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Common Sense

In *Common Sense*, Noah Lemos presents a strong defense of the common sense tradition, the view that we may take as data for philosophical inquiry many of the things we ordinarily think we know. Lemos discusses the main features of that tradition as expounded by Thomas Reid, G. E. Moore, and Roderick Chisholm.

For a long time, common sense philosophers have been subject to two main objections: that they fail to give any non-circular argument for the reliability of memory and perception, and that they pick out instances of knowledge without knowing a criterion for knowledge. Lemos defends the appeal to what we ordinarily think we know in both epistemology and ethics, and thus rejects the charge that common sense is dogmatic, unphilosophical, or viciously question-begging.

Written in a clear and engaging style, *Common Sense* will appeal to students and philosophers in epistemology and ethics.

Noah Lemos is Professor of Philosophy at DePauw University.

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For my wife, Lisa

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
 Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2004

Printed in the United States of America

Typeface Bembo 10.5/13 pt. *System* \TeX 2 ϵ [TB]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Lemos, Noah Marcelino, 1956–
 Common sense : a contemporary defense / Noah Lemos.
 p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in philosophy)
 Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-83784-7

1. Common sense. I. Title. II. Series.

B105.C457L46 2004

149–dc22 2003069664

ISBN 0 521 83784 7 hardback

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Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to several people who have been kind enough to read all or large parts of the manuscript. These include Michael Bergmann, Fred Feldman, Dan Parks, Matthias Steup, and Erik Wielenberg.

I have also benefited over the years from discussions with my colleagues at DePauw University concerning the issues taken up in this book, most especially Marthe Chandler, Marcia McKelligan, and Roger Gustavsson.

I would like to thank DePauw University and John and Janice Fisher for their support through Faculty and Fisher Fellowships. Though it has been more than twenty years since I sat in their classrooms, I remain deeply grateful to my teachers, Roderick Chisholm, who introduced me to the works of Thomas Reid; James Van Cleve, who gave me a deeper understanding of Reid; and, most especially, Ernest Sosa, whose influence is evident throughout this book.

To my father, Ramon Lemos, who has read all that I've sent him, I owe a debt that I can never repay.

Finally, I wish to thank my wife Lisa, to whom this book is dedicated.

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Preface

Often showing only a polite interest in what I do, non-philosophers occasionally ask what I've been up to. I tell them that I've been working on a book on the common sense tradition in philosophy. Often I get a response like this: "Common sense?! What's *that* got to do with *philosophy*?" This response is (one hopes) a good-natured jab at philosophy and philosophers. Those who make it do know a little bit about philosophy. Many of them have read Hume or Berkeley or, at least, have some rough idea of their views. They know that some famous philosophers have said some pretty strange things that seem to contradict common sense. So they assume philosophy is just opposed to common sense. That seems to be, in my experience, a popular view of philosophy. Those who make these jabs are often unaware that there is another view of the matter. Thomas Reid, the Scottish contemporary and critic of Hume, wrote, "Philosophy . . . has no other root but the principles of Common Sense; it grows out of them, and draws its nourishment from them. Severed from this root, its honours wither, its sap is dried up, it dies and rots."¹

Reid, who sought to reconcile philosophy with the principles of common sense, stands as one of the major figures in the common sense tradition. If the popular mind is largely ignorant of the common sense tradition, the same is not true of the philosophical community. Among philosophers, the common sense tradition has not been, to put it mildly, universally endorsed. Many very good philosophers have rejected various aspects of the common sense tradition as being "unphilosophical," "dogmatic," "question-begging," or "intemperate." Sometimes these

1 Thomas Reid, *Inquiry and Essays*, edited by Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), p. 7.

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charges are made quickly within the first few pages of philosophical works, and very little more is said in support of them. It is as though the author assumes that the reader can readily see for himself the philosophical inadequacy of the approach of the common sense tradition. In other cases, however, these charges are often based on well-considered philosophical views about the nature of knowledge and justification. So, for these critics, the popular jibe “What’s common sense got to do with philosophy?” may be raised as a serious philosophical question, one that calls for the common sense tradition and its assumptions to be examined philosophically and critically.

In this book, I discuss the views of some of the main figures in that tradition – namely, Thomas Reid, G. E. Moore, and Roderick Chisholm. My approach will be philosophical and conceptual, rather than historical. I will discuss some of the views of each thinker, views that I think are characteristic of, or important to understanding, the common sense tradition. I also discuss some recent criticisms of these views. In this way, I hope, we might be better able to appreciate the common sense tradition from a contemporary perspective, one that takes into account contemporary views about relevant philosophical matters, such as recent views on the nature of knowledge and justification. I will, for the most part, defend the views of Reid, Moore, and Chisholm. I will be satisfied if the reader at least comes away with the view that the common sense tradition is not unphilosophical, dogmatic, intemperate, or viciously question-begging.

In Chapter 1, I present some of the main features of the common sense tradition. I lay out some views characteristic of the tradition and some views to which it is not committed. One view common to members of the tradition is, roughly, that we may take as data for philosophical inquiry many of the things we ordinarily think we know. This is no doubt part of what Reid means in claiming that philosophy is rooted in common sense. Among the things we ordinarily think we know are various “common sense” propositions such as that there are other people, that they think and feel and have bodies. But why should we take these propositions as data? Members of the common sense tradition have given different sorts of answers, and some of them do not seem very compelling. Some members of the tradition, Reid for example, hold that we may take such propositions as data because we simply cannot give them up. On this view, we may take certain claims as data for philosophical inquiry because we cannot give them up, because we find them doxastically compelling. An alternative answer, and one more central to the common sense tradition, is that these are things that we do know or that we are justified in believing. In

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other words, we may take these things as data because they enjoy some positive epistemic status. But this sort of answer leaves the common sense philosopher open to a variety of objections. Two of the most important are the following. First, we cannot pick out instances of knowledge or justified belief without first knowing a criterion of knowledge. Since the common sense philosophers do not offer us one, their claims to know the epistemic propositions they take as data are false. Second, the beliefs that the common sense philosopher takes as data are instances of knowledge only if those beliefs are reliably formed. But the only satisfactory way to know that those beliefs are reliably formed is on the basis of some “non-circular” argument. Yet philosophers in the common sense tradition simply haven’t provided the necessary argument. So they have no reason to think that the beliefs they take as data are reliably formed. Much of this book explores what the common sense tradition has said or should say in response to these objections. In Chapters 2 and 3, I will focus primarily on the second objection. In Chapter 6, I will focus on the first.

In Chapter 2, I take up the second objection. I consider some reasons in favor of the view that perceptual and mnemonic knowledge require that one know or be justified in believing that one’s perception and memory are reliable. I argue that we should reject such a requirement, in part because it would preclude children and brute animals from having perceptual and mnemonic knowledge. But even if we reject the requirement, I argue that we cannot simply ignore the question of the reliability of our ways of forming beliefs. Does knowledge of the reliability of our ways of forming beliefs really require the sort of non-circular argument that the critic demands? I examine how William Alston and Ernest Sosa answer this question. I will also look at “track record” and “Neo-Moorean” arguments for the reliability of our doxastic sources. Following Sosa, I will hold that knowledge of the reliability of one’s way of forming beliefs simply doesn’t require the sort of non-circular argument the critic demands.

In Chapter 3, I continue the discussion of the issues raised in Chapter 2, examining some criticisms of the view defended by Sosa. I will explore some objections to this view raised by Richard Fumerton and Jonathan Vogel and argue that they do not show that the only way to know that one’s ways of forming reliable beliefs is on the basis of a non-circular argument. I will argue that even if we accept the view that a reflective being knows that p only if he is justified in believing that his belief that p is reliably formed, this does not imply that we must reject

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track-record arguments or the Neo-Moorean argument for the reliability of perception and memory.

In Chapter 4, I look at the views of Thomas Reid concerning our knowledge of the reliability of our ways of forming beliefs. Reid holds that it is a “first principle” that our natural cognitive faculties are reliable. In addition, he seems to endorse some ways in which the reliability of our faculties can be supported. Reid seems to hold the view that we can know on the basis of our natural faculties that they are in fact reliable. Yet Reid also *seems* to criticize Descartes’s attempts to defend the reliability of his faculties as “question-begging,” and some of the criticisms that Reid makes of Descartes would seem no less applicable to Reid’s own views. I will argue, however, that Reid’s criticism of Descartes is mistaken, that it is a wrong turn on his part.

In Chapter 5, I begin by looking at Moore’s proof of an external world and his response to skepticism. It is sometimes charged that philosophers in the common sense tradition do not take skepticism seriously. Well, certainly they aren’t skeptics, but they do address and consider skeptical arguments, though many critics think their responses unsatisfactory. In the first section, I look at Moore’s proof for an external world and defend it against the charge that it is “question-begging.” In the second section, I consider a Moorean response to skepticism and defend it against a criticism raised by Barry Stroud. The third section focuses on the “sensitivity requirement” prominent in recent “relevant alternative” and “contextualist” criticisms of Moore’s views.

In Chapter 6, I return to the objection that picking out particular instances of knowledge or justified belief depends upon knowing some general criterion of knowledge or justified belief. I begin with Chisholm’s discussion of particularism, methodism, and skepticism. Chisholm defends particularism against methodism and skepticism. Methodism holds that in order to pick out instances of knowledge or justified belief, one has to know a criterion of knowledge or justification. Particularism denies this. I believe that Chisholm is right and the methodists are wrong. I look at one attempt to support methodism by appealing to the “supervenient” character of evaluative concepts such as knowledge and justification. I also look at some criticisms of common sense particularism raised by Paul Moser, Laurence Bonjour, and Panayot Butchvarov.

Chapter 7 addresses the relationship between *a priori* knowledge and common sense particularism. On “strong” accounts of *a priori* knowledge and justification, such as Chisholm’s, basic *a priori* knowledge is certain and indefeasible. What enjoys basic *a priori* justification is thus “insulated”

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from defeat by conflict with our common sense beliefs. This presents a problem for the common sense particularist who holds *both* that some epistemic principles are justified *a priori* and that our common sense beliefs can defeat various epistemic principles. Moreover, the strong account makes it very unlikely that many, if any, interesting epistemic principles can be known or justified *a priori*. Some philosophers might welcome such a view. William Lycan, for example, defends a Moorean response to skepticism by calling into question the epistemic credentials of alleged *a priori* intuitions. I defend a “modest” view of *a priori* knowledge and justification, one that does not require that basic *a priori* knowledge be certain and indefeasible. Such a view leaves open the possibility of *a priori* justification for epistemic principles, including those in skeptical arguments, while also leaving open the possibility of defeat by other considerations.

In Chapter 8, I look at some recent views on the role that our moral judgments should play in moral philosophy. If the common sense tradition holds that we may take as data much that we ordinarily think we know in formulating criteria of knowledge and evidence, then may we do the same when we attempt to formulate criteria of right action? I think the answer is “yes.” Particularists in epistemology hold that we can pick out particular instances of knowledge and justified belief. Particularists in moral philosophy assume that we can pick out particular instances of right and wrong action, that we can know that some particular actions are right and others wrong. Several philosophers have taken the opposing view, and hold that in attempting to formulate criteria of right action, we should not rely upon our moral judgments or “intuitions” about what is right or wrong. In some cases, this opposition is rooted in arguments similar to those raised against particularism and the common sense tradition in epistemology. I argue that these objections fare no better when they are raised in moral philosophy. In other cases, however, the opposition to particularism in moral philosophy does not rest on such grounds. Some philosophers, who endorse a form of act utilitarianism, have suggested that we simply cannot know whether particular actions are right or wrong. They hold that we simply cannot pick out particular instances of right and wrong action. Such a view seems to be held, surprisingly perhaps, by Moore. I look critically at such views.

Finally, let me make two cautionary points. First, much of the discussion in this book concerns epistemology and what we may assume when we try to answer the epistemological questions that concern us. However, I don’t give any detailed analysis of the nature of knowledge or criteria for knowledge and justified belief. I leave many substantive epistemological

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questions unanswered. So, for example, I take the common sense tradition to hold that perception and memory are sources of knowledge and justified belief. If, as Reid says, philosophy is rooted in common sense, then a satisfactory epistemological theory should be adequate to the view that we do have perceptual and mnemonic knowledge. Yet I do not offer a detailed account of *how* we have perceptual and mnemonic knowledge. Indeed, even among the members of the common sense tradition there are differences about how we have such knowledge. There are differences, for example, among Reid, Moore, and Chisholm on the nature of perception. So, while a variety of different answers could be offered from within the common sense tradition about the nature of perceptual and mnemonic knowledge, I defend the common sense tradition in a way that does not rule out various possibilities and live options.

Second, I explicate and defend some of the main views of the common sense tradition. There will be no neat original proofs of the existence of external objects or other minds, so the reader is warned not to look for any. Of course, such proofs are, from the standpoint of the common sense tradition, unnecessary for knowledge of such things. Instead, I aim at the more modest goal of defending the view of the common sense tradition that we do know many of the things we ordinarily take ourselves to know and that it is reasonable for us to assume as much in the course of philosophical, epistemological, and moral inquiry.