

Thematizing Common Sense (Presentation of the Dossier 'Science and Common Sense')

“... surrounding every event on an unconscious level is what I refer as a *common sense halo*, or an *implicit counterfactual sphere*, so called because it consists of many related, usually counterfactual variants of the event”

Hofstader (1975)

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The epistemological issue of *common sense* within the field of philosophy of sciences is relatively recent. It acquired momentum with the emergence of the new sub-field known as the *philosophy of mind* to a large degree an outcome of the emergence of psychology as a scientific discipline. “Folk psychology”, understood as a modality of common sense, is a central topic shared by “social psychology”, “development psychology”, “philosophy of mind”, “epistemology” eventually coordinated within the interdisciplinary field of “cognitive sciences”.

It addresses the way of how the everyday man who, like the Moliere’s Monsieur Jourdain, has been doing psychology all his life without knowing it. How all of us in our daily lives spontaneously not only can describe but also understand, explain and predict our behavior as well as the behavior of the others with whom we are related.

For social scientists, this could be explained by factors such as the process of socialization very much helped by the knowledge embedded in the language and reinforced by personal experience.

The issue raised by “folk psychology”, as well as by other “folk sciences” is focused on the extent at which such natural knowledge is underlying the implicit as well as the explicit theories of behavior, human or even animal, could be considered valid according to the norms of science.

There is certainly evidence that folk explanations are eventually found to be erroneous as shown by the more systematic analysis of the scientific method. The History of Science is full of examples of naive explanations about the physical nature, but it was much later, only at the end of the nineteenth century that same suspicion came to be extended to the explanation of human conduct.

Now, this inquiry became a rather prolific line of research. Leading names have been Herbert Simon (1916–2001), Thomas Schelling (1921–2016), Elinor Ostrom (1933–2012), Daniel Kahneman (1934–), just only to mention those who have been awarded the Nobel prize in Economy, although all of them are coming from behavioral and cognitive sciences.

The issue of “common sense” is thus closely related to that much comprehensive as no less complex of the “demarcation of science”, whether science should be distinguished and on what grounds from not science, giving rise to a controversy still alive among philosophers of science. Common sense is not only a theoretical question. Moreover, it has social and political consequences, as it reflects the power conflicts within the “field of science”. In effect, this leads to a hierarchization of the disciplines where “natural knowledge”, “folk knowledge”, let alone the fuzzy “common sense”, as branches of social sciences are located, at best, into the periphery of the field.

This question not to be pursued here is only referred to give some context to the more accurate topic of the common sense versus science to which we return.

In so doing it is almost inevitable to look back to the ancient Greeks. The notion of “common sense” (*koine aisthesis*) was firstly coined by Aristotle as related to perception and interpreted as a sort of an integrative sixth sense granting the unity of the perceived object.

Such a notion, introduced on the *De Anima (peri psychis)* – probably the first known text of a proto-psychology, will be developed by the Scholastic Fathers under the Latin translation of “*Sensus Communis*” which, much later Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) adopted as well to endow it with a philosophical nuance, not to be confounded with “common sense”, as vulgar “opinion”. Let us recall that for Kant the “opinion” is a belief “*aware of being insufficient both subjectively as objectively*” (CRP B 850).

Opinion, so understood, is similar to the notion of the Greek “*Doxa*”, that Plato so much despised and condemned, as opposed to “*Episteme*” – knowledge grounded on reason. We face now a new issue, the one related to the degree of validity granted to our beliefs, the extent at which they eventually could be transformed in “*Science*” that is, again with Kant, – “*both objectively as subjectively sufficient*” (*ibid*).

The question is intriguing given that the “*Doxa*”, notwithstanding its putative “*insufficiency*” is good enough for our daily exchanges either with things or with words.

Besides, as it will be claimed by a particular line of thought of scholars that defend the validity of common sense, initiated with Reid (1710–1796) and followed, among others by G.E. Moore (1873–1958) and Wittgenstein (1889–1951), common sense could not be validated using the canonical scientific criteria. This does not mean that such form of knowledge is less valid, not only in practical but also in theoretical terms offering the indispensable ground for anchoring knowledge in all its modalities.

As clearly summarized by Fernando Gil (1937–2006) both common sense and science share the common matrix of culture, from which science, as well as technology, come to emerge.

If science led to correct common sense in matters related to the natural world – we are no more convinced that the earth is flat or that the Sun turns around the Earth – its success was not the same in terms of the life-world where values and power constitute and probably continue to be the rules of the game (Gil 2002).

Besides even when aware of the “errors” uncovered by the systematic research conducted by psychologists, it is not obvious whether those “errors” are not the result of a biased epistemology.

It is mostly in this field of the “life-world” and the correlative emergence of the social and the human sciences that the debate around common sense and science, mediated by a philosophical reflexivity, always was and remains to be pursued.

Let us make a brief overview starting with Plato, who in the *Theatetus* reminds an Aesopic fable involving an inattentive astrologue scorned by a passerby for falling into a well while looking up at the stars.

Plato slightly changed the story, the astrologue is identified as Thales, and the passerby is a Thracian servant girl who “*jeered at him, they say, because he was so eager to know the things in the sky that he could not see what was there before him at his very feet*” (Plato, *Theaetetus* 174 A,121).

Hans Blumenberg (1920–1996) has written a fascinating book – “*The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*”, published in 1987, where he examines the reception of this metaphor along the history of the western philosophy. The meaning of the fable seems rather clear, every student of philosophy knows the injunction – “*Primum vivere deinde philosophari*” a priority that Plato apparently did not recognize in the Doxa expressed by the Thracian Woman.

For his student Aristotle, philosophy could or should, however, be practised as a defence of common sense given the importance he gives to the virtue of “prudence” (*phronesis*) as practical wisdom – how to act in particular situations, to be distinguished from the more theoretical “wisdom” (*Sophia*) involving reasoning concerning universal truth.

“*Science implies demonstration; but things whose principles or causes are variable do not admit demonstration; and on the other hand, things that are necessarily determined do not admit deliberation. It follows therefore that prudence cannot be either science or art: it cannot be a science because the sphere of action is that which is alterable; it cannot be art because production is generally different from action*” (NE Book VI,5,1140 a,b).

Aristotle does not propose a definition of “*phronesis*” hidden in some abstract Platonic idea of that intellectual virtue. As he states, we understand the nature of “prudence” looking at persons considered as such.

The “example” he gives is Pericles – and people like him, “*they are able to see what is good for themselves as well as for the men in general*” (*ibid*).

At the present state of the art such an approach proposed by Aristotle corresponds to what social psychologists, in the wake of Wittgenstein (*Logical Investigations*) designate as *prototypes* (some easily traceable common features of the class) or *exemplars* (Pericles) used in the natural process of classification, where some members of a category are as more central than others. (Rosh 1973). The famous George Orwell’s quote that “*All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others*” becomes much less paradoxical than its ironical intention might suggest.

The way how we classify persons, animals, things or events on our daily activity is not the same as scientist establish their rigorous taxonomies.

No less relevant is Aristotle’s description of “*prudence*” regarding a “*disposition*” – an idea also highlighted by F. Gil – that is, a sort of “*individual law*”, an “*habitus*” embedded in the mind and the body (Gil 2002 p. 135). These two features of the Aristotelian characterization of common sense will become Ariadne’s thread to guide us on this short journey in the labyrinth in search of its philosophical validity.

We turn now to Kant asking himself about the power of human understanding for dealing with the fundamental questions of human being *What I can know, what I shall do, what I am entitled to hope*, coming to conclude that our “*pure reason*” is finally limited to the natural world, where “*science*” is able to go beyond mere “*opinion*” and where “*certitude*” reinforces “*conviction*” (CRP-B850).

In terms however of those metaphysical interrogations or even facing daily problems, either the pure or the practical (moral) reason seem to be of little help and likely unable to go beyond common sense. This is the melancholic conclusion that he has bequeathed to us on the last pages of his Critique of Pure Reason: “*that about the essential interests of human nature, the highest philosophy can achieve no more than the guidance which nature has vouchsafed to the common sense*” (CRP B 859). We are not very far from what Aristotle already concluded many centuries before.

But Kant went eventually beyond that skeptical approach succeeding to find a way of overcoming what one could call a commonsensical view

about common sense or, in other words, how *common sense* can acquire a sort of epistemological dignity not limited to its pragmatic use.

In his Third Critique dedicated to the “*Power of Judgement*”, the “*Sensus Communis*” instead of being a limitation becomes a powerful faculty (disposition) the one that endows humans with their uniqueness.

As a sort of epiphany Kant becomes aware that “*Sensus Communis*” could be seen in aesthetic terms, obeying to the grammatic of taste. Common is now interpreted as “*communality*” and “*sense*”, in the singular, acquires a new semiotic turn, related to “*meaning*” as contextualized signification.

In the *lifeworld*, the search for sense, the need of making sense, is what finally matters. This is besides what gave rise to the emergence of the field of the social and human sciences as a mediating link between philosophy and the nomothetic sciences, a topic that will not be developed here.

As explained by Kant, “*by sensus communis must be understood the idea of communal sense, i.e. a faculty for judging that in its reflection takes account (a priori) of everyone else's away of representing in thought, in order as it were to hold its judgment set to human reason as a whole and thereby avoid the illusion which, from private conditions that could easily be held to be objective, would have a detrimental influence on judgment*” (CPJ – 40).

Common sense, so understood, is thus constitutive, both apriori condition and consequence of human communication and human intersubjectivity. The famous maxims of Sensus Communis of this new Kantian turn – “(1) *To think for oneself*; (2) *Think in the position of everyone else*; (3) *Always think in accord with oneself*” (*ibid*) could not be more clear.

They however require another no less important faculty – the “*imagination*” defined as the capacity to transform sense objects into images, making present what is absent, which makes possible the second maxim of “*putting himself from the standpoint of other*”, not in actual terms but rather “*from an universal standpoint*”, giving place to what Kant names “*broad minded*” (enlarging the mind) in contrast with a narrow-minded way of thinking.

This very same capacity of imagination, daughter of Mnemosyne, that in Pure Reason generates the “*schemes*” – linking an image to a concept (CRP – A141, 142B180,181). Schemata of pure reason become, therefore “*exemplars*”, a sort of empirical concepts of the *Sensus Communis* also at the core of the judgment of taste (CPJ #59) such as for Aristotle Pericles would be the example of a prudent man. The same psychologic of natural classification described by social psychologists.

I would venture that such a translation of the notion of the Kantian’s scheme in terms of “*exemplar*” could be extended to the pure concepts: the equilateral triangle becoming the “*prototype*” or the “*scheme*” of the pure concept of triangle, which could significantly eliminate the “*unfathomed mystery*” that Kant attributes to this process of thinking (CRP B 181). In other words, the schemata of the scientist would finally obey to the same underlying psychological processes guiding the reasoning of common sense.

It could be argued that the new perspective of common sense as “*Sensus Communis*” or sense of community might open a Pandora’s box. It could render problematic the drawing of the boundaries between the Descarte’s “*good sense*” and the Heidegger’s “*Gerede*” (chattering), such as in the philosophy of science is problematic to distinguish between science and non-science.

The problem of demarcation becomes a political issue. A consequence that Hanna Arendt (1906–1975) elaborated in her attempt to make a comprehensive re-reading of the Kantian triptych in her magnum opus “The Life of the Mind” whose third volume, dedicated to “Judgment on the political philosophy of Kant” was not yet published at the date of her death.

Anyway, in the thirteen conference which would become this future book, H. Arendt is very manifest in arguing that the common sense for Kant is the sense of the community, a *Sensus Communis* to be distinguished from a “*Sensus Privatus*”.

She goes further drawing our attention to the opposition between the “*persuasive judgment*” and the “*constraining truth*” – we don’t judge in computing the sum of two plus two.

The distinction is already present in Kant, but also in Aristotle as formerly pointed out. The argument is that aesthetic judgment as *Sensus Communis* is “*not apodictic*” appealing to a “*universal rule not possible to articulate*” (CPR. 18) to which “we solicit the adherence of the others” (*ibid #sensus communis*) (apud Arendt 1991, p. 112).

For Arendt, as for Kant, it becomes therefore apparent that the epistemological question is not so much the discontinuity between science and common sense but rather the one between non-reflexive and reflexive common sense.

Incidentally one might here recall the late Charles Peirce (1839–1914) whose doctrine of Pragmatism proposes a rather sophisticated approach of what he calls a “critical common sensism”, (CP 5.438–462), on the study of self-control or deliberate conduct in which for fallibilist Pragmatism even criticism itself would be subjected to renewed criticism. Fallibilism is a doctrine that no knowledge is absolute, but is always surrounded by indeterminacy, uncertainty, and vagueness. However, Peirce insists that besides perceptual judgments, there are “original (i.e., indubitable because uncriticized) beliefs of a general and recurrent kind, as well as indubitable acritical inferences”. (CP 5.442) This is said against the Scottish common sense positions that according to Peirce didn’t realize “(...) that the original beliefs only remain indubitable in their application to affairs that resemble those of a primitive mode of life”. Peirce as a result of this installs limitations to undoubtability in common sense. At the same time, he proposes an unlimited scientific possibility of the critic of authorities of formerly uncriticized “instinctive” beliefs that appeared to be beyond doubt. These uncritical views have to be put on test by scientific reasoning and strict experimentation (CP 5.445).

Collectively, the normative sciences (CP 1.281; 1902: aesthetics, ethics, and logics), should work within critical common sense, that is, on the question “*how Feeling, Conduct, and Thought, ought to be controlled supposing them to be subject in a measure, and only in a measure, to self-control, exercised by means of self-criticism, and the purposive formation of habit, as common sense tells us they are in a measure controllable*” (MS 655: 24; 1910). One of the six heuristic features of this doctrine of critical common sense is what he calls “vagueness”. Vagueness in Peirce is a limit function of generality and determination: “*an*

intermediate, or nascent state, between determination and indetermination” (CP 5.450)- in judgment before we can discover more accurate knowledge- a relatively undoubtful and therefore useful “inspecificity” (Short 2007, 274) as it renders its partial overcoming possible.

Hans G. Gadamer (1900–2002) is another author converging with this interpretation of the Sensus Communis or the sense of community. To quote: “*The main thing for our purpose is that more sensus communis does not mean only that general faculty in all men but the sense that founds community*” (Gadamer 1975, p. 21). Gadamer invokes Gianbattista Vico (1688–1744) whose views he shares, and according to whom the most important is not the universality of reason but rather “the concrete universality represented by the community of a group, a people, a nation, or the whole human race” (*ibid*, p. 21).

But Gadamer, diverging from Arendt, does not seem to share the same views about the Kant’s Third Critique where, according to him, judgment is considered as one of the lower power of the mind rendering suspect that it might produce high standard moral judgment about right and wrong. But, contends Gadamer, “everyone has enough sense of common judgment (*Gemeinen Sinn*) – that can be expected to show a sense of community (*Gemeinsinn*), moral and civic solidarity, but that means a judgment of right and wrong and a sense of “*common good*” (*ibid* p. 32). Gadamer does not seem to have considered the role of the Third Critique as mediating between the Pure Reason and the Practical Reason, an issue that is not pursued here.

In invoking Vico, Gadamer points to another conceptual tradition where common sense is opposed to the “*barbarism of reflection*” a curious expression that Vico uses to describe the Cartesian’s solipsistic method of the hyperbolic doubt.

There is no evidence that Kant might have read the “*Scienza Nuova*” whose first edition was published in 1827, or even that he could agree with a rejection of an excess of intellectualism.

Anyway, the cultural universals that Vico claims to have found in the human condition – religion, marriage and the burying of the dead, could have some “*elective affinities*” with the Kantian triad of God, the immortality of the soul and death.

And quite far as they are regarding the style of thought they also converge, as pointed by both Arendt and Gadamer, in considering that thinking is not exclusive of science, let alone that only the scientific thinking would have to become the canon to be applied to all spheres of life. It is in this light that we can understand the provocative remark of Martin Heidegger (1889–1926) that “*science does not think*”, which seems to reverse the common sense (?) view about science (Heidegger 1958, p. 157).

Of course, scientists think and think hard. Who could have doubts about that? Unless the notion of thinking, as it is apparently the case, could be liable to several or even conflicting interpretations. Besides, Heidegger adds that “*the science could not think does not mean an a shortcoming but rather as an advantage*” (*ibid.*).

To a certain extent, this could be viewed as the positivistic corollary of the limits of the Kantian Pure Reason that, in its radical version, refuses the search for the explanation, the “*hypothesis on fingo*” claimed but not precisely followed by Newton.

It is not the vocation of science if we understand by science the study of natural phenomena, which never raises the question of sense, the question of meaning. Anyway, scientists are not supposed to be closed in their ivory towers; they are not prevented from asking about the meaning, the social significance of the science they produce, or about the way they reason, what could be the metaphysical assumptions underlying their paradigms and theories.

For Heidegger thinking is described as a paramount question – the current English expression of “*begging the question*” rightly summarizes the idea of the Heideggerian “Being” as a moving target, as a “sign”, which reveals and at the same time hides its essence.

For Heidegger, both Thales the astronomer and the Thracian girls are masters and slaves laughing in turn of one another. They pursue an endless conversation about the meaning and how to take care of ourselves. They ask how to deal with the Kantian “*unsocial sociability*”, in constructing and sharing a society with the others, and finally how to overcome the anxiety facing death that other oxymoron which Heidegger describes either as a *possible impossibility* or mutatis mutandis an

impossible possibility. For such questions, as also concluded by Kant, we don't have any better than our *common sense*.

The articles assembled in this special issue illustrate how the debate centered on common sense and science is approached in different disciplines. The topics discussed concern the continuities and discontinuities between science and common sense.

In life sciences, presented by Antonio Bracinha Vieira, common sense appears to have introduced some persistent biased assumptions interfering with the development of objective science. The author offers an overview of the history of the discipline giving some examples of naive beliefs of which scientists are not exempted. Particular attention is paid to the theory of evolution which gave rise to lively controversies among scientists themselves, let alone the negative reception by large religiously influenced sectors of the society. Although much of this debate is dated, it has not been entirely overcome in our times, or maybe it has assumed other forms. Vieira also points to the difficulty in distinguishing historical progress from natural evolution which does not seem to be exclusively felt by the less educated people but can be observed as well as on the philosophical debate around the question of nature and human society, at present particularly relevant with the emergence of the ecological crisis. Incidentally whenever scientists are not able to reach a consensus, the problems become political which at some extent they always are, to which the good common sense has a voice.

Fréderic Fruteau de Laclos, a philosopher expert on the work of Émile Meyerson, a name today seldom recalled, examines the contribution of this scholar in showing the continuity between science and common sense. The scientific discipline where the debate here takes place is predominantly the science of physics. The higher in the hierarchy of the “pecking order” more distant are the sciences from common sense. This has been the norm at last since the so-called scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. Even though Fruteau de Laclos shows how Meyerson maybe one of the first authors to diverge from the scientific doxa of his French contemporaries aligned with the Bachelard's notion of the epistemological obstacles to the development of science. For Meyerson, as a result of this argued, as maybe to the rationalist tradition, it is the

same human mind to reason in search of a sort of Eleatic permanence of the object whatever the field of inquiry.

Ivana Markova works on social psychology; a different scientific field is less distant of common sense. Her research is especially focused on the “*epistemology of the common sense*” – a research line initiated by the late Serge Moscovici to which this article is closely linked. Markova also considers that there is not exactly a continuity but rather an overlapping interdisciplinary field where both dialogical and conflictive exchanges can be witnessed. She attributes particular relevance to the Holton’s notion of “thémata” also adopted and adapted by S. Moscovici, a concept that might put some light on the underlying assumptions on which both scientists, as well as social groups, produce their theories, either scientific or naive.

The last article by Alexander Gerner, a philosopher, invites us to come back to the perceptual dimension highlighted by Aristotle’s koine aisthesis in a contemporary light of research on the concept and metaphor of resonance initially exemplified as mutual turning-in relations of musicians making music together. The question followed by Gerner what a unified common sense notion of an intuitive “sixth” sense should conceptually deliver aims at clarifying different common aspects of all senses, including synaesthetic modalities and their primary embodied intersubjective shared community of sensing. Gerner analyses the concept and metaphor of “resonance” in contemporary debates on >resonance< as the acoustic and multimodal figure of thought from acoustics to social psychology. As a result of this, he considers not only social self-other relations and the epistemic Second Person Perspective, but as well a necessary resistance to technical impositions of resonance in interaction if a two-way attunement and exits of resonant social relations are made impossible. The argument of A. Gerner seems to adopt an approach where the debate between science and common sense loses much of its relevance. Or, better said, it is the “sensus” as a metonymy of an enhanced body that becomes the new focus of a transdisciplinary aisthesis approach where literature, philosophy, art, and science, not exactly converge but mutually search for an common synthesis.

Any attempt to draw some general conclusions from these four contributions is likely devoid of sense. Besides we were from the outset expecting to find more differences than identity, more vague entanglements than any sort of manifest commonalities across the invited authors. To come back again to Hofstader, a computer scientist, quoted in the epigraph “we are in an expanding sphere of a conceptual shared space which constitutes the central aspect of everyday thought and the essence of common sense” (Hofstader 1975, p 71).

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