



The Cult of 'Common Usage'

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THE CULT OF 'COMMON USAGE'*

BERTRAND RUSSELL

THE most influential school of philosophy in Britain at the present day maintains a certain linguistic doctrine to which I am unable to subscribe. I do not wish to misrepresent this school, but I suppose any opponent of any doctrine is thought to misrepresent it by those who hold it. The doctrine, as I understand it, consists in maintaining that the language of daily life, with words used in their ordinary meanings, suffices for philosophy, which has no need of technical terms or of changes in the signification of common terms. I find myself totally unable to accept this view. I object to it because :

- (1) It is insincere ;
- (2) It is capable of excusing ignorance of mathematics, physics, and neurology in those who have had only a classical education ;
- (3) It is advanced by some in a tone of unctuous rectitude, as if opposition to it were a sin against democracy ;
- (4) It makes philosophy trivial ;
- (5) It makes almost inevitable the perpetuation among philosophers of the muddle-headedness they have taken over from common sense.

(1) *Insincerity.* I will illustrate this by a fable. The professor of Mental Philosophy, when called by his bedmaker one morning, developed a dangerous frenzy, and had to be taken away by the police in an ambulance. I heard a colleague, a believer in 'common usage', asking the poor philosopher's doctor about the occurrence. The doctor replied that the professor had had an attack of temporary psychotic instability, which had subsided after an hour. The believer in 'common usage', so far from objecting to the doctor's language,

* Received 7. xi. 52

repeated it to other enquirers. But it happened that I, who live on the professor's staircase, overheard the following dialogue between the bedmaker and the policeman :

Policeman : 'Ere, I want a word with yer.

Bedmaker : What do you mean ? ' A word ' ? I ain't done nothing.

Policeman : Ah, that's just it—Yer ought to 'ave done something. Couldn't yer see the pore gentleman was mental ?

Bedmaker : That I could. For an 'ole *hour* 'e went on something chronic. But when they're mental you can't make them understand.

In this little dialogue, ' word ', ' mean ', ' mental ', and ' chronic ' are all used in accordance with common usage. They are not so used in the pages of *Mind* by those who pretend that common usage is what they believe in. What in fact they believe in is not common usage, as determined by mass observation, statistics, medians, standard deviations, and the rest of the apparatus. What they believe in is the usage of persons who have their amount of education, neither more nor less—less is illiteracy, more is pedantry—so we are given to understand.

(2) *An excuse for ignorance.* Every motorist is accustomed to speedometers and accelerators, but unless he has learnt mathematics he attaches no precise significance to ' speed ' or ' acceleration '. If he does attach a precise significance to these words, he will know that his speed and his acceleration are at every moment unknowable, and that, if he is fined for speeding, the conviction must be based on insufficient evidence if the time when he is supposed to have speeded is mentioned. On these grounds I will agree with the advocate of common usage that such a word as ' speed ', if used in daily life, must be used as in daily life, and not as in mathematics. But then it should be realised that ' speed ' is a vague notion, and that equal truth may attach to all three of the statements in the conjugation of the following irregular verb :

' I was at rest ' (motorist),

' You were moving at 20 miles an hour ' (a friend),

' He was travelling at 60 miles an hour ' (the police).

It is because this state of affairs is puzzling to magistrates that mathematicians have abandoned common usage.

(3) Those who advocate common usage in philosophy sometimes speak in a manner that suggests the *mystique* of the ' common man '. They may admit that in organic chemistry there is need of long

words, and that quantum physics requires formulae that are difficult to translate into ordinary English, but philosophy (they think) is different. It is not the function of philosophy—so they maintain—to teach something that uneducated people do not know; on the contrary, its function is to teach superior persons that they are not as superior as they thought they were, and that those who are *really* superior can show their skill by making sense of common sense.

It is, of course, a dreadful thing in these days to lay claim to any kind of superiority except in athletics, movies, and money-making. Nevertheless I will venture to say that in former centuries common sense made what we now think mistakes. It used to be thought that there could not be people at the antipodes, because they would fall off, or, if they avoided that, they would grow dizzy from standing on their heads. It used to be thought absurd to say that the earth rotates because everybody can see that it doesn't. When it was first suggested that the sun may be as large as the Peloponnesus, common sense was outraged; but all this was long ago. I do not know at what date common sense became all-wise. Perhaps it was in 1776; perhaps in 1848; or perhaps with the passing of the Education Act in 1870. Or perhaps it was only when physiologists such as Adrian and Sherrington began to make scientific inroads on philosophers' ideas about perception.

(4) Philosophy, as conceived by the school I am discussing, seems to me a trivial and uninteresting pursuit. To discuss endlessly what silly people mean when they say silly things may be amusing but can hardly be important. Does the full moon look as large as half a crown or as large as a soup plate? Either answer can be proved correct by experiment. It follows that there is an ambiguity in the question. A modern philosopher will clear up the ambiguity for you with meticulous care.

But let us take an example which is less unfair, say the question of immortality. Orthodox Christianity asserts that we survive death. What does it mean by this assertion? And in what sense, if any, is the assertion true? The philosophers with whom I am concerned will consider the first of these questions, but will say that the second is none of their business. I agree entirely that, in this case, a discussion as to what is meant is important and highly necessary as a preliminary to a consideration of the substantial question, but if nothing can be said on the substantial question it seems a waste of time to discuss what it means. These philosophers remind me of

the shopkeeper of whom I once asked the shortest way to Winchester. He called to a man in the back premises :

‘ Gentleman wants to know the shortest way to Winchester.’
 ‘ Winchester ? ’ an unseen voice replied.
 ‘ Aye.’
 ‘ Way to Winchester ? ’
 ‘ Aye.’
 ‘ Shortest way ? ’
 ‘ Aye.’
 ‘ Dunno.’

He wanted to get the nature of the question clear, but took no interest in answering it. This is exactly what modern philosophy does for the earnest seeker after truth. Is it surprising that young people turn to other studies ?

(5) Common sense, though all very well for everyday purposes, is easily confused, even by such simple questions as ‘ Where is the rainbow ? ’ When you hear a voice on a gramophone record, are you hearing the man who spoke, or a reproduction ? When you feel a pain in a leg that has been amputated, where is the pain ? If you say it is in your head, would it be in your head if the leg had not been amputated ? If you say yes, then what reason have you ever for thinking you have a leg ? And so on.

No one wants to alter the language of common sense, any more than we wish to give up talking of the sun rising and setting. But astronomers find a different language better, and I contend that a different language is better in philosophy.

Let us take an example. A philosophy containing such a large linguistic element cannot object to the question : What is meant by the word ‘ word ’ ? But I do not see how this is to be answered within the vocabulary of common sense. Let us take the word ‘ cat ’, and for the sake of definiteness let us take the written word. Clearly there are many instances of the word, no one of which *is* the word. If I say ‘ Let us discuss the word “ cat ”,’ the word ‘ cat ’ does not occur in what I say, but only an instance of the word. The word itself is no part of the sensible world ; if it is anything, it is an eternal super-sensible entity in a Platonic heaven. The word, we may say, is a class of similar shapes, and, like all classes, is a logical fiction.

But our difficulties are not at an end. Similarity is neither necessary nor sufficient to make a shape a member of the class which

THE CULT OF 'COMMON USAGE'

is the word 'cat'. The word may be written in capitals or in small letters, legibly or illegibly, in black on a white ground or in white on a blackboard. If I write the word 'catastrophe', the first three letters do not constitute an instance of the word 'cat'. The most necessary thing in an instance of the word is *intention*. If a piece of marble happened to have a vein making the shape 'cat' we should not think this an instance of the word.

It thus appears that we cannot define the word 'word' without (a) a logical theory of classes, and (b) a psychological understanding of intention. These are difficult matters. I conclude that common sense, whether correct or incorrect in the use of words, does not know in the least what words are. I wish I could believe that this conclusion would render it speechless.

Let us take another problem, that of perception. There is here an admixture of philosophical and scientific questions, but this admixture is inevitable in many questions, or, if not inevitable, can only be avoided by confining ourselves to comparatively unimportant aspects of the matter in hand.

Here is a series of questions and answers.

Q. When I see a table, will what I see be still there if I shut my eyes?

A. That depends upon the sense in which you use the word 'see'.

Q. What is still there when I shut my eyes?

A. This is an empirical question; don't bother me with it, but ask the physicists.

Q. What exists when my eyes are open, but not when they are shut?

A. This again is empirical, but in deference to previous philosophers I will answer you: coloured surfaces.

Q. May I infer that there are two senses of 'see'? In the first, when I 'see' a table, I 'see' something conjectural about which physics has vague notions that are probably wrong. In the second, I 'see' coloured surfaces which cease to exist when I shut my eyes.

A. That is correct if you want to think clearly, but our philosophy makes clear thinking unnecessary. By oscillating between the two meanings, we avoid paradox and shock, which is more than most philosophers do.