

Moore and Wittgenstein on Common Sense.¹

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Abstract: Philosophers often invoke some sort of consensus in order to justify their analyses on knowledge. Such an appeal could be interpreted as a plea for *common sense*. Yet there are many senses of *common sense*. In this paper, I would like to explore G.E. Moore and L. Wittgenstein's appeal to such a folk consensus. I will argue that while the former attaches common sense with the everyday beliefs of plain men, the latter invokes the universal norms underlying human practice and therefore invites an ideal common sense that can better serve as an epistemic criterion.

00. Introduction.

Philosophy often evokes a consensus of mankind in order to justify its analyses. Sometimes this consensus is taken in as a criterion for philosophical inquiry altogether; it is supposed to determine what is sensible to ask for while doing philosophy. This appeal to a common background could be interpreted as a plea for some kind of *common sense*.

In this paper, I would like to suggest that analytic philosophy's request for common sense can be of at least two kinds. The first one suggests an appeal to

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the everyday beliefs of plain men. The second invokes our universal norms of reasoning and acting and therefore invites an ideal common sense. The former is at best represented historically in the writings of G.E. Moore, the latter in the later philosophy of L. Wittgenstein.² The question is whether any of those two notions can provide a solid criterion for ascribing knowledge. I will conclude that Wittgenstein's approach invites an *enlightened* common sense, an ideal, which can better serve as a philosophical criterion. Yet, although the Wittgensteinian conception of common sense is more appealing, it is vague; therefore it is an open question whether it can actually work.

In fact, the term *common sense* has many uses in ordinary contexts. Mostly it has been used to refer to:

- a. *Practical reasoning*, to an adequate handling of everyday-life situations. (Gregory, 1920)
- b. *Sane comprehension* as opposed to "the stupor of a madman or half-wit". (Gregory, 1920)
- c. The *views of the plain man* as opposed to those of the scientist's or the philosopher's. (Somerville, 1986)

Nowadays, it seems hard to sharply distinguish the philosophical meaning of the term from the ordinary. I believe that ordinary usage has surely affected

² There are many different interpretations of Ludwig Wittgenstein. (See for example A.Gary & R.Read 2000, R. Rorty, 1982, S. Cavell, 1990). Here I concentrate on the later Wittgenstein and I will try to stay off big interpretation issues. Yet, my reading is mostly based on *traditional* approaches of Wittgenstein such as P.M.S. Hacker's (See Hacker 1993, 2008; Baker & Hacker, 1997; Bennett & Hacker, 2003), D.G. Stern's (1995) R. Fogelin's, (1994), A. Stroll (1994) J. Schulte's (2001), N. Avgelis (1983) S. Virvidakis (1990), rather than *new* interpretations, under the name of *The new Wittgenstein* (see Gary & Read 2000).

philosophical usage and vice versa. Yet, as J.C. Gregory notes, in philosophy there was a shift in the meaning of the term, “from signifying the efficient handling of ordinary objects of activity to signifying mental habits acquired by all”. (Gregory, 1920) Philosophy supposedly appeals to habits of thought and action, which are common to all and not to the objectives of everyday-life practices. These mental habits are supposed to differentiate the sane from the insane and, in other contexts, the plain man from the specialist.

In philosophy, there is a long history of appeals to common sense. Thomas Reid was probably the first one to openly use common sense as a norm for philosophical enquiry. His appeal invokes both *sound judgment* and the *views of plain men* (Somerville, 1986). From Reid, G.E. Moore picks up and *defends* common sense.

01. Moore.

In “A Defence of Common Sense”, Moore provides a list of obvious beliefs:

There exists at present a human body, which is my body...

Among the things which have... formed part of its environment... there have ... been large numbers of other living humans bodies, each of which has, like it (a) at some time been born (b) continued to exist from some time after birth (c) been at every moment of its life after birth, either in contact with or not far from the surface of the earth...(Moore, 1993, p.107)

Moore goes on with his list of truisms, which, he claims, *everyone* knows with certainty. His defence of common sense reminds us a set of beliefs we all share. Moore's aim is to bring out some obvious truths that people would unanimously agree upon. According to Moore, there is no need for further justification of any of those propositions; they represent native good judgment.

Here *common sense* is used to invoke a set of *propositions* that we would all assert. Common sense is the personalization of the plain man in all of us: it evokes what everybody, in hers or his plain moments, believes. (Somerville, 1986) The sceptic too holds this set of truisms and also knows they are true. In order to refute scepticism, Moore appeals to something we *all* agree on, the sceptic included.

Those beliefs might be about contingent facts, yet we are certain about them. In Moore's writings, common sense refers to a set of beliefs, to pieces of contingent-but-certain propositional knowledge. According to him, these pieces of knowledge are universal and give us a background for certainty. These propositions, he claims, are a crucial part of our beliefs. And they are accompanied with an even stronger belief that they are true. Moore's "Defence" aims to remind the sceptic of this simple fact.³

Moore, then, pleads to *propositions* we are certain of. Common sense is an already acquired set of beliefs. It comes down to certain propositions. We

³ For further discussion of Moore's «Defence of Common Sense», see also A. Stroll, 1994; B. Stroud, 1984; J. Greco, 2003.

all believe them, we all hold them to be true, we are all aware that we hold them, most of the time- that is, in our plain moments of everyday life. Common sense refers to sets of propositional knowledge that we all share *prior* to any philosophizing.

02. Wittgenstein.

An analogous appeal to a consensus is found in the later work of L. Wittgenstein. He also claims to remind us of some universal background, which is contingent but certain, and can serve as the frame of our knowledge claims. But there is a big difference between his appeal and Moore's. For one thing, he is explicitly against the idea that a simple appeal to commonsensical beliefs could solve any philosophical problem. I quote from Wittgenstein's *Blue & Brown Book* [thereafter: *BBB*]:

There is no common sense answer to a philosophical problem. One can defend common sense against the attacks of philosophers only by solving their puzzles, i.e., by curing them from the temptation to attack common sense; not by restating the views of common sense. (*BBB*, pp.58-59)

Indeed Wittgenstein never invokes common sense in the way Moore or Reid do. In the quote above, he criticises the idea that there are any commonsensical answers to philosophical problems. Yet, he does admit that one *must cure the temptation to attack common sense*. He claims that solving

the problems philosophy deals with is the only way one can do this. So again the aim is to prevent us from alternative (that *is non-commonsensual*) views on things. Even if he does not share Moore's attempts to provide commonsensual answers to philosophical problems, he also suggests that common sense is to be valued.

Wittgenstein's idea seems influenced by Moore's. Yet, according to him, when Moore declares *he knows* his list of truisms, he uses the verb "know" wrongly. Sentences about knowledge can always be contested; (*On Certainty* [thereafter: *OC*], §12) Moore's set of propositions, though, cannot be questioned. Any attempt to challenge those propositions would not make any sense. For example, if I say that *I am not certain that I have spent most of my life close to the surface of the earth*, such a statement would not be a sentence of reasonable doubt, but rather evidence of psychological disorder. It would be a sign that I do not share the same *form of life*; that is, the same language, the same habits and practices with the rest of people living in the same cultural background. (*OC*, §67-73, 91-93) The beliefs Moore appeals to are significant because they are an inescapable part of our form of life, not because we "know" them. In fact:

... it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false. (*OC*, §94)

Now I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a *form of life*... (*OC*, §358)

According to Wittgenstein, there is a background of certainties that we have inherited from our language and our form of life. This background is compared with the *riverbed* that serves as the rock bottom of our understanding (*OC*, §94-99). In *OC* he talks of the *rock bottom* or *bedrock* of our understanding; and in all his later work of *form of life, language, language games, grammar*. All of these terms, in the context of Wittgensteinian philosophy, define each other and suggest that we all share a community, a language, habits and practices, rules and prejudices, which amount to a worldview.⁴ Such a worldview is important because it is the ground of all other quests, practices or hypotheses.

In this sense Wittgenstein too evokes some kind of *common sense*. But this version is essentially different: Wittgenstein's analyses do not appeal to the plain man's beliefs but rather to form of life and its grammar, the rules underlying language.

...our investigation is ...a grammatical one... (Wittgenstein,
Philosophical Investigations [thereafter: *PI*], § 91.

We are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomenon
of language ...But we talk about it as we do about the
pieces in chess when *we are stating the rules of the game*,

⁴ For a further discussion of *On Certainty* see S. Cavell, 1982; A. Stroll 1994 and 2000, pp. 139-141; M. McGinn, 1989; G.H. Wright, 1982; R.J. Fogelin, 1994, pp. 193-222. Wittgenstein in *OC* can be interpreted as defending some kind of foundationalism, for he uses the bed-rock certainties of our *form of life* in order to justify knowledge (see Stroll, 1994 and 2000, pp.139- 141; G.D.Conway, 1989; J.Dancy, 1985, pp. 82-83; J. Schulte, 2001). According to some Wittgenstein in *OC* has given the best possible answer to the sceptic (McGinn, Cavell,) while others read him as a Pyrronean sceptic himself (Fogelin).

not describing their physical properties. (*PI*, §108; italics are mine).

According to Wittgenstein, in order to solve philosophical problems a philosopher should describe the grammar, the normative use of our linguistic expressions. Certain phrases can project false images; certain terms are used carelessly and lose their ordinary meaning; certain sentences are taken literally, as if they represent facts in the world, although they have a completely different use. (Baker & Hacker, 1997) Language can give rise to many problems. Every time this happens, the philosopher in all of us will have to step in: We must look at the grammar of the relevant expressions. If, for example, one says *I don't know what is going on in your head*, this expression suggests that the mind is some sort of private room where things happen. But if we clarify this phrase, it will become evident that all one means in using such an expression is *I don't know what you are thinking*. Thus philosophy needs to *uncover* the rules that govern our use in actual language games. (Bennett & Hacker, 2003) The problem is that language users may in fact overlook grammar, although it is in plain view for everyone to see:

... we want to understand something that is already in plain view. For this is what we seem in some sense not to understand. (*PI*, § 89) ... To this end we are constantly giving prominence to distinctions, which our ordinary forms of language easily make us overlook... (*PI*, § 132)

Wittgenstein tries to clarify grammatical features *that are easily overlooked*. We may use grammar, but we do without realising it. We also fail to notice its special features and we don't pay attention to the rules language imposes on us, even though we follow them. This is why we need philosophical analysis. If we were fully aware of the grammar of our concepts, no philosophical problems would arise and no one would contradict common sense. But we are not fully aware of the grammar; we need a more detailed overview.

In the context of later Wittgenstein, it seems that grammar is strongly attached to all kinds of human habits, activities and practices. Over and over he suggests that the meaning of a phrase lies in its use just like knowing a game lies in playing it. (*PI*, §197, 208 and *passim*) He explicitly parallels speaking a language with playing games like chess in order to emphasise the strong bond between understanding and acting. Just as we learn chess by learning its rules and "by the day-to-day practice of playing it" (*PI*, §197), learning a language consists in using it while engaging in the overall practices of the community. Speaking a language, understanding and reasoning are part of all rule-governed practices that humans share. (*PI*, *passim*) *Form of life* also refers to a variety of practices and *language games* that the members of the community engage:

...the term "language game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that speaking a language is a part of an activity or a form of life. (*PI*, §23).

To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.

(PI, §19)

In its entirety, Wittgenstein's later work emphasises the idea that human behaviour, including the use of language, is rule governed and that all rule governed behaviour depends on the practical context of human activity. Thus he expands the notion of language to include *all human practice*.⁵ Grammar provides the rules of such games and practices. The chess paradigm is always at play in Wittgenstein's writings, in order to remind us that our behaviour, including linguistic behaviour, is always normative; every action, as well as every judgement, implies certain (practical) commitments and has certain (practical) consequences.⁶

In his sense, then, *common sense* has to do with a wide variety of *practices* that people spontaneously employ. Such practices are normative, rule governed and they impose further commitments to us all. Yet one cannot always state their rules explicitly. Sometimes they are overlooked, whereas on other occasions the rules are far too complicated to be made explicit. Every member of the community can spontaneously engage in these practices: they ask and give reasons for their beliefs or their actions; they get married and they divorce; they ride bicycles; they sell and buy stuff; they engage in scientific research; they make art which others enjoy and others condemn. We all live in a community that shares a series of complicated, interacting

⁵ See D.G. Stern, 1995, p. 120 and passim. Stern argues that Wittgenstein replaces the logical atomism of his early work with a *practical holism* suggested in his late work.

⁶ R. Brandom explores this idea further in Brandom 1998, 2001.

practices and *knowing how to employ or to deal with them is to have common sense*.⁷ This is the *common sense* that Wittgenstein wants to protect from philosophical perplexity.

Since all human practice is rule governed, we need to uncover those rules by clarifying the grammar of our language games and overall human habits. For, once we clarify grammar, we will not be confused, and thus not tempted to contradict common sense. The rules of grammar are contingent and can change through time. Yet, on each occasion, they lie at the rock bottom of our understanding and determine what is legitimate to ask for or to doubt. (*OC*, §94-99) Getting acquainted with those rules is a part of growing up within the form of life and we follow them spontaneously as we talk or interact with each other. Again, as the game analogy implies, to follow a rule is simply to act on it. (*PI*, §138-242. See also M. McGinn, 1997, pp. 73-106)

It seems then that grammar is the Wittgensteinian analogue to Moore's list of truisms. According to Wittgenstein, the clarification of grammar will keep us on safe ground, namely on the ground of common sense. Grammar is what we have in common. We cannot question the rules we all use when we think, speak or act; any such attempt would hardly make any sense.

⁷ Such a focus in practice, practical knowledge and *know how* is very up to date today in perception theory (for example, see A. Noe, 2004). Sometimes it is explicitly connected with *common sense* and it is used in order to argue that common sense cannot possibly be assimilated by artificial intelligence programmes (see H.L. Dreyfus, 1992, 2001). I will not get into those issues here, though. I will not even discuss whether there is a sharp distinction between *know how* and *know that* (as G. Ryle, 1949 proposed) or whether knowing how can be translated into propositions about knowing that (as S. Jason & T. Williamson, 2001, suggest; for further discussion see P. Snowdon, 2003; Noe, 2005). For now, my only aim is to explore what kind of consensus Wittgenstein appeals to.

Wittgenstein's opposition to Moore's conception of certainty makes their different appeals to common sense explicit. For Wittgenstein, a strong relation between language and form of life grounds all human understanding. He appeals to the grammar of both, to provide us with a clarified (that is, commonsensical) understanding on things.

Wittgenstein's plea for this kind of consensus, which I have here associated with an appeal to common sense, refers to implicit norms underlying our every *practice*, including understanding, reasoning and speaking. Those rules are rooted in our form of life, even if no one notices them. His analyses *invite common sense as an ideal*. Such an ideal does not refer to a worldview that is already common to us all, nor to mental habits that we already practice. It is *the end* we should be aiming at. And if Wittgenstein is right, and philosophical problems arise from our use of language every day, it is *a non-stop guiding norm for philosophy*.

03. Two Senses of *Common Sense*.

In both Moore and Wittgenstein's philosophy common sense serves as a normative criterion that would legitimate questions, answers and ways of doing epistemology. Yet, they appeal to different senses of *common sense*, and they give rise to different epistemic principles.

It seems that Moore has attached *common sense* to a set of propositions. Moore's *common sense* has to do with a list of sentences he knows for certain before we philosophise. Those propositions form the

boundaries that no philosophical quest should transcend. It is for this reason that they are normative. According to Wittgenstein, though, the normativity of *common sense* is attached to *grammar*. The term refers to rules that govern all human *practices*. And, on many occasions, we need philosophy to uncover the grammatical rules of those practices.

Moore is trying to remind us the *beliefs* we all –in our plain moments– share. Even if he is right, and there is a corpus of common-sense views, I think Moore’s appeal is hardly to the point: when we philosophize –when we ask normative questions about empirical knowledge, understanding, etc - we are far from being in *our plain moments*. (see B. Stroud 1984) The sceptical challenge indeed, as Hume suggests, arises in our philosophical studies; or rather, in our philosophical moments, and it is probably there that it should be met. Asking the plain man (in all of us) to answer such questions will turn him into a philosopher.

So, while Moore evokes certain propositions about empirical facts we are certain of, Wittgenstein calls for the rules underlying human practices, including language use. Our everyday practices and the everyday employment of our concepts will by themselves confront philosophical problems. Scepticism, for example, loses its strength when one considers all that we take for granted while performing any kind of practice.

Wittgenstein wants to uncover the rules attached to our practices. This is the philosopher’s job: Or rather, what we should all do in our philosophical moments. Our concepts by themselves suggest certain uses. Yet, when we cry

for philosophical reassurance, we sometimes overlook our linguistic rules and stretch our concepts until they become meaningless. The philosopher in us can only be treated if she acquires a more detailed view of the grammar that is deeply grounded in our form of life.

The question here, though, is whether we can identify grammar, whether we can know if we have uncovered it, rather than invented it. Wittgenstein suggests that clarification is successful whenever we succeed in dissolving some philosophical problem:

For the clarity we are aiming at is indeed complete clarity.

But this simply means that philosophical problems should *completely* disappear.

The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. - The one that gives philosophy in peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions, which bring *itself* to question... (*PI*, §133)

Wittgenstein is very explicit on this: Philosophical problems arise when language is “like an engine idling, not when it is going to work” (*PI*, §132). Our aim is to put language back to work, to uncover “of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of the bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up the limits of language” (*PI*, §119). Once we manage to do this on a topic, there will be no room for disagreement; everyone would agree (*PI*, §128). A grammatical feature is clarified when the philosophical problem

attached to it no longer bothers us. That is, when we are no longer tempted to challenge common sense.

We come back to the same idea: *The only way to defend common sense against the attacks of philosophers is by solving their puzzles.* Clarifying our concepts-in-use, paying attention to their grammatical features, uncovering the rules lying behind our everyday habits is an ongoing practice that should bring us closer to common sense. It is through philosophical analysis that we can reach common sense: this clarified overview of the grammar we all share. Common sense does not come before philosophising but *after* we philosophise. It becomes explicit after we have clarified the grammar of our form of life.

For Moore, *common sense* is attached to propositional knowledge we all share before any philosophizing has occurred. The reminder of those propositions can put philosophy at rest. For Wittgenstein, *common sense* is attached to practices and to the rules that govern those practices and that can be clarified only after we philosophise. Only if we uncover those rules, by philosophical investigation, can we accomplish the mental peace that living within common sense can provide. Common sense is an ideal that could put philosophy at rest but an ideal that will be accomplished only through it.

I am not sure that Wittgenstein's method has succeeded in solving (or dissolving) any philosophical problems up to the point of unanimous agreement. But this is a different (and very tricky) topic.

The point is that, if I am right and Wittgenstein does appeal to some kind of *common sense*, this notion suggests a criterion that pleads for a clear view of things, an enlightened understanding of our concepts' use. What we have in common is our rule-governed practices, not some set of beliefs or pieces of knowledge. Still, forming beliefs is part of those practices and thus uncovering the norms underlying them, can lead to an enlightened common view of things. *Common sense*, on this reading, is a *philosophical ideal* that Wittgenstein pleads for.

Of course, he doesn't say much about what this ideal consists in. The suggestion is rather that *we will know when we reach it*, when we do get a clearer understanding of things in question. For there are, at any given time, certain norms rooted in our reasoning. The clarification of those rules is the only thing we can rely on, in order to answer deep questions that concern us all. Shedding light on those questions comes down to the philosopher's demand for common sense.

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