

CHAPTER 11

COMMON SENSE IN OUR WORLD

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The call for more common sense is a recurring topic, and a lack of it often bemoaned when it comes to political and economic decisions or government regulation. We might ask, where is common sense to be found? Common sense is itself often the object of serious criticism: Is someone using common sense as a way of claiming their own beliefs to be correct or simply offering platitudes as supposed solutions?¹ So what does sound judgment or universal reason mean today?

In uncertain times in particular when guidance is in short supply, the easily understandable advice

provided by common sense is very welcome. It includes the promise of bringing clarity to confusing situations, exposing implausible views, and finding pragmatic solutions. This ranges from everyday adages (“the proof of the pudding is in the eating”) via aphorisms (“talk is silver, silence is golden”) to profound worldly wisdom (“nothing is true without its opposite”). It is clear that the realm of common sense—like a kind of cultural meme—has developed empirical values that prove useful and are passed on down the generations.

But in a highly complex society that demands nuanced answers, which can overwhelm all of us, what does common sense have to offer? We have to set priorities, filter information, and justify our actions to others. This has always been the case, but it applies even more so in situations that fundamentally affect our self-image and our options for action as individuals. At the moment, this particularly affects the consequences of climate change and the impact of artificial intelligence. What role can the thought processes of everyday pragmatism play when people are behaving in ways that threaten their own living conditions on Earth? Can we use practical wisdom to keep up with the rapid development of artificial intelligence? The great advantage of common sense is precisely that it

offers guidance in times of uncertainty. So, let's have more common sense going forward? Yes, but...

In the following essay, I would like to argue for a reinforcement and extension of the basic idea that we humans are capable of developing an understanding of causal effects, human motivations and behaviors and, more generally, of relationships in the world without conscious thought and without any effort—intuitively, as it were—and are able to act rationally on this basis.

A LITTLE LOOK BACK

For centuries, common sense has been brought into play when practical reason and suitability for everyday use are required. An idea, a decision, or an action should be immediately understandable to a normal (“common”) adult of average development with a natural capacity for judgment. On closer inspection, however, such a demand is contingent on many factors and therefore also easy to criticize. But time and again it seems to prove its worth. For example, since the Victorian era, English courts have used the fictional figure of “the man on the Clapham omnibus” to ask how a reasonable person would have behaved in a certain situation.

Adam Smith, the Scottish moral philosopher and founder of classical economics, created his concept of the “impartial spectator” to a similar end.²

The introduction of fictional people as reference points to test reasonableness is a secular version of the religious question of a God-fearing life. In both cases, a change or broadening of perspective is intended to provide better guidance and thus make it easier to find the right path. Fundamentally, it is always about the extent to which a person can trust their immediate sense of perception. In “common sense philosophy,” as first developed by Thomas Reid (1764),³ this question is answered in the positive. In psychology, this approach lives on as “common sense psychology.”⁴ Not without a certain degree of value judgment, this perspective is also referred to as naive or even lay psychology. Here we should draw a distinction between expert knowledge and the rationally based search for truth and knowledge and mere everyday understanding. It seems almost paradoxical: We pursue scientifically proven knowledge and yet cannot do without common sense, which is not always correct but is often astonishingly effective. In complex situations especially, common sense, which comes across as completely unscientific, can create clarity and order.

To the extent we can trace it back, common sense is derived from the Latin expression *sensus communis*, which in turn is probably a translation of the Greek *koine aisthesis* from Aristotle's theory of perception. It assumes a kind of general sense in which perceptual impressions come together to create an overall impression. Later, a wide variety of levels of meaning and concepts were added: ordinary understanding, sense of community, natural judgment, and shared knowledge. What has remained to this day is the emphasis on integrating initially unconnected elements into a holistic perception or form.

Over the centuries, the original idea of *koine aisthesis* has become increasingly refined and applied to various aspects of human perception, judgment, and ultimately human abilities. This ranges from simple sensory-motor stimulus-response relationships (for example the intuitive avoidance of danger) to the highest forms of moral judgment (for example weighing up ethical dilemmas). Soon the question arose of how collectively shared bodies of knowledge in which common sense is culturally anchored are created. Today, the mechanisms that spontaneously create order in psychological and social systems are discussed in modern theories of self-organization.⁵

At least three main points can be identified in this many-faceted debate. *First*, it examines the extent to which this is an unconscious (implicit) or conscious (explicit) ability. *Second*, the connection between individual experience and collectively shared beliefs is repeatedly discussed. *Third*, the question arises as to what role subjective assessments play in common sense.

This last aspect in particular leads directly to the issue of common sense's fundamental abilities. It is applicable when it proves to be useful or meaningful. This applies in all cases where there is no single truth and at best a common interpretation can be found that is acceptable to as many people as possible. Common sense, on the other hand, is clearly inapplicable when there is one fundamental solution to a problem that is considered appropriate, true, and reasonable, regardless of whether individual people can agree with it. Psychological research provides ample evidence of the conditions under which intuition offers good advice and when it does not.⁶

This also reveals the Janus-faced nature of common sense. It can quickly turn out to be a cognitive distortion when applied to issues in the objective world that go beyond immediate everyday experience. In a situation of immediate danger in road traffic, a person can react correctly using their intuition. By contrast,

people find it almost impossible to intuitively grasp physical or chemical processes of climate change or the construction of Large Language Models (LLM) in AI technology. The limits of immediate, intuitive perception also become apparent in the social world. When is something a banal truism and when is it an example of profound wisdom?⁷

Common sense as a collective treasure trove of experience has remained fairly robust over time and thrives as a result of its self-actualization in different eras. So nothing is necessarily added, but rather previous experiences are applied in new contexts. In this respect, it does not indicate a lack of epistemological progress if, for example, the results of modern research into attitudes sound hardly any different in their basic statements than the recommendations of rhetoric teachers from two thousand years ago.

Is this kind of evolutionary updating enough in today's world? Do we need new standards for assessing how we live with artificial intelligence, which could, for example, be asked to analyze feelings and react empathetically to a person? The same question about the usefulness of common sense as it currently exists arises in the case of people's ability to adapt to climate change, for example when it comes to the significant

increase in the pace of transformation that is necessary from a scientific point of view.

In my opinion, there are at least three arguments in favor of society making efforts to reinforce and develop common sense.

I. COMMON SENSE CAN HELP US WHEN WE LACK PRECISE KNOWLEDGE

Without instinctive, intuitive access to our environment and to ourselves, we would be unable to act. We must be able to trust that gravity always works, even if we cannot explain it ourselves. It is exactly the same with many other everyday experiences. It's the only way we can achieve reliability and stability. This seems trivial, but it is by no means the case when we simply consider how challenging it is to explain gravity scientifically, in which case common sense often provides only very rough clues in the shape of metaphors or proverbs. However, such concision usually contains a proven trans-situational insight that must remain imprecise and associative precisely in order to address that diffuse motivational and emotional hinterland inside us that we are hardly aware of and that is difficult to access linguistically.

Sometimes, even in the rigorous natural sciences, the cognitive process itself remains obscure and can only be explained by an intuitive approach. Of course, this form of creativity is often subject to a long research process involving failures and every solution can only claim provisional validity. Anyone wanting to follow the winding paths of common sense should also prepare themselves for long periods of fruitless work and even be prepared to pursue doubts, counterfactual intuition, or simply a gut feeling.

For example, there is a letter from Albert Einstein in which he explains to a friend how he arrives at theoretical statements intuitively from observations. In the letter, Einstein uses terms such as “extra-logical sphere,” “pragmatic,” and “non-logical nature.”⁸ In this context the idea of a flash of inspiration is not so far-fetched. Such cognitive strategies that cannot be derived or deduced by the logic of induction can be easily traced not just in Einstein’s work but also in that of other great scientists such as Isaac Newton or Charles Darwin.⁹

What applies to science should also guide us in everyday life: The source of new, viable solutions does not necessarily have to be well-founded, as long as they feel right to us and are coherent for other people. However, it is then important to estimate the effects

and impacts as rationally as possible.¹⁰ Without this second step, we run the risk of asserting something that knowledge is fundamentally (better) able to tell us. Such an interpretation of common sense is a key feature of populist arguments. Again, it does not apply to those areas where basically no correct solution can be found, such as when evaluating the consequences of climate policies or regulating artificial intelligence. It is precisely here that we can see clearly whether someone accepts the limits of common sense or is abusing it in a populist way and claiming something as truth that is ultimately just a subjective assessment.

If we fail to make an intellectually sophisticated solution accessible to everyday understanding, we should not be surprised if it is not seen as acceptable. The resulting mistrust cannot be eliminated using yet more factual arguments. Either the solution must be rejected or the resources of common sense should be used in a better way. New ideas in the economic, technological, and social world in particular should be subjected to this common-sense test in order to avoid accusations that they lack a connection to reality, are rarefied or elitist. One of the greatest strengths of common sense is its ability to challenge the everyday comprehensibility of grandiose abstractions.

The explosive issue of dealing with complexity lies in the nature of the challenges themselves. It is always important to distinguish whether the answers to questions can lead to fundamentally unambiguous solutions or if such answers always lead only to fundamentally ambiguous solutions. In the first instance, factual knowledge (logic, rigorous argument, etc.) is required; in the second instance, we need values-based knowledge (emotion, motivation, etc.).¹¹ The former aims to produce value-free statements such as those issued by the natural sciences which define their epistemological progress. The latter comprise statements that can never be unambiguous due to their intrinsic need for interpretation. In practice, these different types of knowledge are often closely linked. Common sense suggests we should not play them off against each other.

Today we have good, reliable evidence about the consequences of global warming and environmental pollution. It is much more difficult to find innovative ways of collective adaptation that chime with everyday rationality. The same applies to understanding the incalculable possibilities of artificial intelligence. In both cases we must resort to the practical wisdom of first and foremost not doing things whose consequences we cannot foresee. At the same time, we must

recognize that we are in a process of investigation that takes time. In this respect, we are now particularly dependent on common sense and its development, which acts as a corrective to supposedly simple solutions to complex problems and at the same time does not overestimate its own range of application.

II. COMMON SENSE STRENGTHENS THE COMPETENCE OF THE PUBLIC GOOD

Over time, in the German-speaking world, “gesunder Menschenverstand” became the accepted translation of “common sense.”¹² Today, this almost seems like a definition of *sensus communis*, whereas the first translation of Thomas Reid’s seminal work still talked about “gemeiner Menschenverstand.”

More important for our purposes, however, is the more comprehensive use of the concept, which has been liberated from the original idea of *koine aisthesis*. What interests me about common sense is less the question of developing a sensory-motor stimulus-response relationship, but rather how the integration of value judgments can give rise to something that is considered reasonable to the benefit of the common

good. When it comes to coexistence in society, it is also about integrating needs.¹³

In this context, Immanuel Kant's three maxims for the use of common sense are groundbreaking.¹⁴ He calls the first "thinking for oneself," by which he means independent, unbiased thinking. In the second maxim, "think from the standpoint of everyone else," he calls for a position when forming judgments that goes beyond individual advantage. In the third maxim, "think consistently at all times," the first two combine to form what Kant calls "reason."

I interpret this three-step process as developing the ability to bring together the cognitive and emotional-motivational processes involved in a coherent way. Initially it's irrelevant which parts of these processes the individual is conscious or unconscious of.

If we pursue the basic notion of integration, common sense provides a link between public spirit and the common good. While public spirit describes the motivational basis for a focus on the common good, common sense connects intention with reality. In this context it is important to link different points of view so as to come up with a pragmatically feasible solution that other people consider reasonable.

It is considered reasonable when the balance between individual and collective needs and

expectations is maintained. It is unreasonable when no balance is reached and an approach to a solution conflicts with or deviates too widely from the knowledge and experience of a culture. If the common good is the goal, then common sense can act as a mediator of reason.

In this case common sense can be seen as the ability to intuitively recognize what is right and to do what is appropriate. This first of all concerns the subjective assessment of what is considered fair and just, but also beautiful and useful. It also includes the ability to recognize what is feasible in reality and what value conflicts can arise. In this respect, common sense is conservative because it excludes extreme or radical positions and aims to create balance.

Every realization of ideas of the common good requires common sense. On the one hand, common sense feeds the creative pragmatism needed to find practical approaches in controversial issues concerning the common good. On the other hand, the tension in ideas of the common good between the individual and collective satisfaction of needs is inherent in the concept of common sense: measuring one's own actions against how comprehensible they are to others. In light of the grand challenges we face today, one extension might be to expand the frame of

reference and consider the effects from the perspective of the conditions of life on Earth as a whole. In this broader perspective of the common good, a decision should be acceptable not only to “the man on the Clapham omnibus” but also, for example, to “the tree on the side of the road” and “the artificial intelligence around the corner.”

Isn't that yet another excessive demand? And how can common sense be developed first at the level of the individual? Finally, I would like to outline what the appropriate learning processes for an individual might look like.

III. COMMON SENSE IS FORMED BY EXPERIENCES

Simplification is a core factor in common sense. Its strength, but also its weakness, lies in the express integration of experiences. As meaningful as wisdom, humor, and natural wit may be, prejudices and stereotypes are equally dangerous. Common sense can mean different things depending on experience. “The doctrine of the mean” plays a different role for adolescents than for their parents or grandparents.

Practical wisdom as the highest level of common sense is the result of lifelong learning processes that no

one can shorten or even skip. An assessment of what can be considered “normal common sense” requires inner maturity, which an individual has to develop through experience. Children and young people must first learn which rules and norms apply in the social environment. Their experience teaches them which intuitions they can and cannot rely on. This includes trusting other people as well as understanding the risks and dangers involved when dealing with the forces of nature, animals, objects, and the environment in general.

These learning processes continue into adulthood to the extent that new forms of self-reflection are developed when dealing with contradictory experiences. In the best case of a “common” sense, this leads to a more complex understanding of the world, in which previously conflicting perspectives lead to a new kind of simplicity on another level.

Theories of developmental psychology describe these processes as a higher level of experience, which can be described as inner maturity.¹⁵ First of all, in adolescence we need to understand and accept the values and norms of our social environment. This also includes internalizing the experiences that make up the fund of common sense. As a result, we reach a provisionally stable state of adaptation to our social

environment, which Robert Kegan calls the “socialized mind.” This is the norm for many people and indeed remains so throughout their entire life. Others go a step further because in actively dealing with other people’s various expectations they encounter conflicts that they cannot or do not want to resolve through further adaptation. This results in a reassessment of previous experiences and of course also to a relativization of one’s own common sense. Suddenly what was previously considered common sense no longer seems helpful and even gets in the way. If we manage to arrive at our own convictions and truths, we have to defend them when they come into conflict with our environment. Choosing our own path means more inner independence and freedom, but also more vulnerability. Previous dependencies are not eliminated, but they now appear in a new light and can be reflected upon more consciously. Kegan calls this level of experience the “self-authoring mind.” Some people are then able to take a further, final step in personality development. As a “self-transforming mind,” they learn to locate their own truths in a wider context and do not have to insist on their truth. They begin to accept that simple truths are often unattainable and learn to tolerate contradictions and accept other world views.

It is immediately obvious that a common-sense saying such as “the jug goes to the well until it breaks” takes on new nuances of meaning at each level of experience as we gain more life experiences. As the wealth of experience grows, it then becomes possible to recall the experiential knowledge acquired in the learning processes outlined above and to apply it as common sense. In this way the individual’s *sensus communis* becomes more effective.

This learning process in the development of common sense, from the intuitive adoption of experiences to practical wisdom, can be understood as the elaboration of a constant stream of new answers to the question of the relationship between self-determination and self-assertion on the one hand and, on the other, dependence on and being at the mercy of the other people.

CONCLUSION

The different aspects of the origin, function, and development of common sense, which we have discussed rudimentarily in this essay, suggest that we should not overburden the concept itself. A simple and above all open description is perhaps best suited to do justice to the rich history of the term. Common

sense encompasses the analytically unfathomable ability of humans to orient themselves intuitively in their environment. This ranges from sensory-motor stimulus-response relationships to the highest cognitive achievements of practical wisdom. Common sense manifests itself in its own way at each of these different hierarchical levels.

The answer to the question posed at the beginning about the use of common sense in our era can be summed up as follows: Before we look for new perspectives, we should first make better use of the existing potential. This includes reinforcing trust in our own gut feeling, but also consciously practicing a change of perspective. It is about tapping into previously unused forms of knowledge and self-critically questioning established thought patterns. Developmental psychology suggests that common sense can be trained.

Those in particular who claim to have common sense should use it with caution. Generally speaking, this can apply to any of us! Common sense is not a universal weapon to be deployed when you don't know what to do next. But it is definitely a source of practical reason that makes an individual's inner voice heard and encourages us to trust our intuition. A hunch or inner conviction cannot replace a lack of

factual knowledge, but it can close relevant gaps and guide our actions. Common sense shows its greatest strength when—often with humor— it brings overly rarefied ideas back to the human world of experience.

Common sense reaches its limits when it is no longer subject to scrutiny or wants to detach itself from focusing on the common good. It becomes even more difficult when common sense's power to simplify is abused in order to trivialize complex situations and mobilize the dark side of common sense (prejudices, stereotypes). We should therefore pay careful attention to how the idea of common sense is being used.

The most important extensions of common sense in the 21st century are likely to be in the areas that concern people's own power to act and their position in the world. The wealth of experience inherent to common sense should not stop at what "the man on the Clapham omnibus" considers reasonable and thus beneficial to the common good, but should also include the "tree by the side of the road" and the "artificial intelligence around the corner." In this way, it may be possible to develop one of the most interesting, but also most puzzling of human abilities in an evolutionary and meaningful way.

Notes

1. Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2011).
2. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments, The Glasgow Edition*, vol. 1 [1759] (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1976).
3. Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* [1764] (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).
4. Chris Moore, *The Development of Commonsense Psychology* (Psychology Press, 2013).
5. Hermann Haken, *Erfolgsgeheimnisse der Natur. Synergetik die Lehre vom Zusammenwirken* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1981).
6. For an overview, see Gerd Gigerenzer and Wolfgang Gaissmaier, “Heuristic Decision Making” in *Annual Review of Psychology*, 62 (1) (2011), pp. 451–82; and Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).
7. Upon closer inspection, however, even the apparently simplest platitude often turns out to be a complex psychological effort when dealing with the world.
8. Emil Walter-Busch, *Common Sense und der Lauf der Dinge in Humanwissenschaften* (Paderborn: Brill Fink, 2023).
9. Ibid.
10. The tendency has been to emphasize the primacy of implicit assessment, which precedes conscious cognitive processes. See Timo Meynhardt, *Wertwissen: Was Organisationen wirklich bewegt* (Münster: Waxmann, 2004).
11. Timo Meynhardt, *Wertwissen*.

12. Helga Körver, *Common Sense: Die Entwicklung eines englischen Schlüsselwortes und seine Bedeutung für die englische Geistesgeschichte vornehmlich zur Zeit des Klassizismus und der Romantik* (Bonn: Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 1967).
13. Timo Meynhardt, *Wertwissen*.
14. Robert Nehring, *Kritik des Common Sense – Gesunder Menschenverstand, reflektierende Urteilkraft und Gemeinsinn – der Sensus communis bei Kant* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2010).
15. Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1982).