

“The Truth in American Common Sense”
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Our subject of “Common Sense Philosophy and Politics in America” suggests a number of important questions about the rational basis of society, the practical role of philosophy in politics, and American identity and order. Here are the key relevant questions as I see them, in what strikes me as their natural logical sequence:

- What is common sense?
- What is common sense philosophy?
- What are the political functions of common sense and common sense philosophy?
- What roles have these played historically in the development of American identity and politics?
- What is the task of philosophy concerning American common sense at the present time?

“Common sense” is an ambiguous term. Everyone thinks common sense is a good thing, and everyone thinks he has it. In one sense everyone *does* have it: everyone with a normally functioning brain has the *capacity* for common sense rationality, and the capacity itself is sometimes called common sense. But in another sense many, even most people do *not* have it: for various reasons their potential for common sense rationality is not actualized. This presents a social and political problem. Opposing parties claim opposite positions to be commonsensical. They can’t all be right. And disagreement over what is rational makes consensus about what to do difficult. What is it exactly that people claim to have when they claim to have common sense on their side? How do we determine

whether a given claim to common sense is legitimate? Is “American common sense,” with which we are directly concerned here, truly commonsensical, or is it really a case of partisan pleading? You see how things get complicated.

There are two sources of the confusion. The first is that “common sense” has a double meaning, one involving by definition genuine rationality and the other suggesting only opinion, which may or may not be rational. The essence of the first is a kind of in-touchness with reality. When we admire someone for having common sense we mean that they are firmly grounded in reality, in tune with the real world. When people claim to have common sense on their side they are appealing, of course, to common sense in this sense. “Common sense” can also mean merely common beliefs reflexively taken for granted by all or most people, usually in a particular society but sometimes across cultures as well. The technical term classic political thinkers have used for this in relation to particular societies is *sensus communis*, the sense of a community about communally relevant concerns, especially about what is just and conduces to the common good. Common sense in the first connotation, which I am calling “common sense rationality,” is by definition true; in the second connotation it may be false, in extreme cases even delusional, because people for various reasons sometimes take falsehoods for granted.

The second source of the confusion is a lack of clarity about common sense rationality itself. People claiming to have this typically have not thought about why they believe what they believe. They don’t know the criterion of common

sense. They “just know” they are right. The thing is “obvious” to anyone with half a brain. Because the truth of their beliefs is not in fact obvious to some very intelligent people, their appeal to common sense opens them to ridicule, and if enough people take this obvious-to-anyone-with-half-a-brain attitude, the reputation of common sense itself may be in danger. Intellectuals will first ridicule it, then despise it, and finally, after criticism has done its dissolving work, deny there are any rational foundations at all. This has in fact happened to an alarming degree in the Western intellectual world, including in the American intelligentsia.

How do we know whether a claim to common sense is true or spurious? We go to the touchstone of experience; we go ourselves to the reality the person claims to know and see if what he says is there is really there and is what he claims it to be. The final criterion of common sense is reality itself. Note: the criterion is not logic. Intellectuals have typically treated common sense claims logically, and common sense at its root can never withstand a logical critique, and so logical analysis makes it seem questionable. But you can’t demonstrate the truth of reality logically, unless the reality in question is the necessity of certain logical conclusions. Common sense as knowledge of fundamental reality cannot be either reached or verified through logic. There is no reasoning *to* basic realities, only *from* them. For instance, I defy you to make a logical proof that we are now gathered in this room. You know it only by direct experience. The only way to prove the truth of common sense claims is to look and see if the facts appealed to

are what the claimant says they are and if the truths we spontaneously grasp on seeing them have their evidence in themselves—are self-evident.

Already we are in the domain of philosophy, for common sense is not self-conscious. When we deliberately consider the truth of common sense, we have begun to philosophize. Common sense's lack of self-consciousness is why it needs to be supplemented by philosophy. But philosophy, on its side, has no foundation without common sense. Genuine philosophy has to be common sense philosophy, and indeed common sense as direct awareness of reality is the test of philosophic truth. A person can potentially function quite well without being a philosopher, but without philosophy common sense has no defense against criticism: without at least a basic level of philosophy one cannot know or show how to distinguish between real common sense knowledge and mere opinions taken for granted. So philosophy needs common sense, which is the root of rationality, and, if we want to move beyond simple awareness to understanding, common sense needs philosophy. Society needs philosophy to ground the *sensus communis*, and keep it grounded, in common sense rationality both by exposing common opinions that are not rational and by inspiring a concentrated effort to live in the truth of what really matters.

Once we understand what common sense and common sense philosophy are, it is not hard to figure out their political functions. Implicit in the foregoing account is that common sense is a matter not of feeling but of judgment. Feelings are subjective; they can be neither true nor false. Judgments must be true or false,

and their truth or falsehood can be objectively determined—they square with reality or they don't. The determinations of common sense rationality are sound judgments about reality, basic truths, and real possibilities. The political function of common sense, then, is to judge well about political realities. We need leaders who are good judges of the character of the community, what would be best for it in light of its character and its circumstances, and what can realistically be done to achieve that common good. We need a people who are at least good enough judges to recognize these qualities of a good leader and to manage their own affairs well.

The sense of communities vary in their levels of articulation. Some remain vague or fragmented, while others crystallize around a few public statements or documents that become focal points for popular consensus. Such public expressions never simply *create* the sense of the community; they only give it more definite shape, capture popular attitudes and values and give them form and direction, although in some cases, as with Lincoln's affirmation of the natural equality of the slaves, the expression of ideals may be more a conjuring of something in danger of being lost than an appeal to currently settled assumptions. The American *sensus communis* is almost unique in world history for its very high level of focused, coherent articulation and the stability of the consensus this articulation has achieved. Even more unusual, we can date the establishment of American common sense precisely.

There were three great moments in the crystallization of American common sense, all in the space of a few short years. The first came, appropriately, with a pamphlet called *Common Sense*. John Adams said of Thomas Paine that "Without the pen of the author of *Common Sense*, the sword of Washington would have been raised in vain." Paine's *Common Sense* was critical in hardening public opinion in favor of independence and his "American Crisis" papers supported Washington's sword directly by inspiring his battered troops as they waited for that famous crossing of the Delaware, when the general had selections from the series read aloud to them.¹ More to the point for our purposes, Paine's message in *Common Sense* captured and focused the sense of the American community about who they were and what they believed and what made sense to do in light of it. Almost all the elements of American common sense expressed in the Declaration of Independence, whose reception marked the second great moment of its crystallization, are there in *Common Sense*, from the appeal to "natural right," "conscience," and religion² to the conception of legitimate government as government by consent to the end of "freedom and security." Paine also captured elements of American common sense not explicitly included in the Declaration but pointing ahead to the third great moment of crystallization, the ratification of the

¹ Jill Lepore, "The Sharpened Quill," in *The New Yorker*, 1.

² In the case of religion, Paine specifically appealed to the Old Testament stories of Gideon's and then God's rejection of monarchy (pp. 12-15). Americans did not yet know of Paine's deism and disbelief in Christianity and its Judaic background, which he would reveal later in his *Age of Reason*, and for which he would be roundly condemned and ostracized. But he knew in any case that recurrence to the Bible in *Common Sense* would appeal to an overwhelmingly Bible-believing American public.

U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights: the view of government as “a necessary evil” to keep human wickedness in check (cf. Federalist #51) and the imperative of the rule of law (as Paine put it emphatically, “in America THE LAW IS KING”). He even captured Americans’ sense of themselves as a beacon of liberty in a world “overrun by oppression” and “an asylum for mankind,” echoing John Winthrop’s challenge to make a “city on a hill.”³

Paine was quite consciously and deliberately trying to anchor the American *sensus communis* to common sense rationality. He claimed in the pamphlet to “offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense”—appealing here, of course, to common sense rationality—and he offered these because, though American resolve was at the moment “held together by an unexampled concurrence of sentiment,” this concurrence was “nevertheless subject to change, and...every secret enemy is endeavoring to dissolve” it. “The mind of the multitude,” he said, “is left at random, and seeing no fixed object before them, they pursue such as fancy or opinion starts.” “Could the struggling thoughts of individuals be collected, they [could] form materials for wise and able men to improve into useful matter.”⁴ It would be hard to find a clearer or more compact expression of the political meaning of common sense: he was calling for a common sense recognition of the self-evident import the facts; he meant to provide with his argument a “fixed object” for community consensus; providing

³ Paine, *Common Sense*, in *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Library of America, 1995) 7, 9, 6, 34, 36.

⁴ *Common Sense*, 20, 50, 32. The middle two quotations in this paragraph are from the “Appendix” Paine had added to the pamphlet after original publication.

such an object, if it was indeed commonsensical and intelligible to the common man, would give “wise and able” leaders the means to direct the people to the common good, to what justice and the true interest of the community required under the circumstances.

Jefferson was equally conscious and deliberate about doing these things in writing the Declaration of Independence. He said in his 1825 letter to Henry Lee that he had meant in writing the Declaration to express “the American mind” and “the harmonizing sentiments of the day,” “to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent”—that is, to capture the sense of the American community in common sense terms.⁵ What Paine had done for a moment, Jefferson in the Declaration meant to establish, and succeeded in establishing, as a fixed object for long-term consensus. Indeed, he and the people’s representatives who signed on to the document meant in declaring independence from Britain to establish the people *as* a people, “one people,” as the Declaration has it, and no longer several peoples under allegiance to the British crown; one people agreeing on certain principles taken to be “self-evident,” that is, accessible to common sense. The newly minted American people agreed about the status of human beings—endowed with certain inalienable rights; that consensual government is necessary to secure those rights; and that their rights had been violated by King George.

⁵ Letter from Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, in Adrienne Koch and William Peden, *Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Modern Library, 1998), 657.

The U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights gave greater definition to American common sense with its new structure of government and its establishment of what form securing of the people's rights would take. The Constitution with its Bill of Rights can be said even more than Paine and Jefferson did to express American common sense because the document was formally ratified by the people after intensive popular discussion and debate. Americans in ratifying the Constitution agreed, to use the language of the Declaration, on the "principles" of its "foundation"—which the Declaration had expressed—and the "form" of the government, its organization of "powers," they thought "most likely" to uphold those principles. They thought a strict enumeration and division of effective powers and a judiciable bill of rights to be the means most likely to achieve this end. The first eight amendments to the Bill of Rights, along with some prior specification in the body of the Constitution, gave particular practical form to the people's rights, or at least to those taken to be most essential at that time. There have been many lesser articulations of American common sense over the years, but those of the Declaration and Constitution are the most focused, visible, and, of course, the most fundamental.

So what is the truth in American common sense, and what is the task of the philosopher today in relation to it? To answer these questions, we need, first, to specify more explicitly the elements of American common sense; second, to consider philosophically how well they measure up to the truth of common sense knowledge; and third, to show what philosophers can do to ground American

common sense more securely in common sense knowledge. I can offer in this forum only a suggestive outline of the foregoing, but perhaps a good outline may be of service to philosophers and citizens concerned to reorient an American public that has lost its bearings and needs some fixed objects to navigate by.

The elements of American common sense, as I see them, have been four-fold: Americans have seen themselves as:

1. A nation under God—in the terms of the Declaration, under “the laws of nature and of nature’s God,” the direction of “divine Providence,” and the “Supreme Judge” of our intentions, and individually endowed with certain God-given and thus inalienable rights.
2. Under an obligation to respect and uphold those rights (this is how Americans understand justice)—for the government to “secure” them and for citizens through political participation and civil society to exercise and preserve them.
3. Imperfect human beings needing some restraint but capable of governing themselves—believing power must be checked and therefore that we need a representative government of laws and divided powers (that is, Americans agree on their constitution), but also that people have enough common sense to generally take care of themselves and to choose who will lead them in social and political matters.
4. Engaged experimentally in a world-historic mission to uphold liberty, to be that “asylum for mankind” Paine spoke of and perhaps—Americans have been more divided on this point—to promote liberty abroad.

Now, with regard to truth, Americans have taken the first three points above to be universally applicable to all nations, though the forms they take may vary.

What is distinctive, though no longer entirely unique, about American common sense on these points has been Americans’ conscious recognition of them and belief in them *as* universal truths and not merely cultural values—“*we hold* these truths to be self-evident.” The fourth point, obviously, Americans have taken to be unique and culturally specific, to be a matter of

special providence and to be, at the same time, experimental, a providential mission on Winthrop's covenantal model, one that will continue to succeed only if we stay true to the call. It is emblematic that our national anthem centers not on an assertion but on a question: "does that star-spangled banner yet wave over the land of the free and the home of the brave?"

Establishing the truth in American common sense as outlined here is a project too big for a short paper like this, but I can at least indicate what doing so would involve. It would involve assessing the experiences out of which the ideas came. John Witherspoon gave us a clue on the first and second points when he spoke of a sense of divine presence and of a "natural dependence" on that presence and of conscience as the law of God written in our hearts known through a sense of obligation.⁶ Testing the truth of American common sense in its first and second elements, then, would require confronting certain religious experiences and the experience of obligation and considering what being faithful to the reality disclosed in these experiences would require of us. Consulting these experiences and additionally the historical field of human failure and achievement would help us assess the third element in American common sense. We would have to consider all these in terms of human experience at large and in terms of specifically American experiences. Finally,

⁶ Witherspoon, *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy by John Witherspoon*, ed. Jack Scott (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1982), 92, 78, and see my analysis of Witherspoon's treatment of the moral sense and obligation in *America and the Political Philosophy of Common Sense* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010), 77-81.

we would have to look at the American experience of liberty and associated American religious experiences and consider whether the facts thereby uncovered provide convincing evidence that America has in fact been an exceptional nation in the quality and scope of its freedom and in enlarging the freedom of mankind.

Whatever truth philosophy discovers through such an investigation would provide a plumb line by which to judge current American opinions and weigh competing claims about what we ought to be and do, to determine, in other words, what common sense requires of us here and now. The imperative, next, would be to articulate the truth in a way that can be useful to “wise and able” leaders for forging a consensus on the great issues of the day. It is worth remembering that Paine, Jefferson, and the framers of the Constitution all drew deeply on political philosophy. Paine obviously had Locke in mind. Jefferson, in the letter to Henry Lee I have mentioned, was inspired in writing the Declaration by “the elemental books of public right,” including, among others, “Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney.”⁷ It is well known that the Framers were inspired especially by Montesquieu, but Madison and the rest relied on a vast range of philosophical and historical classics in the constitution-making project. It is therefore not impossible that philosophers can shape the thinking of society’s leaders. We—you and I—have an obligation to at least try.

⁷ Jefferson to Henry Lee, Koch and Peden, 657.