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COMMON-SENSE KNOWLEDGE

Mortimer Adler

Part 2 of 2

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Up to this point, I have skirted the issue about self-evident propositions, such as the axioms about whole and part and about the relation of equals and unequals, or such as the principle of being and non-being (namely, that one and the same thing cannot at the same time both exist and not exist, nor can it at the same time both be in a certain respect and not be in that same respect). The statement about being and non-being or the statement that a finite whole is always greater than any of its definite parts may look like the statement that the parent of a parent is a grandparent or the statement that plane figures are two-dimensional, but there is a subtle difference between them. In the one case, the statement merely makes explicit what is involved in our own linguistic conventions and therefore deserves to be treated as a tautology that gives us no information about the things of this world. In the other case, the statement expresses our understanding of things as they are and of their relationships, which would be the same no matter what words we used or how we set up our linguistic conventions.

Finite quantitative wholes exist and they have definite finite parts; for example, this page can be cut in half or in quarters. Now, as I understand a finite whole (that is, any finite whole) and as I understand any definite part of a finite whole, I understand the whole to be greater than the part, or the part to be less than the whole. So far is this from being a verbal matter that I cannot define the meaning of the words "whole" and "part"; these words express primitive or indefinable notions. Unable to define them, all I can do is to express my understanding of whole and part by a statement of how wholes and parts are related.

That statement is axiomatic or self-evident in the sense that its opposite is immediately seen to be false. I can use the word "part" for this page, and the word "whole" for a half of this page after I have cut it in two, but I cannot think that the page before it is cut is less than the half of it which I have in my hand after I have cut it. However I use language, my understanding of finite wholes and their definite parts is such that I am compelled to say that I know that the whole is greater than the part, and what I know is the relation between existent wholes and their parts, not something about the use of words or their meanings.

In contrast, when I say that plane figures are two-dimensional, I have merely spelled out the meaning that I attach to the phrase "plane figure." If I decide to use the word "plane" for figures that have only length and breadth, and "solid" for figures that have depth as well, then it becomes tautological to say that plane figures are two-dimensional, and solid figures three-dimensional.[5]

5 To assert that the parent of a parent is a grandparent thinly conceals the verbal stipulation, "Let us call the parent of a parent a `grandparent.' "

If there are axioms or self-evident propositions, as I think there are, they have the status of indemonstrable and incorrigible truths; that is, they are knowledge in the sense of *episteme,* not in the sense of *doxa.* Such truths are based on common experience alone and are part of our commonsense knowledge, for they belong to no organized body of knowledge; they do not belong to philosophy or mathematics any more than they belong to science or history. That is why Euclid called them "common notions." However, philosophy does stand in a special relation to them, as it stands in a special relation to common-sense knowledge because both, like philosophical knowledge, rest on common experience alone. If the truth of axioms or self-evident propositions is challenged, or if the effort is made to reduce them to tautologies or to statements of verbal usage, philosophy has the task of defending their status as first-order knowledge. Since they are indemonstrable, the defense must take the form of pointing to the common experience from which they are learned by intuitive induction.

The rest of common-sense knowledge consists of doxai—opinions that are intrinsically corrigible because they do not assert that which it is impossible to deny or that about which it is impossible to think the opposite. Not all intrinsically corrigible opinions, however, are subject to amendment or falsification by means of the data acquired by investigation. Some of the things we know by commonsense in the light of common experience concern matters about which investigation is simply impossible; in other cases, it may be possible but is quite unnecessary. If this were not so, then every first-order question would belong to science and, in addition, every common-sense opinion would ultimately be corrected or replaced by scientific knowledge of the same matter.

We are interested here only in those common-sense opinions which, while intrinsically corrigible, are not subject to amendment or falsification by science because they are knowledge of matters which are not subject to investigation. They cannot, therefore, be challenged by science. Hence, if they are challenged at all, they must be challenged by philosophy; and when they are thus challenged, their defense, if they can be defended at all, must also come from philosophy. At this point we are confronted by a split within philosophy itself—or, it would be better to say, a split among philosophers, between those who are opponents of common-sense and those who are its defenders.

To treat this matter illustratively yet briefly, I am going to characterize the philosophical opponents of commonsense as either skeptics or rationalists. The skeptics present arguments which try to show the untenability of certain common-sense opinions. Their arguments do not appeal to common experience; they ignore it. The rationalists offer theories which claim to be profounder or subtler than the shallow or gross common-sense opinions which they are intended to replace. Their theories do not appeal to common experience; they claim a higher warrant in the structure or revelations of reason itself. Both opponents of common-sense are alike in being non-empirical philosophers; that is, they share the same disregard for, or transcendence of, common experience. The proper contrasting appellation for the defenders of common-sense would, of course, be "empirical philosophers," since their defense rests on common experience.

For typical examples of what is here involved, I refer the reader to G. E. Moore's classic defense, against skeptics, of our common-sense knowledge about the existence of such things as my own body, bodies other than my own, the past, other minds; [6] and to Jacques Maritain's defense of our common-sense knowledge of the order and connection of individual, sensible, material things against rationalists who try to develop a system of the world from some preferential principle, such

as Descartes' *cogito,* Spinoza's *substance,* Fichte's *pure ego,* Schopenhauer's *will,* Hegel's *absolute idea.*[7]

6 Defence of Common Sense," in *Contemporary British Philosophy, First and Second Series,* London, 1924, pp. 193-208.

7 *n Introduction to Philosophy,* London, 1930, Chapter VIII on Philosophy and Common Sense. Cf. *Degrees of Knowledge,* New York, 1938, Chapter II, esp. pp. 99 ff.

The reader will find the empirical philosopher appealing to common experience in order to repudiate erroneous philosophical doctrines or positions. He will see that common experience can serve the philosopher (that is, the philosopher who adopts an empirical approach) in the same way that the special data of investigation serves the empirical scientist, as a means of testing theories. He will also discover that, just as Harvey's correction of the erroneous view about the heart and blood involved the correction of faulty reasoning by his predecessors, so the defense of common-sense against skeptics and rationalists involves logical criticism of their doctrines as well as the marshaling of empirical evidence against them.

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I said earlier that philosophy not only may defend but also may correct common-sense opinions or beliefs. The correction of common-sense opinions is usually the work of science, for where they are faulty, the fault is most often due to the inadequacy of common experience with respect to matters about which investigation is possible. Philosophy, being non-investigative, cannot supplement common experience where it is inadequate. Hence, it corrects commonsense opinions only in those rare instances in which the opinions represent an inadequate understanding of the common experience from which they arise.

For example, from our common experience of the flow or passage of time, the common-sense opinion is formed that time is divided into three distinct parts or portions—past, present, and future—each having a certain extent and each separated by boundary lines, as three distinct parts of a spatial area can be separated from one another. Philosophical analysis of our experience of time corrects this opinion by showing (as Augustine and William James showed) why it is incorrect to understand the parts of time as if they were separated from and related to one another as three parts of spatial area can be separated and related.[8]

This example illustrates how radically different are the ways in which science and philosophy correct commonsense. Science does it by going beyond common experience where it is inadequate, supplementing it by

the special experiences turned up by investigation. Philosophy does it by staying with common experience but providing a better understanding or more accurate grasp of the things experienced.[9] The philosophical correction of common-sense opinions, where these represent a faulty or inadequate understanding of common experience, is, perhaps, one of the things which David Hume had in mind when he said that "philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected."[10]

8 See St. Augustine, *Confessions,* Book XI, Chapters xiv-xxx; William James, *Principles of Psychology,* New York, 1890 Volume I, Chapter XV, especially pp. 608-610, 630-3**1.**

9 That science and philosophy differ in this way, with regard to faulty common-sense beliefs, follows from their essential difference in method—the one, investigative; the other, non-investigative; yet both empirical.

10 *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,* Section XII, Part III, Number 129.

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To defend or correct common-sense is one thing; to rely on it, quite another. The proper method of philosophy calls for reliance upon common experience, but not for reliance on common-sense. The philosopher who adopted the empirical method would naturally respect the commonsense beliefs that have arisen from the same experiences to which he himself appeals; but he would not, in consequence, appeal to the authority of common-sense opinions in order to establish or defend his own theories or conclusions.[11]

11 It is significant that philosophers for whom the employment of common experience is a fundamental and distinguishing mark of philosophical method are also philosophers who understand the critical relation of philosophy to common-sense. Santayana, whose statement about common experience I quoted earlier (see Chapter 7, p. 123), also writes: "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" *(Skepticism and Animal Faith,* New York, 1923, p. v). See Whitehead, *Process and Reality,* New York, 1929, pp. 25-26, and Lewis, *Mind and the World-Order,* New York, 1929, pp. 18-19. Cf. Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy, op. cit.,* Ch. VIII; Etienne Gilson, *"Vade Mecum* of a Young Realist," in *Philosophy of Knowledge,* Philadelphia, 196o, p. 388; and D. J. B. Hawkins, *Crucial Problems of Modern Philosophy,* London, 1957, Ch. IX, especially pp. 124.125.

When the empirical philosopher defends common-sense opinions, he relies on and appeals to the common experience from which those common-sense opinions arise; but since his own assertions are always

supported by philosophical reasoning or amplified by philosophical analysis, they are always distinct from the unreasoned and unanalyzed common-sense judgments based on the same experience. When the empirical philosopher corrects common-sense beliefs, he acknowledges the common experience on which they are based, but he supplants those beliefs with a better understanding or more accurate grasp of the things experienced.

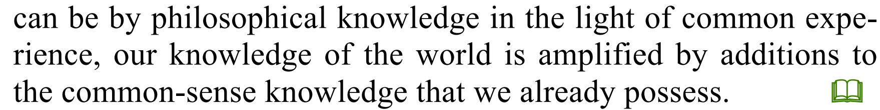
This brings us to an important question: can philosophy go beyond or add to the knowledge of the world that is comprised in the aggregate of common-sense opinions about it? We have seen that science can and does do this. Whether it corrects and supplants faulty common-sense beliefs or simply goes beyond them where they are correct, science is continually amplifying our knowledge of the world, over and above everything that is known by common-sense. Can philosophy also amplify our knowledge of the world? Can it give us knowledge that we would not have if we were confined to the knowledge afforded by common-sense and by science?

A negative answer to this question would mean that philosophy provides us with nothing more than a better understanding of what we already know. Insofar as it gives us a reasoned analysis of common-sense opinions, philosophy does give us a better understanding of what we already know; but it can do more than that. Insofar as it corrects common-sense opinions, it not only gives us a better understanding of common experience, but it also gives us new knowledge of the world that is experienced.

It can go even further. In the process of developing theories to explain some of the things known by commonsense and by science, philosophy may posit theoretical entities, just as science does. The unobserved substances or causes posited by the philosopher are like the unobserved particles or forces posited by the scientist. In the case of philosophy, these theoretical entities serve to explain the observed phenomena in the field of common experience, just as in the case of science, they serve to explain the observed phenomena in the field of special experience. When, in either case, the posited theoretical entities are asserted to exist, the assertions, insofar as they can be supported or defended by appeal to experience, represent additions to our knowledge of that which exists. Philosophy can thus extend our knowledge of the world.

Finally, just as science goes beyond common-sense knowledge by asking questions that never even occur to common-sense, so can philosophy. When such questions are answered, as they are by scientific knowledge in the light of special experience and as they

can be by philosophical knowledge in the light of common experience, our knowledge of the world is amplified by additions to the common-sense knowledge that we already possess.



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