

Toward Wittgenstein as a Common Sense Philosopher

Eric Lemaire, Dijon, France

lemai013@voila.fr

1. Introduction

Following R. Fogelin, D. Stern proposed a general classification of the readings of Wittgenstein:

“The principal fault line separating Wittgensteinians is over a question of philosophical method: whether or not a radical philosophical change – putting an end to philosophy – is possible. Robert Fogelin draws a helpful distinction between ‘Pyrrhonian’ readings of the *Investigations*, which see the book as informed by a quite general skepticism about philosophy and so as aiming at bringing philosophy to an end, and ‘non-Pyrrhonian’ readings, which construe the book as a critique of certain traditional theories in order to do philosophy better.[...] Another way of putting the distinction is to say that Pyrrhonian Wittgensteinians believe philosophy, properly conducted, should not result in any kind of theory, while non-Pyrrhonian Wittgensteinians maintain that Wittgenstein’s criticism of traditional Philosophy leads us to a better philosophical theory, albeit not the kind of theorizing we find in the philosophical tradition.”¹

Here, we want to propose a non-Pyrrhonian reading. More specifically, we want to point out that there are several significant resemblances between Wittgenstein’s second Philosophy and a program of common sense philosophy.

2. What is Common Sense Philosophy?

Let’s begin by raising the question “What is Common Sense Philosophy?” In his book *Common sense*, N.Lemos sums up Chisholm view on the common sense tradition. He writes:

“As we have seen, Chisholm takes to be characteristic of the common sense tradition to hold that we do know much of what we ordinarily think we know. Not surprisingly, some of what we think we know must be considered common sense. But what does it mean to say that some proposition is “common sense”? I think the notion of common sense proposition is rather vague, and that one could take it to mean many things. But suppose we take a common sense proposition to be one that is deeply and widely held. If this is what we mean by a “common sense proposition,” then the common sense tradition holds that there are common sense propositions.”²

So following N.Lemos and R.Chisholm one can say that a common sense philosopher is someone who believes in the existence of propositions that are deeply and widely known. I think that the following examples shall not be controversial:

- a) Things we clearly perceive by our senses generally exist and correspond to our perceptions.
- b) Things could have been otherwise.
- c) Material objects have a mind-independent existence.
- d) We know past events.
- e) Concrete particulars persist through time and qualitative change.

f) It is not possible that the same object be in two distinct places at the same time (at once).

g) It is not possible that two numerically distinct material objects be in the same place at the same time.

h) Concrete particulars are contingent beings.

i) Concrete particulars have a temporally bound existence.

j) Human beings have limited cognitive powers.

If the common sense philosopher is right, propositions like these (at least most of them) are indeed knowledge. This means such propositions, which do not come out of specialized researches, which are sometimes said to be ancestral and trivial, are not just convenient beliefs that human species have used to survive until today. These are not beliefs that could be refuted either by empirical investigations of nature or by philosophical critics. The common sense philosopher holds that propositions such a-j nonetheless are temporally anterior to those of sciences and philosophy but are presupposed by them. These are the essential background on which all other human thoughts shall raise. Here is, we believe, the core of Common Sense Philosophy. However, it needs some further developments.

According to the core, a common sense philosopher held realism (rejects anti-realisms). By ‘realism’ we mean a picture of our relationship to reality that can be presented as follows:

“A certain picture of our relationship to the worlds is intuitively appealing. According to this picture, the world is a mind-independent structure: it consists of objects whose existence, character, and relations are fixed independently of what we happen to say, believe or desire. We, in turn, respond to that world by fixing beliefs and making statements about it. Those beliefs and statements are assertoric: they make claims about the worlds, saying that things are this way or that.”³

By contrast, antirealisms are the views rejecting this picture either by denying the existence of a mind-independent world, or by denying that we have cognitive access to it, or both. Antirealism is a wide category, it includes as well Kant’s idea that there is a noumenal reality that is inaccessible to us as Goodman’s claim according to which there are as many worlds as symbolic systems and no reality in itself.

The core has as well methodological consequences. In philosophy, we have no choice but beginning in *the middle of things*. This, as says L.Rudder-Baker, has three main significances:

Semantical: “We cannot philosophize without a language, and any language that we have embeds a picture of the world. To learn a language is to learn the way the worlds is (or might be)”.

Epistemological: “The Cartesian ideal of finding an absolute starting point without any presupposition is illusory.” Philosophical investigations do not have to begin

with radical sceptical doubts about our usual way of thinking.

Ontological: “the objects of interest at least initially are medium-size thing – primarily people, but also nonhuman organisms and other natural objects, and artefacts and artworks.”⁴

Since the common sense philosopher begins and wants to stay in the middle of things, ontologically speaking, his worlds can be seen as a kind of ontological juggle, a populated ontology. For a nominalist who believes that applying Occam’s razor is the good philosopher’s first duty, who tries to reduce or eliminate whatever he could, this attitude toward ontology would appear to hardly admissible. Thus, a common sense philosopher does not favour ontological economy and rejects reductionism.

Since the common sense philosopher also begins in the middle of things, epistemologically and semantically speaking, he believes, when asking for “what is knowledge?” or “What is understanding?” for example, that he can pick out ordinary uses of words to answer. We do not have to give a definition before asking what counts as “knowledge”, “concrete objects”, etc. In other words, his strategy is not methodist but particularist.⁵

Common sense philosophy rejects as well naturalism in its methodological, epistemological, and ontological senses. Methodological naturalism holds that philosophy should use natural sciences methodology. Epistemological naturalism is the view according to which natural sciences are the most reliable in our web of beliefs; they have to be the ultimate arbiter of epistemological conflicts. Finally, ontological naturalism hold that the ultimate structure of the worlds is what the natural sciences say it to be. One should not infer that common sense philosophy is closely linked with instrumentalism. A. Rosenberg defines instrumentalism as:

“the thesis that scientific theories should be treated as heuristic devices, tools for organizing our experiences and making predictions about them, but their claims about unobservable things, properties, processes and events should not be taken as literally true or false”⁶

It is in principle open to a common sense philosopher to hold that the sciences and common sense do not compete (at least always) with each other.⁷

Common sense philosophy rejects the epistemological ambitions of traditional philosophy and denies its role towards other forms of thinking could be strongly foundational. Traditionally, Philosophy was conceived as an *a priori* study aiming at absolute certainties. These knowledge were conceived as the foundations of all our other knowledge of reality. In other words, Philosophy was supposed to justify the fundamental assumptions of sciences (and possibly to common sense). Philosophy thus conceived is closely linked to the epistemic norm according to which we should not assent to beliefs without evidence or justification. But a common sense philosopher denies both that Philosophy can give us such results and that it can founds our other knowledge. Moreover, he rejects the latter epistemic norm.

3. The second Wittgenstein and Common Sense Philosophy?

In his lectures on the foundations of Mathematics, one of his pupils once writes the following remarks:

“During this lecture Wittgenstein referred to his slogan. ‘Don’t treat your commonsense like an umbrella. When you come into a room to philosophize, don’t leave it outside but bring it in with you.’”⁸

One would be right to say that it is not enough. A philosopher could think that our common sense is useful in philosophical practice, that, for example, we have to accept globally our common sense data, without holding that data correspond to reality. One can hold an instrumentalist conception of common sense beliefs. So we need to show that the second Wittgenstein’s works gives a more significant role to common sense, and that its conception of philosophy closed to the common sense philosopher’s one. That’s what we will do. We will refer to textual evidence from the *Blue Book*, *The Investigations* or *On Certainty*. We will also raise objections to our interpretation. But we will not probably have time to develop convincing answers to them. One of these objections is the following; The second Wittgenstein is often seen as one of the philosophers who undermined the myth of the given. This myth is usually associated with realism, as defined above. If these two statements are true, it seems false to believe that the second Wittgenstein is realist. One can also argue against the idea that the second Wittgenstein holds a realist position by pointing his conventionalist conception of grammatical rules and necessary propositions. According to him, propositions such as a-j do not reflect the structure of reality but constitute our grammar, these are rules determining the meaning of terms like “past”, “material object”, etc. Another objection could be raised by the Neo-Wittgensteinian which see him as a radically destructive philosopher. They could claim that Wittgenstein held no philosophical position at all. All these objections are fair. We hope for we will have time to discuss them, at least during the discussion.

Endnotes

¹ Stern (2004), p.34-6.

² Lemos (2004), p.4.

³ Loux (2001), p.539.

⁴ The last three quotations are from Rudder-Baker (2007), p.13.

⁵ See Sosa (2000), ch. 14.

⁶ Rosenberg (2005), p.197.

⁷ For an attempt to argue that relationship between scientific discourses and common sense, see Thomasson (2007) and also Pouivet (2006).

⁸ Wittgenstein (1995), p.59.

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