Experts Of Common Sense: Philosophers, Laypeople And Democratic Politics

Itay Snir †
itaysnir@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper approaches the question of the relations between laypeople and experts by examining the relations between common sense and philosophy. The analysis of the philosophical discussions of the concept of common sense reveals how it provides democratic politics with an egalitarian foundation, but also indicates how problematic this foundation can be. The egalitarian foundation is revealed by analyzing arguments for the validity of common sense in the writings of Thomas Reid. However, a look at three modern philosophers committed to the link between philosophy and common sense – Descartes, Berkeley and, again, Reid – shows that each assigns very different contents to the concept. This raises the suspicion that modern common sense is not only an egalitarian element, but also a rhetorical tool with which intellectuals attempt to shape the views of the lay masses. The last part suggests that the way out of the predicament is rejecting the supposition that common sense is a unified, homogeneous whole. An alternative is sketched through Antonio Gramsci's concept of common sense.

Keywords: common sense, Thomas Reid, Antonio Gramsci, democracy, egalitarianism, ordinary language.

1. Introduction

The series of popular uprisings that started in various places around the world in 2011 – often referred to as the Occupy Movement – brought to the fore the old question regarding the potential role of ordinary people in politics. Thus,

† Minerva Humanities Center, Tel Aviv University and The Open University of Israel.

for example, the social protest that swept Israel in the summer of that year was initiated by a small group of university students, far removed from the traditional image of professional politicians or social leaders. It succeeded in getting masses of people from various sections of the public involved in sociopolitical discourse by creating forums, discussion circles, and of course websites aimed at creating a popular basis for the protesters' demands and actions.

The protest's opponents tried to play its popular nature against it, portraying its young leaders as naive amateurs unaware of the complexities and implications of their demands. When the movement grew, the government decided to form a team of experts to contain the demands. In response, the protesters formed their own team which combined multidisciplinary experts with students and activists. Members of both teams announced their intention to listen to the public and represent its demands.[1] Is this irresponsible populism or democracy at its best? What is it that allows an ordinary person, who has never studied economics, to formulate demands regarding taxation and the national budget? At what point will that person know that she has exhausted her ability to judge in this matter, and had better consult an expert? One important albeit problematic answer to all those questions is common sense.

Common sense is usually defined as a set of obvious, self-evident beliefs and judgments, equally accessible to all.[2] Although the concept's long history is often associated with epistemological and anthropological discourses (e.g. Lemos, 2004; Stoler, 2010), it is always politically charged *ab initio*, as it sets the beliefs and judgments of laypeople against those of experts, professionals, scientists or philosophers, thereby involving a claim regarding the hierarchical relations between the masses and the elites. In this respect, the concept is charged with two opposite potentials. On the one hand, common sense implies that certain things are self-evident, beyond reasonable doubt, and hence has clear conservative potential in that it may be used to naturalize existing relations of power. On the other hand, it is intimately related to the notion of equality, thus having a significant democratic potential in that it can provide

[1] For the report of the government's committee headed by Prof. Manuel Trajtenberg, see http://hidavrut.gov.il/ [in Hebrew]; accessed Oct. 9, 2014. For the report by the alternative committee, whose education team was coordinated by the author, see Spivak and Yona (2012).

[2] See for example the Wikipedia article on "common sense", which is based on the Merriam-Webster and Cambridge dictionaries: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_sense; accessed Oct. 9, 2014.

liberal-democratic politics with the philosophical and anthropological foundation needed to trust the individual citizen's judgment, allowing him to claim autonomy and oppose traditionalist privileges.

In a thorough study of the political history of common sense, Sophia Rosenfeld (2012) has recently showed how the concept was used to make two contradictory kinds of political demands, sometimes even during the same period: demands for change, and demands for the preservation of the status quo. She traces the way the concept of common sense emerged in the late 17th century as an attempt to deal with the political instability of post-revolutionary England by articulating the common ground shared by all members of the state, but soon became an oppositional tool in the hands of the people or their representatives. Common sense was seen as an apolitical platform for political discussions – "everyman's tribunal", whose authority everybody respects while opposing political parties' claim to be on its side. To be sure, the duality of conservatism and radicalism is never fully resolved: the concept of common sense implies a potential for pluralist-democratic politics that is based on the views of the masses, but this potential is in constant tension with a demand to narrow down the political arena in the name of self-evident truths. This tension is captured by the paradoxical figure of the "specialist on common sense", the expert whose field of expertise is that which requires no experts, who claims privileged knowledge of unprivileged knowledge.

The concept of common sense rarely appears in political theory, but the dominance of the ideas it expresses suggests that it is always implicitly present as a self-evident truism: common sense is part of the common sense of modern political thought. Hence, although the story of modern political theory famously stars reason, common sense is no extra, as it acts as the source of legitimation of the liberal right for minimal government intervention, as well as of the individual's democratic right to express her opinions on public affairs. These rights rest on the assumption that every person of common sense is capable of reasonable judgment, of telling right from wrong, good from evil, etc. This does not mean that every layperson is regarded as a proper arbiter in every matter: certain fields are seen as reasonably left to the judgment of experts. But from the liberal-democratic perspective every restriction imposed on ordinary people should itself be justified by common sense: in other words, common sense alone is authorized to limit common sense. For example, Mill demands in *On Liberty* to grant the right "to carry on their lives in their own way" to those who possess a "tolerable amount of common sense and

experience" (1977a: 270), while in *Considerations on Representative Government* he appeals to common sense to justify denying the right to vote to all those who do not possess enough education: "No one but those in whom an *à priori* theory has silenced common sense will maintain that power over others, over the whole community, should be imparted to people who have not acquired the commonest and most essential requisites for taking care of themselves" (1977b: 470).

In what follows I approach the concept of common sense and the question of the relations between laypeople and experts by examining the relations between common sense and philosophy. The analysis of the philosophical discussions of the concept will reveal how it provides democratic politics with an egalitarian foundation, but also indicate how problematic this foundation can be and mark the way for a new understanding of common sense upon which contemporary democratic theory can rely. First I contrast the traditional scorn philosophy pours on common sense with the modern approach that claims philosophy must keep in line with it. I then present the egalitarian basis the modern concept of common sense attempts to give democratic politics by analyzing arguments for the validity of common sense in the writings of the 18th-century philosopher Thomas Reid. These arguments, which are characteristic of modern philosophy, rely on the connection of common sense to everyday practice and ordinary language, and are independent of the specific contents of common sense. A look at three modern philosophers committed to the link between philosophy and common sense – René Descartes, George Berkeley and, again, Thomas Reid – shows that each assigns very different contents to the concept. This raises the suspicion that modern common sense is not only an egalitarian element, but also a rhetorical tool with which intellectuals attempt to shape the views of the lay masses. Finally, I suggest that the way out of the predicament that results from the importance of common sense for democratic theory on the one hand and its dangerous elasticity on the other is rejecting the supposition that common sense is a unified, homogeneous whole. In order to sketch an alternative I look briefly at Antonio Gramsci's concept of common sense, with which I rearticulate the political challenge of the democratic relations between experts and laypeople.

1.1.

Although every use philosophy makes of common sense involves taking a stance regarding the hierarchical relations that should or should not exist between professional philosophy and the views of ordinary people, the stance itself may vary from one writer to the next. Philosophical tradition has always been fraught with expressions of suspicion of the masses, whose views are contemptuously portrayed as not only false but dangerous. The most celebrated and influential representative of this attitude is Plato, whose writings – clearly influenced not only by Socrates' character but also by his trial – express persistent disdain of the masses and their opinions, the *doxa*. This is manifest, for example, in *Crito*, in which Plato has Socrates respond to his friend's claim that "one must also pay attention to the opinion of the majority" (1997a: 39), by saying that "we should not think so much of what the majority will say about us, but what he will say who understands justice and injustice, the one, that is, and the truth itself" (42). The majority, according to Socrates, "inflict things haphazardly" (39), namely follow inconsistently trends and eloquent speech (see also *Gorgias*, in Plato, 1997b: 800). Plato charges the philosopher – the expert for justice and injustice – with critically analyzing and correcting the *doxa*, thus creating a clear hierarchical difference between the prejudiced layperson and the philosopher. This is an expression of extreme elitism: it assumes that certain people do not really think and that their views are not really theirs, and in that legitimizes the prioritization of the views of the few over those of the many.

However, appeal to the use of common sense of the masses in modern philosophy also involves a conspicuous egalitarian moment. Descartes opens the *Discourse on the Method* by stating that "Good sense is, of all things among men, the most equally distributed; for every one thinks himself so abundantly provided with it, that those even who are the most difficult to satisfy in everything else, do not usually desire a larger measure of this quality than they already possess. And in this it is not likely that all are mistaken" (1985a: 111). That is to say, unlike philosophy that strives to point to the deficiencies and contradictions of ordinary ways of thinking, Cartesian common sense implies the existence of truths accessible to all. This view is not unique to Descartes, though: the main stream of modern philosophy accepts the validity of common sense, and believes that the scholar or expert should make it the starting point for their studies; namely that their conclusions must not

contradict certain things that are known to everybody. The modern philosopher emerges as the ultimate expert in common sense. As Clifford Geertz notes: "Common sense, or some kindred conception, has become a central category, almost *the* central category, in a wide range of modern philosophical systems" (1993: 76).

This modern approach to common sense is at the heart of liberal-democratic politics, furnishing both the political theories in which common sense is not explicitly mentioned, and the political usages of the kind discussed by Rosenfeld. Analyzing the worldview behind the modern concept of common sense sheds light on the grounds liberal-democracy has for trusting ordinary people, as well as on the relations it establishes between the expert and layperson.

1.2

Arguments in support of common sense are found in the writings of many modern philosophers (Lemos, 2004: 1-23), but nowhere are they more central than in those of Thomas Reid, father of the Scottish school of common sense. Although the first philosopher to turn common sense into a central concept was probably Claude Buffier (2009), Reid is undoubtedly the most influential philosopher to have done so.[3]

Reid's philosophy was developed in response to Berkeley's immaterialism – according to which the notion of material substance is contradictory, and perceivable objects do not exist outside the perceiver's mind (Berkeley, 1999: 25) – as well as in response to Hume's skepticism (Hume, 2011). Rather than confronting these views in the philosophical arena, Reid declares that Berkeley and Hume contradict "certain principles... which the constitution of our nature leads us to believe, and which we are under a necessity to take for granted... without being able to give a reason for them – these are what we call the principles of common sense; and what is manifestly contrary to them, is what we call absurd" (1983: 20). According to Reid, philosophy must accept the principles of common sense as its presuppositions, rather than mere beliefs the validity of which may be doubted (8). Although Reid writes that the specific

[3] Reid himself does not present his arguments in a systematic, orderly manner, and they can be assembled, assorted and classified in a variety of ways. For different analyses of Reid's arguments see Greco (2002), Magnus (2008).

principles of common sense cannot and need not be proven, he nevertheless offers some very interesting arguments in favor of their validity: "although it is contrary to the nature of first principles to admit to direct or *apodictical* proof; yet there are certain ways of reasoning even about them" (260). Let us now turn to Reid's main arguments, in order to present the way they link common sense to the social sphere, and analyze its importance for democratic politics.

1.3.

Reid's first argument rests on the distinction between theory and praxis, namely between speculative philosophy and the actual world: Reid argues that a view that denies common sense can exist on paper, but its absurdity is revealed the minute it is brought into the world. More specifically, Reid claims that it would be dangerous to act in accordance with views denying the principles of common sense; with regard to Berkeley, for example, he writes that it is one thing to deny the existence of the material world within "a philosophical inquiry" (27), but a person acting as though material objects cannot hurt him is bound to get hurt.[4]

The second argument takes the first a step further into the social world: the very presence of other people is enough to bring the skeptic back to the commonsensical world: the madness of skepticism, in Reid's words, "is apt to seize the patient in solitary and speculative moments; but, when he enters into society, Common Sense recovers her authority" (119). A person might doubt common sense when reflecting in solitude, but once that person steps out into the real world, he has no choice but to conform to common sense, lest he be "taken up and clapped into a mad-house" (86). Indeed, Reid notes that except for very few examples from ancient times, all skeptics lived and acted in public as if skepticism never occurred to them.[5]

The anchor the social sphere provides common sense is further expressed in Reid's third argument, according to which ordinary language reflects the principles of common sense, which can therefore be learnt and validated by examining how people use language. Reid is well aware of cases in which the

[4] This, as we will see below, is a complete misunderstanding of Berkeley, who claims that immaterialism has no practical implications on everyday experience.

[5] P. D. Magnus interprets Reid as claiming that practical behavior indicates what a person actually believes, and that from one′s respect for common sense in everyday life we may conclude that they trust common sense in every meaningful sense (2008: 7).

obscurity of ordinary language is a source of misunderstandings, like the word "smell" that in everyday parlance indicates both something external (the power of an object to make us sense its odor) and an inner feeling (the sensation itself): this obscurity is one of the reasons for doubting the existence of an external world, as it leads to the mistaken belief that it is possible to sense without an external object being the cause of sensation (25). However, Reid does not think such cases are reason enough to doubt the adequacy of ordinary language, for in everyday use they are easily disambiguated thanks to the context: "every sensible day-labourer hath as clear a notion of this" (ibid.), if only because ordinary people simply do not derive the non-existence of matter from linguistic ambiguities.

The absurdity of all philosophical claims that deny common sense, on the other hand, is evident in the way their allegedly accurate formulations drift away from ordinary language and use words in an inadequate manner (like Berkeley's claim that "objects of sensation" do exist, but are immaterial). In other words, the fact that philosophers give words extraordinary meanings in an attempt to make their views appear plausible, testifies to the falseness of these views:

> If he [the philosopher] means by smell what the rest of mankind most commonly mean, he is certainly mad. But if he puts a different meaning upon the word, without observing it himself, or giving warning to others, he abuses language and disgraces philosophy, without doing any service to truth: as if a man should exchange the meaning of the words *daughter* and *cow*, and then endeavor to prove to his plain neighbour, that his cow is his daughter, and his daughter his cow (26).

Unlike Humpty Dumpty, then, the philosopher cannot make a word mean just what he chooses it to mean (Carroll, 2005: 60) – his professional expertise does not authorize him to alter the language that is normally used by everybody. Problems of ordinary language do not prevent the common people from understanding their world and act successfully within it. This real-life effectiveness of ordinary language is for Reid the crucial evidence for its adequacy. Hence all common languages reflect the common sense of mankind and demonstrate its validity.[6] In other words, our ability to understand each

[6] "...the general principle – that every distinction which is found in the structure of a common language, is a real distinction, and is perceivable by the common sense of mankind – this I hold for certain, and have made frequent use of it... I believe the whole system of metaphysics, or the far greater part, may be brought out of it; and next to accurate reflection upon the operations of our own minds, I know nothing that can give so

other and cooperate in public means that ordinary language can be a source for learning the principles of common sense.

This argument rests, therefore, on the acknowledgment that philosophical claims, just like any other claims, have to be formulated in language and understood by others, be they philosophers or laypersons. Here, Reid captures a point that would become central for 20th-century analytic philosophy: the bounds of meaning, which are also the bounds of reasonable thought, are congruent with those of common language. This does not mean that Reid believes that language precedes thought and determines it, but the linguistic stance Reid expresses, albeit not systematically, reveals extraordinary sensitivity to at least two essential characteristics of language: language is a practice, and this practice is inherently public.[7] According to this view the ultimate philosopher, the expert in common sense *par excellence*, is the philosopher of ordinary language – who accepts it as given and analyzes it either theoretically or empirically in order to study common sense and draw philosophical conclusions from it.

1.4.

We can now tie together Reid's arguments and see them as expressing the same argumentative logic. This logic establishes an essential link between two claims: first, that there are certain obvious things that everybody knows; and second, that if something is to be comprehensible in the public sphere, it must meet certain basic conditions upon which every common action rests – be it linguistic or not. Common sense is therefore not a random collection of principles or beliefs, but may be deduced from people's ability to act in the real world, as well as from the interactions between them, namely their ability to cooperate and understand each other.

This sheds light on common sense's function as supporting egalitarian politics and liberal democracy and the rights it confers on ordinary people. It establishes the assumption that people are capable of functioning properly in

much light to the human faculties as a due consideration of the structure of language". Quoted in Jensen 1979: 361.

[7] Reid is the first to attach such great importance to language in philosophy, foreshadowing 20th century philosophers like G. E. Moore, Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin. See Jensen (1979) and Greco (2002).

the sociopolitical sphere on the fact that they actually function there – as indicated by their ability to speak meaningfully and act reasonably in everyday life. In other words, liberal democracy grants the *right* to speak based on the *ability* to speak, and the *right* to act based on the *ability* to act: one's ability to speak and act normally testifies to their ability to tell right from wrong, proper from improper. The philosophy of common sense thus plays an essential role in drawing the borders of meaningful speech and reasonable behavior, thereby purging the public sphere from disturbances that might turn into political deviations: it protects the relative stability of words used in ordinary language and constitute a linguistic space of shared meanings and values that provides liberal-democratic discourse with an irrefutable foundation.

Reid's arguments by no means suffice to defeat skepticism: the skeptic might dismiss the dangers involved in his behavior as imaginary, resist the social pressure, and simply refuse to present his claims in public. But even if the arguments fail to achieve their philosophical goal, they certainly achieve their political one: they make it clear that every public action must concur with common sense or else be meaningless. The philosopher may reject common sense, and theoretically he may be right, but the political agent cannot: politics is public by nature, and every action or speech must be meaningful to others in order to be effective. Reid's argumentation, therefore, not only founds the liberal and democratic rights of the masses, but also demonstrates the need for democratic politics to make sense to them.

These conclusions seem to contradict the historical evidence of the dynamism of common sense in both the epistemological and political contexts: what seemed self-evident in the 1st or 11th century is very much different from what seems self-evident in the 21st. Scientists and philosophers, politicians and activists, often struggle to change common sense rather than act within it. Indeed, 20th-century common-sense philosophy acknowledges the possibility as well as the need to change common sense in accordance with new discoveries and ideas. It argues that every claim must be open to criticism, even if it is seen as a solid part of common sense (Peirce, 1965: 308). However, such criticism must itself rely on other commonsensical claims, like a boat at sea every part of which can be replaced by its sailors only if most parts remain intact.[8] This approach, referred to by C. S. Peirce as "critical common sensism", was explained by A. J. Ayer as follows:

[8] The metaphor is borrowed from Neurath (1983).

> What the metaphysician would like to do is take up a position outside any conceptual system: but that is not possible. The most that he can hope to achieve is some modification of the prevailing climate... But if such a venture is even to be intelligible... it must have at least a rough correspondence to the way in which things are ordinarily conceived. Thus if a philosopher is to succeed... in altering or sharpening our vision of the world, he cannot leave common sense too far behind him (Ayer, 1969: 81).

This point clearly applies to politics as well: every moral or political belief is open to change, and transforming common sense may be one of the most important tasks of democratic politics; such action, however, must only challenge some parts of common sense while firmly resting on others.

2.

As endorsed by modern philosophers such as Reid, common-sense proves the validity of the vast majority of popular beliefs and judgments, and provides liberal-democratic politics with a solid egalitarian foundation. However, the arguments elaborated above are independent of the concrete contents of commonsensical beliefs and principles. Needless to say, philosophers take the contents to be self-evident, the acceptance of which follows from recognizing the validity of common sense. But a closer look shows that different philosophers, even around the same period, ascribed very different contents to common sense. Let us now see how three philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries – Descartes, Reid and Berkeley (presented here in a non-chronological order) – insist their philosophies are in line with the common sense of the masses but make very different claims regarding its substantive contents.

This will naturally have interesting implications for the connection between common sense and egalitarian politics, and particularly the relations of experts and laypeople: the modern philosopher, the expert of common sense, presumes to work in accord with or even in service of the layperson. But every philosopher defines common sense in a way that suits her own philosophical interests. Every expert of common sense respects the lay masses, but imagines them from his perspective instead of actually listening to them. This raises the suspicion that common sense is used by the philosophers for rhetorical purposes, to appear as though they are on the people's side while attempting to

dictate to the masses how they are supposed to think and act. At the very least, the egalitarian trend committed to common sense and the one despising the commonsensical layperson are two moments coexisting not only in the same period but also in the very same thinker: the concept of common sense itself invites the establishment of hierarchies while at the same time challenging them.

2.1.

Cartesian philosophy is marked by the attempt to free itself from the yoke of traditional authorities. The challenge Descartes poses to the received intellectual and social hierarchies is based on common sense, defined as a cognitive faculty shared by all human beings, cutting across the various natural and social differences between them. This common sense – referred to as either *le bon sens* or *lumière naturelle* (natural light) – is a leitmotiv running through Cartesian philosophy, marking the starting point of philosophy as an egalitarian moment, blind to the differences between everyday thinking and philosophical knowledge. With this concept, Descartes attempts to rethink not only the contents and origins of philosophy, but also the identity and qualifications of those authorized to practice it.

In his unfinished *The Search for Truth by Means of the Natural Light*, Descartes presents an imaginary conversation in which Eudoxus ("one of sound judgment"), who serves as mouthpiece for Descartes' views, proves to his interlocutors – the scholar Epistemon ("knowledgeable"), and Polyander ("everyman"), described as someone who "has never studied at all" – that "a man with a good mind, even one brought up in a desert and never illuminated by any light but the light of nature, could not have opinions different from ours if he carefully weighted all the same reasons" (Descartes, 1984b: 405). Descartes' reservations about esoteric scholasticism and his support of epistemic egalitarianism are evident in the fact that the ideal participant in the philosophical discussion brings with him as little previous knowledge as possible, and must be equipped only with "natural light," which the essay's title guarantees is the proper means for attaining truth.

The clarity of natural light distinguishes it from reason, and provides it with an evident, hence solid, starting point. The division of labor between common sense and reason is clarified in the *Meditations*, where Descartes uses his reason to doubt everything that is uncertain, and then extricates himself from

the abyss of uncertainty by means of the natural light which is immune to every reasonable doubt (1984a: 27). The complex move Descartes makes in the *Meditations*, which involves not only intellectual challenges but also significant psychological difficulties (15-16), rests on that common, minimal cognitive faculty of which he says, echoing the opening sentence of the *Discourse*, that "I have no cause for complaint on the grounds that the power of understanding or the natural light which God gave me is no greater than it is" (42). The considerations raised throughout the *Meditations* are clearly ones every person can, perhaps should, be able to understand and reproduce – the voice Descartes adopts when writing in the first person is that of common sense, of Polyander. However, we must not identify it with the actual layperson of his time. The methodical doubt Descartes casts in the first meditation applies to what he calls "my opinions" (12), which include not only complex theories known to scholars alone but also the simplest beliefs about the natural and social world. Descartes eventually proves most of these to be true, but calling them into even tentative doubt is bound to seem to the non-philosopher as the complete opposite of common sense, indicating that what laypeople take to be self-evident truths are not necessarily common sense according to Descartes.

Indeed, the fact that all humans are endowed with common sense that enables them to attain certain, clear and distinct truths, by no means implies that no-one can err, or even that most people don't. In fact, the lion's share of humanity is often misled by prejudices or "preconceived opinions" that blur the natural light (Descartes, 1985b: 209; see also Morris, 1973). Descartes' mistrust of the scholars of his time, and his challenge to the traditional hierarchy between intellectuals and the laypeople, in no way give credit to the uneducated masses (see Descartes, 1984a: 21). The common, everyday beliefs held by scholars and laypeople alike are therefore the *object* rather than the *tool* of examination and critique (Frankfurt, 2007: 15). The advantage of the lay over the educated, according to Descartes, lies at most in their greater willingness to listen to the voice of common sense, but it by no means derived from their views. Put differently, Descartes turns his concept of common sense against the *doxa*, the common opinion that is commonly referred to as common sense. This means that there is nothing "natural" about the Cartesian layperson and the light that is supposed to guide him: they are both rhetorical figures crafted by the philosopher to provide an elegant solution to the problems reason becomes entangled with; and both are quite remote from what Descartes thinks of ordinary people and their ways of thinking.

2.2.

Let us now return to Reid, whose arguments for the validity of common sense we have examined earlier. As we have seen, the egalitarian moment plays an important role in Reid's criticism of skeptical philosophy, which he identifies with intellectual haughtiness. Reid explicitly declares his inability to find faults in the philosophical arguments of Berkeley and Hume, but claims that the obvious falseness of their conclusions is evidence enough that they rely on false premises. The most important premise in these philosophical systems, according to Reid, originates with Descartes – it is the belief that we do not perceive objects directly but rather through the mediation of ideas which exist in the mind (Descartes, 1984b: 27). Berkeley, who shares this belief, claims it is impossible to compare a mental idea with an extra-mental origin, and concludes that the concept of matter is self-contradictory (Berkeley, 1999: 27); but according to Reid this conclusion should be regarded as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the starting point (Reid, 1983: 20-1). The important point is that the "theory of ideas", identified by Reid as the point where modern philosophy deviates from the course of common sense, is presented by Descartes as a view that expresses the beliefs of the masses, and has been accepted in modern philosophy as an evident truth in no need of justification. Reid, therefore, endorses the Cartesian mission of standing knowledge on solid foundations, but what is clear and self-evident to Descartes he takes to be contrary to common sense.

Like Descartes, Reid locates common sense in the individual, claiming that it is "a part of the furniture which nature hath given to the human understanding" (1983: 118); at the same time Reid, even more than Descartes, fears that the ascription of common sense to every person could undermine the foundations of society.[9] He is preoccupied with explaining how some people fail to acknowledge common sense and behave accordingly. The main reason people think or act in an absurd non-commonsensical manner, according to Reid, is madness – a "disorder in the constitution" (118) that does not allow the patient to use his brain properly. However, Reid does not attempt to define madness independently of common sense. He find this unnecessary, since the borderline between common sense and absurdity, sanity and insanity, seems self-evident to him: "how does a man know he is not in a

[9] Rosenfeld (2012: 60-89) elaborates on the conservative impulse at the heart of the Scottish school, and analyzes the tension between it and the epistemological egalitarianism implied by common sense.

delirium? I cannot tell: neither can I tell how a man knows that he exists. But, if any man seriously doubts whether he is in a delirium, I think it highly probable that he is, and that it is time to seek for a cure..." (18). The limits of common sense are therefore determined ad hoc – what seems to Reid far removed from the alleged views of society is declared to be insane from the point of view of the individual's common sense.

Hence philosophy is given the role of revealing the principles of common sense and making them explicit. This is because although no sane person would deny them, their very self-evidence makes them difficult to formulate. Performing this task requires "reflective introspection", which involves careful attention and as we have seen, careful analysis of ordinary language only trained professionals can achieve (104-5). Among the principles Reid's analysis reveals are some of the most controversial issues in the philosophy of his time, such as the concepts of causality, substance and free will, as well as subjects under dispute in the general public like the existence of God. That is to say, not every person can simply look into herself and reach valid conclusions – reflective introspection is proper philosophy, and its findings are worthy of the label common sense, only if they concur with Reid's views. This means that Reid's criticism of intellectual elitism, as well as his praise of ordinary people, turn out to be quite the opposite: his appreciation for the lay and for their way of thinking is conditioned by the demand that their views be in line with what he takes to be common sense. At the same time, the introspection aimed at revealing common sense is a process only a trained philosopher like Reid can accomplish. Thus it would seem that like Descartes, Reid also tailors common sense to suit his needs – in this case, protecting society from skeptical philosophy.

2.3.

A look at the writings of Berkeley, one of the philosophers Reid accuses as dangerous skeptics, will demonstrate the force of the demand, in the 18th century, to fit philosophy to common sense, and at the same time, the variability of the specific characterization of common sense. In *Principles of Human Knowledge*, Berkeley explicitly argues that not only does immaterialism by no means conflict with ordinary thought and action, but that it accounts for them better than the materialist view. Already in the opening sentences, he voices his preference for common sense over skeptical

philosophy which seems to him – just as it would to Reid a few decades later – to be not only theoretically false but also a source of psychological difficulties:

> Philosophy being nothing else but the study of wisdom and truth, it may with reason be expected that those who have spent most time and pains in it should enjoy a greater calm and serenity of mind... and be less disturbed with doubts and difficulties than other men. Yet so it is, we see the illiterate bulk of mankind that walk the high-road of plain common sense, and are governed by the dictates of nature, for the most part easy and undisturbed... They complain not of any want of evidence in their senses, and are out of all danger of becoming Sceptics (Berkeley, 1999: 7).

Immaterialism is presented as antithetical to skepticism not only because Berkeley does not doubt the ability to know whether matter exists – he claims we can positively know it does not – but rather because the opposite stance is in fact the skeptical one. That is to say, Berkeley thinks that the view that accepts the existence of matter is not the popular view of the lay masses, but a philosophical error which is responsible for "several difficult and obscure questions, on which abundance of speculation hath been thrown away" (61) – pseudo-problems that will surely disappear as soon as the concept of matter is gotten rid of (28). He is certain that with the exception of philosophers and those influenced by them, whoever considers the question will realize that they have no need for the concept of matter in the first place (26). This view is also manifested in *Three Dialogues*, in which the two interlocutors – Philonous ("lover of spirit"), and Hylas (from ὕλη, "matter"), the uneducated layman who abhors skepticism – declare complete loyalty to common sense (1999: 108).

It is easy to see that what Berkeley calls common sense, or the views of the "uneducated", is quite different from what Reid and Descartes took it to be. All three, just like the vast majority of modern philosophers, are in complete agreement that philosophy must not contradict the dictates of common sense; they strongly differ, however, with respect to what these dictates exactly are. None of them, as it turns out, has given much consideration to what the masses actually think. And why should they, if the masses are bound to fall prey to prejudices no less than philosophers? In other words, each of them molds common sense in a way that suits his philosophical views, and they all do so by declaring that their philosophical views are derived from common sense. The reversal of old hierarchies and the promise of epistemic egalitarianism is in this sense merely a pretense: common sense is nothing but another tool with which the scholar imagines the masses, dictating to them how they ought to think.

3.

We have seen that democratic politics is committed to common sense and supported by it, but that the concrete contents given to common sense vary according to the philosophical – in fact the political – interests of whoever applies this term. This raises a political question: can common sense provide politics with an egalitarian foundation, or is it always open for manipulation by experts who consider themselves authorized to speak in its name? It is possible, of course, that only some of the contents given to the concept of common sense by those defining it are wrong, while others faithfully reflect common social assumptions. The philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries may have asked too much of common sense, while it is wiser to limit it to a small number of very general beliefs. This conclusion can perhaps be extracted from G. E. Moore's discussions of common sense, in which he lists propositions like "there exists at present a living human body, which is *my* body" and "the earth had existed for many years before by body was born" (1959: 33). But even Moore's assertions are not necessarily uncontroversial (Berkeley, for one, rejected the existence of material body and world), and more importantly, as Nicholas Rescher clearly indicates, the more secure beliefs are, the less informative they are (2005, 137-8). Hence an indubitable common sense would be too vague and indefinite to provide politics with a solid foundation.

I suggest, therefore, a different answer to the political question. This answer rests on rejecting the presuppositions underlying Reid's argumentation for the validity of common sense, and reformulating the arguments in a way that articulates the challenge facing egalitarian politics regarding the relations of experts and laypeople.

3.1.

Reid's arguments rest on the presupposition that people do indeed understand one another, and normally manage to coordinate their actions. Mistakes and misunderstandings are regarded as rare exceptions that can simply be ignored. That is to say, Reid assumes that all meanings in the social sphere are shared in the same way by everybody; objective reality, the intersubjective sphere, and common, everyday language all amount to a closed realm of perceptions,

meanings, and practices that determine that which is apprehensible, perceivable and reasonable. The arguments in support of common sense are therefore inherently tied to a presupposed unified community of speech and action, in which all adult, sane individuals take equal part.

However, the social fact of cooperation and communication does not necessarily imply a unified, homogeneous social sphere. People can understand each other and live their everyday life together even if not everybody can understand everybody else all the time, and even if some or all meanings are shared only by some. Thus, while common sense is necessary for social existence, there is no need to assume the existence of a *single* common sense throughout the social sphere – there may be a heterogeneous plurality of "common senses", coexisting and making possible many different forms of communication and cooperation, not necessarily understood by all. This understanding of the social sphere – much different from the one relied upon by modern philosophy – can be found in Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*.

3.2.

In his prison cell, Gramsci ponders the reasons for the failure of communist revolution in Italy, and concludes that Marxism was unable to collaborate with the masses and bring them into consciousness of their own objective interests, since it failed to understand the complex way in which they comprehended their world and gave it meaning. Gramsci believes that orthodox Marxism's assumption that the ideological worldview is completely false, and that all its elements contradict the real interests of the proletariat and only legitimize capitalist relations of power is simplistic and misleading, since the uneducated masses are not completely blind to their reality. He uses the concept of common sense (*senso comune*) to articulate a richer, more accurate understanding of the worldview of the masses, one that will hopefully be able to suggest intersections between it and the Marxist worldview, thereby helping to engage them in revolutionary action.

Gramsci is well aware of the uncritical manner in which common sense is acquired, and of the fact that many of its elements justify and perpetuate class domination. His version of the concept, which allows him to recruit it in the service of critical theory and revolutionary politics, is based on the insight that the worldview of the masses is not at all a unified, coherent whole, but rather a

heterogeneous ensemble of perceptions, ideas, customs and prejudices that have very different origins:

> When one's conception of the world is not critical and coherent but disjointed and episodic, one belongs simultaneously to a multiplicity of mass human groups. The personality is strangely composite: it contains Stone Age elements and principles of more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over (2005: 325).

Not all aspects of this ensemble reflect the prevailing relations of production and domination. Some of them represent a critical understanding of reality, which has genuine revolutionary potential (Manders, 2006). Gramsci calls these subversive elements of common sense "good sense" (*buon senso*): "this is the healthy nucleus that exists in 'common sense', the part of it which can be called 'good sense'" (239). Marxism, which Gramsci refers to as "the philosophy of praxis," must therefore apply good sense to the struggle against common sense: "philosophy is criticism and the superseding of religion and common-sense. In this sense it coincides with 'good' as opposed to 'common' sense" (327).

Note that such understanding of common sense implies an entirely new understanding of the sociocultural and linguistic sphere that makes everyday cooperation possible. According to this new understanding society is in fact an incoherent plurality of unreconciled yet coexistent discursive fields: "There is not just one common-sense, for that too [like religion] is a product of history... religion and common-sense cannot constitute an intellectual order, because they cannot be reduced to unity and coherence even within an individual consciousness, let alone collective consciousness" (327); common sense "is the 'folklore' of philosophy, and, like folklore, it takes countless different forms... even in the brain of one individual, [it] is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of these masses whose philosophy it is" (343). In other words, the entire social sphere, just like the individual, is not a unified whole but a split plurality that is never identical to itself.

However, Gramsci ascribes the heterogeneity of common sense to the existing relations of domination in society, and claims that a different kind of common sense, one that is homogenous and fully consistent, one that will reflect an egalitarian, free society, is indeed possible: "to criticize one's own conception of the world means therefore to make it a coherent unity and to

raise it to the level reached by the most advanced thought in the world" (326). Political action, that is, should use good sense to undermine common sense from within, thereby constituting a true, consistent collective consciousness. Thus, like that of the three philosophers discussed above, the egalitarian potential of Gramscian thought also falls apart: by assuming the possible existence of true consciousness, which fully understands the social reality, Gramsci in fact fails to shake off the hierarchical, authoritarian relations between the knowledgeable intellectuals and the lay masses.

What would happen, however, if we took Gramsci seriously and read his discussions of common and good sense as an invitation to think of the social and linguistic worlds as incoherent and disjointed? If we further pursued the line that takes common sense to be a fragmented field, thereby regarding it not as a temporary and undesirable but as a permanent, unavoidable situation? After all, the discussion of the origins of the modern concept of common sense – in Descartes, Reid, and Berkeley – has already suggested that homogeneous common sense exists neither in the minds of individual laypersons nor in the social sphere, but rather in the mind of the philosopher, who imagines it and tailors it to suit his needs. Such an understanding of common sense would call for a rethinking of political action itself, following the direction charted by Gramsci's critique of ideology – and going further.

3.3.

Realizing the coexistence of heterogeneous common senses makes it possible to reformulate the conditions for political action as well as the political relations between laypeople and the experts in common sense (or any other field). In line with Reid's arguments we will say that like every action in the social sphere, political action too must appeal to some common sense; but it need not make sense to all at the same time, or at least not the same sense. This does not mean that political action cannot be democratic and rely on a popular basis. The opposite is true: ridding ourselves of the illusion of a *total* common sense enables a fresh understanding of democratic politics and the legitimation that comes from the masses rather than the elites.

It must be made clear that the heterogeneity of common senses does not contradict the existence and importance of advanced professional knowledge, just as it does not deny the existence of shared popular knowledge (although it

may not necessarily be shared by all). Every common sense implies hierarchies, and may acknowledge the authority of experts and professionals, whose knowledge and experience appear relevant from its perspective. Democratic politics appears here as a struggle over which common sense(s) become(s) hegemonic, namely be recognized as reasonable and obligating by the majority of the political community. This is naturally also a struggle over which experts are recognized as relevant political authorities. In this sense, common sense is indeed an arena in which everybody is equal: for everybody can take equal part in the political struggles determining which common sense(s) are dominant, or in other words, under which circumstances the layperson's opinion can be considered relevant and in which that of the expert should prevail. In this view, everyone may be an expert in some context, and everyone is entitled to say which other experts should be listened to and when. The political challenge of egalitarian democratic politics, therefore, is first and foremost to keep the plurality of common senses relevant; not to let political space become petrified around a single total homogeneous common sense that will determine once and for all who is a layperson and who is an expert, who has a privileged voice in the political arena and who is only "a man of the masses".

This, I believe, has certain important implications for the social protest movement that has been taking place in Israel and around the world. One of the dominant cries throughout the various protest locations has been the demand for a fundamental change of the "system" – a refusal to accept it as self-evident. In the terms of our discussion, this cry challenges what is taken to be the common (non)sense of capitalism. But if indeed the protest has failed, as many now claim, I believe it is because it has attempted to express the voice of the popular masses while renouncing common sense altogether. To regain vitality and influence, activists throughout the world must look for the plurality of common senses, to try to understand the various ways in which different (groups of) people make sense of the world, in order to form political connections even in places that seem unlikely – between factors that seem to have no common denominator – based on communication practices that take as common and self-evident only the shared need to oppose the "system." On the one hand, this opposition should be commonsensical enough so as to express a clear voice and win wide support. On the other hand, the voices of protesters must not be silenced by those of experts, for every particular common sense implies the ability to decide which experts it wishes to consult with and how. The hierarchical relations between "ordinary people" and

experts need not disappear, but become dynamic, and work to undermine relations of domination rather than reinforce them. Such uses of common sense, I believe, are not self-evident at all.

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