

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Aug '14

*Philosophy is Everybody's Business*

Nº 782



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## COMMON-SENSE KNOWLEDGE

**Mortimer Adler**

Part 1 of 2

**T**HE THIRD ARGUMENT, with which the preceding chapter ended, was an effort to persuade the reader that his or anyone else's acknowledgment of common-sense opinions or beliefs presupposes the existence of common experience, with its core of widely or even universally shared experiences. I regard the argument as persuasive, but two misinterpretations of it must be avoided.

The fact that common-sense opinions have their basis in common experience must not be construed to mean that they are all *ipso facto* true or beyond criticism. Like any other opinions, they are corrigible and subject to criticism.<sup>1</sup> One important exception must be mentioned here. If the axioms which Euclid calls "common notions" are self-evident propositions, such propositions express truths that everyone knows as a matter of common experience; but unlike all other common-sense opinions or beliefs, and unlike the conclusions of science and philosophy, these propositions do not constitute knowledge in the sense of *doxa*, but in the sense of *nous*.

1 In Chapter 2 (see pp. 28-30), where I suggested the use of the Greek word *doxa*, as opposed to *episteme*, as a qualifier attached to “knowledge” in order to indicate the use of that word in a moderate sense, I also said that I should use such phrases as “sheer opinion,” “mere opinion,” “unfounded opinion,” to signify opinions that were held without any warrant and held in such a way that they were not subject to rational criticism or amendment. The reader will see at once that the phrase “common-sense opinion” is intended to signify something more reliable and having greater warrant than sheer or mere opinion.

The close relation between common experience and common-sense opinions must not obscure the clear distinction between them or lead us to merge one with the other. As I pointed out in the preceding chapter, experience is not knowledge. The experience of breathing is not knowledge of or about respiration. There are three elements here: my breathing itself, which I may or may not experience according as I am awake or asleep, attentive or inattentive to it; my experience of breathing when I am awake and attentive to that activity; and the opinions that I may form about my breathing—for example, the opinion that my breathing goes on when I am not experiencing it. Experience is a source of knowledge about the things experienced, and it provides a test for what claims to be knowledge of the things experienced. To function in these ways as a source and as a test, it must be distinct both from the things experienced and from the knowledge of those things.<sup>2</sup>

2 Cf. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, Chicago, 1925, pp. 18-21, 25-26.

Knowledge in the form of *doxa* and common-sense opinions or beliefs (which have some of the attributes of *doxa*) are subject to criticism and correction. The only criticism that is applicable to experience as such takes the form of calling it “inadequate.” Such criticism of experience usually stems from a criticism of the opinions which are based on the experience that is called “inadequate.” This type of criticism applies to special experience as well as to common experience. The data obtained by investigation can be inadequate. What is being said here is that other and better opinions would be formed if more and other experiences were had to replace or supplement the experience being criticized.

Though common-sense opinions or beliefs are subject to criticism and correction, common-sense<sup>3</sup> is not a self-critical faculty. It is not a methodical mode of inquiry. It does not produce an organized body of knowledge, but only an aggregate of separate opinions, with little or no corn-pendency. It does not involve specific procedures for questioning opinions, refining or improving them, elaborating them, deriving some from others, relating and ordering them, and putting them to the test. Even in the exceptional case in which one common-sense opinion improves upon and replaces an-

other, this does not occur as the result of a systematic and intentional effort. In all these respects, the aggregate of common-sense opinions differs from such organized branches of knowledge as science and philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> I have been using and shall continue to use the hyphenated word “common-sense” to name our tendency to form opinions on the basis of common experience.

Whence, then, come the criticism and correction of common-sense opinions or beliefs? Clearly, they must come from those branches of knowledge or modes of inquiry which are by their very nature self-critical—that is, which involve procedures for testing and refining the theories and conclusions that they themselves develop. Do they come from each and every one of the major branches of knowledge? From history and mathematics as well as from science and philosophy? No, and for obvious reasons. Commonsense opinions have the character of generalizations; they are seldom if ever opinions about singular past events or existences. Hence, it is unlikely that common-sense opinions would provoke criticism from the historian, or undergo correction in the light of the special data of historical research. Furthermore, common-sense opinions concern matters of fact or real existence; they are opinions about that which is or happens in the world, not about abstract entities of the sort which are the typical objects of mathematical inquiry. Hence, it is unlikely that the mathematician, as such, would be a critic of common-sense opinions.

That leaves science and philosophy. Do both of these remaining disciplines engage in the criticism of commonsense opinions? And if they do, do they do so in the same way or in different ways? Let me state the answer in summary form and then try to explain it. It involves three separate points: (i) the criticism and correction of commonsense opinions come mainly from science, not from philosophy; (ii) philosophy by its very nature is directed to the examination and explication of common-sense opinions, and it undertakes to defend those opinions or beliefs which require and deserve defense; and (iii) in the rare instances in which philosophy criticizes and corrects common-sense opinions, it does so in a manner that is distinctly different from the manner in which science criticizes and corrects common-sense beliefs.

The reason for these differences between science and philosophy in relation to common-sense lies in the essential difference between science and philosophy as two modes of empirical inquiry and two types of empirical knowledge about that which is or happens in the world. When I refer to both science and philosophy as modes of empirical inquiry or as branches of empirical knowledge, I am speaking only of first-order philosophy and I am using the word “empirical” in

the sense in which it is opposed to “formal,” signifying knowledge that is testable by experience, whether that be common experience or the special experience obtained by investigation.

Science is empirical by virtue of the special experience on which it is based and to which it appeals in order to test its hypotheses and conclusions. Philosophy is empirical by virtue of the common experience on which it is based and to which it appeals to test its theories and conclusions. Both are empirical in the same broad sense; yet each is empirical in a typically different sense; and the specific way in which each is empirical is neither a superior nor an inferior way of being empirical—just different. One is neither more nor less empirical than the other. I shall amplify these remarks later, but now I wish to deal, first, with the correction of common-sense opinions by science; second, with the explication and defense of them by philosophy; and third, with the rare instances in which philosophy corrects commonsense.

( I )

Science, for the most part, simply goes beyond our common-sense knowledge of the world, by extending or adding to it.<sup>4</sup> It give us knowledge of matters totally beyond the reach of common-sense, for it is knowledge that can **be** arrived at only through investigation. Concerning most **of** the matters covered by scientific knowledge, commonsense forms no opinions at all because common experience provides no basis whatsoever for doing so. That is why, for the most part, the findings or conclusions of science, based upon special experience, do not correct or replace faulty common-sense opinions.

4 Since common-sense beliefs are not sheer or unfounded opinion, but have some of the characteristics of *doxa*, it is not inappropriate to speak of the aggregate of common-sense opinions or beliefs as constituting our common-sense knowledge of the world, even though that knowledge is not organized or attained in a methodical and self-critical way.

The exceptions to this general rule arise in those instances in which common experience does provide some basis for an opinion but in which common experience is also inadequate for the formation of a correct opinion and, therefore, needs to be supplemented by the special data obtained by investigation. In such cases, the investigative effort usually results in the correction or replacement of a faulty common-sense opinion by scientific knowledge. Consider the following common-sense opinions: that the earth is flat or that it is stationary, neither rotating nor moving through space; that living organisms spring spontaneously from decaying or putrefying flesh; that light is transmitted instantaneously—that it takes no time to travel from its source. It is not difficult to discern the common experience upon which each of these opinions is based. Were it not for the special

data obtained by investigation in each case, the common-sense opinion, though false, would not have been falsified.

It is important to note that science falsifies the commonsense opinion, not the experience on which it is based. Even after the faulty common-sense opinion is corrected and replaced by scientific knowledge, our common experience with regard to each of the matters mentioned above remains exactly what it was before. But science has helped us **to** realize that that experience was inadequate to answer the question in response to which the faulty common-sense opinion was originally formed.

It should also be noted that the manner in which science corrects faulty common-sense opinions, by going beyond common experience through investigative efforts, is, in principle, the same as the manner in which later scientific work corrects earlier scientific errors when the earlier errors arose from insufficient data or from failures of observation which subsequent investigation remedies. Thus, for example, Harvey, by making observations which his predecessors failed to make, corrected the faulty scientific opinion, held by earlier anatomists, that the blood does not circulate.

What has just been said does not preclude purely theoretical advances or improvements in science. Harvey, for example, not only made observations that had not been made before, but he also corrected the reasoning of his predecessors about the observations they did make. He had a better theory of the function of the heart and blood vessels, one which gave a better account of all the data, both old and new. Science does not correct common-sense errors in this way, for common-sense is without theories or explanations of the opinions it holds.

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is published weekly for its members by the

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Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

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