Giving Common Sense its Due

Noah Lemos

Abstract
The common sense tradition in philosophy holds that we have a great deal of common sense knowledge, that there are many ordinary truisms that almost everyone knows, and that this knowledge should have a great deal of weight in philosophy. Such knowledge provides a check on philosophical speculation. In this paper, I have two main aims. First, I contrast the common sense tradition in philosophy with two other philosophical approaches, a Wittgensteinian approach and the Method of Wide Reflective Equilibrium. Second, I respond to criticisms of the common sense tradition which claim that the appeal to common sense belief and knowledge is unphilosophical, useless in philosophical debate, or unable to positively support philosophical theses. These critics of the common sense tradition are not radical skeptics, but I will argue their views do not give common sense knowledge sufficient weight and do not adequately recognize its importance in philosophical inquiry.

1. Introduction

I have two main aims in this essay. First, I contrast the common sense tradition in philosophy with two alternative approaches toward our common sense knowledge. These are a Wittgensteinian approach and the approach we find in some proponents of the method of Wide Reflective Equilibrium. I will urge that neither of these two alternatives do justice to our core common sense convictions. Neither of them give our common sense convictions their due.

Second, I will also consider some criticisms of the common sense tradition that suggest that appeals to our common sense knowledge are either unphilosophical, unhelpful in philosophical debate, or unable to offer any positive support for a philosophical view. Again, I think that these positions do not do justice to the role of common sense knowledge in philosophical contexts.

It is important to recognize that none of the positions I discuss here are radically skeptical. None of them deny, for example, that I can know that the kitchen is clean or that Hobbes was born in 1588. Neither the Wittgensteinian

Filosofiska Notiser, Årgång 12, Nr. 1, 2025, 39–59

view nor the proponents of the method of Wide Reflective Equilibrium are skeptics in the sense that they deny that we have knowledge of other people, ordinary things, or the past. Similarly, the thinkers I discuss who claim that the appeal to common sense knowledge in philosophical contexts is unphilosophical, unhelpful, or unable to offer any positive support for a philosophical position are not radically skeptical. Their criticisms of the appeal to common sense knowledge do not presuppose we have no knowledge of other people, ordinary things, or the past. So, my concern in this paper is not with radical skepticism, at least not with those familiar forms of skepticism that hold that there is no knowledge of ordinary things or particular people. My concern is with those philosophers who, in my opinion, do not take our common sense knowledge, at least our core common sense convictions, seriously enough or underestimate its importance for philosophical inquiry.

In the next section, I will briefly describe some main features of the common sense tradition, a tradition that includes Thomas Reid, G. E. Moore, and Roderick Chisholm. In the third and fourth sections, I will describe the Wittgensteinian view and the view of some proponents of the method of Wide Reflective Equilibrium, respectively, and I shall offer some critical comments of these alternative views. In fifth sections, I shall respond to some claims by Laurence BonJour, Rik Peels, and Nicholas Rescher concerning appeals to our common sense knowledge.

2. The Common Sense Tradition

In "A Defense of Common Sense", G. E, Moore lists a variety of obvious truisms which he takes himself to know with certainty. These include that he has a body, one that is *his* body, that he thinks and feels, that he perceives things, and that he has lived most of his life on, or not far from, the surface of the earth. He also says that he knows, with certainty, that almost everyone else knows various similar things about themselves. Moore holds that in taking himself to know these things he is endorsing the view that the "Common Sense" view of the world "is, in certain fundamental features *wholly* true" (Moore 1959: 44).

Moore held that we may reject philosophical views that conflict with the obvious truisms of common sense which we know. Indeed, we may reject them *because* they conflict with what we know. For example, we may reject philosophical views that claim that we cannot know various facts about the external world.

> But it seems to me a sufficient refutation of such views as these, simply to point to cases in which we do know such things. This, after all, you

> know, really is a finger: there is no doubt about it: I know it, and you all know it. And I think we may safely challenge any philosopher to bring forward any argument in favour either of the proposition that we do not know it, or of the proposition that it is not true, which does not at some point rest upon some premiss which is, beyond comparison, less certain, than is the proposition which it is designed to attack. (Moore 1960: 228)

When a philosophical theory conflicts with our common sense knowledge, then we should reject the philosophical theory.

Similarly, in *Person and Object*, Chisholm suggests that we might adopt a list of obvious truisms like those Moore endorsed in his essay. Chisholm's list includes that he is thinking, that he has such and such feelings, that he perceives various things, and that "I now know, for example, (1) that I see various books and other objects, (2) that I have a body that is sitting and is more than six feet in length, and (3) that I am writing certain things that seem to me to be important, but which had I chosen to do so, I could have refrained from writing." (16) Most importantly, Chisholm suggests that our philosophical views should be adequate to the obvious truisms on our list.

Chisholm suggests that such a list will produce two very different reactions. One reaction would be, "But these things are too obvious to mention. Let us get on with our philosophy." But, Chisholm writes, when we *do* get on with our philosophy and appeal to one of these truisms in order to criticize a philosophical theory, "then we will hear the objection: But you have no right to assume anything like *that*!" (16) The reply to such an objection, according to Chisholm, is that "whatever we are justified in assuming, when we are not doing philosophy, we are also justified in assuming when we *are* doing philosophy." (16)[1]

Chisholm states his view in terms of what we are *justified in assuming*, but I think the same point applies to what we *know*. We might put the point this way: Many of the things we know when we are not doing philosophy are such that we still know them when we are doing philosophy, and we may appeal to what we know when we are not doing philosophy to criticize philosophical theories. If a philosophical theory conflicts with some bit of common sense knowledge, then we may reject the philosophical theory.

There are two main features of the common sense tradition. First, the common sense tradition holds that people know a great deal about the world around them. These include certain "core" common sense claims, e.g. that there are other people, that they think and feel, that they have bodies, that they were alive yesterday, and that the world has existed for many years. Moreover,

people know that other people know these things. People know that this sort of knowledge is widespread and common.

Second, the common sense tradition holds that this sort of knowledge should have a great deal of weight in philosophy. It provides a check on philosophical speculation. If a philosophical theory conflicts with such knowledge, then so much the worse for the philosophical theory. To illustrate this point, consider Zeno's arguments that nothing moves. We know that his arguments are mistaken since they conflict with our common sense knowledge that things move. Even if we are unsure which of the premises in Zeno's arguments are mistaken and even if some of his premises have an intuitive attractiveness, we know his arguments are unsound insofar as they conflict with what we know.

We find such an attitude in Timothy Williamson's *Philosophical Methodology*. He tells us that he had a colleague who presented his theory of perception in a lecture. A student pointed out that the theory implied that it was impossible to see through a window. Williamson says, "My colleague's theory was refuted by the common-sense knowledge that is possible to see through a window. I see trees through one as I write." (10) Williamson's remark illustrates an example in which our common sense knowledge serves as a check on a philosophical theory. The theory is refuted by the common sense knowledge that people can see through windows.

Again, Chisholm writes, "We reject the sceptical view according to which there is no reason to believe the premises of an inductive argument ever confer evidence upon the conclusion. If the skeptical view were true, then we would know next to nothing about the world around us." (1973: 232) Chisholm holds that since we *do* know a lot about the world around us, so much the worse for skepticism about induction.

It might be asked *why* common sense beliefs should have *any* weight in philosophy? Why should philosophers pay any attention to it? A. C. Ewing, who was sympathetic to the common sense tradition, once asked *why* should we reject various philosophical arguments because they conflict with various common sense beliefs? What, he asks, would happen to the natural sciences if scientists had been forbidden to contradict the views which non-scientists held on scientific matters before they had studied science? He replies, "We should still be believing in a flat earth with the sun and all the stars going round it if people acted on those lines" (367).

Why, then, should any common sense beliefs have this weight? I suggest it is because *many* of our common sense beliefs are instances of knowledge and are obvious to almost everyone. It is obvious to almost everyone, for example, that there are other people and that people can see through windows.

It is the epistemic character of these common sense beliefs that gives them this weight. Such a view is reflected in the comments above by Williamson and Chisholm. As Williamson says, "Any theory inconsistent with common-sense knowledge is false. For whatever is known is the case, so whatever it is inconsistent with is *not* the case." (10) Any philosophical view that denies such items of common sense knowledge is simply mistaken.

I think it is important to forestall two misunderstandings of the common sense tradition. First, in claiming that there are *many* obvious instances of common sense knowledge, one need not say that *all* common sense beliefs amount to knowledge. In his "A Defense of Common Sense", for, example, G. E. Moore says that the terms "Common Sense View of the World" and "Common Sense beliefs" are "extraordinarily" vague, and that "for all I know, there may be many propositions which may be properly called features in "the Common Sense view of the world" or "Common Sense beliefs," which are not true, and which deserve to be mentioned with the contempt with which some philosophers speak of "Common Sense beliefs." (45) Still, even if some are false, Moore holds that it would be absurd to claim that those he lists are false. It would be absurd to say that our core common sense beliefs, e.g., there are other people, they have bodies, they think, are false or that we do not know them.[2]

Second, in claiming that some common sense beliefs are instances of knowledge one is not claiming that they are instances of knowledge *because* they are common sense beliefs or *in virtue of* the fact that they are common sense beliefs. Philosophers in the common sense tradition are often concerned with how we know various things, e.g. how we know that there are other people, that they think, etc. But they need not hold that we know them *because* they are common sense beliefs or *because* they are deeply and widely held.

What makes a common sense belief an instance of knowledge is an open philosophical question to which common sense philosophers have offered different answers, and, in some cases, some have offered different and incompatible answers over the course of their philosophical careers.[3] Still, one can know various common sense propositions and know further that one knows them, without knowing *how* one knows them. I assume, for example, that Plato knew that squareness excludes circularity and that piety is the opposite of impiety, and that he knew that he knew such things. But he did not know how he knew them, at least not if his explanation was that he recollected them from a pre-natal existence.

Still, the fact that many instances of common sense knowledge are deeply and widely held is not without philosophical significance. Many common sense claims are known by almost everyone, and whatever our account of the

source of such knowledge, it must be compatible with its being widespread and common. Since almost everyone knows various common sense truisms, such knowledge is not known on the basis of philosophical reasoning available only to an elite few or on the basis of complicated arguments beyond the comprehension of ordinary people. Whatever the source of such knowledge it must issue from the ordinary epistemic competence of ordinary people.

One objection to the common sense tradition is the following. "(1) According to the common sense tradition, we should reject any philosophical or scientific theory that conflicts with what is common sense. (2) But it is a common sense belief that the sun revolves around the earth (or at least moves across the sky). Therefore, (3) according to the common sense tradition, we should reject any scientific theory that is inconsistent with this belief. (4) But this is just false. (5) Our current scientific theories about the solar system are true and common sense is simply mistaken. Therefore, (6) the common sense tradition is simply mistaken."[4]

There are several replies to this objection. First, I see no reason to think that Moore or the common sense tradition is committed to holding that (1) is true. As Moore points out, the phrase "common sense belief" is pretty vague, and he does not claim that *everything* that might be considered a common sense belief is true or known. He allows that some common sense beliefs might be simply false. Still, Moore thinks that many common sense beliefs are known, obviously true, and that it would be absurd to deny them, e.g. the beliefs that there are other people, they have bodies, they think, etc. And, of course, the fact that some common sense beliefs are false is not a good reason to think that many of them fall short of knowledge or that we can't pick out instances of common sense knowledge. The situation here is the same for memory and perceptual belief. Even if some memory and perceptual beliefs are false, this is not a good reason for thinking most of them fall short of knowledge, or that we can't pick out instances of mnemonic or perceptual knowledge.

Alternatively, some defenders of the common sense tradition would deny premise (2). Some defenders of the tradition distinguish between common sense beliefs and beliefs that are "merely common" (cf. Rescher: 23). The belief that the sun revolves around the earth was a merely common belief, one that was widely held. The belief that men have landed on the moon is a merely common belief today. But these philosophers would deny that these merely common beliefs are common sense beliefs. They would say that the rejection of a common sense proposition is absurd, and its rejection makes it very difficult to operate successfully in the society. While this seems true of such common sense claims as there are other people and they think, it is not true of the claim that the sun revolves around the earth or that men have been to the

moon. One could reject these claims without absurdity, and one could reject them without social and practical disaster.

In the next two sections, I will contrast the common sense tradition with two alternative views, a Wittgensteinian approach and that of some philosophers who endorse the Method of Wide Reflective Equilibrium. As I noted above, these views are not radically skeptical. They do not deny that we know a lot about the world around us. Still, I will argue that they do not get the epistemic status of our common sense beliefs right. They do not do justice to our common sense beliefs or their importance for philosophical thought.

3. A Wittgensteinian Criticism

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein comments on Moore's "A Defense of Common Sense". He writes, "I should like to say: Moore does not *know* what he asserts he knows, but it stands fast for him, as also for me: regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our *method* of doubt and enquiry."(Wittgenstein 1969: para. 151.) Again, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, he writes, "It can't be said of me at all, (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I am in pain" (Wittgenstein 1958: para. 256).

Wittgenstein suggests that the common sense truisms that Moore endorses, e.g. I have a body, there are other people, they think and have bodies, do *not* amount to knowledge, they don't have the epistemic status that Moore attributes to them. But, for Wittgenstein, this is not to say that we doubt them or disbelieve them. On the contrary, these things stand fast for us. These "hinge propositions" are not mere hypothetical assumptions that we might give up. They are not merely provisionally accepted. Instead, they are part of the framework against which we conduct inquiry and raise doubts. They are the bed rock against which genuine inquiry proceeds.

These hinge propositions are not like ordinary bits of knowledge for which evidence can be given for and against. We can have reasons to doubt or believe many things, e.g. that the kitchen is clean. We can easily imagine having reasons to doubt that the kitchen is clean, and we can imagine how we might rationally resolve that doubt. But it seems very hard, if not impossible, to imagine having reasons to doubt that we have bodies or how we might rationally remove that doubt should it actually arise.

Wittgenstein's view seems to be that our acceptance of these hinge propositions is *arational*, that it is beyond being justified or unjustified. He writes, "I want to conceive [*of this certainty*] as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified, as it were, as something animal" (Wittgenstein 1969: para. 359). Commenting on Wittgenstein's view, Duncan Pritchard writes, "That which cannot be rationally doubted, cannot be rationally

believed either" (Pritchard: 256). The hinge propositions, the Moorean certainties, lack *any* rational status at all. Our believing them is neither rational nor irrational, justified or unjustified. They are arational commitments.

Clearly, *if* Wittgenstein is right to deny that these claims amount to knowledge, then the common sense philosopher is badly mistaken about the scope of his and other people's knowledge. Many of our core common sense claims do not amount to knowledge. Moreover, *if* Wittgenstein is right to deny that these claims amount to knowledge, then the common sense philosopher cannot soundly argue that various philosophical views are false because they conflict with what we know. One could not soundly argue that, for example, skepticism is false on the ground that one knows that there are other people and that one knows that people have existed in the past.

How might a defender of the common sense tradition respond? First, I think that a defender of common sense may note that it seems false to claim both that we *cannot* know various Moorean common sense certainties and yet we *can* know various other things that we know are true only if those common sense certainties are true. For example, one of the Moorean certainties is that the earth has existed for many years. According to the Wittgensteinian view, this stands fast for us, but it is not something we know. Still, it seems that on the Wittgensteinian view I can *know*, for example, that Aristotle died in 322 B.C. and that Thomas Hobbes was born in 1588. But how reasonable is it for one to hold that one knows *these* propositions, but does *not* know that the earth has existed for many years? If one sees that these things one knows are true only if the earth has existed for many years, how can one *coherently* claim *not* to know the latter proposition? This is puzzling. Again, suppose I know that my car is parked in the driveway because I see it there. Is it coherent or reasonable for me to claim that I know that my car is there because I see it, but I do not know the Moorean certainty that perception is generally reliable? The view that we have much ordinary knowledge, but do not know these Moorean certainties seems very problematic, if not incoherent.

Second, as we have seen, one line of thought in favor of the view that hinge propositions aren't known is that what cannot be rationally doubted cannot be rationally believed. But this seems false. I cannot rationally doubt that I am alive and that I exist, but it hardly follows that I do not rationally believe these things or know them. It is true that I do not believe these things on the basis of arguments, perhaps I do not even believe them on the basis of *reasons*, still I am justified in believing them. But what is more important, I *know* them. Even if we concede that they are not known on the basis of reasons or *via* ratiocination and even if they are not in *that* sense known rationally, they are nonetheless known and we are more justified in believing them than in

believing various other claims. Certainly, we are more justified in believing them than their negations.

Perhaps Wittgenstein is right that many of our common sense certainties are not based on reasoning or ratiocination. Perhaps our belief in them is something animal. But it is not clear why any of this would imply that they are not known.[5]

4. The Method of Wide Reflective Equilibrium

Let's turn to the method of wide reflective equilibrium made famous by Rawls and widely employed in moral and political philosophy. No doubt the proponents of this method differ in some details, but let me broadly characterize the view. According to the method of wide reflective equilibrium, one begins with one's considered judgments. For Rawls, one's considered judgments are judgments of which one is relatively confident (as opposed to uncertain or hesitant), formed in conditions conducive to avoiding errors in judgment (such as being rushed or distracted), and stable over time. One's considered judgments can be at any level of generality, from judgments about very general principles to judgments about particular cases or instances. One then tries to bring one's considered judgments about general principles and particular cases into a coherent equilibrium. As Rawls says, "By dropping and revising some, by reformulating and expanding others, one supposes that a systematic organization can be found. Although in order to get started various judgments are viewed as firm enough to be taken provisionally as fixed points, there are no judgments on any level of generality that are in principle immune to revision." (289) Ideally, one aims at wide reflective equilibrium. In the moral case, this would be a moral view that survives "the rational consideration of all feasible moral conceptions and all the reasonable arguments for them". (289)

The method of reflective equilibrium has figured prominently in moral and political philosophy, but it could certainly be applied to other branches of philosophy, and indeed to philosophy in general. One might hope to bring all of one's considered judgments in any area of philosophical concern into a coherent equilibrium. One might, for example, apply the method to epistemological questions and begin with one's considered epistemic judgments, for example, judgments about particular instances of knowledge, judgments about the reliability of perception, memory and other faculties, judgments about general epistemic principles, and general conceptions of the nature of knowledge. One might then try to bring one's epistemic judgments into a coherent equilibrium, aiming at a wide reflective equilibrium that would

survive the rational consideration of all feasible epistemic conceptions and all the reasonable arguments for them.

David Lewis endorses the search for coherence among our opinions as a reasonable goal for philosophers:

> Our "intuitions" are simply opinions: our philosophical theories are the same. Some are commonsensical, some are sophisticated; some are particular; some general; some are more firmly held, some less. But they are all opinions, and a reasonable goal for a philosopher is to bring them into equilibrium. Our common task is to find out what equilibria there are that can withstand examination, but it remains for each of us to come to rest at one or another of them…(1983: x)

On this view, a reasonable goal for philosophers is to bring our opinions into equilibrium. Of course, each of us might find that equilibrium in different ways. This does not imply that differing views are equally correct. Which view is correct depends, according to Lewis, on what there is.

Catherine Elgin also endorses a coherence method in philosophy. She holds that in adopting the method of reflective equilibrium, we begin with those sentences we accept without reservation. She says, "Being our best current estimate of how things stand, such sentences have some claim on our allegiance" (101). Such claims are "initially tenable". So, on this view, my beliefs that I have hands and there are other people are initially tenable. Later, however, we are told that "Initially tenable claims are woefully uncertain, but are not defective on that account. They are not taken as true or incontrovertible or even probable, but only as reasonable starting points in a reflective self-correcting enterprise" (110).

One common feature in *these* accounts of the method of wide reflective equilibrium is the relatively weak epistemic status of our considered judgments. Rawls says that our considered judgments are firm enough to be taken as provisional fixed points that are not immune to revision. Lewis says that our intuitions are simply opinions. Elgin says that we begin with sentences that are initially tenable but woefully uncertain.

From the standpoint of the common sense tradition these claims are inadequate or mistaken. My considered judgments that there are other people, that they have bodies, and that almost everyone knows these things are not merely "provisional fixed points", "simply opinions", or "woefully uncertain". To describe many of our common sense beliefs in this way is to fail to give them their epistemic due. Many of common sense beliefs are things I know and that almost everyone knows. They are obvious truisms.

It is, I think, philosophically important to recognize that some of our common sense beliefs are instances of knowledge. Suppose that I am considering whether I should adopt a certain philosophical view. If I know that view conflicts with things that I know to be obviously true, then I know that the view is mistaken. I have a very good reason to reject the philosophical view. In fact, if I know that the view conflicts with a great many things that I know to be obviously true, then I have excellent reasons to reject the view.

On the other hand, suppose that I know that the philosophical view conflicts with some beliefs of mine that are simply "provisional fixed points", or beliefs that are simply opinions, or judgements that are woefully uncertain. In this case it does *not* follow that I have a good or excellent reason to reject the philosophical view. It might or not be more reasonable for me to give up my provisional fixed point, opinion, or woefully uncertain belief. Again, to describe many of our common sense beliefs as provisional fixed points, opinions, or woefully uncertain would be to fail to recognize their epistemic weight. It would also be to fail to recognize their proper role in philosophical reflection.

A proponent of reflective equilibrium might suggest that the weak epistemic status attributed to our considered judgments is only their *initial* status. As one reflects and approaches the ideal of wide reflective equilibrium, as one weighs reasonable arguments for and against our considered judgments, the epistemic status of some of our considered judgments can be enhanced. As one's beliefs survive the critical scrutiny involved in approaching the ideal of wide reflective equilibrium, they come to have significant epistemic standing, the sort we associate with knowledge. They approach the status of knowledge when they are supported by critical reflection, by reasons and argument.

But this reply seems unsatisfactory for at least two reasons. First, it suggests our considered judgments are not knowledge from the start, but *become* knowledge only through pursuing the method of reflective equilibrium. But from the standpoint of the common sense tradition, this, too, is a mistake. Almost everyone has this knowledge, including children and the unreflective. They know that there are other people, that they have bodies, and that they think. This knowledge is not the product of philosophical reflection or pursuing the method of wide reflective equilibrium. Again, my common sense convictions that no man is taller than himself, that cars don't grow on trees are instances of knowledge. They are not mere provisional starting points, mere opinions, or woefully uncertain. They do not await the thaumaturgy of reflective equilibrium to become knowledge.

Second, it is not obvious that pursuing the method of reflective equilibrium must necessarily make our particular beliefs or our body of beliefs more

reasonable. According to the proponent of that view, we can drop some of our considered judgments and add new judgments. But it is not clear the pursuit of coherence necessarily results in one's having more reasonable judgments. Imagine that some philosopher follows the method of reflective equilibrium, weighs reasons and arguments, and comes to hold that some of the obvious truisms of common sense are false. Perhaps he judges that nothing moves, that nothing happens before anything else, or that no one knows anything about the mental states of other people. Such judgments seem not merely false, but *unreasonable*. If he really came to hold that these obvious common sense claims were false, then his views would be unreasonable. Indeed, if he really came to sincerely and steadfastly believe that these common sense truisms were false, and acted on those beliefs, then he would be a danger to himself and other people. This is because many of our core common sense beliefs are necessary for successful practical functioning in the world. Were he sincerely to believe such things were false he would not only have unreasonable beliefs, he would *act* unreasonably.

5. Is Appealing to Common Sense Knowledge Unphilosophical?

As I noted in the first section, philosophers in the common sense tradition reject various philosophical views when they conflict with our common sense knowledge. In this section, I want to consider three challenges to this approach that hold that appealing to our common sense knowledge is either unphilosophical, useless in philosophical debate, or that common sense cannot offer positive support to philosophical views. Again, those who raise these objections do not deny that our common sense judgments are instances of knowledge. Still, they hold that it is in some way wrong or inappropriate to appeal to them. As Chisholm noted, some of them would tell us "you have no right to assume anything like *that*!"

The first sort of objection is raised by Laurence BonJour, who suggests that there is something illegitimate about accepting our common sense convictions, at least in the context of philosophical inquiry. BonJour writes:

> [T]o accept commonsense convictions as Moore and other particularists do, does appear to rule out illegitimately even the possibility that skepticism might in fact be true, that commonsense might be mistaken. And, equally importantly, if this solution is taken at face value, it would have the effect of stifling or short-circuiting epistemological inquiry at least as effectively as would simply acquiescing in skepticism. (2002: 265)

BonJour suggests that to accept the common sense claims that, for example, we know there are other people, they have bodies, and they think, is to both illegitimately rule out the possibility that skepticism might be true, and to "stifle" epistemological inquiry.

Does the common sense tradition illegitimately rule out the possibility that skepticism might be true? I don't think so. A proponent of the common sense tradition can hold that it is *logically possible* that skepticism is true. He might allow, for example, that it is logically possible that we are radically deceived by a Cartesian demon. Still, he might hold that such skepticism is not *epistemically possible* in the sense that it is not compatible with what we know. Since we do know that there are other people and they have bodies, we know that skepticism is false. So, the common sense tradition does rule out the epistemic possibility of skepticism, but why would this be illegitimate? Since we do know that there are other people and they think, we know that skepticism about the external world must be false. I don't see why it would be any more illegitimate than ruling out a theory of perception because it implies incorrectly that no one can see through a window.

Does the common sense tradition stifle epistemological inquiry? Again, I don't think so. First, one can hold that we know a great deal of what we ordinarily think we know and still ask what is the nature of this knowledge and what justifies our beliefs? Even if one believes that one has common sense knowledge, one might still wonder *how* one knows. Accepting the basic outlook of the common sense tradition does not require that we forgo debates about externalism or internalism, or foundationalism, coherentism, or virtue epistemology. Second, one might still wonder what distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief or a lucky guess. Embracing the common sense tradition doesn't require that one abandon searching for a solution to the Gettier problem. Third, even if one embraces the common sense tradition, one need not ignore skeptical arguments or regard them as idle. One might still wonder which of the premises or assumptions in the arguments are mistaken. One might try to explain why one or more of the skeptic's mistaken assumptions should seem so plausible. So, given the preceding comments I don't think we have good reason to say that the common sense tradition stifles epistemological inquiry.

A second line of criticism is raised by Rik Peels. Consider again the question raised in the first section, "Why do any of our common sense beliefs have any weight in philosophy?" I suggested that many of them have weight, that they can serve as a check on philosophical speculation, because of their epistemic character, because they are obvious instances of knowledge. Peels thinks we need a better answer since some critics of the common sense

tradition doubt that our common sense beliefs constitute knowledge. If someone doubts that our common sense beliefs are instances of knowledge or justified, then appealing to them in philosophical debate is not helpful. He writes:

> [w]e should not lose sight of the dialectical situation: a wide variety of philosophers believe that common sense does not have any or not much epistemic authority. Claiming that it is a brute fact that it has such authority will not ameliorate the dialectical situation one bit, in the same way as claiming that it is a brute fact that T is true will not be helpful in any other debate (even though the claim maybe justified). (230)[6]

Peels does not deny that many of our common sense beliefs *are* instances of knowledge. He simply believes that appealing to them in philosophical debate is useless when someone doubts that they have any positive epistemic status.

How are we to address this dialectical situation in which another thinker doubts whether our common sense beliefs constitute knowledge? Following Nicholas Rescher, Peels suggests that we might appeal to the "cultural evolution" of our common sense beliefs in order to support the view that our common sense beliefs are true or reliably formed. The argument seems to be: (1) our common sense beliefs have evolved over time to meet certain practical needs of the human community. (2) The best explanation for the persistence and widespread adoption of common sense beliefs and principles of belief formation (e.g. if you seem to remember that *p*, then probably *p*), is that they successfully meet certain basic human needs. (3) They would not successfully meet these needs unless they were largely true and reliably formed. Therefore, (4) common sense beliefs and principles of belief formation are largely true and reliably formed.

What are we to make of this line of reasoning? Is it a promising way of dealing with the "dialectical situation"? I don't think so. First, it is not clear that such an argument would be at all convincing to someone who *actually* doubted the truth of our core common sense beliefs, e.g. there are other people, people think, people have needs, the earth has existed for many years. If someone truly doubted these core common sense beliefs, why would he accept the premises of this argument? If he does not accept these core common sense beliefs, why would he accept (1), that common sense beliefs have evolved over time to meet certain practical needs of the human community? If the purpose of the argument is to convince someone who doubts our core common sense claims, it is not clear how this could be convincing.

Second, it is not clear that this argument is sound. Consider premise (2). Is it really the case that the *best* explanation for the persistence and widespread adoption of common sense beliefs is that they successfully meet certain basic needs? Consider the propositions that *no man is older than himself* and that *no number is flexible*. I assume that they are widely believed by those who consider and understand them. Indeed, such things are a matter of common sense. But is it really the case that these propositions are widely believed by those who understand them *because* they are useful in meeting certain basic human needs? Is this *really* the best explanation for their being widely believed? That seems doubtful. I suspect that people who have never considered or formed a belief about these propositions meet their basic human needs just fine. A better explanation, I suggest, is that these propositions are widely accepted because they are obviously true to people with normal human cognitive capacities. It is their epistemic character for creatures like us that makes them widely accepted.

Third, Peels is concerned with the dialectical situation in which someone doubts that our common sense beliefs amount to knowledge. In that situation, appealing to them is dialectically ineffective and will not be helpful in philosophical debate. Suppose he is right about this. Appealing to common sense beliefs *is* unhelpful if one's interlocutor doubts that they are true. Still, how serious a problem is this? How important is the settling of philosophical debate? How important is it to reach agreement from mutually accepted premises? Suppose that our aim is not settling a debate or even persuasion. Instead, suppose our aim is knowledge. Suppose we want to know the truth about those philosophical questions that concern us. In that case, it seems we *should* appeal to what we know. In trying to get to the truth in philosophical inquiry, one should make use of *all* one's evidence, and this will include a great many bits of common sense knowledge. *Not* to make use of what one knows in philosophical inquiries seems like poor intellectual procedure. The common sense philosopher's procedure in rejecting various philosophical arguments because they conflict with what he knows is simply good intellectual procedure, even if it appeals to common sense claims that someone denies.

Finally, the common sense tradition holds that our common sense knowledge can serve as a check on philosophical speculation. But can it do more? Can it *positively* support philosophical views? Nicholas Rescher strongly endorses the role of common sense knowledge as a check on philosophy. He writes:

> If ever a philosophical thesis, theory, or doctrine did indeed come into clash or conflict with common sense, then we would have little plausible choice but to dismiss it out of hand. While the dicta of common sense do not constrain any particular philosophical thesis or position, they do nevertheless serve to constrict the range of potentially viable philosophical doctrines. They do this not in the way of affirmative establishment but in the way of negative elimination. (213)

On this view, common sense knowledge can serve as a check on philosophical speculation. If a philosophical thesis comes into conflict with common sense, we "have little plausible choice" but to dismiss the philosophical thesis. Rescher suggests, for example, that solipsism and radical phenomenalism, understood as the view that all we can know are how things appear to us, are ruled out by our common sense knowledge (216). They are both ruled out by our common sense knowledge that there are other people.

Still, while common sense provides a check on philosophical speculation, Rescher suggests that our common sense knowledge does not establish any particular philosophical position, that the truisms of common sense "will not of themselves provide answers to philosophical questions…" (219). "No positive substantive solution to a philosophical problem is produced by the minimalia of common sense and the *via negativa* of common sense philosophizing" (216). Again, he writes, "That while common sense facts are too rudimentary to settle philosophical issues, nevertheless questions about common sense can afford instructive material for philosophical deliberation" (235) He says that the elimination or rejection of a philosophical position, does not itself qualify as a philosophical doctrine (215).

While I agree with Rescher that common sense knowledge can serve as a check upon, or refute, a philosophy thesis or theory, I disagree with his contention that common sense can only exercise a veto on philosophical speculation. I don't see why it cannot *positively* establish a philosophical thesis. Rescher's view seems to me to underestimate the importance of common sense knowledge for philosophical inquiry.

Consider the philosophical thesis that we have knowledge of the external world, of things other than our own mental states. We might call this thesis "External World Cognitivism". As we have seen, Rescher holds that we *can* reject both solipsism and radical phenomenalism because these philosophical views conflict with our common sense knowledge that there are other people. But if we *do* know that there are other people (and by people, I mean people with bodies who live and think), then we know that there are things external to us, things other than our own mental states. And if we know that there are

other people, then it follows that External World Cognitivism is true. It seems to me that the very common sense knowledge that supports our rejecting both solipsism and radical phenomenalism, also affirmatively supports the philosophical thesis of External World Cognitivism. And, of course, Williamson's knowledge that he has seen trees through windows and Moore's knowledge that he sees his finger does so as well.

Now, I assume that External World Cognitivism is a philosophical thesis. Rescher might disagree. He writes, "But of course such position-elimination-even if successful-does not qualify as a philosophical doctrine. Even as not-green is not a color, so the rejection of a philosophical position scarcely constitutes one itself" (215). But clearly, the negations of *some* philosophical theses are themselves philosophical theses. The skeptical thesis that no one knows anything about the external world is a philosophical thesis, but so is its negation, that it is false that no one knows anything about the external world. So, I see no good reason to deny that External World Cognitivism is a philosophical thesis, and one supported by common sense.

If External World Cognitivism can be positively supported by common sense knowledge, then I think many other philosophical views might be, too. For example, consider the philosophical thesis of Moral Cognitivism which I take to be the view that some people know some moral truths. I think that there are some moral truths that I and other people know. For example, a few years ago a man not far from where I lived was angry with his sister over an unpaid debt. In his anger he took his sister's daughter and son to a nearby bridge, slit their throats, and threw them into the river below. The son drowned, but the daughter miraculously survived. She climbed out of the river and up the embankment where she was rescued by a passing couple. Now, I and many others would say that we know both (a) that the uncle's action was wrong and (b) that the action of the passing couple was right. Indeed, (a) and (b) are obviously and transparently true. But if we do know both (a) and (b), then it follows that Moral Cognitivism is true.

So, I would say, contrary to Rescher, that the truisms of common sense *can* support various philosophical positions and can "provide answers to various philosophical questions". If we ask whether External World Cognitivism or Moral Cognitivism is true, our common sense knowledge can provide positive answers.

Still, there is an important sense in which Rescher is right that the appeal to such common sense convictions will not *settle* philosophical issues. As I've noted, the appeal to some common sense knowledge won't settle a debate with someone who denies that the common sense claim is an instance of knowledge. If, for example, someone holds that it is false we know that there

are other people, then the appeal to that common sense fact will not convince him, or settle a philosophical dispute with him. If one wanted to settle the dispute with him, one would have to find another approach.

Moreover, Rescher is also right that the appeal to common sense is not a substitute for philosophy. Common sense alone cannot yield philosophical *understanding* of our knowledge. For example, even if we are convinced that we do have common sense knowledge, we might still wonder about the nature of such knowledge, about what makes various common sense beliefs instances of knowledge. Would the best account of our common sense knowledge be, for example, internalist or externalist? Would it be a virtue account, an abductivist account, or something else?

Moreover, we might wonder what is the best way to respond to philosophical challenges to our knowledge. Where, for example, do skeptical arguments go wrong? Even if we know that they are mistaken, we might not know precisely *why* they go wrong. We might not have that kind of philosophical understanding.

Furthermore, even if we agree that we do know some moral facts, we might still wonder about the nature of those facts and about what makes certain actions right or wrong. What Rescher calls the "minimalia" of common sense do not provide answers to those questions.

Even if we agree, then, that we have common sense knowledge which supports particular philosophical positions, philosophical questions still remain. As Rescher says, recognizing the obvious truisms of common sense does not put an end to philosophical inquiry and common sense by itself cannot yield philosophical understanding of our knowledge. Still, as Rescher would agree, to ignore the facts of common sense is to proceed at one's peril.

Noah Lemos
The College of William & Mary
nmlemo@wm.edu

References

BonJour, Laurence. 2002. *Epistemology*. Rowman & Littlefield.
Chisholm, Roderick. 1976. *Person and Object*. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court.
Chisholm, Roderick. 1973. "On the Nature of Empirical Evidence" in *Empirical Knowledge*, ed. Chisholm, Roderick M. and Robert J. Swartz. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall.

Elgin, Catherine. 1996. *Considered Judgment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ewing, A. C. 1951. *The Fundamental Questions of Philosophy*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Lemos, Noah. 2004. *Common Sense*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lewis, David 1983. *Philosophical Papers*, Volume I. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Moore, G. E. 1953. "Hume's Theory Examined" in *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, 124–142. New York: Collier Books.

Moore, G. E. 1959. "A Defense of Common Sense" in *Philosophical Papers*, 32–59. London: George All & Unwin.

Moore, G. E. 1960. "Some Judgments of Perception" in *Philosophical Studies*, 220–252. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Moser, Paul and Arnold vander Nat. 1995. *Human Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Approaches*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Peels, Rik. 2021. "The Epistemic Authority of Common Sense" in *The Cambridge Companion to Common-Sense Philosophy*, ed. Peels, Rick and Rene van Woudenberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pritchard, Duncan. 2021. "Scepticism and Certainty: Moore and Wittgenstein on Common Sense and Philosophy" in *The Cambridge Companion to Common-Sense Philosophy*, ed. Peels, Rick and Rene van Woudenberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rawls, John. 1974. "The Independence of Moral Theory". *Proceedings and Address of the American Philosophical Association*. 47: 5–72.

Rescher, Nicholas. 2005. *Common-Sense: A New Look at an Old Philosophical Tradition*. Marquette, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press.

Sosa, Ernest. 2021. *Epistemic Explanations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Williamson, Timothy. 2020. *Philosophical Method: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1958. *Philosophical Investigations.* Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Macmillan.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1969. *On Certainty*, ed. Anscombe, G. E. M. and G. H. von Wright. New York: Harper & Row.

Woundenberg, Rene van. 2021. "The Delineation of Common Sense" in *The Cambridge Companion to Common-Sense Philosophy*, ed. Peels, Rick and Rene van Woudenberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[1] Strictly speaking, stated this way the claim is not true. When I *am not* doing philosophy, I am justified in believing that I am not doing philosophy, but when I *am* doing philosophy, I am not justified in believing that I am not doing philosophy. Perhaps we can say, more cautiously, that *many* of the things I am justified in believing when I am not doing philosophy, are such that I am still justified in believing when I am.

[2] I agree with Moore that the terms "Common Sense View of the world" and "Common Sense belief" are rather vague. On some views, for example, a common sense belief is relativized to a society, so that a common sense belief for a society A is one that is had by almost everyone in A (cf. Williamson: 7). So, on this view, *there are atoms* would be a common sense belief for most Americans in the late 20th century, but not for medieval Parisians. On other views, a common sense belief is one that is widely and deeply held by almost every one. (Lemos: 4; Peels: 227). On this view, the belief that *there are people*, would be a common sense for both Americans and medieval Parisians. On yet other views, a common sense belief is one that is obvious, transparently true, and noninferential (Rescher: 29-31). So, the belief that *no man is taller than himself* might be a common sense belief to the few who actually have the belief, but it need not be widely held since most people would not actually have the belief (though they might be disposed to form the belief were they to consider the matter). Rescher distinguishes between common sense beliefs and "merely common" beliefs. The belief that *there are witches* might be a "merely common" belief in some society, but it would not be a common sense belief, since it is not obvious, transparently true, and noninferential. For a discussion of what a common sense belief is see Rene van Woudenberg (2021). Despite these different ways of characterizing a common sense belief, I do not believe than anything in the following discussion turns on a precise delineation of common sense belief.

[3] Moore provides an instructive example. In "Hume's Theory Examined" he writes:

> Obviously, I cannot know *that* I know that the pencil exists, unless I do know that the pencil exists; and it might, therefore, be thought that the first proposition can only be mediately known – known *merely* because the second is known. But it is, I think, necessary to make a distinction. From the mere fact that I should not know the first, *unless* I knew the second, it does not follow that I know the first *merely* because I know the second. And, in fact, I think I do know both of them *immediately*. (Moore 1953: 142)

Here Moore says he knows immediately or noninferentially both that the pencil exists and that he knows that the pencil exists. Almost twenty years later, he suggests in "Four Forms of Skepticism", that he agrees with Russell that he know such things via inference, that he does *not* know it immediately. Even though Moore knows that the pencil exists, he held, at least at one time, a mistaken view about how he knows it.

[4] I owe this objection to an anonymous referee.

[5] For an interesting discussion of Moore and Wittgenstein on common sense and a positive answer to how we might know our core common sense claims see the last chapter of Sosa's *Epistemic Explanations*.

[6] A similar worry about appealing to what is disputed is raised by Paul Moser:

> Questions under dispute in a philosophical context cannot attract non-questionbegging answers from the mere presumption of correctness of a disputed answer. If we allow such question begging in general, we can support any disputed position we prefer. Simply beg the key question in any dispute regarding the preferred position. Given that strategy argument becomes superfluous in the way circular argument is typically pointless. Question begging strategies promote an undesirable arbitrariness in philosophical debate. They are thus rationally inconclusive to the question under dispute. (Moser 1995: 27)

I suggest, however, that if we know our premises, and we appropriately infer our conclusions, then our arguments are not rationally inconclusive. We have good reasons to believe our conclusion. Nor is our position arbitrary since it is supported by premises we know. Our arguments might be unpersuasive or rhetorically ineffective, but that doesn't mean we don't have excellent reasons for our conclusion.