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The Epistemic Authority of Common Sense

Rik Peels

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, common-sense beliefs and common-sense philosophy have been besieged by a wide variety of philosophical arguments, such as a priori reasoning to the effect that we cannot know that there is an external world.¹ During the last few decades, common sense has increasingly been criticized from another angle as well, namely, that of science. It is thought that science has shown that many of our common-sense beliefs are unreliably formed, false, or illusory: beliefs about the reasons for which we act, beliefs concerning free action, beliefs about the absoluteness of space and time, beliefs in alleged objective moral truths, and so forth.² Still others point out that common-sense beliefs are plagued by ambiguity, equivocation, and inconsistency (see Unger 1982). Many conclude that we should treat common sense with suspicion.

Adherents of common-sense philosophy, such as Thomas Reid, G. E. Moore, Roderick Chisholm, and Noah Lemos, think otherwise, of course. They take it that common sense has a certain epistemic authority that is only on some occasions defeated. Absent such relatively rare defeating conditions, common-sense beliefs are rational, epistemically justified, and instances of knowledge. I call this combination of alleged positive epistemic statuses the epistemic authority of common sense. The purpose of this chapter is to answer the question in virtue of what, if anything at all, common sense has such epistemic authority in the first place. After all, if it does not, then the fact that something is a common-sense belief does as such not count in favour of its truth.
This chapter is structured as follows. First, I lay out in more detail exactly what common sense and the supposed epistemic authority of common sense amount to. Next, I assess seven proposals that we find in the literature as to why common sense has epistemic authority. They say, respectively, that common-sense beliefs are irresistible; that there are no serious epistemic alternatives to thinking that common-sense beliefs have epistemic authority; that common-sense beliefs are certain, or at least more certain than any alternatives; that common-sense beliefs are instances of knowledge; that common-sense beliefs are vague and ambiguous and, therefore, likely to be true; that common-sense beliefs are the product of a reliable process of cultural evolution; and, finally, that God would not deceive us on such a large scale. I argue that the first five answers are not convincing, not even jointly, but that the sixth answer is, and that the seventh reply may well be combined with it.

EXACTLY WHAT IS THE QUESTION?

In order to clarify the question under consideration, I will answer three other questions in this section: (1) What is common sense? (2) What is epistemic authority? (3) Exactly what are we asking when we ask in virtue of what common sense has epistemic authority?

So, first, what is common sense? I take it, for the sake of the argument in this chapter, that ‘common sense’ denotes a class of beliefs: common-sense beliefs. I will not take a stance on whether there is such thing as a common-sense faculty or whether there are such things as common-sense doxastic mechanisms. Thus, I focus on common-sense beliefs. Here are some examples of common-sense beliefs that I hold now:

1. The belief that I have hands.
2. The belief that last week I flew to Denver, Colorado.
3. The belief that I feel no pain in my left leg.
4. The belief that I am worried about my friend’s mental health.
5. The belief that most people have knowledge of the intentions of many other people.
6. The belief that our perception of mid-sized objects is, generally, reliable.
7. The belief that many species of plants and animals have lived on the earth.
8. The belief that one should not light a match in a gas-filled room.
9. The belief that torturing for the fun of it is morally wrong.

And, slightly more controversially, the following might also be a common-sense belief:

10. The belief that there are supernatural entities.

Some common-sense beliefs, such as (1), are based on observational experience. Others, such as (2), are based on recollection and memory. Still other common-sense beliefs, such as (3) and (4), are based on self-awareness, introspection, or proprioception. There are also beliefs in what seem incontrovertibly obvious facts of common life, such as (5), (6), and (7). Furthermore, there are matters of prudence, such as (8). Finally, there are beliefs that arise, at least partly, from a moral sense, such as (9), or a religious sense, such as (10). These are all beliefs that are often considered to be common-sense beliefs. But what ties them together? What makes them common-sense beliefs?

I suggest that, roughly, there are two conditions and that all of these beliefs meet at least one of them. Meeting one of them is sufficient for a belief to count as a common-sense belief:

a. Being a belief in having a kind of property that almost everyone ascribes to himself or herself, at least when prompted.

b. Being a basic belief in a proposition that is deeply held by almost everyone.

Thus, belief in (1)–(4) is belief in having some kind of property – a physical property, a property having to do with one’s memory, a property concerning one’s own mental state – that almost everyone
has. I say ‘a kind of property’ rather than ‘a property’ because, obviously, only some people believe that they have no pain in their left leg – some people do believe that they feel pain in their left leg. The point is that this is the kind of belief that many people have. Belief in [5]–[9] is basic belief in a proposition that is deeply held in the sense of being fairly firmly believed by almost everyone: people are convinced, relatively certain of the truth of the propositions involved. As I said above, belief in (10) is a slightly more controversial example. Yet, the majority of humanity believes in supernatural entities, as empirical research shows. The issue for (10), then, is how many people ought to believe in it in order for it to count as a common-sense belief and to what degree people ought to be convinced of it. I will leave that for another occasion.

What is excluded by this disjunctive criterion? A lot: most beliefs based on scientific inquiry, most beliefs issuing from journalistic or criminal inquiry, moral and religious beliefs that only few people hold, beliefs based on complicated lines of philosophical reasoning, most beliefs based on technology, engineering, and social planning, beliefs based on economics and the law, and so on.

Second, what is it for common-sense beliefs to have epistemic authority? It is not for each of them to be rational, warranted, or to be an instance of knowledge. After all, even the boldest champions of common sense would not say that common-sense beliefs are never defeated by scientific inquiry or philosophical argument. The idea rather seems to be twofold. First, these beliefs are usually rational, warranted, and instances of knowledge, and they are only sometimes defeated. Second, these beliefs are not easily defeated: having some evidence to the contrary will not do. Even fairly strong evidence will sometimes not suffice. For example, G. E. Moore famously argued that he is more certain of the proposition that he knows he has hands than he is of the proposition that he does not know that he is dreaming or the victim of an evil demon (see Moore 1959b). The belief that he has hands and that he knows that he has hands are beliefs that are not easily overturned, not even by a challenging philosophical argument.

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I take it that this is what many authors have in mind when they talk about the ‘epistemic authority’, ‘credibility’, or ‘probative authority’ of common sense, when they say that common sense is ‘reliable’, that common-sense beliefs are ‘rationally legitimate’, or that ‘we can rely on common sense’.10

Third, what are we asking when we ask in virtue of what these beliefs have epistemic authority? I suggest that what we are asking for is non-question-begging reasons to think that common-sense beliefs generally have a positive epistemic status and that they are not easily defeated. When I say these reasons should be non-question-begging, I mean that these reasons should not assume that common-sense beliefs are indeed epistemically justified, rational, instances of knowledge, and so on.

One might worry that this question is nonsensical, because common-sense beliefs have epistemic authority, but not in virtue of anything. Their epistemic authority is primitive or brute: it does not supervene on some other fact, in the same way as a particular elementary particle’s being that particular elementary particle does not seem to supervene on some other fact. No non-question-begging reason for the epistemic authority of common sense can be given.

My reply is twofold. First, in the case of elementary particles there is good reason to think that it is a primitive fact that that elementary particle is that elementary particle, a fact that does not supervene on any other facts; it is hard to see what such facts would be. In the case of common sense, though, it is much harder to see why it would be a brute fact that common-sense beliefs have epistemic authority. Scientific and philosophical challenges even seem to provide some reason to doubt that common sense has epistemic authority. Of course, some scientific and philosophical arguments are meant to show merely that the epistemic authority is sometimes undermined. But, quite often, the lesson allegedly learned is much stronger: common sense does not have epistemic authority in the first place – we should not confer prima facie rationality to it that is not easily undermined. On the contrary, we should be highly sceptical of
common-sense beliefs. According to British developmental biologist Lewis Wolpert, for instance, ‘both the ideas that science generates and the way in which science is carried out are entirely counter-intuitive and against common sense – by which I mean that scientific ideas cannot be acquired by simple inspection of phenomena and that they are very often outside everyday experience . . . I would almost contend that if something fits with common sense it almost certainly isn’t science’ (Wolpert 1992: 1, 11). Second and even more importantly, we should not lose sight of the dialectical situation: a wide variety of philosophers believe that common sense does not have any or not much epistemic authority. Claiming that it is a brute fact that it has such authority will not ameliorate the dialectical situation one bit, in the same way as claiming that it is a brute fact that some thesis \( T \) is true will not be helpful in any other debate (even though the claim may be justified).

I repeat the main question: in virtue of what does common sense have epistemic authority? The next sections explore seven different answers to this question.

**First Answer: Irresistibility**

A first line of defence appeals to the psychological irresistibility of common-sense beliefs: whether or not we like it, they are automatically and spontaneously formed in us and we, thus, cannot resist them. They are unavoidable for us. This seems to be the view of Thomas Reid:

> Methinks, therefore, it were better to make a virtue of necessity; and, since we cannot get rid of the vulgar notion and belief of an external world, to reconcile our reason to it as well as we can; for, if Reason should stomach and fret ever so much at this yoke, she cannot throw it off; if she will not be the servant of Common Sense, she must be her slave . . . because it is not in my power; why then should I make a vain attempt . . . My belief is carried along by perception, as irresistibly as my body by the earth. (Reid (1764) 1983: 4, 85)
Reid’s idea seems to be this: since common-sense beliefs are psychologically unavoidable in the sense that there is nothing we can do to avoid having them, the best we can do is to take them for granted and reconcile reason to them as well as we can. It becomes clear from his work, such as his formulation of various common-sense principles that ought to guide our thinking, that, for Reid, this means that we need to assume that the common-sense beliefs we have are rational unless we have good reason to think otherwise.

For two reasons, this line of reasoning seems problematic to me. First, it might be a characteristic of common-sense beliefs that we cannot give up all of them, but it does not seem a characteristic of common-sense beliefs in general that for each of them, we cannot give them up. Take our moral beliefs. If we are convinced by evolutionary debunking arguments, we may give up our moral beliefs and continue to assume certain moral propositions or accept them rather than believe them to be true. If we think the arguments for atheism are convincing, we might give up all religious beliefs. If we accept certain conclusions drawn on the basis of social experiments regarding the motivations for our actions, we may come to think that we do not really know why we do the things we do. Consequently, we may decide, in a Humean fashion, to continue to lead our lives as we did but treat each claim about our motivations with a significant degree of scepticism, resulting in a suspension of judgment regarding the reasons for which we acted. Thus, even though some common-sense beliefs may well be irresistible, such as the belief that one exists, many of them are not. Irresistibility as such, therefore, cannot confer epistemic authority on common-sense beliefs.

Second, as Kant already noticed in his Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics (Preface: A259–60), we ought to distinguish between psychological inevitability and rationality, since the former does not entail the latter. Something can be psychologically inevitable and yet not rational, either because it is irrational or because it is beyond rationality. Imagine that Susie has survived a horrible elevator accident and is severely traumatized as a result. She goes through
a long series of therapeutic sessions but unfortunately to no avail. Moreover, she delves into all the scientific research on elevator accidents and, thus, comes to know that there is strong evidence for thinking that elevator accidents are extremely rare. And yet, because of her traumatic experience, the belief that elevators are dangerous sticks with her. It is, thus, psychologically irresistible for her to believe that elevators are dangerous: there is nothing she can do to avoid it. In fact, she has done everything she could to get rid of the belief, but unsuccessfully so. However, it is clear that her belief is *irrational* and *unjustified*: it is unreliably formed, it conflicts with the evidence that she has (she has plenty of reason to think that accidents with elevators hardly ever occur), and so forth. Again, irresistibility as such cannot confer epistemic authority on common-sense beliefs.

One may reply that the elevator belief is irresistible *for Susie*, but that it is generally not irresistible for us, normal, healthy, and well-functioning human beings. However, there are beliefs that *many* people hold and that are clearly not rational. Take the belief that the Grand Canyon Skywalk (a glass bridge over the Grand Canyon) is not safe. There is plenty of evidence that it is safe, but many people, understandably, disbelieve that – at least in some sense of the word. Moreover, if irresistibility is not something that confers epistemic authority on a belief for Susie and a few others, then it is hard to see how that same irresistibility for more people (no matter what the number) does confer epistemic authority. The mere appeal to irresistibility will not do; one would have to explain why irresistibility is a good reason to think that common-sense beliefs have epistemic authority.

**SECOND ANSWER: NO EPISTEMIC ALTERNATIVES**

A second answer, suggested by Roderick Chisholm, is that there is no real epistemic alternative. He writes that in investigating the theory of knowledge from a philosophical point of view, we assume that what we know is pretty much that which, on reflection, we think we know. He goes on to say, ‘This might seem like the wrong place to start. But where else could we start?’ (Chisholm 1977: 16). Now, note
that in saying this Chisholm implies that common sense has epistemic authority at least in the sense that, unless we have good reason to think that they are false or unreliably formed, we should continue to hold common-sense beliefs.

It is important to realize that this point is different from the previous argument for the epistemic authority of common sense. Here, the idea is not so much that it is psychologically impossible to start somewhere else because common-sense beliefs inevitably force themselves upon us. Rather, the suggestion is that, in forming beliefs, there is no serious epistemic alternative to starting with our common-sense beliefs.

Now, is Chisholm right that there is no epistemic alternative to common sense, at least when it comes to starting somewhere? I’m afraid he’s mistaken about this. Let me give two examples.

First, it seems that there are epistemic alternatives to start with. Take Descartes’s line of reasoning in favour of the reliability of our senses, that is, belief formation on the basis of sense perception (see Descartes 1988). He points out that we might be dreaming or deceived by an evil demon, so that all of our perceptual beliefs are false. Hence, our common-sense beliefs do not have epistemic authority. They gain such authority only if we can show that they are reliably formed. Needless to say here, Descartes offers a complicated argument for that, involving the idea that it is impossible to not exist if one notes that one thinks, the idea that God exists, and the idea that God would not deceive us by giving us unreliable perceptual cognitive faculties. In the course of his argument, he appeals to various controversial metaphysical principles that are clearly not common-sense beliefs. Whether or not this line of reasoning is actually convincing, the point is that this is an epistemic alternative to starting with common sense.

Or take scientism. Some of the stronger versions, such as that of Alex Rosenberg, say that only the natural sciences provide us with rational belief and knowledge. Now, elsewhere I have argued that, in order for scientism to be true, at least some of our common-sense beliefs...
beliefs have to be rational and count as knowledge as well; we cannot discard all of our common-sense beliefs, because then science would never get off the ground (see Peels 2017a). Yet, clearly, not all of our common-sense beliefs are necessary for science. Many of our religious, moral, and introspective beliefs are irrelevant for science.12 I presume one cannot do science without some kinds of common-sense belief, but one need not assume that all kinds of common-sense beliefs are generally reliably formed in order to do science.

Second, and most importantly, even if there is no alternative starting point, then that may confer practical or pragmatic authority on our common-sense beliefs: we have to start with them. Yet, it is not clear how that, as such, confers epistemic authority on our common-sense beliefs. Why should we think that if there is no alternative starting point, that very fact makes our common-sense beliefs epistemically rational unless there are defeaters for them?

Hence, whether or not they are viable, there are alternatives to assuming from the very start that our common-sense beliefs have epistemic authority.

THIRD ANSWER: RELATIVE CERTAINTY

A third answer one could give is that our common-sense beliefs are simply more certain than any of the other beliefs they might compete with – or, at least, that this is true for the vast majority of our common-sense beliefs, and that this confers epistemic authority on them. This might well be the view of G. E. Moore:

But it seems to me a sufficient refutation of such views as these [i.e., sceptical views], 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 premise which is, beyond comparison, less certain, than
is the proposition which it is designed to attack. (Moore 1960b: 228, my italics)

There is, in this quote, also the idea that common-sense beliefs constitute knowledge and have epistemic authority in virtue of that. I return to this idea in the next section. Here, I focus on another idea that we also find in this passage— an idea that I have made explicit by italicizing the words ‘less certain’. The idea seems to be this: common-sense beliefs have prima facie epistemic authority because they have a high degree of certainty, very often a higher degree of certainty than some of the premises in the sceptical philosophical or scientific arguments that are levelled against common-sense beliefs. This raises at least two questions: (1) Is it true that quite often the relevant common-sense beliefs are more certain than some of the premises in the arguments raised against those beliefs? (2) If this is true, does that confer epistemic authority on common-sense beliefs? I answer these two questions in this order.

As many philosophers have pointed out, there are at least two different kinds of certainty: objective and subjective certainty. Objective certainty is the probability that a proposition is true given the evidence that one has. Subjective certainty is a person-dependent feeling of how convinced one is of the relevant belief. Objective certainty seems irrelevant here. After all, according to adherents of the common-sense tradition the very fact that something is a common-sense belief confers epistemic authority on it. Thus, it is at least prima facie rational, no matter what evidence there is in favour of it or against it (that evidence may defeat the common-sense belief so that ultima facie it is no longer rational to embrace; that leaves the prima facie rationality intact).

However, if subjective certainty is the relevant issue, then what we will have to say is that whether or not a particular common-sense proposition is more certain than each of the premises of the philosophical or scientific arguments levelled against it, depends on the person in question. Those who find, say, sceptical Brain-in-a-Vat
arguments convincing are not more certain of the common-sense proposition that there is an external world than of each of the premises used in these arguments. And mutatis mutandis the same applies to those who embrace the results of experiments like those by Daniel Wegner and Thalia Wheatley, which they take to demonstrate that we often do not know and even hold false beliefs about the reasons for which we act. So, whether or not a common-sense proposition is more certain for one than propositions that (jointly) conflict with it is person-dependent. Where does that leave us? Should we say that these common-sense propositions have epistemic authority for some people, but not for other people?

In order to answer this question, let us address the second question: if one believes the proposition \( p \), does the fact that \( p \) is subjectively more certain for one than each of a set of alternative propositions \( q_1, q_2, \ldots, q_n \) confer epistemic authority on the belief that \( p \)? It is not clear that this is the case. People used to think that geocentrism is true until this was shown to be false by such scientists as Galileo Galilei and Johannes Kepler. What if people had replied that they were simply more certain of geocentrism than any of the premises in the scientific arguments against it? Would the common-sense view that geocentrism is true – at least, that was common sense back then – thereby have had epistemic authority? That seems questionable. Also, even if it had had epistemic authority for them, it certainly would not have had epistemic authority for the relevant scientists. That one is certain of something or more certain of it than of its rivals is hardly a reason to think that it is rational, justified, warranted, an instance of knowledge, or any such thing. Again, it seems that more is required than subjective certainty in order to explain why common sense has epistemic authority.

**FOURTH ANSWER: COMMON-SENSE BELIEFS ARE INSTANCES OF KNOWLEDGE**

As I pointed out in the previous section, in the writings of Moore we also find the idea that common-sense beliefs have epistemic authority
because they are instances of knowledge. Knowledge seems epistemically at least as good as true belief, justified true belief, and so on, if not better. Surely, then, if we have good reason to think that common-sense beliefs are (usually) instances of knowledge, then common sense has a certain epistemic authority. A recent advocate and articulator of this idea is Noah Lemos. Says Lemos:

Here, then, we have a reply to Ewing’s question, why philosophers should be expected to pay so much respect to common sense. It is because some common sense beliefs are instances of knowledge and they are more reasonable than the philosophical principles that compete with them.14

One might wonder whether, in order for this line of reasoning to be convincing, the common-sense philosopher should give arguments for thinking that common-sense beliefs constitute knowledge. Lemos thinks that this is not the case: as long as common-sense beliefs do indeed constitute knowledge, it is perfectly fine to accept such beliefs – that is, to hold those beliefs and to endorse that one holds those beliefs. After all, if they constitute knowledge, common-sense beliefs have a wide variety of positive epistemic statuses, such as epistemic justification, being reliably formed, and so on.

What should we think of this approach? Well, undoubtedly, it would be a good thing if common-sense beliefs constitute knowledge. However, that is the very issue under consideration. The opponent of common sense doubts that common-sense beliefs constitute knowledge. To claim that common-sense beliefs are instances of rational belief, justified belief, knowledge, and so on, may well be true, but, clearly, doing so is not to provide a non-question-begging reason to take it that they have epistemic authority. The adherent of common-sense philosophy may of course very well be right that common-sense beliefs are justified and instances of knowledge, but merely claiming so is different from providing reasons or evidence for thinking that this is the case.
FIFTH ANSWER: COMMON SENSE IS VAGUE AND AMBIGUOUS

A fifth suggestion in reply to the question why we should think that common sense has epistemic authority is that common sense is vague and ambiguous (see Rescher 2005). It might sound somewhat paradoxical to say that vagueness and ambiguity can confer epistemic authority. Upon further consideration though, the idea is less implausible than one might initially think. The idea is that, since common-sense beliefs are fairly imprecise and ambiguous, there is likely to be some way in which they are true. For example, common sense tells us that human beings have free will or, in other words, that many of our actions are up to us. But it does not tell us exactly what such free will amounts to (thus also Haselager 2020). Since belief in free will is so ambiguous and imprecise, it may well still be true even if, say, determinism is true; for even if determinism is true, we are reason-responsive beings, and our deliberation makes a difference to what we do, so that our actions are at least in some sense up to us. Common-sense beliefs, then, are likely to be true and thus have epistemic authority.

The problem with this strategy is that it applies to relatively few common-sense beliefs. It applies to rather general metaphysical beliefs, such as the belief that we have free will, or general beliefs about the world, such as that the earth has existed for a very long time. However, take the common-sense beliefs mentioned at the outset of the chapter. There is nothing ambiguous or imprecise about perceptual beliefs, such as the belief that I have hands, beliefs based on memory, such as the belief that I was in Denver, Colorado, last week, beliefs based on proprioception, such as the belief that I feel no pain in my left leg, and many beliefs about one’s own mental states, such as the belief that I am worried about my friend’s mental health.

Thus, this reply may explain why some common-sense beliefs have epistemic authority, but it does not explain why common-sense beliefs in general have (defeasible) epistemic authority.
SIXTH ANSWER: COMMON SENSE IS THE PRODUCT OF EVOLUTION

The sixth answer to the question of what confers epistemic authority on common-sense beliefs is that they – or at least many of them – are the product of cultural (rather than biophysical) evolution and that cultural evolution selects for true beliefs, so that we have sufficient reason to trust the faculties that deliver common-sense beliefs. According to Nicholas Rescher (2005: 57),

Man is a creature whose *modus operandi* evolves in the course of rational selection under the pressure of purposive efficacy. The validity of those established cognitive practices and customs is accordingly something that they wear on their sleeves: their appropriateness is manifested by the very fact of their being what they are – established customs and practices.

Cultural evolution can be seen as a rational process that, in the course of time, selects for true beliefs on issues that have to do with everyday affairs:

They [i.e., common-sense beliefs] are the fruits of experience – the collective experience of people on a large scale and over a long time, having prevailed in the struggle for cultural survival through providing information that meets the needs of the group. Accordingly, they issue from principles rooted in human culture by means of rational selection . . . And while even communal experience may not be an infallible and failproof resource, it is one that will (and given its rooting in a vastly extensive body of experience must) yield trustworthy results in the vast preponderance of cases relating to matters of everyday affairs. (Rescher 2005: 58)

In order to assess the claim that common-sense beliefs are the deliveries of a process of cultural evolution and the claim that this process has selected for true belief, we first need to know what
‘cultural selection’ amounts to. Presumably it is not the regular process of random mutation and natural selection, for then it would just be an instance of biophysical selection processes.\textsuperscript{15} So what kind of process is it? Unfortunately, Rescher tells us little about this. What he does say raises significant worries, though. He talks about ‘the struggle for cultural survival through providing information that meets the needs of the group’ (my italics). This is worrisome, because information that meets the needs of the group need not be true or reliably formed – unless one takes it that the word ‘information’ is factive, but then this whole suggestion would beg the question, because what we need is an answer to the question of why we should think that common-sense beliefs constitute information or knowledge or understanding. Beliefs may be pragmatically useful or contribute to social cohesion without being true.

Fortunately, there are further ideas in the quote given above. Rescher speaks about ‘rational selection’, ‘communal experience’, ‘trustworthy results in the vast preponderance of cases’, and so on. More importantly, there is a whole field of research on the relation between biological and cultural evolution and the selection for true belief. Most participants in that debate agree that biological and cultural evolution jointly select for true belief. Someone with true beliefs is generally more likely to survive and reproduce than someone with false beliefs. Maybe for each common-sense belief an alternative can be concocted that has the same survival value, but it seems questionable whether this is also true for entire belief systems. It is more controversial whether this also applies to complex mathematical and other scientific beliefs, but it is widely taken to apply to beliefs from the senses, beliefs from memory, beliefs about macro material objects, such as tables and chairs, and so on.

I would also like to stress that the case for the epistemic authority of common-sense beliefs when it comes to the five senses and, say, memory and introspection is more likely to be convincing than it is for moral beliefs. Morality, after all, is concerned with the wrongness and permissibility of various actions, and those are abstract entities
rather than physical characteristics we need to know in order to survive in this world. In fact, there is a whole separate literature on whether evolutionary theory provides debunking explanations of common-sense realist beliefs.\footnote{16}

One may object to this idea that in defending the epistemic authority of common sense, one will inevitably appeal to various common-sense beliefs and assume that those common-sense beliefs themselves have epistemic authority. Will an argument for the epistemic authority of common sense, therefore, not inevitably be circular? I think this is right. In fact, it seems to me this squares well with an important idea that we find in epistemology. The idea is that it is \textit{impossible} to show or make plausible, without begging the question, that a large number of common-sense beliefs are epistemically justified, reliably formed, and so on. The idea is that this is impossible because, in order to show that they have these positive epistemic statuses, one will have to appeal to further common-sense beliefs and either assume that they have positive epistemic status or, in showing this, rely on even further common-sense beliefs (and so on). William Alston, for instance, has famously argued that we cannot show sense perception to be reliable.\footnote{17}

Thus, the argument for the epistemic authority of common sense will have to assume that common-sense beliefs have epistemic authority. I do not think that is a problem, though. The argument for the epistemic authority of common sense from the alethic orientation (truth-guidance) of evolutionary processes, for instance, is for an important part a \textit{scientific} argument. Of course, science itself is built on a wide variety of common-sense beliefs. But there are few people who doubt not only common sense but also science. This is partly because science is thought to have filtered out many of the misleading common-sense beliefs. Since the appeal to common sense in this argument is very much indirect, it will convince many people, even though it is, strictly speaking, circular.
Note that for some kinds of common-sense beliefs, their epistemic authority cannot be defended by appealing to our evolutionary history. Sharon Street (2006) has famously argued that evolution provides a debunking explanation of our moral realist common-sense beliefs, because true moral beliefs are in no way needed for survival or for increasing your chances at survival. Some philosophers have defended the position that the argument falls short (e.g., Copp 2008), but this just goes to show that we might need a different story to explain why moral common-sense beliefs have epistemic authority. In fact, various philosophers have tried exactly that, such as Jesse Prinz (2007) in defending sentimentalism and Terence Cuneo and Russ Shafer-Landau (2014) in arguing that moral truths are conceptual truths.

Does it follow that common-sense beliefs had no epistemic authority before Darwin developed evolutionary theory? Fortunately not. Common-sense beliefs may well have been rational, instances of knowledge, and so on before 1859. Of course, the fact that one had no argument for such common-sense beliefs before then does not imply that those beliefs were irrational; there are, according to many philosophers, properly basic beliefs after all. All I say is that since then we can formulate reasons of this kind to accept the epistemic authority of common sense.

SEVENTH ANSWER: GOD WOULD NOT DECEIVE US

A seventh and final proposal that I would like to consider is the idea that common-sense beliefs have epistemic authority, because humans use common sense on a large scale and God, being perfectly good, would not deceive us. Therefore, we can trust that common sense is largely reliable and that our common-sense beliefs are rational, instances of knowledge, and so on.

This line of reasoning – even though hardly ever expressis verbis cashed out in terms of common-sense beliefs – has, of course, a venerable pedigree. Descartes’s appeal to the idea that God would not let us be deceived by our senses is a good example.
Another field from which one might derive theistic arguments for the reliability of common sense is the debate about the so-called argument from reason. The basic idea of the argument is that materialism and other varieties of naturalism cannot explain why we should trust logical and mathematical reasoning, whereas theism can (it provides a better explanation). The argument has received much attention ever since the well-known debate between C. S. Lewis and Elisabeth Anscombe. Recent literature provides detailed discussion of various objections against it (see, e.g., Reppert 2012).

There are various worries one can have with regard to this argument. Most importantly, one may not share the idea that there is a perfectly good God. Or one may not accept the idea that God has that kind of loving relationship with humans. But there are further worries apart from whether or not one accepts classical theism. One may also worry whether God’s perfect goodness would entail that he ensures that our beliefs are by and large reliably formed. Clearly, the argument works only if premises along these lines hold water. Unfortunately, I cannot discuss the argument in much more detail here. Rather, I would like to stress that it may well be convincing for those who embrace theism, assuming that worries concerning various premises in the argument can be met.

I would like to stress here that the response from theism can be combined with other arguments, the response from evolution in particular. For, one might argue that God has equipped humans with reliable cognitive mechanisms via a long evolutionary process. As various philosophers of religion have argued, the randomness of neo-Darwinian evolution does not exclude theistic guidance (e.g., Plantinga 2011: 3–30). If this is true, then this response can well be combined with the previous one.

**EPILOGUE**

The central question of this chapter is why we should think that common-sense beliefs have epistemic authority. I have explored
seven answers to this question that we find in the literature. I argued that only two of them are possibly convincing for a broad range of common-sense beliefs. Four of them either provide no epistemic (rather than practical or pragmatic) reason to think that common-sense beliefs are actually epistemically justified, rational, instances of knowledge, and so on, or they do so but beg the question in doing so. One of them provides some reason to think that common sense has epistemic authority, but the scope of the relevant common-sense beliefs is rather restricted. In order to explain why we should think that common-sense belief has epistemic authority, we should appeal to biological and cultural evolution or possibly, but more controversially, to theism. A particularly fascinating response would combine the two approaches. Such a response would have to address various questions in much more detail than I have been able to do in this chapter, such as the issue of whether evolution selects for true belief, exactly how cultural evolution works, how moral knowledge is possible, and why we should believe that God would ensure that common sense is by and large reliable.

NOTES

1 Many claim that philosophy can overturn common sense. See, for instance, Ewing (1973) and Moser (1998: 364). Susanna Rinard (2013) even claims that philosophy can overturn common sense because science can do so, since those scientific arguments rely on philosophical assumptions.

2 See various essays in Peels et al. (2020).

3 Moore and Chisholm do not refer to a common-sense belief-forming faculty. Reid does do so (see Reid (1785) 2002), but it is not clear that he refers to a sui generis common-sense faculty.

4 This is a classic example of a common-sense belief, first provided by G. E. Moore. See also Rinard (2013: 186).

5 See Rescher (2005); Lemos (2004). See also their contributions to this volume, Chapters 9 and 12, respectively.

6 This strongly resembles Noah Lemos’s definition of ‘common sense’. See Lemos (2020: 20–21): ‘Others may understand the notion of a common sense belief differently, but I shall take a common sense belief to be either [i]
a belief in a proposition that is deeply held by almost everyone or (ii) the self-attribution of a property that almost everyone attributes to himself.

One may wonder exactly who falls under ‘everyone’: everyone in history? Everyone in the past and now? Everyone in the West? For the purposes of this chapter, I take it to mean ‘every healthy adult human being currently alive’.

7 Here I will not take a stance on whether that means that the belief is held to a high degree or whether the degree is held with a high degree of conviction or certainty, the difference between these boiling down to the issue of whether or not belief comes in degrees. Whether or not it does depends at least partly on what exactly it is for something to come in degrees. For more on that, see Van Woudenberg and Peels (2018).

8 See research by the Pew Research Center, e.g., www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/.

9 Rinard (2013: 199–201) rightly points out that prima facie rationality or warrant is pretty weak. The second condition, which says that beliefs that have epistemic authority are not easily defeated, turns epistemic authority into a challenging property.

10 Thus, I do not take ‘epistemic authority’ to include responsible belief or blameless belief. This is not to deny that something’s being a common-sense belief may well imply that it is responsibly or at least blamelessly held unless it is defeated. I explore this in more detail in Peels (2017b).

11 See Rosenberg (2011). See also various essays in De Ridder et al. (2018).

12 For an in-depth exploration of scientism, see De Ridder et al. (2018).

13 See Wegner and Wheatley (1999); Wegner (2002).

14 See Chapter 12 by Lemos in this volume; according to him, this is also William Lycan’s view.

15 As to natural selection, philosophers like Alvin Plantinga have argued in detail that neo-Darwinian evolution does not select for true beliefs. That seems to be a minority position, though. See Beilby (2002).

16 See Street (2006) and all the literature in its wake.


18 For an argument along these lines, see Wilkins and Griffiths (2013).

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