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The Common Sense Tradition

In this chapter, I begin by describing some of the main features of the common sense tradition, whose chief representatives include Thomas Reid, G. E. Moore, and Roderick Chisholm. There are certainly important differences among the views of Reid, Moore, and Chisholm, but I think one can give a rough account of some central features of the common sense tradition. In the first section, I describe some of the main views accepted by members of the tradition as well as some views to which they are not committed. In the second section, I consider some views about *why* we should take various common sense propositions as data for assessing philosophical theories. Philosophers in the common sense tradition have offered different sorts of answers to this question. Sometimes they suggest that we simply have no alternative to taking these propositions as data. Sometimes, however, it is suggested that such propositions are "irresistible" – that we cannot give up our belief in them. Reid, for example, appears in places to take this view. In other cases, they point, not to irresistibility, but to the positive epistemic character of our beliefs in such propositions as that which makes them worthy of being taken as data. On this view, it is the fact that we know or are justified in believing certain propositions that makes them worthy of being taken as data. This "epistemic answer" seems to me to be the best. However, appealing to the epistemic character of various common sense beliefs invites a variety of objections and criticisms that we shall consider in various forms throughout this book.

1.1 SOME MAIN FEATURES OF THE COMMON SENSE TRADITION

Roderick Chisholm, along with Thomas Reid and G. E. Moore, is one of the most prominent defenders of the common sense tradition in philosophy. Chisholm once wrote that in investigating the theory of knowledge from a philosophical or "Socratic" point of view,

> We presuppose, first, that there *is* something that we know and we adopt the working hypothesis that *what* we know is pretty much that which on reflection we think we know. This may seem like the wrong place to start. But where else *could* we start?[1]

Elsewhere, we find Chisholm saying:

> It is characteristic of "commonsensism," as an alternative philosophical tradition, to assume that we do know, pretty much, those things we think we know, and then having identified this knowledge, to trace it back to its sources and formulate criteria that will set it off from those things we do not know.[2]

Chisholm held that we can pick out instances of knowledge and reasonable belief and use them as "data" for formulating and assessing criteria of knowledge and evidence. He held, roughly, that our criteria of knowledge and evidence should fit or cohere with what we take ourselves to know or to be justified in believing. If some proposed criterion of knowledge implies that we do *not* know many of the things we ordinarily take ourselves to know – for example, that there are other people and they have bodies – then so much the worse for that proposed criterion. Our philosophical theory of knowledge, our criteria of knowledge and evidence should be, in his view, adequate to the fact that we *do* know such things.

Chisholm saw himself as belonging to the common sense tradition, a tradition that includes the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid and the influential English philosopher, G. E. Moore. Reid was a contemporary and critic of that better known Scottish philosopher, David Hume. It is Hume who gets credit for awakening Immanuel Kant from his "dogmatic slumbers," but it is Reid who gets things more nearly right, or so think Chisholm and the other commonsensists. Hume belonged to the great tradition of British Empiricism that included John

1 Roderick M. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 2nd edition (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1977), p. 16.
2 Roderick M. Chisholm, *The Foundations of Knowledge* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 113.

Locke and Bishop Berkeley. But it was the intrepid Hume who, to many, including Reid, drew out the implications of British Empiricism. Reid took Hume to have shown that empiricism implies that we have no knowledge of the material world; no knowledge of the future, the past, other minds; nor, indeed, any knowledge of ourselves as continuing subjects of consciousness. Reid took Hume to have shown that the wages of empiricism are a rather thoroughgoing skepticism. Reid writes:

> A traveller of good judgment may mistake his way, and be unawares led into a wrong track; and while the road is fair before him, he may go on without suspicion and be followed by others but, when it ends in a coal pit, it requires no great judgments to know he hath gone wrong, nor perhaps to find out what misled him.[3]

According to Reid, since we do know many things of the sort that empiricism would rule out, so much the worse for empiricism. Since the theory implies that we do not know things we *do* know, we should reject the theory. A similar stance was taken by Moore. Concerning skeptical arguments in general, Moore writes:

> But it seems to me a sufficient refutation of such views as these, simply to point to cases in which we do know such things. This, after all, you know, really is a finger; there is no doubt about it: I know it, and you all know it. And I think we may safely challenge any philosopher to bring forward any argument in favour either of the proposition that we do not know it, or of the proposition that it is not true, which does not at some point rest upon some premiss which is beyond comparison, less certain, than the proposition which it is designed to attack.[4]

Elsewhere, Moore writes:

> There is no reason why we should not, in this respect, make our philosophical opinions agree with what we necessarily believe at other times. There is no reason why I should not confidently assert that I do really *know* some external facts, although I cannot prove the assertion except by simply assuming that I do. I am, in fact, as certain of this as of anything; and as reasonably certain of it.[5]

3 Thomas Reid, *Inquiry and Essays*, ed. Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), p. 11.

4 G. E. Moore, "Some Judgments of Perception," *Philosophical Studies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 228.

5 G. E. Moore, "Hume's Philosophy," *Philosophical Studies*, p. 163.

Like Reid, Moore holds that if some philosophical theory or some philosophical argument implies that we do not know anything about "external" objects, then so much the worse for the theory or the argument. That we do know such things is more evident, more reasonable to believe, than the theory or one of the premises for the opposing view.

As we have seen, Chisholm takes it to be characteristic of the common sense tradition to hold that we do know much of what we ordinarily think we know. Not surprisingly, some of what we think we know might be considered common sense. But what does it mean to say that some proposition is "common sense"? I think the notion of a common sense proposition is rather vague, and that one could take it to mean many things. But suppose we take a common sense proposition to be one that is deeply and widely held. If this is what we mean by a "common sense proposition," then the common sense tradition holds that there are common sense propositions. It holds that there are propositions that are deeply and widely held. Examples of such propositions would be that there are other people, that they have bodies, that they think, that they know various things about the world around them. Clearly, many other examples could be given. In any case, in holding that there are common sense propositions, the tradition implies that there are other people and that they believe things.

Moreover, the common sense tradition holds that *some* common sense propositions are *known* to be true. For example, it holds that we do *know* that there are other people, that they have bodies, that they think, and that they know various things about the world. Indeed, the tradition holds that these and many other common sense propositions are such that almost everyone knows them. In this respect, the tradition holds that *some* common sense propositions are matters of *common knowledge*. Certainly these would be among the things that Chisholm takes to fall within the scope of what we ordinarily take ourselves to know. Furthermore, it is worth noting that among those things that are matters of common knowledge are some *epistemic* propositions – that is, propositions about what is known or what it is reasonable to believe. Thus, the proposition that people *know* various things about the world around them would be for the common sense philosopher an epistemic proposition that is *both* a common sense proposition and a matter of common knowledge.

Though the common sense tradition does hold that *some* common sense propositions are known, it is *not* committed to the view that *everything* that might be called a "common sense" belief or proposition is

true or known or even reasonably accepted. In his essay, "A Defence of Common Sense," Moore is quite clear on this point. Moore writes:

> The phrases 'Common Sense view of the world' or 'Common Sense beliefs' (as used by philosophers) are, of course, extraordinarily vague; and, for all I know, there may be many propositions which may be properly called features in 'the Common Sense view of the world' or 'Common Sense beliefs', which are not true, and which deserve to be mentioned with the contempt with which some philosophers speak of 'Common Sense beliefs'. But to speak with contempt of those 'Common Sense beliefs' which I have mentioned is quite certainly the height of absurdity. And there are, of course, enormous numbers of other features in 'the Common Sense view of the world' which, if these are true, are quite certainly true too: e.g. that there have lived on the surface of the earth not only human beings, but also many different species of plants and animals, etc.[6]

In spite of the title of his essay, Moore's defense of common sense is clearly limited. Though he clearly thinks that some common sense beliefs are true, he avoids endorsing them all. As Arthur E. Murphy notes, Moore "takes great pains to specify the kinds of statement he is talking about and to add that it is statements of these kinds and not 'the common sense view of the world' in general that he claims to know for certain, in some cases, to be true."[7] The common sense tradition is simply not committed to the view that *all* widely held propositions are true or even reasonable.

In sum, I think we may make the following general points about the common sense tradition. First, it holds that we do know pretty much what we think we know. Second, it holds that there are some propositions that almost everyone knows, that are matters of common knowledge. Third, it holds that we may take these propositions as data for assessing various philosophical theories. It holds that a philosophical theory about the nature and scope of knowledge should be compatible with the fact that people *do* know such things, and it should seek to explain how people know such things. Fourth, it assigns a great deal of weight to these propositions, holding it to be more reasonable to accept them than any philosophical theory or premise that implies that they are false. The preceding points would be accepted, I believe, by Chisholm, Reid, and Moore.

In suggesting that the common sense philosopher takes as data some common sense propositions, I do not imply that these are the *only*

6 G. E. Moore, "A Defence of Common Sense," *Philosophical Papers* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959), p. 45.

7 Arthur E. Murphy, "Moore's Defence of Common Sense," *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, 3rd edition, ed. Paul Schilpp (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1968), p. 302.

propositions that he takes as data for philosophical inquiry. If we take the Chisholmian view that we know pretty much what we think we know, this would certainly include propositions that are *not* deeply and widely believed. Thus, among the propositions I think I know would be that I had eggs for breakfast and that I live in Indiana. Similarly, Moore may take as data propositions such as those expressed by the sentences "My name is Moore" and "I live in England." These propositions are not common sense propositions in the sense that they are widely or deeply believed, nor are they matters of common knowledge. Yet we may hold that a philosophical theory of knowledge must be adequate to the fact that people do know such things.

Moreover, though the common sense tradition does hold that *some* common sense propositions are epistemically justified for us, it is not committed to the view that they are epistemically justified for us *in virtue of* their being common sense propositions or in virtue of their being deeply and widely held. It is not committed to the view that being widely and deeply believed confers, or is a source of, any positive epistemic status upon a proposition. Similarly, though it holds that some common sense propositions are known, it doesn't claim that they are known *because* they are common sense propositions. Furthermore, the common sense tradition is not committed to, and in fact rejects, the view that we know various common sense propositions on the basis of inferring them from the general principle, (1) Whatever is a common sense proposition is true, and (2) *p* is a common sense proposition. Our knowledge that there are other people does not depend on an inference of that sort. (Reid *seems* to think that *knowing* that a proposition is widely and deeply held by almost everyone now and in the past is *some* reason for believing it. But even for Reid, this is a defeasible reason. And such a view is not to be found in Moore or Chisholm.)

It is important to emphasize that Moore and Chisholm do not take being a common sense proposition in the sense that it is widely and deeply held to imply that the proposition is true or epistemically justified. They are not "methodists" who begin with a criterion such as "Whatever is a common sense proposition is true or epistemically justified." On the contrary, they are particularists who believe that we can pick out instances of knowledge and justified belief without such a criterion. (I say more about methodism and particularism in Chapter 6.) I do not think that we should see them as appealing to common sense in the following way: (1) If something is a proposition of common sense, then it is true or reasonable. (2) Theory T denies a proposition of common sense.

(3) Therefore, Theory T is false or unreasonable. One might well find this form of argument unsatisfactory. "Why," one might ask, "should we reject a metaphysical, epistemological, or scientific theory simply because it conflicts with some proposition of common sense? Indeed, why assume that premise 1 is true?" But I would stress that there is no reason why we must view common sense philosophers such as Moore and Reid as committed to this sort of argument. As we have seen, Moore would reject premise 1, and there is no reason to attribute such a view to Chisholm. (Again, Reid, I think, would not accept premise 1. Reid *seems* to hold the weaker view that our knowing that some proposition is widely and deeply held by almost everyone now and in the past is a defeasible reason for believing it.) What Moore, Chisholm, and Reid *do* maintain is that there are some common sense propositions that we know. We might take them frequently to be arguing: (1′) *P* is a common sense proposition that I and many others know. (2) Theory T implies that *p* is false. (3) Therefore, Theory T is false or unreasonable. I do not see that arguing in this fashion is objectionable. Rejecting a metaphysical, epistemological, or scientific theory because it conflicts with something one knows is not an unreasonable procedure. In arguing this way, the emphasis is on the fact that the theory conflicts with something known, something that also happens to be common sense. We might say, then, that Moore, Reid, and Chisholm reject certain views because they conflict with something that happens to be common sense, but not because it is common sense.

Still, the fact that some common sense propositions are matters of common knowledge is not utterly without significance for the common sense philosopher. If some propositions are matters of common knowledge, then there must be some way of knowing them which is not unique to an elite few. Thus, for example, since it is common knowledge that there are other people, such knowledge cannot rest on philosophical arguments or considerations grasped only by a handful of philosophers and it can't be the fruit of philosophical reasoning followed only by a philosophical elite. Our account of such knowledge must be adequate to the fact that it is, after all, *common* knowledge. Thus, if a philosopher suggests that one's belief that there are other people or that there are external objects is a mere matter of faith until grounded in some philosophical argument that he hopes to develop, then, I think, such a view is antithetical to the common sense tradition. Similarly, one doesn't need to know a philosophical analysis of knowledge or have a sophisticated theory of what makes a belief an instance of knowledge. That people do know things about the world around them is a matter of common knowledge, and ordinary men and

women, who know such epistemic facts, do not have a philosophical analysis of knowledge or have a satisfactory epistemic theory. This is not, of course, to deny that having such an analysis or such a theory might yield a deeper, richer, or better sort of knowledge of various epistemic facts. It is simply to claim that such things, desirable as they might be for a variety of reasons, are unnecessary for the sort of ordinary knowledge most people enjoy.

In addition to noting the preceding points, I think it is important to note certain other claims that are not accepted by the common sense tradition. First, the common sense tradition is not committed to the view that there is "a faculty of common sense" or that one's considered judgments are known *via* such a faculty. Such a view is not found in Moore or Chisholm. Reid, of course, does refer to a faculty of common sense. It is not clear, however, that Reid considers it to be a *sui generis* faculty. Indeed, he suggests that "common sense" is "only another name for one branch or degree of reason."[8] In any event, it would be a mistake to assume that the common sense tradition in general holds that there is some special faculty of common sense by which we know various propositions.

Second, though the common sense tradition holds that we can pick out instances of knowledge and justified belief, and use these in assessing criteria of knowledge and justification, it is also important to note that the common sense tradition does not insist that *everything* we take to be known is known. It does not insist that it can never be reasonable to abandon what we might have taken to be instances of knowledge. Indeed, this is part of Chisholm's point in calling himself a "critical commonsensist."[9] Philosophical reflection sometimes reveals that some of what we take ourselves to know conflicts with other things we take ourselves to know. Plato's dialogues artfully illustrate the puzzles that arise through thoughtful examination of one's beliefs. Such self-examination sometimes requires revision of one's commitments, but it does not require that one withhold *ab initio* belief in what one takes oneself to know. Nor does it require

8 Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (Cambridge, MA: The M. I. T. Press, 1969), Essay VI, Chapter II, p. 567.

9 Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 3rd edition (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1989), p. 64. The point that Chisholm emphasizes is that accepting some proposition *h* does not make it probable that *h* is true. Instead, Chisholm endorses the principle that "If S accepts h and if h is not disconfirmed by S's total evidence, then h is probable for S." Thus, simply accepting that *h* does not make it probable that *h* is true. Whether *h* is probable for S also depends on the fact that S's total evidence does not disconfirm *h*. Whether it is reasonable to believe some proposition, including the epistemic proposition that one knows that *p*, depends on the fact that the proposition is not disconfirmed by one's total evidence.

that one assume initially that one knows nothing or that one cannot pick out instances of knowledge or reasonable belief. In this respect at least, the Socratic tradition of self-examination agrees with the common sense tradition. It is important that we see the quest for coherence and the willingness to revise some of our beliefs as compatible with the common sense tradition.

Perhaps it would be useful to understand better the common sense tradition to consider what John Rawls calls "the method of wide reflective equilibrium." In the method of wide reflective equilibrium, one begins with (1) one's particular considered judgments, (2) one's beliefs in general principles, and (3) general background theories. One then seeks to achieve a coherent balance or "equilibrium" between these various elements. In some cases, this might require abandoning or revising one's particular judgments in favor of, say, a general principle that seems, on reflection, more reasonable. In other cases, one might give up or revise the general principle in favor of the particular judgment. The method of "wide" reflective equilibrium can be contrasted with the method of "narrow" reflective equilibrium. In the latter, we seek coherence only within a particular domain. For example, one might seek merely coherence between one's particular moral judgments and one's general moral principles, ignoring the relevance of considerations outside the domain of the moral. But in wide reflective equilibrium, one does not restrict oneself to beliefs within a given domain. One seeks a wider harmony between one's particular judgments and general principles and whatever other considerations might seem relevant. So, conceptions of the person and the functioning of social institutions as well as principles of economic theory might be brought to bear on particular moral judgments and general principles. What favors the method of wide reflective equilibrium is that nothing that seems relevant is excluded.

I suggest that the common sense tradition is compatible with the method of wide reflective equilibrium. The common sense philosopher begins with various considered judgments, general principles, and background theories and attempts, insofar as he can, to bring them into reflective equilibrium. He wants his philosophical theories and his criteria of knowledge and evidence to fit and cohere with his considered particular judgments, including his considered particular judgments about some common sense propositions.

Still, one can certainly take up the method of wide reflective equilibrium without belonging to the common sense tradition. For example, suppose that a philosopher held that the only things he knows and the

only things he may take as data are propositions about his own mental states and some simple logical and metaphysical propositions. Suppose that his considered judgments were restricted in this way. He might then seek to achieve a coherence between his particular judgments and his general principles, but he would not be, I suggest, a common sense philosopher. Similarly, some proponents of the method of wide reflective equilibrium seem to hold that our initial beliefs, our considered judgments, have only a low degree of credibility.[10] The credibility of these judgments may, however, be increased as we weave them into a coherent body of beliefs. However, the view that our considered judgments or initial judgments have only a low degree of credibility conflicts with the common sense tradition. For the common sense philosophers, there are various truisms that they know and that almost everyone knows, and to hold that they are known is incompatible with holding that they have only a low degree of credibility. It is contrary to the common sense tradition to hold that all considered judgments have only a low degree of credibility until anchored in a philosophical web. Thus, simply taking up the method of wide reflective equilibrium is not sufficient for being a "commonsensist." One's considered judgments must have a certain breadth and scope, extending beyond, say, one's own mental states, and one must take at least some of them to be instances of knowledge and to be highly credible.

Again, it seems that one can take up the method of wide reflective equilibrium without being a commonsensist, even if one's considered judgments have broad scope and one takes them to be highly credible. Consider, for example, the follower of Zeno who shares many of the considered judgments of the common sense philosopher, finds them highly credible, and yet abandons them on hearing his master's arguments. Or consider the skeptic who finds at least initially credible most of what the common sense philosopher finds credible and yet comes to believe, on the basis of a philosophical argument, that he in fact knows nothing about

10 See Catherine Elgin, *Considered Judgment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), Chapter 4. Elgin holds that in adopting the method of reflective equilibrium, we begin with those sentences we accept without reservation. She says, "Being our best current estimate of how things stand, such sentences have some claim on our allegiance" (p. 101). Such claims are "initially tenable." So my belief that "I have hands" and that "there are other people" are initially tenable. Later, however, she tells us that "Initially tenable claims are woefully uncertain, but are not defective on that account. They are not taken as true or incontrovertible or even probable, but only as reasonable starting points in a reflective self-correcting enterprise" (p. 110). I think philosophers in the common sense tradition would reject the view that the claims that "one has hands" or that "there are other people" are "woefully uncertain." Moreover, they would take these claims to be true.