

## Introduction: Why Common Sense Matters

René van Woudenberg and Rik Peels

'Common sense' is a notion that philosophers seem unable to work without. They have used it for a variety of purposes. Some use it merely as a more or less neutral term to refer to truisms and platitudes that are widely held, such as that there is a material world external to our minds or that nature can be known by human beings. Others have gone further and used the term in order to make certain claims about it. Immanuel Kant, for example, urged that when we attempt to settle a philosophical dispute, we should never appeal to common sense. Thomas Reid and G. E. Moore, by contrast, held that common sense provides legitimate points of reference for settling philosophical debates. Other claims involving common sense concern its relation to science. Some philosophers have claimed that common sense is at odds with science – that the flipside of scientific progress is the undoing of common sense.<sup>1</sup> But others have argued that science, in Gustav Bergmann's memorable phrase, is 'the long arm of common sense' (Bergmann 1957: 20). In one way or another, philosophers had a need to speak of common sense.

This introduction shows why and how common sense matters to philosophy, thus lightening up the terrain that subsequent chapters explore in much greater detail. First, we explain briefly what *common sense* is and, next, what common-sense *philosophy* is. Then we consider whether, and if so how, common sense should *matter* to philosophy; can we not do without common sense? Subsequently, we turn to criticisms of the idea that common sense matters to philosophy and criticisms of the very idea of common-sense philosophy. We conclude with a short note on the organization of this book.

2 RENÉ VAN WOUDEBERG AND RIK PEELS

WHAT IS COMMON SENSE?

When one tries to pinpoint the referent of ‘common sense’ as the notion is used in the philosophical literature, one will be struck by the fact that it is used to refer to rather different kinds of things: to a particular group of beliefs, to a set of intuitions, to a number of principles, to a belief-forming faculty, and to a loose array of methodological rules.

The Greeks used the notion to refer to beliefs that are widely held. That Zeus is the highest god in the pantheon was widely believed in ancient Greece and hence qualifies as a common-sense belief (see Chapter 1 by Richard Bett in this volume).

In later times, philosophers wielded a much more restricted notion of common-sense belief. Thomas Reid, for instance, delineated common-sense beliefs as beliefs that are widely held and that have, in addition, such properties as that their denials are absurd, that they are not believed on the basis of some kind of scientific investigation, and that they are foundational to practices that humans are ineluctably engaged in.<sup>2</sup> Take the belief that there is life and intelligence in the people we converse with. This belief is widely shared, its denial is absurd, it is not based on some form of scientific investigation, and it is foundational to such practices as buying and selling, education, and leading a social life. Hence, this notion of common sense is much more restricted than the notion that the Greeks used. That Zeus is the highest god of the pantheon was once widely believed. But its denial is not absurd, nor is it foundational to a practice that humans are ineluctably engaged in. Therefore, it is not a common-sense belief in Reid’s sense.

‘Common sense’ is also used to refer to certain intuitions that we have. If we think of intuitions as intellectual seemings, then the following sentences state intellectual intuitions: there presently is a body which is *your* body (to use an example from G. E. Moore); and no proposition can be true and false at the same time. An intellectual seeming is not necessarily a belief, nor does it necessarily lead to one.

It may intellectually seem to you that velocities are additive, but you do not believe it – at least, not if you are aware of the fact that Einstein’s theory of special relativity entails that velocities are not strictly additive. But no doubt often there is nothing wrong with believing what intellectually seems to be the case; for instance, that the thoughts we are conscious of must have a subject. Here, then, is a common-sense intuition of a proposition, an intuition that leads us to believe it as well.

The phrase ‘common sense’ is also used to refer to principles of reasoning and inquiry widely held to be utterly plausible and wholly unproblematic. Examples include:

- in *epistemology*: the principle of credulity (‘It is probable that what seems to be the case actually is the case’) and the principle of epistemic conservatism (‘It is unreasonable to revise or alter a belief one has without good reason to do so’);
- in *metaphysics*: the principle of parsimony (Occam’s razor: ‘Entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity’), the principle that ‘every change has a cause’, and the principle that ‘everything that begins to exist must have a cause’;
- in *ethics*: the principle of double effect (‘There is a morally relevant difference between those consequences of our actions that we intend and those we do not intend but still foresee’), as well as the principle that ‘like cases should be treated equally’;
- in the *philosophy of science*: the principle of parsimony (Occam’s razor).

Occasionally (but the idea never had many adherents), Thomas Reid spoke of a ‘faculty’ of common sense – a faculty operating in humans alongside perception, memory, and reason (see Reid (1785) 2002).

Finally, ‘common sense’ is also used to refer to what could *very* loosely be called a method for doing philosophy (see Daley 2010: chapter 1). If that method is used or applied, what we then have – the activity as well as the results thereof – could be called ‘common-sense philosophy’.

4 RENÉ VAN WOUDENBERG AND RIK PEELS

WHAT IS COMMON-SENSE PHILOSOPHY?

In broad strokes, *common-sense philosophy* is philosophy that is roughly characterized by three methodological features.<sup>3</sup>

First, it accords common-sense beliefs, intuitions, and principles a strong and privileged epistemic status: roughly speaking, they have authority with default status and should only be given up, if that is possible at all, in the face of extraordinarily strong reasons. (We note that Moore held that no reason is strong enough to force us to give up a common-sense belief: ‘the common sense view of the world’, he said, ‘is in certain fundamental features wholly true’ (Moore (1925) 1993: 110). Other common-sense philosophers, however, have adopted the idea that common-sense beliefs and intuitions are potentially defeasible; they are innocent until proven guilty.)

Second, common-sense philosophy evaluates extant philosophical positions by how well they square with common-sense beliefs, common-sense intuitions, and common-sense principles; if the positions deny, or entail the denial of, common-sense beliefs, intuitions, or principles, then that is decidedly a strike against them.

Third and finally, when not engaged in philosophical critique but in constructive philosophy, common-sense philosophy takes common-sense beliefs, intuitions, and principles as *data points* that should be given their rightful place. In Thomas Reid’s view, common sense is the soil on which the flower of philosophy should bloom: ‘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’ (Reid (1764) 1997: 19). Moore, Chisholm, and other common-sense philosophers concurred: common-sense beliefs and intuitions are data points to be reckoned with, or even starting points for philosophical theorizing.

WHY COMMON SENSE MATTERS TO PHILOSOPHY

Common sense and appeals to common sense play an important role in various subfields of philosophy, even if they are not named or

presented as ‘appeals to common sense’. Epistemologists, for example, have offered many proposals as to how the concept of knowledge should be analysed. In the course of these discussions, counterexamples to proposed analyses have been presented, and these counterexamples usually triggered common-sense intuitions about knowledge. Edmund Gettier’s counterexamples to the justified-true-belief account of knowledge, for example, triggered common-sense intuitions about knowledge – even if Gettier himself did not use the expression ‘common-sense intuition’ (see Gettier 1963). The intuition that Gettier appealed to can be described by means of Bertrand Russell’s case of the man who looks at a clock that indicates that it is twelve o’clock; the man forms the belief that it is twelve o’clock, and it actually *is* twelve o’clock. Now suppose that the clock served the man well over many years; then his belief seems justified as well. He has a justified true belief. However, unbeknownst to him, the clock came to a halt exactly twenty-four hours ago. Then, although he has a justified true belief, so the Gettier argument goes (thereby relying on a common-sense intuition), it would seem that he has no knowledge. (Between brackets we note that appeals to common sense are often made by means of such locutions as ‘It seems (to me) that ...’, ‘It would appear that ...’, ‘It is intuitive that ...’, ‘It would be utterly strange to say that ...’, ‘Thinking that ... would be absurd’, and ‘The person in the street holds that ...’.)

Appeals to common sense are by no means restricted to epistemology. Think, for example, about the discussion in meta-ethics about the claim that moral responsibility requires the ability to do otherwise. This claim, or one very close to it, is one of Reid’s common-sense ‘first principles’: ‘No man can be blamed for what it was not in his power to hinder’ (Reid (1785) 2002: 494). Harry Frankfurt famously presented the case of a ‘counterfactual intervener’ who would have made Jones do deed D if Jones were to decide ‘on his own steam’ not to do D – but the intervener need not come into action as Jones does D ‘on his own steam’ (Frankfurt 1969). In this case, says Frankfurt, it is intuitive that Jones *is* morally responsible for doing D,

6 RENÉ VAN WOUDENBERG AND RIK PEELS

and hence it would seem that the principle that moral responsibility requires the ability to do otherwise is false. Our point is not to take a stance on Frankfurt's example, but to flag the fact that the Jones case that Frankfurt presents is meant to trigger common-sense intuitions (although, again, not under that description). This case is interesting because Frankfurt brings a common-sense intuition (about the Jones case) to bear against another common-sense intuition (about a general principle concerning responsibility). This illustrates – admittedly in a somewhat backhanded way – that common sense really matters to philosophy. Common-sense intuitions compare to the bumpers in a pinball machine: they move our thoughts in a way somewhat analogous to the way the bumpers move the pinball. In this example, two common-sense intuitions set our thoughts in motion: the intuition behind Reid's first principle, and our intuition that Jones is responsible.

In ethics we find appeals to common sense in, for example, the discussion of utilitarianism – roughly, the view that the morality of an action exclusively depends on its results. If abusive teachers, corrupt politicians, or slave owners get some utility from their actions, this should be as much thrown in the balance of reasons as the welfare (or rather, the absence thereof) of their victims. If no other action would produce as much overall benefit, then the abuse is, by the utilitarian's light, morally justified. And this, Shafer-Landau suggests, just seems plain wrong, for it is intuitively obvious that some actions are intrinsically wrong (Shafer-Landau 2012: 143). Here we see an appeal to common sense, albeit, again, not under that name.

The same holds in metaphysics, although there the dialectical situation seems to be rather different than in epistemology and ethics. Whereas in the latter fields common sense (common-sense beliefs, intuitions, principles) functions as a court of appeal, in metaphysics that seems far less the case. One area of metaphysical discussion of which this is true concerns material objects, their parts, and their identity across time. As Peter van Inwagen (1997: x) has said, common sense tells us (1) that the world contains numerous material objects,

(2) that many of these objects have parts that are themselves material objects, (3) that these objects endure through time, (4) that these objects can sometimes gain or lose parts, (5) that no two material objects can occupy the same space at the same time, and (6) that we humans are able to identify and know these material objects. Common sense tells us a lot!

However, it has been argued, there is a problem: the common-sense propositions are inconsistent with each other.<sup>4</sup> And if they are, this means that common sense cannot be fully relied upon, for in that case at least one of the propositions of common sense should be rejected. But what this shows is *not* that common sense *plays no role* in metaphysics, nor does it show that it *should play no role* in metaphysics. Rather, what it shows is that common sense does in fact play a *very* important role in metaphysical theorizing: the six common-sense propositions function somewhat analogously to the bumpers of the pinball machine – they move metaphysical thinking processes. The alleged inconsistency of the six propositions does not show that common sense should play no role in metaphysical theorizing either. It shows, at best, that we may have to give up something that *seemed* plain common sense, but was not. But that we may have to discard some common-sense beliefs does not entail that *none* of them can be a court of appeal. In fact, this example shows that alleged common-sense intuitions or beliefs may lose their innocence and be found guilty.

It is not only in epistemology, meta-ethics, ethics, and metaphysics that common sense and appeals to it matter. We should expect common sense to matter in *all* fields of philosophy. Let us illustrate this by reference to the field of philosophical reflection on the writing and reading of texts – which can be thought of as a subfield of what is often called ‘hermeneutics’. There is a general heuristic for how to spot common-sense assumptions in a field, namely, by reflecting on the question ‘what would obviously be absurd to assert in this field?’ A related heuristic is to concentrate on a practice in the field and reflect on the question ‘which statement *s* is such that it is obvious that you

8 RENÉ VAN WOUDENBERG AND RIK PEELS

cannot consistently engage in the practice and deny *s*?' We note that the inclusion of the element of 'obviousness' is motivated by the idea that common-sense propositions don't require, for their identification, scientific research or protracted and technical forms of reasoning.

If we apply this heuristic to the field of writing and reading texts, the following three propositions would seem to be common-sense propositions:

1. Texts have authors.
2. Authors mean to communicate things by means of their texts.
3. People can often come to know what authors mean to communicate by means of reading their texts.

After all, the denials of these propositions are obviously absurd. Moreover, it is obvious that you cannot consistently engage in the practice of writing texts and deny (1). It is also obvious that you cannot consistently engage in the practice of reading letters and messages directed to you and deny (2). Finally, it is obvious that you cannot consistently engage in the practice of higher education (which involves lots of reading) and deny (3). The point about identifying these common-sense propositions is not, of course, to startle ourselves and others with them. They are truisms, platitudes, not worth stating – that is to say, until people start thinking and saying things that entail their denial. And in the area of hermeneutics and literary theory, many statements are made that at the very least *seem* to entail their denial.<sup>5</sup> This has triggered a fundamental discussion – with common-sense intuitions once again functioning not wholly unlike the buffers on a pinball machine.<sup>6</sup>

All of this goes to show that common sense does indeed matter to philosophy: common sense, in one way or another, needs to be, and in fact usually is, reckoned with. The purpose of this book is, first, to register this fact and, second, to stimulate reflection and discussion on *why* it matters to philosophy and *how* exactly, and on which role and what sort of authority common sense has been and should be given in philosophical thinking.



## CRITICISMS OF APPEALS TO COMMON SENSE

Common sense and appeals to it in philosophical discussions have been frowned upon. Immanuel Kant, for instance, in the Introduction to his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, says:

It is indeed a great gift of God to possess . . . plain common sense. But this common sense must be shown in action by well-considered and reasonable thoughts and words, not by appealing to it as an oracle when no rational justification for one's position can be advanced. To appeal to common sense when science and insight fail, and no sooner – this is one of the subtle discoveries of modern times, by means of which the most superficial ranter can safely enter the lists with the most thorough thinker and hold his own. But as long as a particle of insight remains, no one would think of having recourse to this subterfuge. Seen clearly, it is but an appeal to the opinion of the multitude, of whose applause the philosopher is ashamed, while the popular charlatan glories and boasts in it.  
 (Kant (1783) 1950: 7)

Although not everything Kant says here is fully clear, what *is* clear is that he is less than enthusiastic about appeals to common sense in philosophy. Appeals to common sense, he holds, are appeals to the opinions of the multitude. And although he does not say *why* it is wrong to make such an appeal, we may perhaps assume that it is because he relies on some principle like 'If the multitude thinks that  $p$ ,  $p$  is false or unreasonable'.

What Kant says is, for a number of reasons, at the very least puzzling, if not problematic. First, as indicated earlier on, the common-sense philosopher does not hold that each and every proposition believed by the multitude is a common-sense proposition. For, in addition to being widely believed (or assumed), common-sense propositions have such properties as that their denials are absurd, that they are not believed on the basis of some kind of scientific investigation, and that they are foundational to practices that humans are

10 RENÉ VAN WOUDEBERG AND RIK PEELS

ineluctably engaged in. Many beliefs held by the multitude lack these properties – such as the belief that reading poetry is worthless and useless, or that travelling the world (never mind one’s ecological footprint) is a really fine thing to wish for and to do. So common-sense beliefs are, at best, a subset of beliefs held by the multitude.

Second, Kant does say that having common sense is a gift of God. But he immediately adds that it ‘must be shown in action by well-considered and reasonable thoughts and words, not by appealing to it as an oracle when no rational justification for one’s position can be advanced’. This is puzzling. For it looks as if Kant says that God offers us a gift that we should reject! Or rather, it looks as if he says: ‘Now see here, common sense is something that is really important, and we can get it (if we can get it), in two ways: as a gift from God, or through our own rational activity. But we should not want to get it in the former way, only in the latter.’ The question is why this should be so.

Third, it is puzzling, and in a subtle way also in tension with the idea that common sense is a gift from God, that Kant relies on some principle like: ‘If the multitude thinks that  $p$ ,  $p$  is false or unreasonable’. In the philosophical tradition, principles like this have often been considered implausible. *Consensus gentium* arguments keep making their appearance, be it under the name of ‘wisdom of the crowds’, ‘common sense’, or ‘folk philosophy’. Saying that ‘ $p$  is believed by the multitude and therefore  $p$  is false or unreasonable’ just is not convincing. For a basic idea behind *consensus gentium* arguments is that the universality of a belief is taken to be evidence that it is instinctive – and that the best explanation of its being instinctive is that it is true.<sup>7</sup>

Fourth, as Noah Lemos has suggested, Kant may have wanted to bring against appeals to common sense that common-sense beliefs *lack justification*, and that therefore appeals to them are no better than appeals to oracles. And he may have thought that such beliefs lack justification because the common-sense philosopher does not adduce arguments that buttress those beliefs. But if that is what