Common Sense Epistemology as a generativist Meta-Philosophy

In recent decades, many epistemologists have found some inspiration in Thomas Reid and the "common sense tradition" of epistemology. But this tradition (and Reid's own works) contain a variety of arguments, in which the very notion of "common sense" plays very different roles. Common Sense beliefs are sometimes conceived as having a special epistemic status just because they are *highly intuitive* beliefs, sometimes because they are *universal*, or *natural*, or *epistemically basic*, or *chronologically original*, or *known to be known*, etc.

(Chisholm 1982) and (Lemos 2004) consider that the most fundamental (and most promising) argument in the "common sense tradition" is the particularist emphasis on beliefs that are known to be known.

I want to develop here another line of argument, also present in Reid's works, namely the conception of Common Sense as the system of beliefs which constitutes, *chronologically* speaking, the starting point of all philosophical enquiry. According to Reid, this chronological antecedence gives common sense beliefs a "*jus quaesitum*, or a right of ancient possession, which ought to stand good till it be overturned" (Reid 1788 IV, 6). This chronological strategy hasn't been defended by recent epistemologists. My intention is to develop a modernized version of this line of argument, using the resources of contemporary *dynamic epistemology*. The revised argument offers an original meta-philosophy of common sense (very different from what (Double 1996) and (Boulter 2007) call the meta-philosophy of common sense) according to which every philosophical system must be conceived as ultimately derivable from the common sense (i.e. the original) system through a finite series of justified system revisions. In reference to Chomsky's Universal Grammar hypothesis, I call this meta-philosophy a *generativist* meta-philosophy.

In the first part of the presentation, I will set in place the basic concepts of dynamic epistemology that are needed for the argument. Here, I draw on Isaac Levi's work (Levi 1980), which draws attention to *revisions* of beliefs. A belief revision is a process by which the agent moves from one system of beliefs S1 (what Levi calls a "corpus") to another one S2. And, as Levi notes, a belief revision can be *justified* or *unjustified* in a sense which has nothing to do with the traditional synchronic (or foundationalist) notion of justification. In order to distinguish clearly between synchronic justification and diachronic justification, I call the former *support* and the latter *motivation*:
- a belief *state* can be *supported* by another belief (by inference) or maybe by a perceptual experience
- a *revision* of one's system of belief Sn can be *motivated* by an inconsistency or an incoherence within Sn.

In dynamic epistemology, the central question is not whether a given belief is (synchronically) *supported* or not within the agent's system of belief Sn. The central question is whether the *move* from Sn-1 to Sn was or was not (diachronically) *motivated*. This approach is also very close to what Harman calls "the coherence theory of belief revision" (Harman 1986, 32).

An important difference with Isaac Levi's (and other dynamic epistemic logicians') approach is that I don't take systems of beliefs to be closed under deduction, because I want to leave open the possibility that the agent possesses (unbeknownst to her) sets of inconsistent beliefs: this is important in order to account for philosophical arguments which have the form of trilemmas for instance (where the argument shows to the agent that she has three inconsistent beliefs, which constitutes a *motivation* − in our technical sense − to adopt a revised system of belief).

One important principle that I keep from Levi's work is that according to which the principle which motivates a revision from S1 to S2 *must be a principle in S1 itself* (this is what I call the "principle of internal motivation").

In the second part, I will apply this framework to the idea of Common Sense as a first or original system of beliefs S0.

Suppose an agent starts with the belief system S0, then any system S1 (immediate successor of S0) can only be motivated by principles in S0 (and some internal tension – inconsistency or incoherence – within S0). And more generally any later belief system Sn can be *ultimately* well motivated *only if* it is derivable, through a finite series of motivated revisions, from the principles and beliefs of the original system S0.

It is important to note here that this strategy is not strongly "conservative": Sn may differ a lot from S0, and indeed may have abandoned *all* of S0's beliefs. The requisite is only that it should be *derivable* from S0 through a series of motivated revisions.

Of course, it would require a high degree of idealisation to suppose that all men start with a common or universal set of beliefs. Different people probably start with different S0s. But the hypothesis of common sense is that there exist a *subset* of S0 which is common to all men. I call it Scs. Furthermore, I introduce the idea that generally a philosopher who proposes an argument *tries* to make it in principle pertinent to all men: this means, in our framework, that generally, philosophers propose arguments which appeal to common sense, or in other words, arguments which *should be derivable through a finite series of motivated steps from the subset Scs of everyone's S0.*

This set up gives the basics of an original conception of philosophical methodology (a common sense meta-philosophy), which will be the topic of the third part of my talk: every philosophical argument should be presented as derived, through a finite series of motivated revisions, from a set of beliefs that are part of common sense.

This meta-philosophy is different from Richard Double's highly conservative definition of a common sense meta-philosophy (according to which the only purpose of philosophical activity would be to preserve common sense beliefs, come what may, and just provide underpinnings for them). In my common sense meta-philosophy, common sense beliefs *can* be revised, but any revision of common sense must be ultimately "generated" from principles of common sense itself, through a series of motivated revisions.

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