

The Plain Truth about Common Sense

Skepticism, Metaphysics, and Irony¹

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1995

¹ This paper was prepared with the assistance of a postdoctoral research fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I would like to thank Christopher Dustin, Hayden Ramsay, and Alex Oliver for helpful discussion. Earlier versions of this paper were read at meetings of the Cambridge University Moral Sciences Club, the Edinburgh University Philosophy Colloquium, and the Canadian Philosophical Association. My thanks to all those who offered comments on those occasions, and especially to those who disagreed so usefully: Hugh Mellor, Peter Lewis, and Lynd Forgyson.

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A historically minded reader will see that my title is a cobble of titles: both the famous pamphlet by Thomas Paine and the less famous objection to that work that indicated how, in political argument anyway, *Plain Truth* and *Common Sense* need not always be in agreement.² The title is also meant to recall Thompson Clarke’s influential dissection (1972) of that quintessentially plain philosophical man, G. E. Moore—whose “Defence of Common Sense” (1959a)³ is taken by Clarke to get some airplanes off the ground of the plain and, therefore, unwittingly to inspire an uncommonsensical skepticism about them. The title is meant, further, to express a wish that most thinkers who ally themselves with common sense share, namely, that what I have to say will strike you as commonsensical. The precariousness of that wish, its instability within the context of a philosophical argument such as this one (and such as Moore’s, and, in a much different way, such as Reid’s and Berkeley’s), is the last thing, by way of introduction, that the title is meant to say.

Plain Common Sense

What is the plain truth about common sense? It is surprising, though perhaps not to philosophers, that this question has no easy answer. We all think we know what common sense is until we begin either (1) to reflect critically on it, in which case we have arguably ceased to be commonsensical, or (2) to conflict with others about certain elements of it, casting parts of our own common sense into question. This, of course, will not do, for, among other things, common sense must be common; it must also, I could add, be stable, and these disagreements appear to threaten that stability. Sometimes such disputes proceed from category mistakes and a rather common (if not a sensible) unwillingness to draw distinctions. If it is true, as Timothy Sprigge suggests, that “we will only be able to articulate clearly what the common sense view of the world is when we do not have an inordinate respect for it” (1986, 204), then a degree of justified violence is in the offing. To get at common sense, we must do some conceptual carving. Whether this will *ex hypothesi* bar us from speaking, later, of the plain truth about it is the central question I want to raise in this discussion.

Some distinctions may help immediately. A great deal of what we commonly speak of as common sense is better described as “common nonsense”: the tenets of folk wisdom, fishwives’ tales, traditional remedies, received lore, and the like. With no disrespect to fishwives, much of what passes for sense in this realm is, and has been shown to be, false; and whatever else is true about common sense, it must not be known to be false. In other words, it survives as sense only to the extent that its falsity does not arise. It is very possible that its truth does not come up either, in any verificationist sense, but that does not pose a threat to sense—at least not yet. But beliefs on the order that

² This objection to Paine’s tract may remind readers of a different text, the magazine of that name distributed by an organization called The Worldwide Church of God.

³ See also “Proof of an External World” (1959b).

colds are contracted by sitting in drafts, that butter is good for blistered burns, or that philosophers cannot master worldly tasks are false and yet elements of a certain kind of common sense. We need not trouble to distinguish here— though we surely could— among superstition, pseudoscience, delusion, prejudice, and sheer bloody-mindedness, all of which may be found represented in this realm. Nor am I suggesting that the realm is itself a stable one, presenting a unified face to the world. We all have our own stores of this common (non)sense, sometimes defined by family or group solidarity, usually determined by cultural background, and almost always of little lasting philosophical interest when we want to isolate common sense for bigger fish frying.

To do *that* we have to draw at least one more distinction, though I do not pretend it will deal decisively with the elastic nature of common sense. The distinction, borrowed from Marcus Singer, is between common sense as what we might call *basic knowledge* and common sense as *sound judgment*. In the first sense, common sense “is ordinary, normal, average understanding—common understanding—without which one is foolish or incompetent or insane. In the other, common sense is thought of as good, sound, practical sense” (1986, 227).⁴ The distinction, Singer adds, is among other things useful for showing that “it is one of the anomalies of common sense that, in one sense, common sense is something common, while, in another sense, common sense is something uncommon.” I propose to leave the uncommon sense of common sense aside⁵ and concentrate now on those elements, or at least those we can easily isolate, of the sense without which we court folly or insanity.

Once more, here we normally think we know what common sense is, but our thinking so can rapidly lead us into trouble. *Common* common sense (which I will call, with Clarke, “plain common sense”) is thought to be something shared by all human agents. It is sense both in the sense of being based on sense (the sensory receptors through which we experience the world) and in the sense of being common (it does not depend on particular experience or background). So it would not, could not, make sense to cut against this common sense, at least in those realms we call the everyday or the ordinary or the plain. That is, we would make ourselves out to be fools or madpeople if we did that. We would lack what Herbert Fingarette has called, with reference to insanity, a “grasp of essential relevance” (1972, 15–18). That much is clear enough, I think, to stand.

Yet it is possible that, from some points of view (both plain and philosophical), we have left common sense behind even in saying this small amount. That is, by speaking of something common to all, have we left the realm of plain common sense and ventured into the realm of philosophical prejudice, the marshalling of universal categories and the bending to them of already historicized experience? Perhaps. An

⁴ I am also indebted to Singer’s analysis in this paper of folklore as “common nonsense.”

⁵ I think, however, that Singer is convincing on the point that this species of common sense has a considerable moral significance. This is true of the “sensus communis” thinkers discussed, for example, by Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (1,1), namely, Vico and Shaftesbury ; it may be equally true, in the guise of the virtue *phronesis*, of Aristotle.

even more pressing objection is that our small clearing of commonsense space is always going to be a false achievement, for we cannot ever fully specify what the elements of plain common sense must be. In other words, all talk of plain common sense becomes, like it or not, talk of *philosophical* common sense—and, whatever its charms, that is not the plain truth that we wanted. The reason for this claim, which I think is not quite commonsensical, is that plain common sense will by its very plain nature defy strict determination. Because it is a basic feature of—or perhaps “background to”—experience, our normal methods of investigation will fail when we attempt to isolate its *general* features and state them clearly. The commonsense view of the world is, as L. T. Hobhouse said, “the result of thought acting on masses of experience too great to be perfectly articulated” (1896, 377). So any articulation will be partial (not whole) and therefore partial (prejudiced). Thus, the second objection really becomes a version of the first.

Yet I do not think these objections are entirely convincing, and for a fairly commonsensical reason, namely, that whatever difficulties we may observe in the prospect of giving a full description to plain common sense we can, without inordinate difficulty, say what some of the *main* features of plain common sense are. If we could not do that, it would not, I think, remain common sense. It is true that it will, at a later stage, prove necessary to stop the investigation of the plain, but not for these reasons exactly, and certainly we will not stop before we have fairly begun. Therefore, with apologies to these qualifying warnings, and with a measure of awareness about the dangers courted, I want to claim that the essential features of plain common sense are the following: (1) that there is an objectively existing world external to me; (2) that it has existed for some long time in the past and will so exist in the future; (3) that I exist as both a subject and an object in this world; (4) that I existed in the past and will exist in the future; and, finally, (5) that there are numerous others like me, both subjects and objects, who exist in time and the external world.

There is a great deal more I could say about plain common sense, shadings of detail and complex relationships, with exceptions and qualifications of varying degrees of interest. I could, in addition, speak like William James of common sense’s pragmatic value: “Common sense appears,” he writes, “as a perfectly definite state in our understanding of things ... satisfies in an extraordinarily successful way the purposes for which we think... It suffices for the necessary practical ends of life” (1907,181,182). To speak this way is not necessary, however, and it may be misleading, for all of these details may be seen either to follow from my five commonsense propositions or to extend beyond them to our goals and actions. What is plain, I think, is that those goals and actions could not succeed without a view of the world as it is essentially described by my five propositions.

Stated *as propositions*, of course, they have an odd flavor: the oddness of the move from plain common sense to philosophical common sense. It is an oddness that can lead us to wonder for what reason, in what sense, or in response to what challenge such propositions would or could be relevantly uttered. More of that later. For now, I

think it is plain that anyone who doubted the truth of any of these propositions would be, as Bradley once put it, either a fool or an advanced thinker. Let us consider the advanced thinker.

Metaphysics/Skepticism

Common sense has been both a source and a target of skepticism. It has also been both an enemy and a friend of certain metaphysical doctrines, sometimes at the same time. It is these varied uses that will show us, I think, just why the philosophical truth about common sense is that there is none, and the plain truth about it is that there is no more to say, except ironically. What do I mean?

I mean first that many uses of common sense are tropic. That is, they post an appeal to common sense as part of a rhetorical strategy or course of argumentation. Thomas Paine did it, and so did his pamphleteering opponent, and disagreement here no more indicates the incoherence of common sense in the plain sense than such appeals ever do. These opposing appeals can indicate genuine disagreement about a proposition, but it is not necessarily or even often a commonsense one. For example, I may think it is only common sense that taxation without representation is unfair. You counter that it is only common sense that colonies cannot have the full rights of a home nation. Neither of these views is common sense, let alone “only” common sense—as if to quibble indicates a troubled mind, or a foolish one. Both speakers want to appear realistic, hard-nosed, and sensible; both want to suggest that any opposing view courts incoherence, if not outright insanity. But this is not strictly speaking true, for sane people may disagree about certain matters, especially in politics.

The same rhetorical strategy is evident in what might be called commonsense, or plain, skepticism. I say, for example, that I am skeptical of the efficacy of placing purple rock crystals in my pockets during a *viva voce* examination. Here the tropes are a little harder to untangle. Plain skeptical appeals are usually scientific ones, finding superstition and widespread delusion full of error. This is not, it goes without saying, what we think of as philosophical skepticism; but neither is it, and this may require saying, a straightforward appeal to plain common sense—though it is allied with it. We might say that science is systematic and reflective common sense, but it will therefore conflict with undifferentiated or truly plain common sense (as in, e.g., the heliocentric model of the universe, which seems to confound the solid commonsense perception that the sun rises and sets), as well as with what I called earlier common nonsense (as in, e.g., the nonfalsifiable nature of astrological claims).

Despite the close relationship between them, then, straightforwardly to call this scientific attitude “common sense” is no more than to attempt an argumentative stamp of approval. Hence the rhetoric is not very different from the political example, though the appeals may be more resistant to objection. Plain common sense and science do run on some kind of line: “the way things really are” and “the way we commonly see

them” are linked together, but never simply or without further ado. For one thing, plain common sense appears to require and admit of no particular theory or paradigm, whereas science always will. (At the very least, there must be a theory of experimental proof.) Theory provides access to the reality described in the *really* of the phrase “the way things really are.”

It is perhaps *this* link between common sense and science that leads a certain kind of philosopher to make an appeal to common sense. Indeed, as in politics and other spheres of conceptual dispute, the appeal is frequent and may even provide a master trope for philosophical argumentation. Because there is, as Montaigne reminded us, no thing so absurd that some philosopher has not thought it, it has long been the habit of philosophers to decry the excesses and absurdities of their predecessors. This is most commonly, and most easily, accomplished by showing (or saying) that the predecessor has deviated from common sense in some ridiculous manner.

“From Descartes onwards,” says Jonathan Ree, “the habit of decrying the wayward voyages of old philosophers who, as represented by Milton, ‘found no end, in wandering mazes lost’, became a pervasive mannerism of philosophical writing; and it enabled philosophical authors to make an intriguing invitation to their readers, that they join a democratic, commonsensical alliance against the baseless, self-deceiving conspiracy by which philosophers had imposed upon an over-indulgent public opinion in the past” (1987, 41). The starting point Ree chooses (“from Descartes onwards”) is not idle. It is characteristic of philosophy in the mood inaugurated by Descartes—a mood in which the possibility of perceptual error is a great enemy—that questions of doubt and certainty, partiality and generality, assume an awful importance. Appeals to common sense, then, assume an authoritative status in what can be called traditional epistemology, the branch—though mood, again, is better—of philosophy in which knowledge is thought to be (required to be) both certain and general. As we shall see shortly, to just the extent that this thought (or requirement) is present, so is the spectre of skepticism: but not now of the plain or commonsense variety.

In my view, claims to accord with common sense really perform a rhetorical role even greater than that suggested by Ree. In addition to distancing themselves (often, though not always, explicitly) from earlier or anyway other systems of firm knowledge, they also distance themselves (often, though not always, implicitly) from suggestions that firm knowledge cannot be had. Thus, to take one prominent example, we have Bishop Berkeley’s much-quoted avowal: “I side in all things with the mob,” he says, pledging himself “to eternally banishing Metaphysics, &c., and recalling Men to Common Sense.” Lest this statement appear incongruous with Berkeley’s celebrated idealism, one has only to recall that a thesis about the grounds or dependency of knowledge may, possibly should, in no way affect the contents of knowledge. The reader of Berkeley who doubts his sanity with respect to the presence of the table in front of us (as students are sometimes inclined to) has failed to see that the *metaphysical* claim he makes is not in conflict with the *commonsensical* claim, but is, in fact, dependent on it.

Hence, to the extent that they attempt to provide solid grounds for belief or knowledge, and not change or perhaps even challenge the content of it, all metaphysical claims revolve on appeals of greater or lesser degree to the status and authority of plain common sense. George Pappas (1986) notes that both realism and idealism can therefore be of the commonsense variety, claiming (1) that commonsense propositions are, in their own sphere, true and certain; and (2) that common sense is a reliable criterion for assessing metaphysical theories, if not the sole or strongest criterion. Divergences in metaphysical commitment result not from variable views of common sense as such, but rather from variation on what to do with it, what to make of it, how to relate it to truth, or how things really are. In Berkeley's case, *versions* of the two claims are accepted. He might, of course, quibble that it makes no sense to speak of *truth* or *certainty* within the commonsense sphere, but he certainly does not doubt the stability of the mob's view of things for their purposes. He might also add that, given this, common sense can be only a *touchstone* to metaphysical evaluation, not a strict determinant. In short, Berkeley's "weak" commonsense metaphysical view entails that philosophy should accord with common sense only if it is also already superior to its metaphysical rivals in offering greater explanatory ability. Put oppositely, metaphysics should only contradict common sense when it thereby provides superior explanation of the world's true nature.

"Strong" commonsense claims will argue by contrast that, given common sense's presumptive truth, anything that does not accord with common sense must be false and cannot be countenanced in a metaphysics. Thus the no-nonsense realism of Thomas Reid, the Scottish "commonsense" philosopher who wished to tie all metaphysical judgments to the putative authority of common sense, is only the most extreme version of a philosophical strategy intrinsic to all metaphysical system building. That extremism is dangerous, though, for it can lead to contradictions: common sense may change or be effectively reformed by science. And a variable realism no longer looks so hard-nosed and sensible. Reid makes the mistake of thinking that common sense is a firm category and therefore a suitable sole basis for his philosophical position. But "the common-sense view of the world is a mass of contradictions," Sprigge reminds us, "and one who wants to know how things really are must move on from common sense, to some view of the world which will clash with it at points. Since common sense clashes with itself the requirement of consistency with common sense rules out common sense itself" (1986, 203). Like the scientist, the responsible metaphysician *begins* with how things appear and moves from there to how things really are, based on a theory that is, by degrees, more or less responsive to the imagined firmness of the original appearance. Or, put in different philosophical vocabulary, the philosopher begins with the *contents* of commonsense beliefs and from there moves to query the *grounds* of those beliefs, hoping either to establish the firmness of those grounds or to discover the manner in which belief of some (any) kind could be firmly grounded.

Thus it has always been philosophically fair to claim that, though the table appears to be really out there in front of us, it is not (i.e., not really), or that, though we

believe the table to be there, we do not know it (or know it justifiably). What it is *not* fair to claim is that the table does not even appear to be there, that we do not believe it to be. That claim is insane. Of course the table is there; open your eyes and look! Metaphysical systems may bring on themselves all manner of tortuous apparatus and system machinery in a drive to say how things really stand, but if they do not, at some level, begin with how things commonsensically stand, they are no good even as metaphysics. The traditional appearance/reality distinction and the more nuanced contents/ grounds of belief distinction are, from this point of view, versions—perhaps the governing ones—of the move from the plain to the philosophical.

In sum, responsiveness to common sense, true to philosophical argumentation’s governing strategy of claiming to side with the mob against absurdity, is a necessary condition of a successful metaphysics, though (as the example of Reid shows) it is not a sufficient condition.⁶ Singer puts the matter this way: “Although a metaphysics too literally attached to [common sense] may be false as metaphysics, no metaphysics that contradicts it *in its context and about its proper business* can be true” (1986, 234; emphasis mine).⁷ Still, metaphysics often invites misunderstanding as a result of its alleged responsiveness to common sense, and it may in addition be motivated by urges that can be (should be?) resisted. Common sense, it is commonly thought, remains unimpressed by, and shows no need of, the saving systems constructed by metaphysics to save or explain it. It has no desire to move outside itself, and consequently its impatient replies to the metaphysician are usually on the order that he or she is not an advanced thinker, but, in fact, a fool. You argue that there is no table really there? I just told you there was. How do I know? I opened my eyes and there it was before me. What, of what peculiar kind, is your problem?

Speaking now diagnostically, the metaphysician’s problem is a philosophical one, and like many others of the same kind, it has the peculiarity that it cannot be felt to be a problem unless one had already assumed the one and only odd position from which it can arise as a problem. Put another way: to get the plain person to see a problem with common sense is already to demand a surrender of plainness in favor of the philosophical, a surrender the person will resist insofar as he or she has common sense. What is the problem with untutored common sense? The problem is that it does not see

⁶ A failure to appreciate this instance of necessity/sufficiency has led some metaphysicians to discard common sense too quickly. “Very little can be done with common sense,” said C. D. Broad: “Any theory that can fit the facts is certain to shock common sense somewhere; and in face of the facts we can only advise common sense to follow the example of Judas Iscariot, and ‘go out and hang itself’” (1925, 184–86). Or compare Bradley’s pronouncement, “I see no way ... by which the clear thinking which calls itself ‘Common Sense’ and is satisfied with itself, can ever be reconciled with metaphysics... And for ‘Common Sense’ also it will remain that we shall be able to live only so far as, wherever we feel it to be convenient, we can forget to think” (1914,444). What is distinctive about these complaints is that they arise from the philosophical realm—where one is in possession of “the facts”—looking back on the plain from which they have only just come.

⁷ This italicized phrase, I want to say, captures what the plainness of plain common sense is all about.

its own weakness—but therein lies also its strength. Commonsense metaphysics, and metaphysics of many other kinds, are from this vantage responses to a certain kind of vulnerability that is felt to exist in plain common sense— but felt only philosophically.

What is that vulnerability? It is that common sense is felt not to be immune from a skeptical challenge of Cartesian provenance—not the dubiety of our senses on certain occasions (for we have commonsense, and also scientific, ways of dealing with that), but rather the dubiety that can arise even in cases of otherwise perfectly clear knowledge, namely, that I might be dreaming, or might be a brain in a vat.⁸ It is understanding the true force of this doubt, understanding it in a sense in which it cannot simply be waved impatiently away, that motivates the metaphysician.

Yet here, as it has often been remarked, especially in the recent diagnostic moods of philosophy, the metaphysician cannot succeed. In order to refute the doubt introduced by Descartes, the metaphysician must resort to just the sort of system that common sense will find hard to countenance. Berkeley siding with the mob is all very well, but they will want none of him and his principled antirealism. The low opinion of the commonsense world would be a small price to pay in exchange for certain knowledge of that world. But it is the worse fate of the metaphysician to find that all quests for certainty will of necessity fail to rid themselves of the doubt introduced by Descartes. Any degree of knowledge that falls short of laying to rest the dreaming doubt cannot be called certain; and that doubt cannot, in the sense imagined by Descartes (i.e., under conditions of perfect knowledge, while I otherwise think myself clearheaded and with eyes peeled), be laid to rest.⁹ The ingenuity of metaphysicians in seeking this good riddance of doubt may know no bounds, but their efforts are Sisyphean. Metaphysician and skeptic are locked in eternal struggle, a dance to the death that shall consume them both in claim and counterclaim.

It is no wonder, then, that the commonsense response to these disputes of traditional epistemology has been to leave the disputants to their own perverse devices and desires. There are, after all, lives to be led, houses to be built, meals to be savored, warm afternoons to be enjoyed in good company. And who, in his right mind anyway, could doubt that the world is right where it appears to be, moreover, that it is *really* there and requires no defense and succumbs to no challenge? Who could doubt that I am here, and so are others like me? That we have been in the past and will continue to be, though not for long, in the future? Though common sense might not put it this way,

⁸ Ree says, of the latter possibility, that, of course, we *are* brains in vats. Our vats happen to be bodies situated in the world. I take it that the point of saying this is to show that the force of the Cartesian doubt does not depend on a peculiar science-fiction imagination, or the “intuition-pumping” efficiency of some ingenious thought-experiment.

⁹ This dilemma of certain knowledge has been much remarked on, and it is, among other things, what Barry Stroud means by *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (1984), especially chapter 1. Stroud’s study is a book-length reply and commentary on Clarke, (1972). See also Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (1979), chapters 6 and 8.

traditional epistemology is language on extended holiday, a long and fruitless journey to a world other than this one, a fanciful Club Med of the mind.

The Plain Person

This plain impatience with the traditional philosopher becomes the plain patience of Moore in his “Defence” and “Proof.” But here the complications of plain and philosophical proceed in a reverse direction: not the metaphysician who claims plain authority for his or her system (like Berkeley or Reid) but the system-busting plain person who inexplicably writes as a philosopher.

Moore convincingly shows that common sense of the plain variety is immune from the skeptical challenge, and concomitantly is uninterested in the system building of the metaphysician. For Moore, as for common sense generally, these two warring figures are two sides of the same foreign coin. And yet Moore’s defense, and his proof, are generated by a philosophical intelligence, given philosophical window dressing of the usual kind (rigor, argumentation, plodding qualification), and ultimately thought to be philosophically worth saying. He says his “philosophical position” is that certain commonsense propositions are ones he “knows, with certainty, to be true” (1959a, 32).

These are, with some variation, the propositions I enumerated earlier. Moore’s “defence” of these propositions is to point out what we might call a “performative contradiction” in those who persist in denying them. Any philosopher who has, for example, denied the existence of what are usually called “other minds” has at the same time assumed their existence in the people he or she is addressing. Moreover, because the propositions of common sense are known, with certainty, to be true, they cannot be consistently denied. “Some philosophers,” he says, therefore find themselves in the unenviable position of affirming some (metaphysical) propositions that are incompatible with common sense, even while they *must* at the same time affirm the propositions of common sense.

Matters are likewise in Moore’s “proof” of the external world. Here the existence of external objects is proven by demonstrating that we know that at least two external things exist, namely, my left hand and my right hand. I prove it by saying, “Here is one hand” (with a suitable gesture) and adding—though this is really philosophical overkill—“Here is another” (gesturing now with my other hand). Since we know this is a hand, to offer it to view is to *prove* its existence: that is, to generate a conclusion that is not contained in the premises, and goes beyond them.

It is with this “going beyond” the premises that the picture begins to get confusing. Our dissatisfaction with Moore’s sleight of hand is the clue to this confusion, for it is only here that it is obvious just how Moore has failed to hit the mark in his remarks.¹⁰

¹⁰ Thomas Nagel (in *The View from Nowhere* [1986, 69]) expresses this dissatisfaction by saying that Moore, confronted with the epistemological abyss between the content of belief and grounds of it, turned his back and announced he was on the other side.

The problem, I take it, is not so much with him as with the status of the claim he thinks he is refuting. But Moore shares the blame in thinking that the skeptical claim (which may not be one) is even capable of refutation in the way assumed. In short, by ceasing/or *even one moment* to be the plain person (the patience he displays is evidence of this ceasing), Moore succeeds only in giving his remarks a peculiar plain/philosophical status that is no better (though no worse) than the peculiar plain/philosophical character of the traditional epistemologist's remarks. Moore protests too much. Instead of offering a philosophical defense where one is neither needed nor possible, Moore might have been better advised to introduce his metaphysical foe to a skeptic and send them both off to another room.

I believe the picture of Moore is therefore relevantly as Clarke sees it. Moore, "the inveterate plain man," is fending off doubts that from the point of view of common sense are not serious: "These implained doubts are ignorable—either absurd, irrelevant, or out of place" (1972, 755). Yet Moore's foible is to attempt a defense of common sense in terms of very general propositions (that is, propositions of philosophical common sense). This attempt leads him beyond the security of the plain. He can—he must—be forgiven. It is not simply Moore's desire to philosophize that led him astray, but the nature of common sense itself. "Under a certain conception of common sense," says Clarke, "reality exceeds this daydream" of a plain person simply defeating always implained doubts. Our view from the plain extends past its limits, in other words, and this of necessity. Here we have not only the roots of the skeptical problem, but also the first indication that common sense is, contrary to common sense, not immune from doubt/*ram its own standpoint*.

How does reality exceed the plain, and in what sort of direction? Consider Clarke's misleading and misled plane spotters, who discern features of warplanes on the basis of partial information. From the position of greater information (knowledge of a little-used type similar in most respects to another), certain judgments of the spotters begin to appear doubtful. Though for practical (military) purposes, the spotters do not need to know of the additional possibility—the little-used plane is not as threatening as its near twin—it is nevertheless the case that grounds for doubt can be introduced, but only, of course, from the position that is detached from those practical purposes.

Clarke, and Barry Stroud, believe the skeptical doubt is like this: a function of a detachment view of objectivity. It is only in wanting to step back, and back again, and again, that Descartes's dreamer enters the picture. As Clarke puts it, "We want to know not how things are *inside* the world, but how things are, absolutely. And the world itself is one of these things" (1972, 762). The desire to detach from practical purposes, and therefore from all imaginable contexts, is the engine that drives Cartesian doubt. (Certainty and doubt always come together, two modalities of the same desire.) It is the peculiar virulence of the skeptic's challenge that, though it arises only at the furthest reaches of the backward dance, appears to have an effect on all subordinate positions. That is, philosophical doubt casts aspersions on all knowledge, though not usually for practical purposes. Hence, drawing the line of doubt from context to context, and

out of all context—the move from partial to general to universal—is tantamount to surrendering the certainty common sense led us to believe we had.

Is this a false trail, however? Is the line really connected, or is the philosopher instead doing something so different from the plane spotters that imagining the wider circles of possibility is a mug's game, the pathology of some few twisted minds? We may be inclined to think so. If we just say no to objectivity (of the detached sort), can we not forestall doubt at just that point where we might otherwise threaten to tumble into the dreaming question? Then the question looks mad, or ill posed, or abusive of grammar, or falsely motivated, or excessively general—in short, a fetish of a strange minority of the population, deviant and ignorable. In Stroud's example, a party guest, told another guest has just seen a goldfinch in the garden, is moved to ask, "How does he know he's not dreaming?" We might take this as a feeble joke, of the kind often enough made at philosophy parties. If the guest were to persist in the question, however, past the point where we all laughed dutifully in recognition of the attempt at wit, we might begin to wonder just what was wrong. Was the guest ill? Tired? Or worse, gone mad?

Yet these responses will not do, ultimately, in laying the question to rest— though we may lay the guest to rest in a quiet corner. Certainly, the question is ill posed, perhaps pathological, in this context. But there is little question that we can pose the question otherwise, in other places, in a way that makes it immune from routine dismissal. Doing philosophy is one of these ways, perhaps the only one. For this reason, the impatience of some ordinary-language philosophy, confronted with a skeptic, begins to look similar to Moore's patient hand waving. Yet, because it is still philosophical, ordinary-language philosophy is subject to the same limitations as Moore, ultimately locking itself in an eternal struggle of claim and counterclaim.

It is Stanley Cavell's genius to describe this moment in the struggle over common sense, to suggest that the recovery of the ordinary is more problematic than the brisk ordinary-language philosopher sometimes assumes. (Skepticism's legacy, as Clarke suggests, may lie in its ability to force us to come to grips with, give a better characterization to, the plain.) What, after all, is the basis of a claim to ordinariness? It is trivial, but true, to say that the ordinary-language claim is always already extraordinary, just as Moore's common sense is already too uncommon to avoid philosophical countercharge. Hume argued that, to recover the world we all know, one had to work through the false metaphysics of his predecessors; it was not enough merely to start with the everyday and remain there. Why not? Why not, from another vantage, simply dispense with the quest for certainty, the drive to detach, that leads us down that well-trodden garden path of doubt?

The reason, I think, is clear. Common sense itself demands it, rests happy with nothing less. The line of back stepping is contained in the very claim to certainty of itself that makes common sense commonsensical. Do we know that the world is out there? Of course we do. Is it really there, are you certain? Of course I am. How do you know you are not dreaming? I may reply that I simply know, or that I have just awoken,

or that I pinched myself: but these are all consistent with the dreaming possibility. It is possible, as Clarke argues, that “we are forced winetasters of the conceivable” and will therefore reach the limits of what we can imagine, where the detached doubters will begin to collapse in on themselves. Stroud does not think so, partly because his hard objectivity is consistent with all of us being dreamers, with no one around to say so, or stand where one could say so. True detachment means never having to say (never having to have at least one agent who can say) the rest are dreamers. And that is precisely the version of objectivity contained in common sense. Common sense is a time bomb of certainty whose own desires set it always on autodestruct.

Irony

The plain truth about common sense, then, is that it cannot restrict itself to the plain. That is also, I think, the philosophical truth about common sense. Common sense is not, contrary to itself, immune from skeptical doubt in its own sphere, or from its own inbuilt instability. The plain and the philosophical run together whenever we stop to speak of the plain, whenever common sense pauses to say anything about itself. Moore’s dilemma is therefore ours. Common sense appears to entail, in its nature, what Stroud calls “the conditional truth of skepticism”: If the Cartesian question can be posed, it leads to doubt of a kind we cannot coherently master or defeat. Can the question be posed? Or better, must it be? Or is the real question ultimately, as Hume suggested, how to *live with* our (always inevitable) skepticism, given that we cannot *live* it? Is philosophy, and common sense, too, always about forging deals with doubt?

Consider two possibilities. Stroud concludes his assessment of skepticism’s philosophical significance, after demonstrating the inadequacy of Kantian and Carnapian (i.e., very roughly, both metaphysical *and* antimetaphysical) strategies of defeating the skeptic,¹¹ with a claim made current by Cavell: the “not fully natural” nature of the skeptic’s doubt, evident in our reactions to it, resides in its having been made in “a nonclaim context.” This is not to say what the ordinary-language philosopher sometimes says, namely, that the doubt simply cannot be raised (there is no context for raising it). That objection to the skeptic is only useful, I suggested, in locking the ordinary-language philosopher and the skeptic in a mortal, and unwinnable, battle. Talking that way, they talk past each other: “What do you mean I cannot (we do not ordinarily) talk that way? I just did.” The context in which the dreaming doubt is raised is the philosophical, and while we may be inclined to call the move to that

¹¹ I cannot here provide the details of these demonstrations, but put briefly, Kantian transcendentalism, which attempts to save empirical certainty with idealism at another level, can provide no motive for its two-worlds thesis independent of its desire to defeat the skeptic. It is likewise with Carnap’s verificationism, which cannot adequately take account of the objective world—that is, the reality of a world independent of our verifications. Stroud’s insistent realism, which underwrites both criticisms, may certainly be challenged, but it *is* consistent with common sense.

context pathological or perverse, it remains to be explained why so many otherwise responsible people go there so often and stay there so long. We cannot explain the philosopher away by claiming that “we” do not ordinarily talk that way.¹² Philosophical appeals to the ordinary cannot be authoritative if they are merely appeals to what *we* consider worth, or not worth, saying.

Cavell notes that such appeals are really about making sense, about the relation of speech-act to the sphere of its occurrence. He concludes from this that the philosophical context is an odd one, perhaps the oddest.¹³ The oddness lies in the kind of desire that operates here, the desire that finds the dreaming doubt so necessary and so difficult. At work here is the philosophical desire for *completeness* (knowledge of the whole world—that is why, for example, the philosopher’s chosen object is always a generic macroobject, a table or chair and not, say, a Louis XV gilt escritoire) and for *certainty* (sure knowledge of the world). Though Cavell finds this desire natural enough—the philosopher is not making the simple-minded error of perversely raising standards of knowledge too high to be met, or twisting language to her own malicious purposes; the philosopher is somehow compelled to raise these doubts—the investigation it leads to is, as a result of its peculiar context, locked in a dilemma.

The traditional investigation of knowledge “must be the investigation of a concrete claim if its procedure is to be coherent; it cannot be the investigation of a concrete claim if its conclusion is to be general. Without that coherence it would not have the obviousness it has seemed to have; without that generality its conclusion would not be skeptical” (Cavell 1979, 220).¹⁴ The dilemma is captured by the suggestion that “the example the philosopher is forced to focus upon is considered in a non-claim context” (218) and therefore can never be vindicated coherently. Thus we have the inherent *instability* of the philosopher’s position, which oscillates between a desire for certainty and the debilitating doubt that comes with it. The only thing that can or should be

¹² This summary undersells the force of ordinary-language responses to the figure Austin calls “the wily metaphysician.” In “Other Minds” (1979), Austin makes the point with the subtlety it deserves: the metaphysician’s claim, and the skeptic’s attendant doubt of the claim, are “outrageous” because they never specify in what sense “real” or “certain” is meant in their tussles; no conditions are given that could possibly satisfy the claim, and therefore the claim is not sensible. Cavell’s discussion is predicated on the force, as well as the limitations, of this view.

¹³ Cavell’s debt to Wittgenstein is evident here, though he seems to insist in the preface to *The Claim of Reason* that he has not looked at Wittgenstein’s remarks in *On Certainty* and relies instead on thoughts gleaned from *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein at times seems to make the apparently ordinary-language claim that the skeptic’s doubts are not “real,” that is, they cannot be sensibly raised (though “unreal” and “senseless” may be different notions). It is this claim that fuels criticism of Moore’s argument provided by followers of Wittgenstein, notably Norman Malcolm. Stroud (1984, chap. 3) gives a good defense of Moore against these claims that he is doing something hasty, ill judged, dogmatic, or linguistically incorrect. For a comparison of Wittgenstein and Moore on the issue of whether or not the skeptic’s doubt is senseless, see Alan R. White, “Common Sense: Moore and Wittgenstein” (1986).

¹⁴ I am not able here to give Cavell’s enormously suggestive and nuanced account of the ordinary language/skepticism encounter its due. In its depth of detail and witty attention to the integrity of conflicting positions, it is the best such account in the literature.

said in response is that the philosopher is no longer making sense. The philosopher is being odd in a way that incidentally demonstrates the dispensability of doubting. For, though the desire to be certain and complete may be natural, it is not necessary: the philosopher discovers nothing about the world, only finds what he or she has put there.

We will be inclined, I think, to regard this as a rather hollow victory (Cavell himself only hazards that he might be willing to call it a “refutation” [223]). Commonsensically, the *oddness* of the skeptic has never been very far from view, and gaining some fine-tuning on that oddness does not lay to rest the power of the philosopher’s doubt as long as we share even a vestige of the desire that brought it on. That is, as long as we presume a commonsense world that is really out there existing, the dreaming doubt will have a hold on us. At most, Cavell has succeeded in getting rid of an unwelcome party guest; but the odd question hangs in the air, disturbing us whenever we pause to remember it. We can ignore the skeptic, put the doubts aside for now, even think the guest is crazed and peculiar; but for common sense the doubt the guest has raised will, now and then, arise as something that makes sense. And insofar as that is true, no genuine and final refutation of the doubt is possible.

It is for reasons like these, among others, that Quine attempted to naturalize epistemology¹⁵ and Rorty (1972) felt compelled to argue that the world was something well lost. For it is only by dispensing with the very desires for completeness and certainty about our knowledge that the grounds for doubt are systematically removed. It is only by no longer seeking the world through ever-better descriptions (i.e., descriptions that approach greater correspondence to what is out there, or even greater coherence among claims about what is out there)¹⁶ that we can free ourselves from the shackles of Cartesian doubt and, as Wittgenstein suggests, stop doing philosophy when we want to. In the terms of a later discussion, the problem is, according to Rorty, the following: “Ever since Plato we have been asking ourselves the question: what must we and the universe be like if we are going to get the sort of certainty, clarity, and evidence Plato told us we ought to have? Each stage in the history of metaphysics—and in particular the Cartesian turn toward subjectivity, from exterior to interior objects of inquiry—has been an attempt to redescribe things so that this certainty might become possible.” But each of these attempts has failed, getting us no closer to the imagined world of

¹⁵ See “Epistemology Naturalized,” in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (1969). Quine argues that the detachment view of knowledge is incoherent: “There is no such cosmic exile” as the detached viewer, he says. The reason is simple: we cannot ever stand elsewhere than in our own standpoint. The image of Neurath’s ship is a favorite here: the world, like the mythical sailing vessel, can be rebuilt in places, but never from the ground up, and we can never stand elsewhere than on it. From this point of view, the skeptic is not *incoherent*: he’s simply *overreacting* (see Stroud 1984, chap. 6).

¹⁶ Rorty suggests that a correspondence theory must be abandoned as a result of its failure to gain true access to the real world (the metaphysical project, or in typical Rortian caricature, “Platonism”). A coherence theory must likewise be abandoned because it is predicated on pragmatist desires—desires to cope better with ourselves-in-environment.

true knowledge we set out to find. “The only things that are really evident to us” in this long history of fruitless searching, says Rorty, “are our own desires” (1991b, 29).¹⁷

It follows from this, I think, that the philosophical quest for a general theory of knowledge is similarly up for retirement. It was the desire to provide such a theory that, according to Stroud, underwrote the worst excesses of the metaphysician. The desire for generality and certainty that generates skepticism is a desire that arises, not for practical purposes, but only for philosophical ones.¹⁸ The theoretical part of this desire, the wish to codify and defend, is not commonsensical—indeed, it is partly in opposition to theorizing that common sense remains commonsensical, happily implained as Clarke says. Is this *theorizing* wish the wish to be cured, then?

This, too, may seem a little too easy. Philosophy in this charming therapeutic mood may appear simply to be waving a magic wand or the healing hands of a televangelist (“Evil metaphysical delusions... come out!”). What is of lasting interest is the diagnosis concerning the impulses and desires, including those of cleaving to a tradition of inquiry, that lead us to the quandary characteristic of the skeptic’s challenge. It is partly Rorty’s willingness to look to other traditions, including the tradition of recovery associated with Husserl’s reconstruction of the natural attitude and Heidegger’s emphasis on everydayness, as well as the tradition of American pragmatism, that allows him to find his kind of antirepresentationalism convincing.¹⁹ There is also, not to be underes-

¹⁷ Rorty suggests that, since “Plato set things up so that epistemological skepticism would become the recurrent theme of philosophical reflection” (32), the only choice lay between Platonism and some sort of Deweyan pragmatism. He sees Heidegger as torn by the choice—unable to accept Platonism, yet unwilling to accept pragmatism wholeheartedly. As elsewhere, Rorty counsels us to relax and accept pragmatism—including the “contingency” of our moral and philosophical vocabularies—without unnecessary (and futile) hair-pulling about losing the reality of the real world.

¹⁸ This is perhaps overly crude. Rorty himself, in “Cavell on Skepticism” (1982), criticizes Cavell for conflating three *different* versions of the skeptical challenge: (1) the technical, Reid/Berkeley worries generated when perception is analyzed in terms of a “theory of ideas”; (2) the Kantian worries about whether or not we can overcome the gap between the world and our descriptions/knowledge of it; and (3) a “Sartrean” worry that incomplete knowledge generates a contingency about the world, which we find threatening. Rorty chides Cavell (180–83) for not seeing that, though there may be a link between (2) and (3), there is no obvious one between (1) and (2)—certainly not simply because there is one between (2) and (3). But Rorty is being too reductive: there is no *prima facie* reason against seeing (1) as a species of a more general worry. Cavell’s problem in *The Claim of Reason* is not, as Rorty suggests, that he is hung up on certain “classic” philosophical positions; Rorty’s problem is that he does not want to see these “Anglo-Saxon” positions as part of the bigger picture.

¹⁹ Rorty’s precise relationship to these traditions is not easy to nail down. For example, he wants to follow Heidegger’s criticism of metaphysics some distance, part company with Heidegger on the question of pragmatism, and arrive at a position even more deeply historicized than Heidegger’s own. See part 1 of *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (1991a), especially “Heidegger, Contingency, and Pragmatism,” pages 27–49.

There is some misleading talk of “common sense” in this last article. Rorty quotes Heidegger as equating common sense with sophistry, and contrasting true thinking with this sort of unquestioning refusal to “hear the call of Being” in our language. Rorty agrees, only suggesting that we are not as bad (and the Greeks not as good) at challenging this sort of complacent common sense as Heidegger

timated, an Ockhamist flavor to our salutary losing of the world: in terms of elegance and explanatory adequacy, Rorty's pragmatism and theses about contingency may be considered theoretically superior to the muddles of metaphysics.²⁰ (Whether or not they are superior on other counts is a separate question.)

Still, plain common sense will balk at this prospect of ironical (and therefore uncommon) common sense.²¹ The skeptic's challenge seems to induce a kind of epistemological vertigo, but so does Rorty's dispensing with the world. Whither the firmness of my ordinary experience? Are we doomed, philosophically, to find the world dissolving between our fingers, either in skeptical doubts or (little better) in cheerful antifoundationalism? Is this, perhaps, just another reason why common sense should steer clear of philosophers, those malpracticing surgeons of the obvious? Cultivate irony, someone could suggest, for we cannot avoid acting just as though the world is already out there now. But what advance is this over the sociability of Hume, never troubling to doubt in the midst of backgammon? Both attitudes, underwritten by a putative recovery of the everyday on the other side of philosophizing, may leave the commonsensical cold. Yet how can we avoid them without compromising our very commonsense awareness of the world? Can we simply keep our heads down, ostrich-like, and get on with things, untroubled?

Common sense would have us think so, but on this count, as on others, it is at war with itself. I suggested earlier that philosophical systems built on appeals to common sense were not structurally sound; however, no straightforward philosophical defense of the propositions of common sense could hope to succeed. Such defenses might even be systematically incoherent, arguing specifics in terms of generalities or mixing the plain with the philosophical. Now it seems likewise true that no commonsense avoidance of philosophy can hope to succeed, for the drive to philosophize is inscribed in common sense, even (or especially) when it is most strenuously avoiding the quagmires of philosophy. Philosophical appeals to common sense—not only Berkeley's and Reid's sort, but also Moore's very different sort—are not stable. But this is because common sense itself is not stable, not because philosophy and common sense have nothing to say to each other. Quite the contrary, they have, perhaps to the chagrin of both, all too much.

So I am moved to say, in conclusion, that the plain truth about common sense is that we have no way of talking philosophically about it. The recurring oddness and confusion

suggests. I believe this use of common sense as sophisticated received opinion is not simply equatable with the "basic knowledge" use I have adopted in this discussion, though there is a connection. Plain common sense does, to a large extent, succeed only by fending off the challenges of (philosophical) thinking. Yet, as I have been suggesting, this success is not stable, for thinking enters the picture like it or not.

²⁰ The richness of this complex of theses, and their significance for political life, is suggested by Rorty's recent collection *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989).

²¹ Stroud notes, I think correctly, that Moore is decidedly not an ironical defender of common sense—and that is partly why Moore looks so odd to us. The oddness lies in, among other things, Moore's unwitting demonstration that philosophical defenses of the plain are self-contradictory.

of our attempts so to talk stem from the dual fact that the plain actively resists philosophical defense (indicating a decisive break between the two realms), and yet inevitably demands the philosophical whenever plain-dwellers stop to think (indicating a continuity between them). The image of vertigo is well chosen: it is not simply that our heads spin when we pause to think about the world and our knowledge of it; more to the present point, we can only avoid that spinning by not looking down, not pausing to think about the status of our commonsense achievement, but instead walking blithely on, eyes front. It is true that for most people, most of the time, this blitheness comes naturally. They put one foot in front of another without apparent effort. Some of us, cursed with a peculiar kind of curiosity, will insist on gazing into the abyss. Our best hope, then, is that we can, though unavoidably dizzy, avoid falling into it—and do so in interesting ways. I hope, plainly, that this is one of them.

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The Plain Truth about Common Sense
Skepticism, Metaphysics, and Irony²²
1995

The Journal of Speculative Philosophy, New Series, Vol. 9, No. 3 (1995), pp. 169–188.
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25670146>>
1995 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.

Penn State University Press

www.thetedkarchive.com

²² This paper was prepared with the assistance of a postdoctoral research fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I would like to thank Christopher Dustin, Hayden Ramsay, and Alex Oliver for helpful discussion. Earlier versions of this paper were read at meetings of the Cambridge University Moral Sciences Club, the Edinburgh University Philosophy Colloquium, and the Canadian Philosophical Association. My thanks to all those who offered comments on those occasions, and especially to those who disagreed so usefully: Hugh Mellor, Peter Lewis, and Lynd Forgyson.