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# Common Sense and Uncommon Sense

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The term 'Common Sense' in my title refers in the first instance to that type of thinking developed in eighteenth century Scotland, known in the histories of philosophy as 'The Common Sense School'.

I first became acquainted with the Common Sense School when I attended the class on Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow, where its instigator, Thomas Reid, professed it for years. Not that it was taught as such in that Moral Philosophy class, but its atmosphere was still in the air, as I realised more and more in the course of my own investigations. The fact is that I spent most of my time at Glasgow University in the Library, reading up in all kinds of matters, running from geology to metaphysics, from astronomy to aesthetics, and it was in the course of this polymorphous research that I came across Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*.

I may as well confess at the outstart that I found it heavy going and was inclined to dismiss it as what I called 'pulpit philosophy'. But it had obviously exercised a considerable influence in Scotland, and, as I discovered later, in a certain sector of France, so I conscientiously persevered. I bought a second-hand copy of the *Inquiry* for my ever-growing personal library, and added to it, during a trip to France, a very neat three-volume edition of *Éléments de la philosophie de l'esprit humain* (*Elements of the philosophy of the human mind*) by Dugald Stewart, Reid's pupil and continuer.

Maybe, before going further into the field, I should touch on that influence of Scottish Common Sense thought in France, which some upholders of Common Sense in Scotland make much of.

I don't deny the fact, or neglect it. But it has to be put in perspective. If this philosophy was a ponderous presence in the schools and universities of France throughout the nineteenth century, it was because Napoleon, in his imperial status, was intent on removing France from revolutionary ferment and radical thinking into a subdued enclosure.

This was, in part, successful, at least on the surface, but the movement of real French intelligence and genius went on.

When I was living down in Pau, I was able to consult, in the library of the local lycée, the translation of a book by Dugald Stewart, *Esquisses de philosophie morale* (1841). On the inside cover, the eight pupils of the philosophy class of 1864–1865 had inscribed their names, followed by a description: ‘philosophe septique’, ‘philosophe cynique’, ‘philosophe quiétiste’... One of them, Isidore Ducasse, the future poet Lautréamont, presented himself as a ‘philosophe incompréhensibiliste’.

This ‘incomprehensibility’, at least by commonsense standards, was to be the background of later movements.

It was after reading David Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*, on which he saw a soul-destroying skepticism subversive of the whole fabric of human being and the structure of society, that Thomas Reid set up, not, I would say, the philosophy, but the ideology, of Common Sense – first, talk after talk at the Wise Club in Aberdeen, later, lecture after lecture at the university of Glasgow, and, mainly, massively, in the composition of his *Inquiry* (1764).

So that, in all logic, it’s with Hume and his ‘uncommon sense’, that we have to start.

In his autobiographical essay, ‘My Own Life’, Hume describes himself as being of a ‘studious disposition’, with ‘an unsurmountable aversion to everything but the pursuits of philosophy and general learning’ and with a great capacity for intellectual work. A description endorsed by his mother in her own words: ‘Our Davie’s a fine good-natured crater, but uncommon wake-minded.’

Around 1730, at the family house, Ninewells, in Berwickshire, he was engaged in a great mass of reading, ‘sometimes a philosopher, sometimes a poet’, knowing a ‘Saturnian happiness’. He read the classics, for example, the *Treatise on the Sublime* by Dionysius Longinus, apprehending ‘a form of beauty extraordinary’. He went through Locke’s *Essays* and *The Principles of Human Knowledge* by Berkeley. But it was mainly French works that attracted him: Pierre Bayle’s *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (‘A philosopher ought not to have recourse to divinity in order to explain the effects of nature. Philosophy will destroy both errors and truths if she be allowed to have her full scope’), Fénelon’s *La différence entre un philosophe et un chrétien* (‘A philosopher is a man that examines everything deeply by the light of reason’), Dubos’ *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture*.

More and more he felt opening up before him ‘a new scene of thought which transported me beyond measure’, while well aware that all he had to show for it were notes and fragments on ‘loose bits of paper’ (I’m quoting

there, as elsewhere throughout my text, from letters). It was after four years of this practice that, out of a need for distance (from the family home and from his home-town, Edinburgh), out of an intellectual attraction, and with the idea of composing a work more consequential than his initial notes, he decided to leave for France: 'I went over to France with a view of prosecuting my studies in a country retreat and I there laid that plan of life which I have steadily pursued' ('My Own Life').

In the Spring of 1734 he left for Paris, where he lived for a while before removing to Reims, finally settling in the village of La Flèche, in Anjou, where he could live cheaply and well, lodged at a manor-house, with easy access to an excellent library.

It was during three years of intense study and concentration, both in the silence of his rooms and in solitary walks, that he wrote the *Treatise of Human Nature*, the first two volumes of which appeared in 1739, the third in 1740.

I have no intention here of going into a detailed account of the *Treatise* and its later development, the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, because I want to examine the scene and the scenography from higher up, follow a long line, open up a larger field.

Hume had been out to apply the experimental method of reasoning, put forward by Francis Bacon in the seventeenth century *Advancement of Learning* and the *Novum Organum* to moral subjects and, deeper still, to the workings of the psyche. In the *Novum Organum*, Bacon had indicated the main obstructions to clear thinking and keen living as four *idola*: the 'idola of the tribe', the 'idola of the cavern', the 'idola of the marketplace' and the 'idola of the theatre'. Despairing of ever seeing his project realised in England, Bacon had ended up writing a utopian voyage, the *New Atlantis*, an island first seen, 'at the distance of a kenning' (twenty sea-miles), amid cloud, to the North.

Hume had continued that voyage towards, shall we say, an Atlantis of the mind.

He saw himself as a 'projector' (letter to Henry Hume of 1739) and while acknowledging, in the text of the *Treatise*, that he hadn't yet fulfilled his ambition of 'compassing the globe' (note the navigational and cartographic metaphors), he knew he had gone farther than most. He had penetrated into very uncommon, uncharted territory, arriving at principles 'so remote from all vulgar sentiments that were they to take place, they would produce a total alteration in philosophy', such a 'taking place' being highly unlikely 'as the world is disposed at present'. He had done the work, at least an initial sketch, but he had no illusions as to its reception.

Apart from the general fact, always worth mentioning, at least in passing, that most people read for amusement, not for understanding, delighting in various types of fiction, he was well aware, exceptions apart, what he could expect from the intelligentsia: 'When I look abroad, I foresee on every side, dispute, contradiction, anger, calumny and detraction (Book I of the *Treatise*).

The first articulate reaction came from the aforementioned Thomas Reid, one time minister of the Church, now university Professor of moral philosophy, in that *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*. If Reid's work wasn't totally, as I'd thought at first, 'pulpit philosophy', he had definitely God at his back (just as others later were to be convinced they were working according to the sense of History), and his principles were prompted and propped up by God-given, self-evident truths. His 'common sense' wasn't ordinary common sense, always useful in limited contexts, it was Common Sense, with capital letters.

If Reid can appreciate 'acute and clear reasoning' on 'abstract subjects' as displayed by 'ingenious men' such as Hume, his basic position is that their intellect leads them up paths that are 'in contradiction to the commonsense of mankind'. So that his counter-enquiry to Hume's enquiry settles down into a kind of trench warfare, with Reid hurtling bomb after bomb from his Commonsense Trench ('equipped with common sense both as individuals and as members of a community'), at what he takes to be Hume's Trench ('the artillery of the logician'), but which fall, at shorter or greater distance, into a no man's land, because Hume simply isn't where Reid thinks he is. It's as if Hume had been asking questions such as 'Does God exist?', whereas, when he entered into the theistic arena at all, which was rarely, his question would have been rather: Why do people believe in God? The first position is theological, the second is psychological, with epistemology, not in the middle, but still elsewhere, in the wings, waiting to get on the wing.

Convinced that Hume was undermining all that Thomas Reid, D.D., believed in, all the foundations of a viable community, and that he himself was speaking in the name of 'the common man', Reid accumulates statement after statement about this 'common man' and his 'fundamental beliefs' that are 'grounded in our constitution' and on principles that are 'common in all languages'.

It was such beliefs and principles that, in Reid's eyes, Hume's philosophy opposed and endeavoured to overturn. This, went on Reid, had led him to 'warp the common language into a conformity with his principles', but we 'ought not to imitate him in this' until we 'are satisfied that his principles are

built on a solid foundation'. The ultimate point is there. Hume was not at all out to build on a solid foundation. He saw none such. His research and thought had lead him into an area, a difficult area, out of which a new 'foundation' might, possibly, emerge. As to Reid's statement about 'the principles common to all languages', there he was blasting forth from a thick cloud of complacent ignorance.

I prefer to leave Reid there, as a relatively reasonable and well-meaning man, which is how Hume himself, always loathe to react to criticisms, chose to consider him, speaking in a letter of his 'friendly adversaries' in Aberdeen.

But there were other Common-Sensers who were not so reasonable, painstaking and well-meaning as Reid, closer to some of Reid's cruder statements, such as: 'I despise philosophy and renounce its guidance, let my soul dwell in common sense', common sense, in his final, dead-end definition, being 'that degree of judgement which is common to men with whom we can converse and *transact business*' (my emphasis).

One of these less reasonable opponents of Hume was James Beattie, Professor of Moral Philosophy and Logic at Marischal College (and also a poet, of sorts).

In Beattie's *Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism* (1770), we have this choice description of Hume's work: 'Those unnatural productions, the vile effusion of a hard and stupid heart, that mistakes its own restlessness for the activity of a genius, and its own captiousness for sagacity of understanding'. The King of Britain, George III, notorious even in England for his conspicuous non-intelligence, was delighted with this, declaring that Beattie had 'cut Mr Hume up by the roots', and granted Beattie a pension of £200 a year, to which the University of Oxford added an LL.D. All was bright again in the British sky. True to his decision, Hume made no direct reply, referring, in passing, to George III's favourite philosopher, in the preface to a collection of his *Essays*, as 'that bigoted silly fellow Beattie'.

If Hume was 'at home' in Edinburgh (he hated what he thought of as money-grubbing, stuffy-minded, pomp-and-ceremony London), if he had friends there, and if there was a minority in the vicinity engaged, to use the vocabulary of the time, on the path of 'free enquiry' and 'liberality of sentiment', he felt hemmed in. As he said in a letter: 'Scotland suits my fortune best and is the seat of my principal friendships, but it is too narrow a place for me.' Bigotry and dogmatism were thick on the ground. On all sides, he was branded, again in the language of the time, as Sceptic, Atheist and worse. As such, he found it hard to find congenial employment. When, in 1745, he

applied for the Chair of Ethics and Pneumatical Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, he was not only turned down, but set aside, cast out. Applying a few years later (1751) for a similar chair at Glasgow, he was again blackballed. He finally obtained a post as library-keeper to the Faculty of Advocates, finding himself reprimanded there for bringing in books, French books, considered improper and seditious.

Where he got relief was the spell he spent as secretary to General St Clair during the campaign in Brittany, and later (1763–65) as secretary at the British Embassy in Paris, where he had access to all the books he wanted, and could dine and talk with Diderot or Rousseau at the Procope café in the Latin Quarter.

In Edinburgh, thinking back to his early period, he often dreamt of finding himself a quiet place, ‘outside all clamour’, in the French countryside, with access to a good library, there to pursue his reflexions and investigations. But he never did. A force of inertia always prevailed, and settlement in what you might call a *debonnaire* despair.

At one point, this ‘wanderer on the face of the earth’, as he says in a letter, took to writing history, *A History of Britain*, a much less exhausting enterprise than philosophical enquiry. But that soon palled: ‘I believe I shall write no more history, but proceed directly to attack the Lord’s prayer and the Ten Commandments.’

The irony of the statement is obvious enough. But what he did decide to do was to put over his thought in a series of thrown-to-the-wind essays. In one of these essays, ‘On National Character’, we have this: ‘The ambition of the clergy can often be satisfied only by promoting ignorance and superstition and implicit faith and pious frauds. Most men have an overwhelming conceit of themselves, but they have a peculiar temptation to that vice.’ And in ‘The Natural History of Religion’, this: ‘Survey most nations and most ages. Examine the religious principles which have, in fact, prevailed in the world. You will scarcely be persuaded they are anything but sick men’s dreams.’

Hume was no roughrider Radical, no ‘enthousiastic’, far less fanatical revolutionary. For that, he had too little confidence in conditioned humanity. What he was out for, in the first instance, was a deconditioning. What he had undertaken, by means of a cool analysis, was a radical eradication of all the fictionality that encumbers the human mind, with dire consequences both mental and existential.

In a letter of 1770, Hume wrote this (using the term ‘common sense’ in the ordinary sense of the word): ‘It is impossible for me to forget that a man who in his fifty-ninth year has not many more years to live, and that it is time

for him, if he has any common sense, to have done with all ambition. My ambition was always moderate and confined entirely to Letters. But it has been my misfortune to write in the language of the most stupid and factious barbarians in the world, and it is long since that I have renounced all desire of their approbation.'

Having given the controversial, historical context its due, we can now try to open up that larger field I evoked.

It was no mere chance that brought Hume to La Flèche in Anjou. It was there, at a college founded by Henri IV of Navarre and Pau (the man who advocated 'reciprocal naturality' between Scotsmen and Frenchmen) that René Descartes did his early schooling.

In literature concerned with the history of philosophy, Descartes is seen as 'the father of modernity'. Which, paternal metaphor apart, is true enough, so far as it goes: the division between subject (*res cogitans*) and object (*res extensa*), and the project: 'Something like the mastery of nature' (just don't forget the 'something like', often neglected). That modernity has proceeded on the basis of these statements can be demonstrated and is patent: the subject, the self, becoming more and more subjected and subjective (wrapped in frustrations, ending up on the psychoanalytic couch); the object becoming more and more objectified, seen more and more simply as matter to be exploited; and the 'mastery of nature' understood in mechanical, industrial, numerical terms.

I don't see these early cartesian statements as programme, but as an initial schema of thought to be worked at, over and through. As to what is probably the most bandied about phrase in philosophy, the famous *cogito ergo sum* ('I think therefore I am'), I don't see it as a conundrum (much philosophantine ink has been spilled over it), but as a declaration of intellectual independence.

Remember rather those wonderful phrases at the beginning of the *Discourse on Method*: 'At that time I was in Germany and the beginning of winter found me in a quiet quarter, with nothing to bother me, so that I could look into my own thoughts at leisure.' Considering that collective work always remained imperfect, Descartes was convinced that the best results were got at by a single mind, the singular intelligence. And it was these he proceeded to approach in his *Meditationes de prima philosophia* – 'meditations on primal philosophy'. In its original presentation, the book had a sub-title: 'In which is proven the existence of God and the Immortality of the soul.' Since works of thought had to get by the Faculty of Theology in Paris, it was as well to sound as if you were interested in such matters. But the 'first things' that occupied the attention of René Descartes were closer at hand, and in the mind. And they



had to be contemplated, meditated by ‘a mind completely free of prejudice’.

Again, it is no part of my intention here to go into a long commentary on cartesianism. They are legion, and throughout modernity, the cartesian reference has been omnipresent, the more cogent among recent ones being Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* and Chomsky’s *Cartesian Linguistics*.

What I propose is a paradigm which I think applies both to Descartes and to Hume, the paradigm, if you like, of a geo-logisation of human being. On the first level, there is egoic self-consciousness, followed by passion (allied to passivity), emotion (congealed in emotivity), sentiment (liquefied, often liquidated in sentimentality), sensation, and then, perhaps, deeper still, a radical system, neither innate, nor simply acquired by instruction, but evolved out of experience.

Work can go on at all of those levels by several types of science and of art. Descartes takes both into account, saying even at one point that a certain type of poetic activity (I won’t say ‘poetry’, this being an all too hold-all word) can go further into the really interesting area than either philosophical or scientific activity.

It was with this kind of area in mind, and following a traditional Scottish track, that I left for France in the sixties to live, work and write. If, in the post-war period elsewhere, business would go on as usual, the war left France not only with a sense of disaster, but with a sensation of senseless absurdity. Such disaster and collapse can be a good terrain, a good starting-point, for really radical thinking.

It was this that interested me, seeing in it a context in which I would not only participate but in which I would be able to work at my own field.

I don’t want to go into all its aspects here. I’ve done that elsewhere, and will go over the ground again, existentially, in a forthcoming autobiography. I’ll concentrate on only one figure: Gilles Deleuze. And this for two reasons. One, because, with some differences, we had a lot in common: a sense of open space, a deep interest in nomadism, for example – which is why he was on the jury of my thesis on intellectual nomadism. Two, because of Deleuze’s rarely-noticed connection with Hume.

One of Deleuze’s books, *Empirisme et subjectivité* (*Empiricism and Subjectivity*), is devoted entirely to Hume’s thought. Here I reveal a hunch of mine: that Hume lurks also behind Deleuze’s principal book, *Mille Plateaux* (*A Thousand Plateaus*), 1980. Twice in *Empirisme et subjectivité*, Deleuze quotes a phrase of Hume’s according to which, even if it runs through ideation *a thousand times*,

the mind will never discover *a truly original conception unless nature has fashioned that mind's faculties in a specific way, and unless the mind at work keeps in touch with that outlying nature* (my emphasis).

Elsewhere, in *Logique du sens* (*The Logic of Sense*), 1969, Deleuze goes further and deeper into the theme I've chosen to work on in this essay: 'Common Sense', he says, 'is agricultural, inseparable from agrarian problematics, implying the establishment of enclosures and the business dealing of middle classes supposed to balance out and achieve regulation.'

The logic towards which Deleuze moves is, by analogy, in contrast to that of the agriculturalist and the bourgeois citizen, that of the nomad. In *The Logic of Sense*, his approach to what he was later to call nomadology is via a series of 34 paradoxes, ranging from the distinction in Plato between measured things and pure becoming to Bloom's metafuzzical mumblings on an Irish beach, via seriality and heterogeneity, superficial and transcendental, person and individual, depression and schizophrenia, orality and writing, primary order and secondary organisation . . . These paradoxes are the threshold to a 'superior empiricism', and are the impulse to a trajectory composed of differences and repetitions (*Différence et répétition* – the title of another deleuzian study) leading to 'the intense world of difference' in which phenomena flash out their sense, like signs indicating a 'strange kind of reason', that of the multiple, the chaotic. In this context, 'an idea is neither one nor multiple, but a multiplicity made up of differential elements'.

That is a pretty accurate description of the field I work in.

What the moving, thinking, searching mind has always looked for is an intense field of thought and existence. This field can be transcendental, or empirical. The first depends on a constructive logic (ultimately, mathematical), the second maintains an immanent situation, remains in more open contact with data and phenomena, its logic based on perception and experience, leading, in the intensest zone, to spaced-out projection.

That's what I've called, in global terms, metaphorically, 'white world' and, peripatetically, 'open world', and to which I make multiple and varied approaches via narrative, essay and poem.

Maybe the best conclusion, open conclusion, to this talk, will be a poem, as follows :

*Take it from Hume  
forgetting the human  
at least the all-too-human*

*'the field is the world'*

*from the sharp lines of sceptical Scotland  
move on, say, to*

*an ice-field in the vicinity of Reykjavik  
a high plateau in Utah  
a raked zen garden in Kyoto  
the house of Wittgenstein in Vienna*

*the Tractatus logico-philosophicus  
has this :  
'a picture presents a situation  
in logical space  
the existence and non-existence  
of states of things'*

*the mind loves elements  
related to one another  
in a determinate way  
and from there reaches out  
to the sum-total of reality*

*forms and void  
bulk and blanks*

*it is difficult  
to avoid drawing distinctions and conclusions  
so pleasant  
to enter an area  
beyond the climate of opinion  
and over-particularized existence  
where the less you say  
the more is said*

*I think of a room in Otterthal  
and snow drifting*