

TWO CRITICISMS OF THE COMMONSENSE TRADITION

Noah Lemos
(College of William and Mary)

Résumé

Dans cet article, je défends la tradition du sens commun en philosophie contre deux sortes de critiques, une critique "kantienne" au sens large et une critique wittgensteinienne. La critique kantienne soutient qu'un grand nombre de nos croyances de sens commun ne constituent pas des connaissances parce que nous ne pouvons leur apporter une preuve suffisante. Le partisan de cette critique kantienne considère que c'est un scandale pour la philosophie de ne pas avoir apporté des arguments appropriés, et, par conséquent, il reproche au philosophe du sens commun de ne pas en apporter. À l'inverse, le partisan de la critique wittgensteinienne remarque qu'un grand nombre de nos croyances de sens commun sont dépourvues de toutes raisons ou arguments en leur faveur, mais il soutient que ce n'est pas là une raison pour les mettre en doute. Au contraire, il considère qu'un grand nombre de nos croyances de sens commun les plus profondément ancrées en nous *ne peuvent* être *ni* rationnellement mises en doute *ni* rationnellement crues. Le partisan de la critique wittgensteinienne en conclut qu'elles se situent *au-delà* de l'évaluation rationnelle et reproche au philosophe du sens commun de considérer ces croyances comme des cas de connaissance ou de croyance justifiée. L'une et l'autre critique contestent aux croyances de sens commun le statut de connaissances.

Dans la première section de cet article, je présente quelques aspects fondamentaux de la tradition du sens commun, que l'on peut trouver dans les ouvrages de Thomas Reid, G. E. Moore et Roderick Chisholm. Dans la deuxième section, je réponds à la critique kantienne. Dans la troisième, je réponds à la critique wittgensteinienne.

Abstract

In this paper, I defend the commonsense tradition in philosophy against two sorts of criticisms, a broadly "Kantian" criticism and a Wittgensteinian criticism. The Kantian criticism holds that many of our commonsense beliefs don't amount to knowledge because we lack any satisfactory proof for them. The Kantian critic claims that it is a scandal to philosophy that it has not provided the appropriate arguments, and, by implication, faults the commonsense philosopher for not providing them. In contrast, the Wittgensteinian critic notes that many of our commonsense beliefs lack the backing of reasons or arguments, but holds that this is no reason for doubting them. On the contrary, he holds that many of our most deeply held commonsense beliefs *cannot* be rationally doubted *or* rationally believed. The Wittgensteinian critic concludes that they are thus *beyond* rational evaluation or appraisal and faults the commonsense philosopher for holding that these beliefs are instances of knowledge or justified belief. Both critics deny that our commonsense beliefs amount to knowledge.

In the first section of this paper I lay out some main features of the commonsense tradition that we find in the work of Thomas Reid, G. E. Moore, and Roderick Chisholm. In the second section, I respond to the Kantian criticism. In the third, I respond to the Wittgensteinian.

In this essay, I want to consider two different criticisms of the commonsense tradition, at least in the form the tradition takes in the work of Thomas Reid, G. E. Moore, and Roderick Chisholm. According to the first line of criticism, the commonsense tradition fails to provide arguments for things that *need* to be argued for. On this view, many of the claims of the commonsense philosopher do not amount to knowledge since we lack cogent arguments for them. They might be asserted, they might be articles of faith, but they simply aren't known, and thus they don't have the sort of epistemic authority the commonsense philosopher takes them to have. We may call this line of criticism, the "Kantian" criticism. Consider, for example, the following passage from Kant's *Prolegomena*:

"It is indeed a great gift of God to possess right or (as they now call it) plain common sense. But this common sense must be shown in action by well-considered and reasonable thoughts and words, not by appealing to it as an oracle when no rational justification for one's position can be advanced. To appeal to common sense when insight and discovery fail, and no sooner – this is one of the subtle discoveries of modern times by which the most superficial ranter can safely enter the ranks of the most thorough thinker and hold his own. But as long as one particle of insight remains, no one would think of having recourse to this subterfuge. Seen clearly, it is but an appeal to the opinion of the multitude, of whose applause the philosopher is ashamed, while the popular charlatan glories and boasts in it." (Kant 1970, 7)

On Kant's view, it is a mistake, indeed shameful, to appeal to commonsense claims, when no rational justification for those claims is offered. What is needed for the claims of commonsense is rational justification or argument. In their absence the claims of commonsense have no weight and no place in philosophy.

According to the second sort of criticism, the commonsense philosopher is mistaken in thinking that certain commonsense claims are justified, reasonable, or amount to knowledge because these commonsense claims lie *beyond* rational evaluation. On this view, they are not the sorts of things that can be rationally believed or rationally doubted. But since they lie beyond rational evaluation, it is a mistake for the commonsense philosopher to hold that they are more reasonable than the philosophical views that conflict with them. We might call this the "Wittgensteinian" criticism. Concerning the things that Moore claimed to know in his "A Defence of Common Sense," Wittgenstein 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." (1969, para. 151)

In this first section of this paper, I lay out what I take to be some main features of the commonsense tradition that we find in the work of Reid, Moore, and Chisholm. In the second section, I shall defend the commonsense tradition against the Kantian criticism and in the third I shall take up the Wittgensteinian criticism.

1. The Commonsense Tradition

According to the commonsense tradition in philosophy we do know many of the things we ordinarily take ourselves to know, and our philosophical views should be adequate to the fact that we know them. It holds that we may use much of what we take ourselves to know as data for developing and assessing philosophical theories and principles.

We find this view in the work of Reid, Moore, and Chisholm. In his 1919 essay, "Some Judgments of Perception", Moore begins by considering some views about perception and the possibility of perceptual knowledge. He rejects certain philosophical views because they imply 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 1960a, 228)

Elsewhere, Moore writes:

"There is no reason why we should not, in this respect, make our philosophical opinions agree with what we necessarily believe at other times. There is no reason why I should not confidently assert that that I do really *know* some external facts, although I cannot prove the assertion except by simply assuming that I do. I am, in fact, as certain of this as of anything and as reasonably certain of it." (Moore 1960b, 163)

Moore holds that it is reasonable for us to reject various skeptical arguments because (i) they incorrectly imply that we do not know certain facts about this external world, e.g. that this is a finger, and (ii) it is more reasonable for us to hold that we *do* know those facts than one or more of the premises of the skeptical argument.

Again, Chisholm takes a similar stance: "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." (Chisholm 1973, 232) Chisholm holds that since we do know a lot about the world around us, so much the worse for skepticism about induction.

What is a commonsense belief? I am not sure that all the philosophers in the commonsense tradition have understood the notion of a commonsense belief in the same way. Let me begin by saying what I shall take a commonsense belief to be. I will take a commonsense belief to be either (1) a belief in a proposition that is deeply held by almost everyone, or (2) the self-attribution of a property such that almost everyone attributes that property to himself. If we understand a commonsense belief this way, then the beliefs that there are other people, who think and feel and have bodies will be commonsense beliefs. The beliefs

that I think, that I have a body, and that I have been alive for several years are also commonsense beliefs since almost everyone attributes to himself such properties. Other examples of commonsense beliefs would be the beliefs that people are born, that they existed yesterday, and my beliefs that I am alive, that I have hands, and I was much smaller when I was born.

In addition to the examples above, our commonsense beliefs include some epistemic beliefs. These would include that people know their names, that they know there are other people, that they know others think and feel and have bodies. In addition, there are commonsense beliefs about our faculties. So, for example, these include the belief that our memory is, under certain conditions, reliable, that sense perception is, under certain conditions, reliable, that introspection is, under certain conditions, reliable. Though they might not be explicitly formulated, they are accepted nonetheless. They guide our belief formation, our actions, and the way we assess the testimony of others.

If this is how we understand a commonsense belief, then a great many commonsense beliefs are instances of knowledge. Indeed, they are instances of *common* knowledge. The fact that some commonsense beliefs are matters of common knowledge is not without significance. If almost everyone knows that other people think and feel and have bodies, then there is some way of knowing such things that does not rest on philosophical arguments or considerations grasped only by a handful of philosophers, and it can't be the fruit of philosophical reasoning followed only by a philosophical elite. Whatever our account of knowledge is, it must be adequate to the fact that such knowledge is widespread.

The commonsense tradition is not committed to the view that all commonsense beliefs are instances of knowledge.¹ This is not the view of Moore or Chisholm, and I do not believe that it is the view of Reid. Moreover, the commonsense tradition does *not* hold that a belief is an instance of knowledge, or even reasonable, in virtue of the fact that it is a commonsense belief in the sense described above. It is not committed to the view that a belief is an instance of knowledge in virtue of the fact that it is deeply and widely held or in virtue of the fact that it is the attribution to oneself of a property such that almost everyone ascribes that property to himself. While the commonsense tradition holds that a great many commonsense beliefs are instances of knowledge, it does not follow that these beliefs are instances of knowledge *because* they are commonsense beliefs in the sense described above. It does not follow, for example, that they are known *because* they are deeply and widely held. This no more follows than it follows from the fact that many wrong acts are widely condemned that the acts are wrong *because* they are widely condemned.

The commonsense tradition holds that a great many of our commonsense beliefs are instances of knowledge, and more reasonable to hold than any philosophical principles which imply that they are false or that they are not instances of knowledge. It is important

¹ In his "A Defence of Common Sense", Moore writes: "The phrases "Common Sense view of the world" or "Common Sense beliefs" (as used by philosophers) are, of course, extraordinarily vague; and for all I know, there may be many propositions which may properly be 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." (Moore 1959, 45).

to note, however, that this is also true of a great many beliefs that are not commonsense beliefs in the sense described above. Consider Moore's particular belief, tokened at that particular moment, that *this is a finger*. This proposition is not one that is deeply and widely believed and it is not the attribution to oneself of a property that almost everyone attributes to himself. Still, Moore claims that he knows it and that it is more reasonable to believe than at least one of the propositions in any philosophical argument that he does not know it. Each of us, I would say, have beliefs that enjoy the same positive epistemic status. My beliefs that I am now seated, that I live in Virginia, that I have been to Alabama, that I had coffee this morning are not commonsense beliefs in the sense described above, but they are also instances of knowledge and more reasonable for me to believe than any philosophical premise that conflicts with them. If some of our commonsense belief enjoy a certain weight or authority, then the same is true of a great many of our other beliefs.

But *why* should *any* of our commonsense beliefs have this weight? Why should we reject various philosophical arguments because they conflict with various commonsense beliefs? A. C. Ewing asks why philosophers should be expected to pay so much respect to commonsense. Ewing asks why should those who have studied philosophy alter their philosophical views because people who have never studied it think them wrong? 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). Essentially, the objection assumes that since it would be a mistake to reject scientific views that conflict with commonsense beliefs, it would also be a mistake to reject philosophical views that do so.

The issue raised by Ewing is an important one. What role should our commonsense beliefs have in philosophical or scientific inquiry? Should they have any weight at all? And, if so, why?

The answer, I would say, is that it is because some of our commonsense beliefs are instances of knowledge and are more reasonable to believe than any philosophical principle that conflicts with them. The same is true, as I noted above, of a great many of our other beliefs. I would say that the mere fact that a philosophical view conflicts with a commonsense belief in the sense explained above does not necessarily require philosophers to alter their views. Some commonsense beliefs might be false or unreasonable. *But* if a philosophical theory conflicts with some commonsense belief that is known, then the philosophical view is simply false. In this regard there is no difference between our philosophical and scientific views. Any view that denies what is known is simply mistaken. So, if a philosophical theory or principle implies that I do not know that there are other people or that I was alive yesterday, then that theory or principle should be rejected.²

Still, even if the commonsense philosopher knows some fact, such as this is a finger, it is not clear that he must know *how* he knows it. Commonsense philosophers such as Reid, Moore,

² For a different approach see Rik Peels (2021).

and Chisholm have different answers as to how they know various things about the external world. They have different views about what knowledge or justified belief supervenes on. Indeed, in some cases, their views about how we know various things about the external world changed over time.

Consider, for example, Moore's views about perceptual knowledge. At one point in his career, Moore wrote in "Hume's Philosophy Examined":

"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 claims that he knows immediately both that the pencil exists, and the epistemic fact that he knows that the pencil exists. Later, however, in "Four Forms of Skepticism", Moore writes:

"Russell's view that I do not know for certain that this is a pencil or that you are conscious rests, if I am right, on no less than four distinct assumptions. (1) That I do not know these things immediately; (2) That they don't follow from any thing or things that I do know immediately; That if (1) and (2) are true, my belief in or knowledge of them must be 'based on an analogical or inductive argument'; and (4) That what is so based cannot be *certain knowledge*. And what I can't help asking myself is this: Is it, in fact, as certain that all these four assumptions are true, as that I do know that this is a pencil and that you are conscious? I cannot help answering: it seems to me *more* certain that I *do* know that this is a pencil and that you are conscious, than any single one of those four assumptions is true, let alone all four...I agree with Russell that (1), (2), and (3) *are* true; yet no one even of these do I feel as certain as that this is a pencil. Nay more: I do not think that it is *rational* to be as certain of any one of these four propositions, as of the proposition that I do know that this is a pencil." (Moore 1959, 226)

Here Moore says that he agrees with Russell that he does *not* know this is a pencil immediately. He tentatively endorses Russell's view that the knowledge that this is a pencil must be based on analogical or inductive argument. Still, Moore says that it is not as rational to be as certain of any of Russell's four assumptions as of the proposition that he *does* know that this is a pencil.

At different stages of his career, Moore held incompatible philosophical or epistemological views about the nature of his knowledge. At one point in his life, he was wrong about the nature of his knowledge. At one point, he was mistaken about *how* he knows that this is a

pencil. Still, I would say that he did know that this is a pencil. His epistemological failure did not prevent him from having this particular bit of perceptual knowledge.

The commonsense philosopher need not claim that our commonsense knowledge of various things is a brute fact. He can allow that it is an epistemic and evaluative fact. And like other evaluative facts, it supervenes on more fundamental facts. Still, one need not know what those more fundamental facts are in order to have the particular bit of commonsense knowledge. Consider, for example, our mental states. I assume that our mental states supervene on more fundamental facts involving brain states and neurons. But I assume that I can know that I have various mental states without knowing on what more fundamental facts they supervene. Similarly, I can know that some particularly vicious act is morally wrong without knowing why it is wrong. I might not know whether it is wrong because it fails to maximize utility, treats someone as a mere means, would be prohibited by the ideal moral code, etc. I would say that one can know a great deal without knowing how one knows it, without knowing on what one's knowledge supervenes.

2. The "Kantian" Criticism

I want to turn to the "Kantian" objection to the commonsense tradition. According to this view, many of the items that the commonsense philosopher claims to know do not amount to knowledge because he has failed to provide an argument or rational justification for them. This, of course, is a very broad objection since the commonsense philosopher claims to know a variety of things. Some of the items he claims to know might be more plausibly be thought to require argument or rational justification than others. At a minimum, however, the Kantian criticism of the commonsense tradition is that it offers no proof or justification for an external world. In his "Proof of an External World", Moore quotes from the preface to the second edition of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* translated by Norman Kemp Smith: "It still remains a scandal to philosophy...that the existence of things outside of us...must be accepted merely on *faith*, and that, if anyone thinks good to doubt their existence, we are unable to counter his doubts by any satisfactory proof." (Moore 1959, 127)

Kant here suggests that it is a scandal to philosophy that it has not provided any satisfactory proof of the existence of things outside of us. Kant adds that in the absence of a satisfactory proof, the existence of things outside of us must be accepted merely on *faith*. The implication is that in the absence of such a satisfactory proof we have no knowledge of things outside of us.

But from what knowledge would such a proof proceed? Perhaps, one might suggest, from the immediate and non-inferential knowledge of one's mental states and of simple necessary truths. On this view, one's immediate, non-inferential knowledge is limited to the testimony of introspection and reason.

Still, the view that our knowledge of the external world, the past, and other minds depends on such a meager foundation is, from the standpoint of the commonsense philosopher, deeply problematic. First, it is not clear what the relevant argument would be. Perhaps one would appeal to some form of inductive argument or inference to the best explanation to argue for the existence of a material world. Perhaps some inference of that sort could give

us *some* probability that there are material objects or that others are conscious, but it is not clear that such an argument can establish the conclusion to a sufficiently high level of justification for those propositions to be known. Second, most of us, most mature adults, simply don't know what the relevant argument is, so it is hard to see how we could have knowledge about such things on the basis of such an argument. The situation seems even more bleak if we think children and animals have knowledge of the material world. They seem to lack the sophistication to reason and infer their way to such conclusions. Finally, our perceptual knowledge seems to be cognitively spontaneous and non-inferential. We do not seem to be inferring the existence of tables and chairs. We simply see them.

If our knowledge of the external world, the past, or other minds required such rational justification, an argument from such a meager foundation, then it seems such knowledge would be unattainable and skepticism would be the result. However, Reid, Chisholm, and, sometimes, Moore rejected the view that our immediate, non-inferential knowledge is confined to our own mental states and simple necessary truths. As noted above, Moore held at one point in his career that he knew *immediately* both that this is a pencil, and that he knows that this is a pencil. He claimed to know *both* the proposition about a particular material object, and the epistemic proposition immediately. Reid also held that our immediate, non-inferential knowledge is not confined to our mental states and simple necessary truths. Reid wrote, "It is by memory that we have an immediate knowledge of things past" (*Essays*, Essay III, Chapter 1, 324). Concerning the objects of sense, He writes: "If the word *axiom* be put to signify every truth which is known immediately, without being deduced from any antecedent truth, then the existence of the object of sense may be called an axiom. For my senses give me an immediate conviction of what they testify, as my understanding gives me of what is called an axiom." (*Essays*, Essay II, Chapter 20, 294)

Given this stance, the commonsense philosopher will reject the demand of the "Kantian" critic for a rational justification or argument for claims about the past, external objects, or other mind. Such knowledge is immediate and non-inferential. Just like the testimony of introspection or our knowledge of simple necessary truths, it is immediate and non-inferential. Proofs and arguments are not necessary for what is known immediately.

The Kantian critic claims that knowledge of the external world requires proof while the commonsense philosopher denies this. One might object that in denying that knowledge of the external world requires proof, or in asserting that we have immediate knowledge of the external world, the commonsense philosopher is merely "begging the question" against his Kantian critic. Still, the commonsense philosopher may make three points in defense of his position.

First, the Kantian critic claims that *all* knowledge of things external to us requires proof. In contrast, the commonsense philosopher claims to know various things about the external world, e.g. this is a finger, I have body. So, consider the following two claims: all knowledge of things external to us requires proof, and I know I have a body. Are we *really* at a loss to say which of these claims it is more reasonable for us to believe or merits greater confidence? Is it really the case that this broad and general philosophical claim is as reasonable to believe as the claim that I know I have a body? The general philosophical

claim of the Kantian critic seems less reasonable to believe that the humble claims of the commonsense philosopher.

Second, when one is trying to answer various philosophical questions, why should one eschew appeal to what one knows or reasonably believes in trying to answer them? Not to make use of what one knows or reasonably believes would seem to be poor intellectual procedure. Moreover, why should one *not* appeal to one's justified beliefs simply because someone disagrees? Admittedly, we do sometimes suspend judgment in some claim when we know that a competent peer disagrees with us. But that hardly provides us with any reason suspend judgment about our knowledge of the external world. To know that there is indeed a disagreement between the Kantian critic and the commonsense philosopher would presuppose that we *do* have knowledge of the external world and lots of additional commonsense knowledge, e.g. that there are other human beings and they think and have bodies.

Finally, the commonsense philosopher might note that we *do* know *some* things without proof. We have immediate knowledge of some simple necessary truths and of our own mental states. We accept and rely on the immediate non-inferential testimony of reason and introspection. We treat the immediate non-inferential testimony of reason and introspection as knowledge without proof. If this is so, then there seems to be no good reason why we should not do the same for the immediate non-inferential testimony of perception and memory. There is no good reason why we should treat these faculties differently.³

Still, the demand for rational justification or argument can take other forms. For example, it is sometimes suggested that in order to have knowledge that *p*, one must be able to rule out or exclude various skeptical hypotheses, hypotheses that are incompatible with one's knowing that *p*. Sometimes the requirement that we be able to rule out some skeptical hypothesis is understood in terms of our being able to *prove* that the skeptical hypothesis is false. For example, Keith Lehrer writes, "To meet the agnological challenge of skepticism, we must provide some argument to show that the skeptical hypothesis is false and the beliefs of common sense are correct. And this leads to a second equally inescapable conclusion. The challenge cannot be met." (1978, 361)

Lehrer suggests that we must provide two sorts of arguments. First, a proof that the beliefs or commonsense are true. Second, that the skeptical hypothesis is false. Again, the commonsense philosopher might reply that he does not need an argument and does not need to *show* that his commonsense beliefs about the external world are true in order to know them. Again, he would say that such knowledge is immediate and non-inferential.

³ Reid makes this criticism of some skeptical positions in the *Inquiry*. "Reason, says the skeptic, is the only judge of truth, and you ought to throw off every opinion and every belief not grounded on reason. Why sir, should I believe the faculty of reason more than perception? ¶ they both came out of the same shop, and were made by the same artist; and if he puts one piece of false ware into my hands, what should hinder him from putting another?" (Reid, 1983: 84-85) For more discussion of the charge of question-begging see Lemos (2004, 122-134).

But what about the skeptical hypothesis? Perhaps the skeptical hypothesis that I am now dreaming. Mustn't the commonsense philosopher *show* that this skeptical hypothesis is false? That is not so clear. There are at least two ways we might understand the requirement that we be able to rule out a skeptical hypothesis. Consider both:

(1) If *h* is incompatible with *S*'s knowing that *p*, then *S* must be able to know that *h* is false.

(2) If *h* is incompatible with *S*'s knowing that *p*, then *S* must be able to show that *h* is false.

(1) simply requires that one know the skeptical hypothesis is false. In contrast (2) requires that one must be able to *show* that the skeptical hypothesis is false, that one must provide an argument or proof that it is false. But why should we think that our commonsense knowledge requires that we be able to *show* or *prove* that the skeptical hypothesis is false? Why would it not be enough simply to *know* that it is false? So, consider the skeptical hypothesis that I am now dreaming. If that hypothesis is true, then I do not now know that I am sitting at my computer typing. According to (2), in order for me to know that I am sitting at my computer, I must be able to show that I am not now dreaming. I must be able to give a proof for it. But why should we think that this is required? Why would it not be enough for me to simply know that that I am not now dreaming, for me to know that I am awake? It seems to me that the commonsense philosopher could reasonably hold that he does know that he is awake and that he is not dreaming *immediately*, that his knowledge of this is simply not based on any reasoning or inference. If this is right, then the commonsense philosopher may reasonably reject the demand that he must show or provide an argument that the skeptical hypothesis is false⁴.

Moore, I believe, took this approach in his "Proof of an External World". There he claims that he has conclusive evidence that he is awake and not dreaming: "I have, no doubt, conclusive reasons for asserting that I am not now dreaming; I have conclusive evidence that I am awake; but that is a very different thing from being able to prove it. I could not tell you what all my evidence is; and I should require to do this at least, in order to give you a proof." (Moore 1959, 149)

Moore holds that he knows without proof, without an argument that he is awake and not dreaming. He claims he has reasons and evidence for this, but that he cannot say what all his evidence is.⁵

Finally, some critics of the commonsense tradition argue that we need *both* some argument to show that our faculties, such as perception and memory, are reliable, *and* that this argument must not be epistemically circular.⁶ They reject epistemically circular arguments

⁴ For a good discussion of how we might have immediate epistemic knowledge see Bergmann (2021) Chapters 5 and 6. Bergmann's book is a good discussion of skepticism from a commonsense perspective.

⁵ For further discussion of Moore's response to skepticism see Lemos (2008).

⁶ We shall say that an argument that a faculty *M* is reliable is epistemically circular if it uses the testimony of *M* to support the premises of that argument. An argument that uses the testimony of memory to support the conclusion that memory is reliable is an epistemically circular argument. Similarly, an argument that uses the testimony of perception to support the conclusion that perception is reliable is an epistemically circular argument.

as being epistemically vicious, as being unable to confer epistemic justification on their conclusions. Consequently, they hold that in the absence of a non-circular argument to show that memory and perception are reliable, we have no good reason to believe that they are reliable. Moreover, they claim that if we have no good reason to believe that they are reliable then we have no reason to think that those faculties yield knowledge or that the beliefs based on them have any epistemic authority⁷.

Whether epistemic circularity is indeed vicious, whether an epistemically circular *argument* can confer justification on its conclusion is a broad topic that cannot be adequately broached here. I will simply note here that Reid suggests that it is a first principle “That those things did really happen which I distinctly remember” (Reid 1969, 625) and it is a first principle, “That those things do really exist which we distinctly perceive by our senses, and are what we perceive them to be” (Reid 1969, 630). These principles assert the reliability of memory and perception.⁸ They are *first* principles insofar as they are not known on the basis of reasoning or inference. In claiming that they are first principles, Reid holds that they are incapable of proof and they do not depend epistemically on other things we know.⁹ Concerning first principles, he writes,

“But there are other propositions which are no sooner understood than they are believed. The judgment follows the apprehension of them necessarily, and both are equally the work of nature, and the result of our original powers. There is no searching for evidence; no weighing of arguments; the proposition is not deduced or inferred from another; it has the light of truth in itself; and no occasion to borrow it from another.

Propositions of this last kind, when they are used in matters of science, have been commonly been called *axioms*; and on whatever occasion they are used, are called *first principles, principles of common sense, common notions, self-evident truths.*” (Reid 1969, 593)

Reid holds that our beliefs that our faculties are reliable, that memory and perception are reliable, are not the effect of reasoning or arguments. It is certainly not the result of philosophical arguments. He says, “When a man in the common course of life gives credit to his senses, his memory, or his reason, he does not put the question to himself, whether these faculties may deceive him; yet the trust he reposes in them supposes an inward conviction, that, in this instance at least, they do not deceive them” (Reid 1969, 633) But how do we come by this inward conviction and trust in the testimony of our senses? Reid’s

⁷ Among those who see epistemic circularity as vicious are Bonjour (1985) and Fumerton (1995). Those who argue that it need not be vicious are Alston (1989), Sosa (1996), Lemos (2004), Bergmann (2004), and Van Cleve (2015).

⁸ I assume that Reid’s principles concerning memory, introspection, and perception are principles about the reliability of these faculties. For an opposing view and excellent discussion see James Van Cleve (2015). For further discussion of Reid’s views and Van Cleve’s position see Patrick Rysiew (2018).

⁹ Can *general* principles that assert the reliability of our faculties be self-evident or known immediately? Indeed, can there be any contingent general principles that are self-evident and known immediately? Van Cleve (2015) says no. For other views see Rysiew (2018) and Sosa (2021 Chapter 11).

answer is clear. He compares the trust we give to the testimony of our senses to that we to the testimony of others:

“There is a much greater similitude than is commonly imagined between the testimony of nature given by our senses and the testimony of men given by language. The credit we give to both is at first the effect of instinct only. When we grow up, and begin to reason about them, the credit given to human testimony is restrained and weakened, by the experience we have of deceit. But the credit given to the testimony of our senses, is established and confirmed by the uniformity and constancy of the laws of nature.” (Reid 1983, 87)

Our trust or credit in the testimony of our senses, our tendency to believe what our senses tell us is not the effect of reasoning or argument. It is the effect of instinct. In Reid’s view, it is, at least initially, not the result of argument. It is, Reid says, “a good gift from Nature”. What would make this trust justified? Perhaps it is justified by the reliability of the disposition itself. Our instinctual trust is justified in the first instance in virtue of the fact that trusting our senses leads us to true belief. A trust that manifests a natural virtue or disposition of belief formation. This trust can be established and confirmed by later “reflection” and experience. Indeed, for any mature adult, one’s belief that one’s memory and perception are reliable fits into a coherent body of beliefs, one in which the beliefs can be mutually supporting. One might believe, for example, that one has often found one’s way home, that in so doing one relies on memory and perception, that one would not have been so successful had they not been reliable, etc. Even if we initially trust our perception and memory from instinct, our confidence can be justifiably enhanced by developing a coherent perspective on our own powers and those of others.

3. The Wittgensteinian Criticism

I want to turn to the “Wittgensteinian” criticism of the commonsense tradition found in Reid, Moore, and Chisholm. Wittgenstein appears to reject many of the epistemic claims that they would affirm. In “A Defence of Common Sense”, Moore lists a variety of propositions that he claims to know with certainty. These include such truisms as: There exists at present a living human body which is my body. It was born and has existed continuously ever since. Ever since it was born it has existed in close contact with or not far from the surface of the earth. The earth had existed for many years before my body was born. In addition to claiming to know these things, Moore claims to know that almost everyone knows similar things.

In *On Certainty*, however, Wittgenstein comments on Moore’s claims saying, “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.” 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).

Clearly, *if* Wittgenstein is right to deny that these claims amount to knowledge, then the commonsense philosopher cannot soundly argue that skepticism is false on the ground that

I *know* that I have a body and I *know* I existed in the past. Furthermore, the commonsense philosopher is simply mistaken about the scope of his and other people's knowledge.

The denial of these epistemic claims is certainly puzzling. Why should we say that Moore does not know his commonsense truisms? Why think that we can't say (without joking) of someone that he knows that he is in pain? Interpreters of Wittgenstein have offered a variety of explanations for these puzzling claims. I will focus on one line of interpretation suggested by Duncan Pritchard.

Pritchard agrees with many interpreters of Wittgenstein who treat the Moorean claims as hinge propositions. Wittgenstein writes:

“[T]he *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend upon the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *indeed* not doubted.

But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.” (Wittgenstein 1969, para. 341-3)

These hinge propositions stand fast for us. They are not mere hypothetical assumptions that we might give up. They are part of the framework against which we conduct inquiry and raise doubts. We are certain of them, and do not doubt them. While we can rationally doubt many things, e.g. that our team will win the match or that the kitchen is clean, these hinge propositions are beyond rational doubt. It would be absurd, irrational for one to doubt that other people have bodies or to doubt that they have existed for many years. Again, we can easily imagine having reasons for doubting, say, that the kitchen is clean, and we can imagine how we might actually resolve that doubt. But it seems very hard, if not impossible, to imagine having reasons for doubting that we have bodies or how we might rationally remove that doubt should it arise.

On Pritchard's view, these hinge propositions cannot be rationally doubted, but they also cannot be rationally believed. He says, “That which cannot be rationally doubted, cannot be rationally believed either” (Pritchard 2021, 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 *a-rational* commitments. Pritchard notes that Wittgenstein emphasizes how such certainty is rooted in our actions rather than being the result of ratiocination, that it is primitive, visceral, ‘animal’. Wittgenstein 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).

While we can give reasons for many ordinary bits of knowledge, e.g. that this is my book or that my car is parked in the driveway, our hinge commitments have a certainty that far outstrips any evidence we have for them.

“Rather than showing there is something epistemically amiss with these certainties, however, Wittgenstein instead claims that this highlights the special role they play in our epistemic practices, one that by its nature excludes them from rational evaluation altogether.” (Pritchard 2021, 254)

Compared to Wittgenstein’s view, Pritchard suggests, it is Moore’s that is really quite radical. Moore claims to know these commonsense certainties and that they are more reasonable to believe than the philosophical claims that conflict with them, and yet, Moore cannot even say what the evidence is for these commonsense claims. He cannot say how he knows them. Moore says, “We are all, I think, in this strange position that we do know many things, with regard to which we know further that we must have had evidence for them, and yet we do not know how we know them, i.e. we do not know, what the evidence was” (1959: 44). For so many ordinary knowledge claims, we can produce our evidence and we can give our reasons. For example, I know that this is my car since I parked it here this morning, I remember what my car looks like, and my coat is in the back seat. For such ordinary claims of knowledge, we seem to have no trouble saying what our evidence is. Yet Moore claims that he knows various things with certainty, and yet he says he does not know what the evidence is.

How might a defender of the commonsense tradition respond? First, I think that a defender of commonsense may note that it seems false to claim both that we *cannot* know various Moorean commonsense certainties and yet we *can* know various other things that we know are true only if those commonsense 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* 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, Pritchard suggests 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. 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.

Again, there seem to be many things we know for which it seems we have now no reasons. Almost all of us know certain things and we believe them even though we have currently no reason for believing them. For example, I know that Thomas Hobbes was born in 1588 and that Lincoln was the sixteenth President of the United States, but I cannot remember when or how I learned these things. I believe that I must have learned them through the testimony of others, but I cannot remember the occasion on which I heard or read them. Again, as Moore notes, we know these things and we must have had evidence for them, but we cannot remember what the evidence was.

Furthermore, there seem to be some things that we know and are such that we *do* have reasons for believing them, but they are not known or believed on the basis of those reasons. So, consider my belief that I live in Virginia. I know that I live in Virginia, and I could give a variety of reasons for this claim. For example, that I live in Williamsburg not far from the College of William and Mary and each of these is in Virginia. Of course, even if these are true and good reasons for believing that I live in Virginia, my belief that I live in Virginia is not based on those reasons and certainly my belief is not inferred from them. My belief that I live in Virginia certainly coheres with these other beliefs and it is supported by them, but I do not now believe that I live in Virginia because I have inferred this fact from these other propositions.

Therefore, even if it is true that some propositions are not presently believed on the basis of reasons, it hardly follows that they are not known or that we are not more justified in believing those propositions than others with which they conflict. Even if we concede that many of the hinge propositions or Moorean certainties are not now believed on the basis of reasons, it does not follow that they are not known or that we are not more justified in believing them than other propositions, even the philosophical propositions that figure in the skeptic's arguments.

But what could make them justified or instances of knowledge if they are not now believed on the basis of reasons? Consider my belief that Lincoln was the 16th President. Why is this true belief an instance of knowledge? One candidate might be that after being acquired on the basis of testimony, say through reading or hearing, the true belief is sustained by an intellectual virtue or reliable cognitive process long after the original ground or reason is forgotten. The same might be true for my knowledge that I live in Virginia. The true belief is sustained by some intellectual virtue long after the original ground or reason is forgotten. Similarly, my beliefs that I exist or that I think amount to knowledge because they are acquired through the exercise of some truth conducive intellectual virtue. Again, none of this would require one's knowing that *p* at *t* be based on the reasons or evidence that one has for *p* at *t*. In this respect, then, Wittgenstein would be right in suggesting that our knowledge of some things outstrips our evidence for them, at least the evidence we have at that time. But even so, it does not follow that the propositions thus believed aren't known or justifiably believed.

Still, Wittgenstein seems right in suggesting that in many cases our conviction in various Moorean certainties does not rest on reasons or argument, but is something "animal". Consider Reid's claim that our trust in the testimony of our senses and the testimony of

others is originally the effect of instinct. We believe implicitly that our faculties are reliable. But even implicit belief rooted in instincts or animal dispositions can still amount to knowledge provided that the instinct or disposition is sufficiently truth conducive. It might even come to acquire the backing of reasons as the belief becomes part of a growing web of mutually supporting beliefs.¹⁰

Conclusion

We have seen that the Kantian criticism of the commonsense tradition holds that many of our commonsense beliefs don't amount to knowledge because we lack any satisfactory proof for them. The Kantian critic holds that it is a scandal to philosophy that it has not provided the appropriate arguments, and clearly finds fault with the commonsense philosopher for not providing them.

The Wittgensteinian critic notes that many of our commonsense beliefs lack the backing of reasons or arguments, but holds that this is no reason for doubting them. On the contrary, he holds that many of our most deeply held commonsense beliefs cannot be rationally doubted *or* rationally believed. The Wittgensteinian critic concludes that they are thus *beyond* rational evaluation or appraisal. The Wittgensteinian critic faults the commonsense philosopher for holding that these beliefs are instances of knowledge or justified.

The commonsense philosopher allows that many of our commonsense beliefs are not believed on the basis of reasons or arguments, but, contrary to the Kantian and Wittgensteinian critic, he denies that this bars them from being known or justified. He holds that some cases of knowledge and justified belief do not require the backing of reasons or arguments, that they are instances of immediate knowledge and justification. This is an answer we find in Reid, Chisholm, and sometimes Moore. What could make these beliefs justified or instances of knowledge? Perhaps it is their being grounded in truth conducive virtues or animal dispositions common to our species that make common knowledge and commonsense knowledge possible.

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¹⁰ For a good discussion of the dialectic between Moore and Wittgenstein see Sosa (2021, Chapter 11).

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