

COMMON SENSE – A PRESENTATION

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My talk falls into three parts. In the first, I attempt to answer such questions as “What is Scottish common sense philosophy?” and “What, in the history of philosophy, does the term 'common sense' mean?”. That's to say, my first section comments on the *concept* of common sense; in addition, it comments on 'common sense' as a term in the history of ideas. My second section offers some thoughts on common sense and education. In particular, it asks why the notions of common sense and “general” education appear to be linked. My third section moves the scene of discussion from the history of ideas to the (recent) present. I note that, in the 1980s, George Davie's discussion of the generalist and common sense tradition in Scotland became a beacon for radical and – in a broad sense – “alternative” ideas. The presentation ends by wondering aloud whether the term 'common sense' may serve as a rallying point for political and educational and cultural ideas in the present day.

1. COMMON SENSE PHILOSOPHY

The term 'common sense' has a lengthy history. It has roots in Ancient thought, and plays a part in the work of – for example – Aquinas and Leonardo and Descartes. In Scotland, at the time of the eighteenth century “Scottish Enlightenment”, it became especially significant: internationally, the Common Sense philosophy of Thomas Reid and his followers was sometimes equated with 'Scottish Philosophy' *per se*.

Perhaps the most helpful thing to say about 'common sense' as a philosophical term is that, from Ancient days onwards, the term had two distinct meanings (or two distinct shades of meaning). 'Common sense [*sensus communis*]' might mean EITHER a sense which was shared (or 'common') to a group or community of individuals. OR it might refer to a so-to-say “sixth” sense which drew together, into a coherent picture, the data supplied by the other five (sight, touch, sound, etc.). We may note that, in both of these meanings, 'common sense' signifies *shared* sense. However, we may note that in each case, the sharing is of a different kind. In the first meaning of the term, the *sharing* is between a number of individuals: 'common sense' in this meaning of the term presupposes a plurality of human beings. In the second meaning of the term, however, the *sharing* is between the five senses: it is a sharing which takes place not *between* individuals (or *amongst* individuals) but – so to say – *within* the individual concerned.

Both meanings (or both shades of meaning) are present in Scottish eighteenth-century philosophy. The first meaning – common sense as set of ideas shared by a number of

individuals – is present when, for example, Hutcheson translates the Latin expression *sensus communis* as 'Publick Sense'.¹ The second meaning is present when Reid refers to Aristotle's claim that 'the faculty by which we distinguish the objects of different senses , e.g., white from sweet, must be a faculty distinct from sight and touch'.² If both meanings of the term 'common sense' are present, then – a reader of Scottish philosophy may ask – how are they related? Is one meaning to be preferred over the other? Or are the meanings complementary? If they are complementary, how may a synthesis between them be understood?

In the Scottish philosophers, a clear-cut answer to such questions is difficult to discover. Reid, for example, introduces the idea of common sense by referring to 'certain principles...which the constitution of our nature leads us to believe, and which we are under a necessity to take for granted in the common concerns of life, without being able to give a reason for them'³ – but does not tell his reader how these 'certain principles' are grounded. Do the principles come from God – who has, from a Christian perspective, brought the 'constitution of nature' into being?⁴ If this is the case, then the notion of a God-given common sense *within* the individual takes precedence over 'common sense' in the first-mentioned meaning of the term. Or do the 'common concerns of life' – or, in short, human interaction – exercise a formative influence on 'our nature' and the 'certain principles'? If so, common sense in our first (plural, public) meaning of term comes into view.⁵ Like many (but not all) of the Scottish Enlightenment theorists, Reid (I propose) opts for the “divine assurance” position.

I end this section with a suggestion. Whatever view may have been favoured by Reid, the overwhelmingly most attractive view of common sense is one where both meanings are brought together. Ideally, we should like to say (a) that it is *in and through* public interaction – interaction between a plurality of individuals – that an individual becomes able to “totalise” his or her experience in a coherent way. And we should like to say (a) that individuals who are thus, able to “totalise” their experience are able to sustain interaction in a fruitful and to-and-fro way. And we should be able to say that, in effect, (a) and (b) are ways of stating the same thing. How may we bring about this synthesis? Numerous currents in present day thought – from

1 F. Hutcheson *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 2002) p. 17.

2 T. Reid 'Curia Prima on Common Sense' (Appendix to L. Marcil-Lacoste *Claude Buffier and Thomas Reid*, Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press 1982) p. 189. The passage is quoted in G. Davie *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect* (Edinburgh: Polygon Books 1986) p. 187.

3 T. Reid *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* [1764] (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2000) p. 33.

4 Read thus, Reid becomes an exponent of the 'supernaturalistic, teleological perspective' which Fate Norton terms *providential naturalism*: see D. Fate Norton *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1982) pp. 19, 171.

5 Arguably, such a view of common sense is advocated by Adam Smith: 'Every faculty in one man is the measure by which he judges of the like faculty in another. I judge of your sight by my sight, of your ear by my ear, of your reason by my reason, of your resentment by my resentment, of your love by my love. I neither have, nor can have, any other way of judging about them': A. Smith *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1976) p. 19.

Wittgensteinian philosophy to Habermas, from neo-Hegelian social theory to object relations psychoanalysis – can be viewed as attempts to grapple with the issue.

2. COMMON SENSE AND GENERAL EDUCATION

George Davie's *The Democratic Intellect*, published in 1961, was the work which alerted a generation of scholars to the riches which post-Union Scottish thought contains. A key aspect of these riches was common sense philosophy.⁶ However, the main focus of Davie's book was on education. The notion of a 'general education' – an education and, indeed, a culture in which 'the general should take precedence over the particular and the whole over the parts'⁷ – was the *Democratic Intellect's* most insistent theme.

And, in Davie's presentation, general education and common sense were closely related. This relation is one which obtains, I suggest, at a number of levels. First, George Jardine – Professor of Logic and Rhetoric at the University of Glasgow between 1787 and 1824, and chief proponent of general education in Davie's sense of the term⁸ – was a pupil and friend, for twenty years, of Thomas Reid. Jardine declared that, when he wrote his *Outlines of Philosophical Education*, it was 'extremely difficult to distinguish thoughts and sentiments suggested by that excellent person [Reid] from those which may have derived from other sources'.⁹ Second, the form of general education which Davie admires is one where 'philosophy acquired a commanding position in the higher educational system'¹⁰ – and an evident question to ask is: which form of philosophy might play this 'commanding' role? Might it be common sense philosophy? I do not pursue this (highly plausible) suggestion here.

Third, we may set history-of-ideas considerations aside and look again at the notion of *sensus communis* or common sense. When we address a topic or question or issue "in the spirit of common sense", what sort of conceptual picture comes to mind? For myself, the picture is one where the topic or issue is placed against a background of preconceptions and informal judgements and doubts (some of them nagging ones) and previous academic and non-academic debate. To add sound to our picture: behind the issue or topic which I seek to understand, a whisper (sometimes a clamour) of previous and on-going discussion is to be heard. In common sense thinking, in other words, background considerations – which may be distracting or deeply informative – are all-important. How do these reflections relate to general education? Let me

6 See G. Davie *The Democratic Intellect* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1982) ch. 11: 'A Metropolis of Common Sense'.

7 Ibid. pp. 4, 10.

8 Ibid. pp. 10ff.

9 Jardine, as quoted by C.E. Channel in her 'George Jardine's Course in Logic and Rhetoric: An Application of Thomas Reid's Common Sense Philosophy' in M. Dalgarno and E. Matthews, eds., *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid* (Dordrecht: Kluwers Academic Publishers 1989) p. 458. For Jardine's admiration of Reid, see G. Jardine *Outlines of Philosophical Education* (Glasgow 1818 [reprinted by Forgotten Books 2012]) pp. 157-8, 274-5.

10 *Democratic Intellect* p. 13.

explain.

If any topic or issue to which we turn our attention stands against a background of boundlessly large discussion, and if this background discussion may be formal and informal (and academic or non-academic) as the case may be, our consideration of the topic cannot take the received wisdom of any “specialism” for granted. This is so because our comments on the topic may be pictured as addressed to an indefinitely large audience – and it may be that someone in that audience may call in question the rules of the “specialism” concerned. This is not to say that specialist discussion is defective or somehow needless. Far from it: there can be numerous occasions where a specialist audience is exactly the right audience to address. It *is* to say, however, that there is no difference in conceptual rigour between “specialist” and “introductory” discussion – or, stated differently, “introductory” discussion has a conceptual rigour of its own. Or, stated in still different terms, “introductory” discussion is the specific form of discussion where issues of first principle and (loosely put) “philosophical” issues are most appropriately and vividly addressed. Such “philosophical” issues are, we may note, at the heart of *Democratic Intellect*-style general discussion.

I end this highly speculative section of my presentation with a note. Above, I have indicated that the term 'common sense' has two meanings, and a listener/reader may ask how these meanings relate to my remarks on general education. My answer is that considerations of what I have called “background” are present in both cases. If the notion of “background” may be explained by imagining a boundlessly large discussion, common sense in its meaning of *a sense shared by a number of individuals* is already invoked. If, instead, common sense is understood as *a sense shared by the other, more familiar, five senses* then considerations of background are likewise implied. So a background to any one sense is supplied by some or all of the remaining four.¹¹ This suggestion may, perhaps, be unpacked by looking at the form which metaphors frequently take: we speak of a “smooth” sound, a “discordant” combination of colours, a “vivid” person, a “spiky” thought and so forth. And, furthermore, it may be because we relate to other individuals – as, say, an infant relates to a parent – that our experience can achieve coherence.¹²

3. COMMON SENSE IN THE 1980s AND TODAY

In the course of the 1980s, George Davie's ideas about common sense and a general education served as a focus or rallying point for a range of radical and, so to say, “alternative” discussions. Stated differently, lines of thought associated with the common sense tradition developed a fresh urgency and unfolded in a range of formal

11 Adam Smith comes close to this suggestion when he contends that, in understanding 'the nature of the objects of Sight', 'their dissimilitude to, as well as their correspondence and connection with those of Touch' is a relevant consideration: see A. Smith 'Of the External Senses' in his *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics 1982) p. 148.

12 See, for discussion of this last-mentioned point and a helpful diagram, M. Tomasello *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 2000) p. 65.

and informal, university-based and non-university-based, ways. The decade in which the south of England did its best to co-opt the term 'common sense' as a reactionary slogan was one when, in Glasgow and Edinburgh, a multiplicity of very different common-sense-inspired flowers started to bloom.

Why did this happen when and where it did? One answer to this question is that circumstances combined in a propitious and mutually supporting way. New work by Davie was published, and existing work was republished in an accessible form.¹³ The *Edinburgh Review*, under the editorships of Peter Kravitz and Murdo Macdonald, became a centre of debate and published (besides essays by Davie) fictional and non-fictional work by a new generation of writers. Its masthead declaration – 'To Gather the Rays of Culture into One' – stressed its rootedness in the generalist tradition. Meetings of the Free University of Glasgow (1987-1991) provided a forum where Davie together with Naom Chomsky and James Kelman might meet. In May 1987, *Common Sense* commenced twelve years of small-journal publication.¹⁴ This list of events and developments – a list which could readily be extended – gives an idea of a process of discussion which, although loosely textured, built momentum at every step.

Viewed in retrospect, the renaissance of common sense thinking that I associate with the late 1980s had two striking features. One is that discussion in those years addressed a range of topics without a sense of *either* appealing to rival centres of expert knowledge *or* seeking a common denominator (which would have had the effect that the level of discussion was brought down). This feature is best exemplified in the 'Encyclopaedia Section' which became a regular feature of the *Edinburgh Review* from February 1987 onwards and, I think, *Common Sense* in its early issues. What allowed discussion to be wide-ranging whilst maintaining a challenging level was a tacit commitment on the part of contributors to think and write in a "generalist" and, so to say, "introductory but non-patronising" way. In the juxtaposition of subject-matters and approaches that resulted in such a discussion, "philosophical" or first-principle-oriented considerations occupied – as the *sensus communis* tradition leads us to expect – a prominent place.

The second feature which, in retrospect, calls for comment is easy to describe but much more difficult to explain. It is simply that a wide range of people, whether or not university based, pursued ideas out of interest and for their own sake. There was little trace of the instrumentalist 'bread-and-butter scholarship' – to borrow the poet Schiller's telling expression¹⁵ – which, in response to research ratings and careerist conformity, has become all too familiar in the universities of neoliberal years. How should we account for the non-instrumentalist (or more-than-instrumentalist) attitude

13 A soft-cover edition of Davie's *The Democratic Intellect* appeared in 1982 and *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect* was published under the Polygon imprint in 1986. Two collections of Davie's papers – *The Scottish Enlightenment and Other Essays* and *A Passion for Ideas* – were published by Polygon in 1991 and 1994 respectively.

14 A complete run of *Common Sense* may be consulted at www.commonsensejournal.org.uk/.

15 F. von Schiller 'The Nature and Value of Universal History: An Inaugural Lecture [1789]' *History and Theory* Vol. 11, No. 3 (1972) pp. 322-5.

to ideas and the life of the mind that I associate with common sense thinking? What brings such an attitude into being? I confess I have no clear answer to this question. Two points or, rather, impressions, may be relevant. One is that experiments with informal education and the notion of 'free universities' seem, characteristically, to bring a non-instrumentalist view of thinking into play. The other is that, when a subject-matter's first principles are under discussion, participants become absorbed in the exchange of ideas and conversation unfolds according to issues and questions that are raised.

Why did the resurgence of the common sense tradition in the 1980s come to an end? Two answers suggest themselves. The first is the least interesting: a process which is, in its nature, informal evaporates when individuals' lives develop in different directions. The second is not merely interesting but deeply alarming: the two decades which divide the common sense renaissance (as I have called it) of the 1980s and the present are those in which neoliberalism and, in the universities, 'marketisation'¹⁶ has been the order of the day. Is the eclipse of the common sense tradition caused (or partially caused) by neoliberalism's ascendancy? Is 'marketisation' a source of the bread-and-butter attitude to the life of the mind which, in contradistinction to the spirit of common sense, I have bewailed? I think it is very difficult to return negative answers to these questions.¹⁷

Might the common-sense-lead discussions of the 1980s be renewed at the present time? I use the publication in June 2013 of a new edition of Davie's *Democratic Intellect*¹⁸ as an occasion to wonder aloud whether such a renewal of expectation is not only possible but timely as well. If the life of the mind is given a focus outside the universities, and in informal and self-directed groupings, there seems to me no reason why common sense perspectives should not be reopened in a vigorous and flourishing and challenging way.

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[Note: papers by Richard Gunn, including some from the 1980s, may be found at

16 L. Levidow 'Neoliberal Agendas for Higher Education' in A. Saad-Filho and D. Johnston, eds., *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader* (London: Pluto Press 2005) p. 156.

17 It is tempting and, I think, justified to relate questions raised in the present paragraph to Adam Smith's worries about 'commercial' (or market-based) society: see especially A. Smith *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics 1981) pp. 781-2. But I do not explore Smith's (frequently misunderstood) view of commercial society here.

18 G. Davie *The Democratic Intellect*, with a preface by Lindsay Paterson and an introduction by Murdo Macdonald and Richard Gunn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2013).

<http://www.richard-gunn.com>