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Troubles with Common Sense

by Daniel Schulthess (Neuchâtel)

"But this is imagining the Vulgar to be
Philosophers [...] from their Infancy."

D. Hume to H. Blair, July 1762¹

In this new book², K. Lehrer has given a full treatment of Reid's published writings. The present review will be mainly devoted to that characteristic feature of Reid's philosophy, the appeal to common sense. My conclusion will be that *there is little point in the appeal to common sense*. In the following, I'll give my reasons for that conclusion. As K. Lehrer seems to believe, with Reid himself, that there is a point in the appeal to common sense, I'll take issue with some passages of the book.

The notion of common sense is a complex one.³ It may be that a description of what it involves is not an epistemologist's task, but primarily a phenomenological

¹ P. B. Wood, "David Hume on Thomas Reid's *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*: A New Letter to Hugh Blair from July 1762", *Mind* 95 (1986), p. 416.

² Keith Lehrer: *Thomas Reid*. London [u. a.]: Routledge 1989. (The Arguments of the Philosophers.) XII/311 S.

³ What does the possession of common sense involve? Considering the notion from the theoretical side, my own account would include at least the following features:

- (i) mastering a classification of things in the world — this includes an understanding of the dispositional characteristics of the things classified;
- (ii) having, at time *t* and place *p*, a set of beliefs as to the spatio-temporal distribution of the things there are at time *t* and around place *p* ("what everybody knows about these time and place");
- (iii) having correlative expectations concerning the future and correlative knowledge concerning the past;
- (iv) having a capacity of adjusting the above sets of beliefs to changes in the world and in the belief sets (herefrom, the potential dimension of 'good sense' or 'bon sens');
- (v) understanding one's interests at time *t* in the relevant context.

The criterion of the features that are here counted as parts of 'common sense' is pragmatic: human life depends on them. One has to observe, then, that little of all this is ever displayed in utterances. Capacities, as such, cannot be 'stated' — only their products (sometimes) can.

one, with developments towards psychology, sociology and anthropology. Having such a description would be useful to assess philosophical arguments concerning common sense. On the background of the complex account of common sense outlined in footnote 3, I think that Reid's interest in common sense is one-sided. His attitude was determined by his reaction to Hume's skepticism. At least by one of its main strands (see e. g. *Inquiry into the Human Mind* I), it can be sketched in *modus tollendo-tollens* form, like G. E. Moore's. We start with the conditional:

- (1) If Hume's theory is true, it is not the case that the basic common sense beliefs are true. (Hume rejects the idea that such beliefs can be characterised as true. That implies that common sense is 'overturned'.)

We negate the consequent:

- (2) But the basic common sense beliefs are true. (Common sense cannot be thus 'overturned' by philosophical argument.)

We conclude by negating the antecedent as well:

- (3) Therefore, Hume's theory is not true.

Reid is driven by step (ii) towards an intimate connection between common sense and truth. For him, common sense means the set of knowledge claims which has to be maintained in face of Hume's skepticism and which, taken as true, allows him to show that Hume's theory is built upon a false basis (the *ideal theory*). Hence the typical Reidian view that common sense contains the first principles — the very propositions which cannot be established on grounds usually admitted by philosophers — of all further things we hold as true.

Two remarks about this view of common sense:

First, it involves a certain conception of the structure of our belief system — derivative beliefs built on "first principles" — which must not be held as adequate.

Second, it leads to a propositional account (a 'knowing that' or 'believing that' account) of common sense, since only what can be true comes to play a role in it. This leads to an impoverished view of common sense. In my own account, only (ii), (iii) and (v) have a propositional character (see above, footnote 3).

The substance of the appeal to common sense is this: there is a set of commonly held beliefs we can appeal to and which cannot be shaken by derivative, e. g. by philosophical considerations. I hold that two requirements would have to be satisfied for the appeal to common sense to carry some force: (I) There must be a way of specifying *to just what* an appeal is being made. (II) An explanation of the epistemic authority of the relevant items must be given.

(I) The first requirement raises the following issue: How are the contents of common sense specified or individuated or identified? There are two possibilities for attempts to meet this requirement: (A) one takes common sense as something explicit; (B) the other takes common sense as merely tacit, and as made explicit only by a philosopher (like G. E. Moore) or in other appropriate contexts.

(A) If the items of common sense are explicit, common sense will obviously involve a linguistic dimension. If one stands on the requirement of being explicit, are there really common beliefs? Without entering the difficulties of radical translation, one must ask how the common character of some beliefs could really be established from what is said by a diversity of persons. But obviously this is not Reid's approach.

(B) When one looks at Reid's sayings concerning common sense, they abound in attributions of non-explicit beliefs — of "beliefs" that are "taken for granted". This raises the general problem of the ascription of unexpressed beliefs. Which conditions should we set for the ascription of such beliefs? Can we say that a person S believes that p (at early times, etc.) when we can legitimately doubt whether S ever entertained the thought that p? And then, at which conditions can we say that a belief is being entertained? The problem becomes difficult when we take account of the fact that general terms must probably be available in order for the relevant thought to be entertained. Reid is very liberal and even loose in matters of belief ascription, and I find that K. Lehrer is uncritical about this. When he says of the "beliefs of common sense" that, "since they are the output of innate systems, they are universal" (p. 20), I'm driven to ask: *What, precisely, is universal?*

Both on the (A) and (B) options, there is some ground for skepticism concerning the identification of common sense beliefs.

Reid, it is true, shows some sensitivity to the problem of belief attribution. He holds that everybody admits the first principles of common sense, but that this happens primarily with their "instances": they "force assent in particular instances more powerfully than when they are turned into a general proposition" (*Essays on the Intellectual Powers* VI.5). But do they really "force assent" in their proper formulation, either particular or general? A closer scrutiny shows that it is difficult to stick to that notion. I take two examples from the important principles concerning perception and memory (quoted by K. Lehrer, p. 160–161, from *Essays on the Intellectual Powers* VI.5). Both principles have a conditional formulation:

— "Those things do really exist which we distinctly perceive by our senses, and are what we perceive them to be."

In other words: if S distinctly perceives x, x exists, etc.

— "Those things did really happen which I distinctly remember."

In other words: if S distinctly remembers x, x did happen.

The problem lies here in the specification of the sufficient condition. We are faced with a dilemma. Either the verb is taken in the ordinary way as an achievement verb (this is what Reid would approve), and we lose the synthetic character of the principle: the principles simply specify the meaning of the words 'perceive' or 'remember'. Or the verb is taken in some non-committal sense, but then, the proponent of the principles is trapped in the 'ideal theory' which Reid himself rejected.

Such difficulties show that there is something unsound in Reid's discussion. I take it that the whole effort of bringing the "principles of common sense" within the range of what is actually believed, commonly or not, is mistaken. A description

of dispositions to form beliefs of certain types in certain circumstances — such dispositions may constitute what Reid is after — does not belong to the judgmental content of common sense, if there is such a content at all.

But then, the various arguments that trade on that conception, like the supposed universality of some beliefs, their early appearance in children, their independence from education, become irrelevant and are mistaken as well. I regret that K. Lehrer does not say that there is something wrong with Reid's approach in this respect.

(II) Once the common sense beliefs are identified, their supposed authority has to be explained. Such an authority could be derived from the truth of common sense beliefs. But then, the common sense philosopher has to explain why false beliefs are prevented from being found among the common sense beliefs. Is there really the case that common sense beliefs exclude the false ones? Some philosophers hold that one of the properties of situations of communication is to eliminate false beliefs. They do not 'survive' in a social context. This answer, however, is not Reid's, and has not to be examined here.

The notion of common sense, where 'common' has the sense of 'shared by the members of a community of rational beings', is given a nativist interpretation in Reid — an interpretation which K. Lehrer justly emphasizes. I suggest that K. Lehrer could have explained that this is not a necessary move. One could hold a theory of common sense and even of the authority⁴ of common sense without being a nativist. But Reid's doctrine is that the cause for the common character of a belief is not communication but nature. We regress from the common to the native — 'native' meaning here: due to the workings of native faculties.

What about the authority of common sense in that interpretation? It is to be established by an argument which K. Lehrer usefully emphasizes and which I'd like to discuss now.

The thesis is that our faculties are trustworthy in their globality. This establishes the authority of their natural output.

The first step of the argument is simply that there is no reason why one faculty (e. g. consciousness) should be trusted more than the other ones (see Lehrer, p. 155). Skeptics like Hume admit that this is so, but they overlook the fact that all our faculties share the same origin. As a result, trustworthiness, if there is any, is distributed over all the faculties.

The second step is a special (pragmatic) sort of *reductio ad absurdum*. Let us suppose that the thesis is false: it is not the case that our faculties, taken in their globality, are trustworthy. This is given the sense that our faculties are trustworthy only if certain criteria are met. This restriction, so goes the argument, is self-defeating, since the successful application of these criteria would precisely assume the trustworthiness of our faculties in applying them. Therefore, no additional

⁴ For instance, on a consensus theory of justification. Most current European common sense theories (H. G. Gadamer, H. Lübbe, O. Marquardt, etc.) are not nativist.

criteria for the trustworthiness of our faculties can be admitted. The thesis is — so to speak — under constant pragmatic confirmation: trying either to controvert it, or to establish it, is confirming it (*in actu exercito*, by the accomplishment of the act itself, the medievals would have said) even before any result is reached.⁵ And if this pragmatic assumption is false, no help is left. So there is no ultimate answer to the skeptic.

My criticism of the previous two-steps argument is this: The argument trades on a very broad and unspecific notion of trustworthiness. I'd like to show this by making two observations.

First, I observe that production by trustworthy faculties is not enough for the truth of a belief, since these trustworthy faculties can produce false beliefs as well. Therefore, one cannot hold a belief to be true barely on the ground that it is a product of such and such faculties. After all, all our beliefs, true or false, are products of our faculties. Their being trustworthy ("in principle", one would say) gives no warrant to specific beliefs.

Second, let's suppose that a person, S, has come to believe that p, and that another person, T, has come to believe that not-p. How do we resolve the controversy? We have a process of ascertainment. It will probably involve the same faculty, but with additional criteria. (See Reid's discussion of Hume's skepticism concerning reason, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers* VII.4.) Such criteria will vary vastly from case to case. (As to reasoning, there are criteria of logical correction, etc.) In order to produce true beliefs, our faculties must be exercised *correctly* — a normative element must come into play.

I conclude, then, that trustworthiness, taken in the unspecific sense of the previous argument, fails to confer the needed authority on some set of our beliefs. Trustworthiness confers the relevant authority only when the adequate criteria are met in the workings of the faculties. So my criticism is that Reid's nativist epistemology will not do as an epistemological theory: something else is needed. I suggest that Reid has not fully used one of his most interesting results, his analysis of judgment or other propositional attitudes (to which K. Lehrer gives due weight). Reid clearly understands the problem of the complexity of judgment.⁶ A judgment has parts (a notion which Hume would have denied⁷): an act and a content (what is being judged). Each of these parts can be varied independently from the other (this is what Hume's theory would not allow). So we can combine the same (type of) act with different contents, and different acts with the same content. With this remarkable instrument in hand, Reid could have developed a different epistemology,

⁵ I have described this type of argument, as well as other characteristic Reidian arguments, in my book, *Philosophie et sens commun chez Thomas Reid*, Berne, P. Lang, 1983, chap. 3.

⁶ On certain aspects, he antedates Husserl's classical analysis in the *Logical Investigations*.

⁷ Hume acknowledges only one variable factor, the vivacity of the idea. This one factor determines the propositional attitude that is exemplified. So Hume's theory, as Reid shows, has no provision for variation.

with a variety of epistemic states — an epistemology based, e. g., on the notion of comparative justification in the sense of R. Chisholm's work.⁸ Instead, Reid admitted the dubious notion of irresistibility.⁹ I find it regrettable that he has indulged in it. He could have founded an original and truly fallibilist epistemology precisely by dropping it.

I agree that one must put great weight on the natural output of our faculties.¹⁰ But once set in the proper light, what comes in the foreground is not just the working of the faculties, but a *correct* working according to criteria. Nativism will not do as an epistemological doctrine. But then, the appeal to common sense or native faculties loses its appeal. I have come to believe that the strength of Reid's work does not lie in his epistemology, because he has overstressed the case of his appeal to common sense. Its main strength lies in a field to be compared with Brentano's descriptive psychology or its successors (Husserl's phenomenology, etc.), or with contemporary philosophy of mind. His philosophy is liberated from the restrictive empiricism of XVIIIth century, which was blurred by psychological prejudice. Reid gave novel and fruitful descriptions in that field, introducing e. g. "social acts of the mind" — i. e. speech acts. This originality extends to Reid's metaphysics, philosophy of action and ethics. I have left this outstanding work undiscussed. My discharge will be that it was given a full and truly remarkable presentation in K. Lehrer's book.

⁸ See R. Chisholm's recent "An Analysis of Thirteen Epistemic Categories", in D. F. Austin (ed.), *Philosophical Analysis*, Kluwer, Dordrecht, 1988, p. 47–54.

⁹ Comparisons like the one Lehrer quotes, without taking issue with it (p. 33), between, on the one hand, a belief in a simple arithmetical truth and a belief in a perceptual truth, raise a problem. What is wrong with such comparisons? The uneasiness one has with them would be accounted by the fact that a correct working of the relevant faculty implies vastly different criteria in each case. (No uneasiness appears when beliefs of the same kind are compared.) Cognate matters were discussed by R. B. Braithwaite some time ago, in a behaviourist spirit. I suggest that the difference between both kinds of beliefs lies in the criteria involved in the ascertainment process of a belief rather than in the behavioural consequences of holding the belief, as Braithwaite maintained.

¹⁰ Compare F. Brentano, "Und noch ein anderes Verdienst hat hier Reid. Er macht nämlich darauf aufmerksam, daß die Natur durch blinden Drang uns zur Erkenntnis den Weg bahnt, indem sie vielfach Richtiges und der Erkenntnis Förderliches zunächst blind annehmen läßt." "Was an Reid zu loben", *Grazer philosophische Studien* 1 (1975), p. 6.