research. It cannot do so because these conclusions are based on the special experience—the observed data—not accessible to common sense. But when philosophical theories or conclusions come into conflict with commonsense knowledge, that inconsistency acts as a challenge to the philosophical doctrines in question. In consequence, the philosophical doctrine may need correction.

Let me give some examples of this. I pointed out earlier that common sense affirms the existence of a reality that is independent of the human mind and that measures the success or failure of our efforts to make our thinking about reality correspond to the way things really are or are not. Though the conflict between philosophy and common sense is prevalent in modern times, it is found also in antiquity.

A thesis proposed by Plato's Socrates is clearly contrary to our common experience and our common sense. It is the Socratic doctrine that knowledge is virtue—that a person who knows what is right will inexorably do what is right. This is patently false, as everyone who has ever experienced remorse or regret for having committed an act that he or she knew at the time to be wrong, but nevertheless performed the action. Aristotle, criticizing the Platonic error, explains the human incontinence that allows this to happen.

Aristotle's correction of the errors made by his teacher Plato almost always involves a defense of common sense against philosophical mistakes. I have often quoted Alfred North Whitehead's statement that the history of Western philosophy is largely a series of footnotes to the dialogues of Plato, always adding that Aristotle wrote most of the footnotes.

Another philosophical mistake that philosophical thought in harmony with common sense rejects is the dualism of body and mind (or soul) to be found in Plato and Descartes. Here philosophy proposes a view of human beings that is contrary to the commonsense view of the unity of the human person. That unity is denied by the view that body and mind are two completely separate substances, yet somehow interactive. The unintelligibility of this generated all the insoluble riddles of the mind-body problem which have plagued philosophy since Descartes's dualism of *res extensa* and *res cogitans*.

Another example of philosophy in conflict with common sense is the doctrine of causal determinism, with its denial of human free will. Parents who try to form a good moral character in their offspring exhort them to modify their behavior when they do wrong, assuring them that, if they had only exercised their willpower, they could have done otherwise than they did. Free choice is the ability always to choose otherwise, no matter what one chooses at a given time.

A few philosophers in this century have carried on their work in the light of common experience and a sound view of common sense.

One, as we have already seen, is George Santayana. To Santayana's statement quoted earlier, I would like to add another statement by him, as follows:

I think that common sense, in a rough dogged way, is technically sounder than the special schools of philosophy, each of which squints and overlooks half the facts and half the difficulties in its eagerness to find in some detail the key to the whole. I am animated by distrust of all high guesses, and by sympathy with the old prejudices and workaday opinions of mankind: they are ill expressed, but they are well grounded.

Professor G. E. Moore of Cambridge University is another commonsense philosopher. I refer to his classic defense, against skepticism, of our commonsense knowledge about the existence of such things as my own body, bodies other than my own, the past, other minds, and so on.

Of course, it is Aristotle who is preeminently the commonsense philosopher. In 1978, I wrote *Aristotle for Everybody*. I would like to quote here the opening passage in my Introduction to that book.

Why Aristotle?

Why for everybody?

And why is an exposition of Aristotle for everybody an introduction to common sense?

I can answer these three questions better after I have answered one other. Why philosophy? Why should everyone learn how to think philosophically—how to ask the kind of searching questions that children and philosophers ask and that philosophers sometimes answer?

I have long been of the opinion that philosophy is everybody's business—but not in order to get more information about the world, our society, and ourselves. For that purpose, it would be better to turn to the natural and the social sciences and to history. It is in another way that philosophy is useful—to help us to understand things we already know, understand them better than we now un-

derstand them. That is why I think everyone should learn how to think philosophically.

For that purpose, there is no better teacher than Aristotle. I do not hesitate to recommend him as the teacher to begin with. The only other teacher that I might have chosen is Plato, but in my judgment he is second best. Plato raised almost all the questions that everyone should face; Aristotle raised them too; and, in addition, gave us clearer answers to them. Plato taught Aristotle how to think philosophically, but Aristotle learned the lesson so well that he is the better teacher for all of us.


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When philosophy gets out of touch with common sense, as has happened strikingly in modern times, its doctrines tend to become esoteric, if not outlandish. When this happens, philosophical discourse becomes filled with technical jargon, each philosopher specializing in his own set of made-up terms.

Philosophical discourse, when it is in touch with common sense and harmonious with it, has no need whatsoever for any special jargon. It might even be said that philosophical discourse that uses the words of everyday speech reveals its affinity with common sense, for the words of everyday speech are the words that commonsense individuals employ in communicating with one another.

However, while the avoidance of all technical jargon in philosophical discourse is a desideratum, recourse to the vocabulary of everyday speech must be accompanied by great precision in the use of its words.

The words of everyday speech are used with great ambiguity, in many senses, often loose and ill-defined ones. One very special contribution that philosophy can make to common sense is to refine the use of the words of everyday speech by eliminating equivocations and calling sharp attention to the precise sense—one or more—in which a word is being used.

Philosophical discourse thus illuminates and elevates everyday speech, and in doing so, philosophy refines, elaborates, and enlightens common sense. 

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