Two Senses of Common Sense

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Analytic philosophy often evokes a conceptual consensus of mankind in order to justify its analyses. It is the "rock bottom" of our understanding: a corpus of pre-theoretical intuitions incorporated in our community. Sometimes this consensus is taken in as a criterion for philosophical inquiry altogether; it is to determine what is sensible to ask for while doing philosophy.This appeal to a common conceptual background could be interpreted as a plea for some kind of "common sense". In this paper, I would like to suggest that analytic philosophy's call for common sense can be of at least two kinds. The first one suggests an appeal to everyday intuitions of plain men. The second invites an ideal common sense of a "second nature".[1] The former is at best represented historically in the writings of G. E. Moore and J. L. Austin, the latter in the later philosophy of L. Wittgenstein. I would like to explore those two notions and examine whether each or any of them can provide a solid, intercultural criterion for philosophical purposes.

In "A Defense of Common Sense", G. E. Moore cites a list of obvious beliefs:

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

Moore goes on with his "list of truism" which, he claims, everyone knows with certainty. His defense of common sense consists of reminding us beliefs we all share. Moore aims at bringing out some *obvious truths that people in common would agree on.* There is no need for further justification of any of those propositions; they represent native good judgment Here "common sense" evokes what a typical man believes. It is a quasi-statistical notion suggesting what an average person admits – more or less – without any hesitation.

A more elaborated, but similar sense of common sense is implicit in the works of J. L. Austin. He constantly asks what the *ordinary man* would say on this or that occasion and uses his supposedly spontaneous responses in order to draw philosophical conclusions about free will or empirical knowledge, for example, about the legitimacy of philosophical enquiry in general:

> "It is clearly implied …that the ordinary man believes he perceives material things. Now this… is surely wrong straight off; for material thing is not an expression which the ordinary man would use…" (Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, [*SS*] pp.7).

> "…But in fact the plain man would regard doubt in such a case, not as far –fetched or over-refined or somehow unpractical, but as plain nonsense…" (*SS*, pp.10).

The philosopher here relies on the *ordinary man*: if we keep in mind what *he* would say in real life situations, we will see that the problem in question has a rather obvious solution. Austin, too, appeals to common sense, to what plain men sense that is, in order to remind us what no-one would sensibly agree on or deny.

Austin's version is more *linguistic* than Moore's: the former evokes our spontaneous linguistic responses being interested in what would seem obvious *to say* in the circumstances he describes.

It is partly because of this linguistic element that Austin's appeal is improved: On the one hand, linguistic data is a more reliable guide for what we perceive as common. Language is a rule-governed activity; we give the correct, common answer, simply because we have all mastered those rules. On the other hand, language, as used in Austin's writings, does not provide us with beliefs but rather with an *understanding* that is common. What we share, then, is *concepts* or a conceptual background, not necessarily (truth-begging) beliefs or opinions about how things are. As he puts it:

> "…When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking again not merely at words … but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, …, the phenomena." (*PP*, pp.182).

The idea is that the analysis of language is going to guide us in order to clarify our understanding of things. Looking closely at the expressions we use, we can clarify our reasoning. Language is the medium of our understanding; it embodies the concepts we employ.

Yet Austin's steady appeal to the "*plain man"* still implies something short of arithmetic mean. The term "plain man" is by itself a quasi-statistical notion. It suggests an abstraction of all actual language users: "Plain man" is the *average* speaker.

I don't think that Austin uses this term without realizing this very connotation. Elsewhere he claims that the common understanding of mankind is to be found within our linguistic history:

> "…our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing… in the lifetimes of many generations: these surely are likely to be more…sound, since they have stood up to the long test of the survival of the fittest and more subtle, at least in all ordinary …practical matters, than you or I are likely to think up in our arm-chairs…" (*PP*, pp.182).

So it then seems that Austin's appeal to the "plain man" is an abstract way to refer to the descendent of all previous language users. As such, he has inherited all the distinctions mankind found worth drawing, all the concepts that have proven useful for every practical purpose.

Austin's view on the history of our concepts might seem similar to Wittgenstein's "form of life". Yet, I believe that he appeals to linguistic history rather literally. On many occasions,[2] Austin refers to a historical process of creating distinctions, whenever an actual practical need is presented, and he explicitly compares this (natural)

[1] I use J. McDowell's phrase. He claims human nature to be of a "second nature", intermediated with norms of reasoning. See McDowell, J., 2000, pp 85-86, 94-95.

[2] Austin, J.L., 1979, *Philosophical Papers*, pp. 68-69,195, 281-282.

practice with the philosophers' (unnatural) invention of new vocabulary. He often speaks as if he is describing the actual empirical process of language evolution. The same empirical element is also apparent when he appeals to "plain men" to get the answers he seeks for in possible everyday circumstances.

Wittgenstein's method is not of this kind. His analysis of language does not appeal to the typical speaker but rather to the "grammar", the *rules* of our language.

> "…our investigation is …a grammatical one. Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. " (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations [PI*], 91).

We are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, not about some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm. …But we are talking about it as we do about the pieces in chess when we are stating *the rules* of the game, not describing their physical properties. (*PI,* 108, the italics are mine).

According to Wittgenstein, language sometimes projects false images and we have to be very careful and look behind those images, at the grammar of the relevant expressions. The aim of his philosophy is to uncover the rules that govern our language use in actual language games. And this may in fact be overlooked even by *all* language users.

> "… it is rather of the essence of our investigation that …we want to *understand* something that is already in plain view. For *this* is what we seem in some sense not to understand." *(PI*, 89)

We want to establish an order in our knowledge of the use of language: an order with a particular end in view… To this end we are constantly giving prominence to distinctions which *our ordinary forms of language easily make us overlook…* (*PI*, 132, italics: mine)

Wittgenstein aims to describe grammatical features that are easily overlooked. In this way, he can clarify our concepts, avoid false images imbedded in language and reach a better understanding.

What he is looking for is the corpus of our pre-theoretical intuitions or presuppositions which are embedded in our language or in our form of life. *This* is what lies beyond any doubt, *not the propositions that Moore states*. (Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, passim). It is the rock bottom of our understanding and it determines what is legitimate to ask for or to doubt. It is not questionable itself – any such attempt would hardly make any sense. Wittgenstein's opposition to Moore's conception of certainty elaborates the difference of their appeal to common sense. Wittgenstein's plea for this kind of conceptual consensus, one that I have here associated with an appeal to "common sense", refers to some *underlying norms of reasoning that are rooted in our form of life even if no-one notices them*. His analyses invite a common sense of a "second nature", an ideal or a guiding norm for philosophy.

Austin indeed seems to stand halfway between Moore and Wittgenstein. On the one hand, his appeal to language brings out the Wittgesteinian idea of an appeal to the norms of our understanding, while, on the other hand his constant plea to the plain man suggests that a typical speaker's responses can provide us with the criterion we seek for. A typical speaker's responses might be the very propositions Moore quotes.

Who, then, is this "plain man" that Austin puts so much confidence in? From his writings it seems that an ordinary or plain man is a competent English speaker *who is not a philosopher*.

Now, Austin goes to him with questions regarding very small and detailed distinctions of ordinary language: would we say "by mistake" or "by accident", "real" or "proper" carving knife" (etc). So, plain man is supposed to draw distinctions that not even a dictionary would make. Yet, even if a competent speaker has mastered the rules of language and relies on them in order to give the appropriate answer, it seems that those rules cannot always help when he is faced with such detailed distinctions- not in real life situations, anyway.

But, more importantly, these questions are related to philosophical problems and, therefore, the average speaker's answers are to provide us with the correct understanding on empirical knowledge, free will or the legitimacy of philosophical query in general. The ordinary man is faced with questions that do not normally arise in everyday life and which probably he has no interest in, not to mention a complete lack of intuitions to rely on. In fact, when confronted with such questions the ordinary man *turns into a philosopher*: he will have to take a theoretical stand. When we raise normative questions, there are no theory-free answers. Any kind of criterion is a theoretical criterion and our pre-theoretical presuppositions cannot be of any help.

Yet Austin's appeal to the linguistic responses of plain men raises an extra question as to whether these can provide us with an intercultural criterion. If we are to answer very detailed questions about the use of terms, and if these questions are supposed to determine our theses in philosophical matters, can we rely on our ordinary linguistic responses to provide us with common answers for any physical language? Surely not. Different languages employ different distinctions, many of which are very difficult to translate. Besides, physical language is not theory-free, as Wittgenstein implies, and may embody many alternative theses. Austin seems partly aware of this problem and suggests that any difference in usage is to be highlighted and studied (*PP*, p184). Yet, on the one hand, he implies that we are not to look for answers that can be applied to all problems, and on the other, suggests that his answers (concerning free will, for example) are global. (*PP*, pp. 175-204).

Wittgenstein's idea is different; the strong relation he draws between *language* and *form of life* and his appeal to the grammar of both, suggest a common ground for all human understanding. It is this that we are to elucidate: the underlying norms of our reasoning. It is an intercultural criterion that refers to the common ways language relates to our understanding. An analysis of language can then provide us with a clarified understanding on things.

But such a criterion requires further explanation. How can we identify grammar? When will we know we have uncovered it, rather than invented it?

Wittgenstein would suggest: whenever we succeed in eliminating philosophical problems:

> "For the clarity we are aiming at is indeed complete clarity. But this simply means that philosophical problems should *completely* disappear. The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. - The one that gives philosophy in peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* to questions…" (*PI*, 133)

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

If I am right and Wittgenstein does appeal to some kind of common sense, this notion suggests a criterion that advocates a clear view of things, an enlightened understanding of our concepts. It is *a philosophical ideal* that Wittgenstein evokes and not some typical or average understanding. Of course, he doesn't say much about what this ideal consists of. The idea is rather that we always know when we reach it; when we do get to a clearer understanding of things in question. Wittgenstein suggests that there are, at any given time, certain norms rooted in our reasoning as humans and that a clarification of those rules is the only thing we can rely on in order to answer deep questions that concern us all. Shedding some light on those questions is the philosopher's demand.

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