

Recovering the Metaphysics of Common Sense: Thomas Reid, the Scottish Philosophy, and American Higher Education

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Introduction

Sophia Rosenfeld claims that contemporary political use of the phrase “common sense,” particularly by President Donald J. Trump, is a “populist appeal” that exalts the “infallible, non-political logic of the kitchen table.”¹ She implies that this kind of common sense is inadequate for “the management of an ever more intricate and interdependent world.”² There is, however, a philosophy of common sense that while not equivalent to the wisdom of the kitchen table does not controvert it. Instead it starts with, refines, and perfects it. There is a metaphysics of common sense that begins with the first principles of sound judgment and directs us toward knowledge of the order of being. The metaphysics of common sense was taught in American colleges and universities for nearly one hundred years, from just before the American Revolution to the Civil War. The return of the metaphysics of common sense to college classrooms, I argue, could help generate a return to a distinctly American public philosophy that is suited to our constitutional order.

The Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid (1710–1796) articulated the Common Sense philosophy. And, as James McCosh (1811–1894), the eleventh president of the College of New Jersey,

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stated, “If [Reid] was not the founder, he is the fit representative of the Scottish philosophy.”³ This philosophy constituted a kind of American orthodoxy from John Witherspoon’s (1723–1794) tenure as the sixth president of the College of New Jersey to McCosh’s tenure. Scott Segrest describes Witherspoon’s writings and McCosh’s writings as bookends of the American season of common sense.⁴ During this one-hundred-year span, the Common Sense philosophy was taught not only at the College of New Jersey but also at other institutions, including Brown, Harvard, and the College of Charleston.⁵ And the most popular ethics textbooks, such as those written by James Beattie (1735–1803), Dugald Stewart (1753–1828), and Francis Wayland (1796–1865), were rooted in the Common Sense philosophy.⁶

Reid’s Common Sense philosophy countered the pervasive doubt expressed by David Hume (1711–1776). Reid thought Hume’s skeptical philosophy was the culmination of what he called ideal theory, or the theory of ideas. The ideal theory, which characterized the modern philosophical systems of René Descartes (1596–1650), John Locke (1632–1704), and George Berkeley (1685–1753), holds that all we know directly are our own ideas. We cannot know, with any accuracy, what causes those ideas. The way of ideas cuts off our access to external reality. For this reason, Reid thought the modern way of ideas results in Humean skepticism, which produces doubt that we can verify the existence of mind and matter, doubt that we can perceive the same reality as others.

Reid’s philosophy, taught in American colleges, constituted a return to shared experience by teaching the rudiments—that is, the first principles—of speculative and practical reason. These first principles of common sense provided a universal architecture, instituted by God, by which to understand reality. And professors in early American colleges and universities thought the Common Sense philosophy fit for educating future citizens and statesmen, providing them with a shared framework of thought and discourse to facilitate the project of self-government.

This article considers the possibilities for reintroducing common sense principles into college curricula. It argues that as

the metaphysics of common sense countered the falsehoods of ideal theory in the eighteenth century, the metaphysics of common sense can counter the falsehoods of critical theory in higher education today. First, I suggest that the political language of common sense, particularly as it relates to higher education reform, should not be boiled down to opportunistic populist rhetoric, as critics suppose.⁷ This language, though not always suitably refined in public political discourse, points to a real need to replace critical theory with common sense principles in our universities. Second, I explain how the Common Sense philosophy swept through the United States from the Revolution to the Civil War, in part to correct modern philosophical mistakes. Third, I describe the metaphysics of the Common Sense philosophy. Fourth, I argue that in response to the errors of critical theory, the metaphysics of common sense can restore an American public philosophy, a shared framework for moral and political deliberation and decision-making. Fifth, I recommend ways of incorporating the metaphysics of common sense into academic institutes devoted to classical and civic education.

Common Sense Language and Higher Education Reform Today

President Trump announced in his second inaugural address that his new executive orders would “begin the complete restoration of America and the revolution of common sense.”⁸ One of the Trump administration’s top priorities—in the effort to restore common sense—has been freeing higher education from the ideological stranglehold of critical theory. Critical theory, under the guise of “diversity, equity, and inclusion,” or DEI, governs most faculty hiring and administrative decision-making. DEI is the practical deployment of Herbert Marcuse’s (1898–1979) totalizing critical theory of society, which is based on the imperative to resist oppressive systems and achieve the liberation of the marginalized.⁹

Critical theory arose in the twentieth century in the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. Its most prominent proponents included Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), Theodor W. Adorno

(1903–1969), and, of course, Marcuse, who, according to Stephen Bronner, “introduced critical theory to America.”¹⁰ Critical theory, in general, aims to be postmetaphysical. It accepts the world not as a divine or rational order but as an outcome of historical contingency.¹¹ And as Jürgen Habermas has maintained, critical theory possesses an “emancipatory interest.”¹²

Marcuse exemplified this emancipatory interest by emphasizing the “negative” aspect of dialectic, a “protest” that “condemns the established reality.”¹³ Marcuse’s negative thinking sought to understand not reality itself but the historically determined human order. This human order conceals the domination of the weak by the powerful. Negative thinking, then, is intended to free us “from the deceptive objectivity which conceals the factors behind the facts.”¹⁴ Marcuse’s negative thinking explicitly rejects “common-sense” thought.¹⁵ It interprets the “objective order of things” as the “result of domination.”¹⁶ In this case, in the absence of any legitimate universal standard of judgment—for example, correspondence to reality—to guide philosophic inquiry, the truth-seeking project is replaced by the political project of emancipation.¹⁷

Marcuse’s negative thinking produces a “critical, revolutionary consciousness” that advocates for liberation from oppressive social structures.¹⁸ For this reason, as his protégé, Angela Davis, political activist and member of the Black Panther Party, remarked, Marcuse encouraged his students to be agents of revolution, furthering “the emancipatory promise of the German philosophical tradition.”¹⁹ Marcuse’s critical theory, then, inspired activists to contend against social systems that oppressed the outcasts, particularly members of persecuted races.²⁰

Marcuse’s critical theory, which inspired New Left radicals in the 1960s, began its takeover of the American academy in the 1990s, as Richard Rorty observed.²¹ The cultural left began to entrench itself in newly created academic departments focused on victim studies and dedicated to the proposition that the United States is a racist, sexist, and genocidal imperialist regime.²² Decades later critical theory moved from the classroom to the administration, as diversity bureaucrats pushed for the hiring of ethnic

minorities and women to enhance DEI. This further diminished the number of conservatives, classical liberals, and moderates in humanities departments in particular.²³

According to Vice President J. D. Vance, the White House intends to pressure elite universities, such as Harvard, until they stop favoring a “particular political narrative” over the “pursuit of truth” and stop elevating “identity . . . over ideas.”²⁴ To achieve this end, the Trump administration has threatened to withhold federal funding from universities that continue their diversity programs. This threat, together with public backlash against diversity initiatives, has led states such as California, Arizona, Georgia, Missouri, and North Carolina, and universities such as Harvard and MIT, to stop requiring diversity statements for faculty hires.²⁵ These diversity statements served as ideological litmus tests, forcing candidates to profess their allegiance to a philosophy that views all things through the lens of identity, victimhood, and systemic oppression.²⁶ In addition, some schools, such as the University of Michigan, which had over 1,000 DEI-related jobs and 248 jobs devoted exclusively to DEI services, have ended their diversity programs, as well as its practice of requiring diversity statements for faculty and staff hiring, reviews, promotion, and student admissions.²⁷ As Frederick M. Hess notes, “For good or ill, what’s unfolding truly is something new. We’ve never before seen a Republican presidential administration seek to aggressively drive change in higher education.”²⁸

Beyond the attempt to withdraw federal funding from universities that implement discriminatory diversity programming, the Trump administration has expressed interest in preventing accreditors from requiring DEI-related practices.²⁹ Individual states, moreover, have made similar moves to defang accreditors that have forced universities to include critical theory in their curricula and school governance.³⁰ Some states have combined to create a new accreditor altogether.³¹ The most consequential efforts at higher education reform have occurred within states that are revising their general education courses and instituting new academic departments devoted to classical and civic education.

States including Florida, Texas, Utah, and Arkansas are narrowing the list of courses that qualify for general education credit in their universities.³² The Florida Board of Governors instituted a new rule to ensure that general education provides students with the common knowledge and the shared culture necessary for them to become learned individuals and engaged citizens who understand—and are capable of defending—their civilizational heritage.³³ As a result, the Florida State University Board of Trustees removed 432 of 571 general education courses that were not sufficiently foundational.³⁴ Courses based on “identity politics” or “theories that systemic racism, sexism, oppression and privilege are inherent in the institutions of the U.S.” might be suitable as electives,³⁵ but in Florida they no longer qualify as general education courses. Texas, meanwhile, has given authority to each university’s board of regents to review general education standards, to ensure that courses are “foundational and fundamental,” that they “prepare students for civic and professional life.”³⁶ And the University of Texas Board of Regents has established control over a faculty senate that had previously passed a resolution stating they were going to teach critical theory no matter what the legislature said or the taxpayers desired.

Aside from pruning general education offerings to make them more coherent and more suitable for the cultivation of good citizens, states including Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, and Utah have established new academic institutes, or departments, dedicated to classical and civic education.³⁷ These new institutes, which teach the great books, ideas, and events of Western civilization, together with the political thought of the American Founding, have already hired faculty members in political theory, history, classics, philosophy, and literature. These academic institutes are designed to counter the influence of critical theory in the humanities. But as Benjamin Storey and Jenna Silber Storey argue, there is a danger that proponents of higher education reform, by returning to “neglected subfields and forgotten courses,” might succumb to nostalgia—the desire to restore a bygone age—without adequately responding to “the distinct challenges of [the] moment.”³⁸

One challenge to which new institutes of classical and civic education must respond is the disintegrative effect that critical theory—which, recall, Marcuse called negative thinking—has had on the humanities.³⁹ It is this disintegrative effect of negative thinking that has produced incoherence in general education courses together with an impious, irreverent approach to our country's—and our civilization's—past and present. The proper response to negative thinking, though, is not necessarily nostalgic, or backward, thinking. We can and ought to learn from the past. And we can and ought to apply those lessons to the present. I argue that common sense higher education reform today can learn from the Common Sense philosophy that was taught in American colleges and universities before the American Revolution and throughout the Antebellum period. The metaphysics of common sense, moreover, can be retrieved and applied without nostalgia. The metaphysics of common sense, which is permanent and universal, is perennially applicable. It is reintegrative and supportive of our constitutional order.

Common Sense philosophy, at its origin, was a reintegrative project designed to combat the disintegrative aspects of Humean skepticism. There is a similar disintegrative quality to Hume's and Marcuse's respective theories. Hume trapped people in their own minds, limiting them to their own perceptions and leaving them without an anchor in reality. Marcuse—and critical theory in general—traps people in oppressive systems, leaving them without a legitimate standard of judgment grounded in the nature of things. Distrust in nature and alienation from it is present as much in Hume as it is in the postmoderns. As Segrest notes, this fact “has not been sufficiently appreciated.”⁴⁰ The common sense idea that we have “trust-and-kindship-with nature,” then, is a valid response to the skeptical and cynical theories of both Hume and Marcuse, in whatever age they might be articulated.⁴¹ Whereas Hume rebelled against the classical Christian metaphysics that prevailed in his day, Marcuse rebelled against political systems, most especially capitalism, that prevailed in his day. Both theories constitute rebellions. And both rebellions share a

common root—that is, denial that we have access to reality, to the natures of things—and this, according to McCosh, is “one of the most fatal heresies . . . ever introduced into philosophy.”⁴² For McCosh, rebellion against common sense and the natural order leaves us alienated from nature and susceptible to political ideologies. These ideologies lead us to try to change nature, rather than to conform to it. Only sorrow and folly can attend this violation of the order of nature and of providence.⁴³

The denial that we can access reality reigns in our educational institutions today, which is why the pursuit of truth, understood in a common sense way of understanding the natures of things, has lost out to an emancipatory agenda of unmasking domination. The only “reality,” in this case, is power. The reduction of all education, from the humanities to mathematics, to the liberation of minorities from oppressive systems has seeped from the academy into K–12 education. For years professors of education have written academic journal articles about how “mathematics operates as whiteness” and how we need to “decolonize mathematics for students who are Black, Latinx, and Aboriginal.”⁴⁴ As a direct result of this critical pedagogy, which has worked its way into primary education, the Illinois State Board of Education has stated there is “not one ‘correct’ way of doing or understanding something,” because “what is seen as ‘correct’ is most often based on our lived experiences.”⁴⁵ In the humanities, too, general education has been reduced to lived experience, so that instead of taking classes on canonical Western texts, students satisfy their “general education” requirements by learning about “Queer Girlhood” or “Intersectional Disability Studies.”⁴⁶

There can be no unified effort of self-government when truth is sacrificed to activism, when the end of education is portrayed as resistance to systems of oppression as opposed to understanding the natures of things. The restoration of the humanities depends on our recognition of this point and our response to it. The attempt to correct these errors in higher education should not be portrayed as a nostalgia play, a desperate effort to return to a bygone era. It is a matter of prudence, of returning to the metaphysical center, which

is the heart of reality. That is how the Common Sense philosophers perceived their response to the errors of modernity. And their response can inform our own approach to correcting modern disintegrative philosophies today.

The Common Sense Response to Philosophic Errors in the Eighteenth Century

Professors in eighteenth-century Scotland and America thought that bad philosophy produces bad morals and bad politics. As a result, they combated unsound doctrine. And they thought there was no doctrine as unsound as Hume's. Hume, in Henry May's words, was that "century's most durable devil."⁴⁷

James Beattie, a professor at Marischal College, Aberdeen, thought Hume's skepticism and atheism constituted the greatest threat to the proper formation of young minds. Charles B. Haddock, a professor at Dartmouth, insisted that the "infidel spirit" exhibited by Hume produced a socially debilitating "spirit of distrust[,] . . . of irreverence of antiquity, and age, and office[,] . . . a *critical* carping, querulous spirit . . . of acute, little, mean men."⁴⁸ Beattie, in Scotland, and Haddock, in America, both taught Reid's Common Sense philosophy. Reid countered Hume's doctrines in defense of common sense and Christianity.⁴⁹ Reid's response to Hume, the "Great Infidel," as James Boswell referred to him, was institutionalized in Scotland from the 1780s through the 1820s and in America from the 1780s until the Civil War.⁵⁰

Scottish philosophy—particularly Common Sense realism, which McCosh described as "the Scottish philosophy"—had a profound influence on content and curriculum in the American university.⁵¹ At Yale, Thomas Clap, Ezra Stiles, and Timothy Dwight regularly referred to such Scottish moralists as Francis Hutcheson in their lectures on ethics and politics.⁵² At the College of Philadelphia, William Smith taught Hutcheson and the Common Sense philosophy.⁵³ He also implemented a course of study consistent with Alexander Girard's 1753 reforms at the University of Aberdeen.⁵⁴ Thomas Jefferson placed Reid in his planned curriculum for the University of Virginia.⁵⁵ Witherspoon and Samuel

Stanhope Smith championed the Common Sense philosophy at the College of New Jersey. And after being included in James Wilson's ruling in the 1793 Supreme Court case *Chisohn v. Georgia*, it became, in Arthur Herman's words, "part of the grammar of American governance."⁵⁶

Textbooks used in American college classrooms were written by Common Sense philosophers. Reid's friend and student Dugald Stewart, chair of moral philosophy at Edinburgh, expounded on Reid's principles in his *Philosophy of the Active and Moral Powers of Man* (1828). This became one of the most widely read books in American colleges in both the North and the South. Reid's and Stewart's writings were foundational to moral philosophy education at the College of William and Mary.⁵⁷ They were also foundational at Harvard, where Levi Hedge taught Common Sense philosophy to James Walker. Walker became a professor of moral philosophy and president of the university. He edited both Stewart's *Philosophy of the Active and Moral Powers of Man* (1849) and Reid's *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1850). Walker's successor, Francis Bowen, also taught the Common Sense philosophy. And he edited Stewart's *Philosophy of the Human Mind* in 1854.⁵⁸

When college students in the United States learned the Common Sense philosophy, they learned a specific doctrine that debunked specific falsehoods. Reid's philosophy was a powerful refutation of the ideal theory, or the theory of ideas. According to this theory, propounded most influentially by Locke, the only things that are immediately accessible to the mind are ideas, not objects. According to Locke, "[T]he mind, in all its thoughts and reasonings, hath no other immediate object but its own ideas."⁵⁹ Reid battled ferociously against this "false hypothesis."⁶⁰ He thought Locke's theory was dangerous because it provides us with no certainty about the outside world. If ideas are all we can access, then we do not have access to external reality itself, and we have no means by which to gauge how accurate our sense perceptions are.

Reid set out to correct the mistakes of modern philosophy, beginning with Descartes. According to Reid, we do not perceive ideas. We perceive objects. And when we perceive those objects,

we make a judgment, simultaneously and automatically, that those objects have independent existence.⁶¹ When we think about ourselves, or our friends, we do not think about ideas but about people. When we think about the sun, we do not think about an idea but about a thing. My friend is not an idea, nor is the sun. To think otherwise is absurd.⁶²

Reid thought Hume's philosophy carried ideal theory to its logical end: total skepticism. Like Berkeley, Hume questioned the existence of the external world, the world of matter. If all we can access are perceptions, then we cannot directly access any external object, much less any matter in which attributes inhere. But Hume went beyond Berkeley. He doubted the existence of the internal world—that is, the mind. This also is consistent with the theory of ideas. If all we can access are perceptions, then we cannot directly access anything underneath these perceptions, any mind, or subject, in which perceptions inhere. Hume, elaborating on the shocking conclusions of these doctrines, wrote, "Let us chase our imagination to the heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence, but those perceptions, which have appear'd in that narrow compass."⁶³

As Reid recognized, Hume took the ideal theory to its "full extent," showing "that there is neither matter nor mind in the universe; nothing but impressions and ideas. What we call a *body*, is only a bundle of sensations; and what we call the *mind*, is only a bundle of thoughts, passions, and emotions, without any subject."⁶⁴ Reid thought this was scandalous. Hume tried to rationally justify things that did not need to be rationally justified—namely, the existence of mind and matter. Reid stated, "That every act or operation . . . supposes an agent, that every quality supposes a subject, are things which I do not attempt to prove, but take for granted."⁶⁵

Because they were committed to erroneous philosophical views, Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, along with Nicholas Malebranche, among other philosophers, spent pages upon pages trying—and struggling—to prove the existence of a material world,

something every person—except perhaps for the clinically insane—believes in and acts on. Immanuel Kant, too, thought this was a scandal for philosophy. But common sense was not Kant's solution. Kant looked down on Reid's Common Sense philosophy for appealing to the "opinion of the multitude."⁶⁶

Hume, of course, understood the scandal caused by his skeptical reasoning. When he realized he could not rationally justify his belief in the existence of the self, the external world, and the uniformity of nature, he experienced a crisis—a debilitating malaise, a kind of paralysis—which he documented in the conclusion to the first book of the *Treatise*. He acknowledged, as did Reid, that human beings must judge, believe, and act. But total skepticism forces us to suspend judgment about the most basic and essential matters. For this reason, as Hume and Reid agreed, total skepticism is unlivable.

But Hume and Reid responded to total skepticism in different ways.⁶⁷ Hume argued that nature forces us to believe in the self, the external world, and the uniformity of nature. We feel the impetus of nature pressing upon us, giving us no other choice but to believe in these first principles, even though they are contrary to reason. For Reid, by contrast, these first principles of common sense are consistent with reason. They are, in fact, prerational, instilled in us by a rational, supreme, divine Creator. They constitute the building blocks of all thought, all discourse, all action and investigation.

Hume accepted rational criticism of the faculties of sense and reason and clung to feeling to resolve his skeptical doubt.⁶⁸ Reid rejected rational criticism of these faculties as foolish and counterproductive. Hume accepted the ideal theory and found a way to live with it. Reid rejected the errors of ideal theory and defended reason and reality. Reid railed against philosophers, such as Hume, who used overly theoretical language to perplex people by contradicting common experience. Reid thought the alleged need to rationally justify our trust in our faculties was a philosophical conceit destructive of common sense, common speech, and common life.

Reid also thought Hume's reduction of moral judgment to feeling was detached from common sense and detrimental to common

life. Hume thought that beauty and goodness—like color, sound, and taste—existed not in objects themselves but in our perceptions alone. Virtue and vice, then, in Hume's system, derived from our feelings of pleasure and utility, not from our judgment about what is morally excellent in accordance with the nature of things. This, according to Reid, was yet another devastating error perpetuated by Hume.

Hume's theory of ideas and of morals prevented us from making judgments about reality as it is, nature as it truly exists. Reid proposed another path that possessed an enduring appeal to Americans who were engaged in a common project of self-government, which required trust in reason's access to reality and could spare no time on convoluted, sophistic navel-gazing. Americans needed to generate agreement about the first principles necessary to undergird the discourse and practice of self-government. For that reason, moral philosophy courses introduced students to the metaphysics of common sense, which represented a return to reality after the ill-fated adventure of ideal theory.

Returning to Reality: The Metaphysics of Common Sense

Reid asserted that all the acts of the mind are judged by their correspondence with reality. Our standard of true perception, true remembrance, and true belief is the thing itself, the event itself, the reality itself.⁶⁹ Ideal theory robbed people of reality as the standard of judgment. And it did so in both speculative and practical matters. Knowing the reality of nature and human nature makes good judgment and good action possible. Reid's principles of common sense appealed to American moral philosophers because they served as a return to reality, a corrective to the mental and moral mistakes of the ideal theory.

Turning to the Common Sense philosophy is not a capitulation to the judgment of the crowd, as Kant disparagingly remarked. Instead, it rescues and rehabilitates common judgment. It reveals that the common judgments of the common man are rooted in reason and necessity. Reid articulated the common principles underlying these judgments. These first principles of common

sense are foundational to “all reasoning, and . . . all science.”⁷⁰ They make possible the pursuit of truth, in the mental realm, and the pursuit of the good, in the moral realm. And the person who rejects them is “lunatic or destitute of common sense.”⁷¹

According to Reid, reason has “two offices”: “[T]he first is to judge of things self-evident; the second to draw conclusions that are not self-evident from those that are. The first of these is the province, and the sole province, of common sense.”⁷² There are first principles of speculative and practical reason. The first principles of speculative reason include the existence of the material world; the persistence of personal identity (you are the same person you were yesterday); the existence of a world inhabited with other people with their own minds, thoughts, and feelings; and the need for every change in nature to have a cause. These principles are self-evident in the same way that the principle that a part cannot be greater than a whole is self-evident. It is undeniable and inescapable. To deny it is “not only false but absurd.”⁷³

One is bound by the first principles of common sense, no matter how much one might like to reject them in theory. For example, one who thought his perception of an alligator five feet away from him was only an idea and not a real alligator would soon be killed. One who thought he was not the same person today that he was yesterday could not order his life in any coherent manner. In fact, he would need medication. As Reid remarked, “[E]ven those who reject [common sense] in speculation, find themselves under a necessity of being governed by it in their practice.”⁷⁴

There are also first principles of practical reason. The first principles of practical reason include the reality of free will to do one thing and not another and the reality of right and wrong in human conduct. The first principles are self-evident, common to all, and necessary to all. One cannot govern one’s own affairs without them. And one cannot be a member of a polity without them. Our understanding of law itself, without which no polity can exist, is dependent on the self-evident moral axioms of common sense. Reid stated:

This inward light of sense is given by heaven to different persons in different degrees. There is a certain degree of it

which is necessary to our being subjects of law and government, capable of managing our own affairs, and answerable for our conduct towards others: this is called common sense, because it is common to all men with whom we can transact business, or call to account for their conduct.⁷⁵

The first principles of common sense, in speculative and practical matters, are metaphysical because they give us access to an order we did not create, an order of being that is intelligible to us. There is more to reality than what is seen. And the metaphysics of common sense gives us access to this unseen reality.

In the study of nature, we make metaphysical judgments. To say that an object, for example, the orange tree behind my house, exists even when no one perceives it is to say that it has being. Thus, there is a “metaphysical as well as empirical level to the beliefs of common sense.”⁷⁶ This applies to the principles of the mind as well. When we study the mind, we study what we cannot see. On this matter, Reid quoted Cicero, who said, “So with the mind of man, though thou seest it not, as thou seest not God, nevertheless as thou recognizest God from His works, so from memory, power of discover, rapidity of movement and all the beauty of virtue, thou shalt recognize the divine power of mind.”⁷⁷

The metaphysics of common sense, then, requires trust in the intellect and the intelligibility of being. Knowledge of being, of the constitution of nature and human nature, which guides our thoughts, speech, and actions, individually and in society, is not reduced to the physical or the empirically verifiable. It is a mental, or spiritual, knowledge, that is public insofar as it can be known by two or more people and affirmed or rejected on the basis of philosophical argumentation. In this way we stretch beyond the vagaries of feelings, perceptions, and circumstances and affirm or deny the truth of general propositions pertaining to an order of being that we did not make but that we share with others and with God.

These metaphysical first principles of common sense are essential to good moral and political reasoning. Only by knowing ourselves can we guide ourselves toward the goods suited to us and our communities. Reid, like Cicero, maintained that we come to

know ourselves through “intellectual analysis” by which we “form general conceptions” and, ultimately, understand the “truth” about our nature.⁷⁸ It is through abstraction and generalization—operations of the intellect—that we grasp the reality of the world and of ourselves. Through abstraction and generalization, we develop definitions of universals, including that of “man.” These universals are the basis of our reasoning and language.⁷⁹

To understand the constitution of human nature, we must adopt the common sense approach of defining the human species in relation to its genus and its specific difference.⁸⁰ This approach is “not a subtle invention of Philosophers, but an operation which all men perform by the light of common sense.”⁸¹ The specific difference that separates humans from the rest of the genus (animal) is reason, which enables the human person to generalize, categorize, define, and communicate.⁸² The human person, then, is a rational animal. And we come to know the human person by an act of the intellect.⁸³

One major mistake made by Berkeley and Hume is that they “explain[ed] away the power of abstraction,” and by doing so they left “no specific distinction between the human understanding and that of the brutes.”⁸⁴ By denying the role of the intellect, these philosophers denied the specific difference between man and beast. They turned the difference between human and beast from one of kind to one of degree. Beyond that, they stripped the human person of his very ability to access, or grasp, the constitution of human nature and reduced him to an image-processing machine driven by sense-perception rather than reason.

It is only when we know the human person, the constitution of our nature, that we can know what the good is. The common sense understanding of the human person is that “he is an animal made up of body and mind . . . capable of various improvements in arts, in knowledge, and in virtue.”⁸⁵ As the human person develops the capacity to think, to read, to procreate, to build, and to manage, he develops powers that accord with his nature. The improvement and perfection of his powers contributes to his excellence, or goodness. According to Reid, man’s “good consists in the vigorous

exertion of his active and intellective powers upon their proper objects; he is made for action and progress, and cannot be happy without it.”⁸⁶

Nature, then, is intelligible. By the act of the intellect, we can understand our own nature. And when we know ourselves, we can know the good for us as humans. “Whatever our feelings or our constitution be,” Reid wrote, “we must be convinced [by the dictates of common sense] that there is a real excellence in some things.”⁸⁷

After the Civil War, the Common Sense philosophy faded from both the academy and the public mind. McCosh criticized Reid and Beattie, in part, for the eventual decline in Common Sense philosophy because, he thought, they were ambiguous about the meaning of common sense.⁸⁸ They insufficiently detached common sense from the prejudice of the masses, or the consent of humankind. Common sense is not merely what the common person thinks about any given matter. While McCosh may have been too harsh in his judgment of Reid and Beattie on this point, McCosh was right to emphasize that in Common Sense philosophy nature has the final say. Prejudice, or common judgment, is merely the starting point, not the standard. As McCosh and Reid both acknowledged, the Common Sense philosophy recognizes that there is an objective, external reality and that the constitution of human nature is equipped with the faculties by which to discern that reality. The final, or ultimate, aim is the proper development of the reasoning faculty so that it assents to that which is true. Thus, Segrest describes common sense as “the intuitive grasp of reality,” oriented toward the attainment of “maximal clarity about the essences of things.”⁸⁹ There is a trajectory in Common Sense philosophy, from the prerational, self-evident first principles on which all common judgments are necessarily grounded, to the acquisition of knowledge about the natures of things and their respective excellences.

Segrest, meanwhile, offers another explanation for the decline in Common Sense philosophy. He faults McCosh for failing to articulate a robust moral and political philosophy of common sense at a time in which consensus on matters of conscience and

common judgment were rapidly declining in America. McCosh “did not grasp the magnitude of the crisis.”⁹⁰ He took common sense for granted.

Segrest argues that the inheritor of the Scottish tradition was William James (1842–1910), who had been schooled in Scottish realism.⁹¹ James’s pragmatism retained some common sense ideas—namely, the idea of conscience as a faculty derived from religion and a thoroughgoing skepticism of power, a remnant of the Christian view of the universality of sin, a view emphasized most notably by Calvin. But James’s pragmatism no longer looked to the constitution of nature and human nature to discover the first principles of speculative and practical reason. According to James, common sense principles were rooted in ancient habits, not the permanent constitution of human nature. James, in fact, interpreted the “laws of nature” not as final, but as malleable and revisable.⁹² It is unsurprising, then, that pragmatism, by reducing laws of nature to custom and by retaining a skepticism of power, would soon set the American public adrift, detached from metaphysical grounding and left only with historical contingency. By rejecting the first principles of the constitution of nature, though, James jettisoned what the Scottish realists had kept from Aristotle and gifted to the Americans. This severed an important philosophic link that Americans shared with Western Europe and its classical past.

The Common Sense Response to Critical Theory

It is still possible to recover the metaphysics of common sense. Just as common sense countered the disintegrative effect of ideal theory in the eighteenth century, it can counter the disintegrative effect of critical theory today. Critical theory, the philosophical perspective of the cultural left and the modern university, places individuals in one of two classes: oppressors or victims of oppressive systems and ideologies. The good of oppressed individuals consists in overcoming the forces of oppression. The oppressors, meanwhile, are treated as irredeemable. This perspective conceives of persons in accord with the contingencies and circumstances of their birth, whether race, sex, and gender, or one’s situatedness

within a political or ideological regime. One's moral status is determined not by individual action but by unchosen attributes, which makes one morally clean if classed among the oppressed or morally unclean if classed among the oppressors. And one's salvation, in this account, is determined not by Christ's death and resurrection—a revealed truth professed by many Common Sense philosophers, many of whom were clergymen—but by overturning the “system.” This perspective erases the universality of human nature (and the natural law that binds it); it downplays moral agency and responsibility and strips the human person of his place in the divine economy of salvation.

Civic education rooted in the metaphysics of common sense and focused on the constitution of human nature can save students from the socially debilitating effects of critical theory and restore a common ground for public discourse. It can do so by focusing, first, on the healthy case and, second, on the whole person.

The metaphysics of common sense is informed by the healthy case, not the unhealthy case, of the individual and of society. Reid adopted the Aristotelian principle of reasoning from the healthy, or sound, state: “[A]s we do not judge of the natural constitution of the body, from the disorders or diseases to which it is subject from accidents, so neither ought we to judge of the natural powers of the mind from its disorders, but from its sound state.”⁹³ We ought to use the healthy case when determining the nature of the human person and when legislating for the common good. Reid wrote that if there is an unusual or exceptional case, say, “a monstrous birth of a woman” in which it is unclear whether it is “a man or not,” it is best not to legislate on such matters but to leave them to judges in specific cases.⁹⁴ One does not draft laws for the one-legged man but for the two-legged. Law, to the extent possible, must be general and universal. It is wise to legislate on the basis of the normal, healthy case, not the exceptional one.

The metaphysics of common sense, moreover, is informed by the substance of the human person, in his entirety, and does not substitute the qualities or accidents of the person (including but not limited to race, sex, and gender) for the whole of the person.

Focusing on the whole of the human person requires nonreductionistic reasoning. Accordingly, the metaphysics of common sense resists confinement to scientistic or systemic analysis. For instance, common sense reasoning acknowledges that science does not explain the whole of human experience. Nothing at the level of brain chemistry can explain our rational deliberation, beliefs, and decisions. Nor do we rely on neurological exams to determine why a political leader decided to drop bombs on another country's nuclear sites or to determine whether that was the right decision.

Similarly, common sense reasoning is not reductionistic on the level of race, sex, and gender. None of these contingent attributes alone can fully explain religious belief or voter behavior, much less the *telos* of human life. Nor can it provide an account of the functions that humans perform—by which we judge excellence.⁹⁵ The metaphysics of common sense rejects the assumption that all life can be explained by scientific analysis, mathematical modeling, quantitative studies, systemic racism, or oppressor-oppressed relationships. Instead, it respects the unseen—though universally felt—reality that human beings have moral agency and are morally assessed, not on the basis of their skin color, sex, or position in society, but on the objective standard of human excellence in speculation and action.

Objective standards ground debates about mathematics as they do debates about morals. “As you cannot reason in mathematics with a man who denies the axioms,” Reid stated, “as little can you reason with a man in morals who denies the first principles of morals.”⁹⁶ C. S. Lewis restated this common sense principle two centuries later, writing, “If nothing is self-evident, nothing can be proved.”⁹⁷ And if nothing can be proved, then everything is reducible to power. It is no coincidence that a critical theorist such as Marcuse rejected the principles of common sense and then regarded reality, as we experience it, as a cover for the domination of the weak by the strong. But truth exists. And self-evident axioms are necessary for us to arrive at truth. Five plus five is not forty-two. A part is not greater than the whole. These are self-evident first principles that are taken for granted. Similarly, it must be taken for

granted in public discourse that strength is superior to weakness, knowledge is superior to ignorance, wisdom is superior to folly, courage is superior to cowardice, and self-command is superior to being carried away by passion. Without agreement on these first principles—which are derived from the whole of human nature, not only from its contingent accidents and circumstances—there can be no reasonable discourse and no self-government.

Incorporating Common Sense into Civic Education

Civic education, rooted in the metaphysics of common sense, informed by the healthy human condition, and grounded in the perspective of the whole, is consistent with true education, which elevates the mind and brings it into a lively encounter with reality—that is, the nature of things. It is on this basis—a common sense understanding of the nature of things—that reasonable discourse takes place. Academic institutes that are instructing college students in civics today, insofar as they are teaching a common sense understanding of the nature of things, are returning to a classical conception of the education of the citizen.

In the classical world of Greece and Rome, the politician was the rhetorician. And the education, or *paideia*, of the rhetorician was all-encompassing, a general education allowing him to take all things into account so that he could prudentially guide the community toward the common good.⁹⁸ The rhetorician received an education in the whole, including metaphysics, ethics, politics, and law. When university presidents from the 1750s to the Civil War offered their capstone courses in moral philosophy, they were providing their students with this kind of knowledge of the whole, a general education that was suitable for statesmen. They were teaching the “architectonic art,” as Aristotle called it, the art of guiding the entire community toward the common good. Since the time of Socrates, moral philosophy explored the entirety of human relations and institutions. And as William Smith, provost of the College of Philadelphia and advocate of the Common Sense philosophy, told his students, “Tully call[ed] [this] education a divine work. . . . Plato call[ed] it a God-like one.”⁹⁹ A civic

education based on the metaphysics of common sense teaches a classical *technologia*, an education in the whole of life, devoted to the discovery of the nature of things.

This classical conception of the education of the citizen, which instructs students in the whole of human affairs (morals, politics, law, economics, history, and aesthetics) and provides them with a shared framework for reasonable discourse rooted in knowledge of the nature of things, can help higher education reformers craft content, curriculum, and pedagogical strategy in new academic institutes. Even seemingly minor pedagogical practices can help students think in accordance with the metaphysics of common sense. One instance, relevant to pedagogical practice, in which Reid's response to Hume is instructive, is Reid's insistence on the right use of language.

Reid thought that Hume violated the principles of common sense by regarding moral distinctions as products of feeling. According to Hume, we praise a character trait as virtuous when we feel a particular sensation in response to it. This, for Reid, constituted an attempt, on Hume's part, to change reality, to persuade ourselves that the language of virtue and vice is an expression of preference, rather than a judgment of truth or falsehood regarding human excellence. Reid distinguished between feeling and judgment. It is one thing to feel the toothache. It is another to judge, or affirm, that we have a toothache. The feeling itself is not true or false, but the judgment, or affirmation, must be true or false. When we are making moral judgments, we are making a statement of truth or falsehood about whether something is in fact virtuous or not.

Students in a contemporary classroom setting routinely say "I feel," rather than "I think," when expressing an opinion. But Reid would not accept this because it is inaccurate. When we are stating an opinion, we are presenting a judgment. We arrive at this judgment after weighing evidence regarding what is or is not the case. Reid wrote, "I give the name of judgment to every determination of the mind concerning what is true or what is false. This, I think, is what Logicians, from the days of Aristotle, have called judgment."¹⁰⁰

Similarly, Reid would oppose a student's use of "I imagine," rather than "I think." To imagine is to take percepts, which may or may not exist in reality, and combine them in the imagination. To think, in contrast, is to abstract and to generalize, to contemplate the universals. It is to rise above the particulars of sense perception and reflect on concepts and categories.

When we use language, we are taking for granted a certain conception of the human person. When students preface statements of opinion with "I imagine," they are, consciously or not, withdrawing their judgments from public philosophical consideration and giving priority to their personal experience. When students preface statements of opinion, particularly about morals, with "I feel," they are abiding by a conception of the person consistent with ideal theory, according to which ideas, not objects, are all we encounter. Those personalized perceptions are not shared. They are not public.

To help return our students to reality, to help them recover the metaphysics of common sense, we can fix their language. When they replace "I feel" with "I think," "I imagine" with "I judge," they remind themselves and each other that philosophical investigation is public, shared, and subject to critique through the exercise of the intellect. A pedagogical fix this small—prohibiting the use of "I feel" before an expression of an opinion—can help restore the architecture of speech that affirms our ability to judge truth and falsehood according to the natures of things.

A bigger fix would consist in curricular changes. When college presidents in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries taught their capstone classes, they instructed their students in what they needed to know to be good human beings and good citizens. Subjects treated in these capstone courses were divinity, moral philosophy, and rhetoric. As Charles Bow writes, "The Common Sense system's scientific approach to moral and metaphysical philosophy advanced the existence and importance of God as the first cause of everything as the architect of the material world and the human constitution." In order to teach students to abide by the natural and providential order of things, these college presidents, including Witherspoon and Stanhope Smith, taught natural

theology, the basic principles of classical theism. And though the American consensus is no longer friendly to classical theism—or perhaps, because of this—it is essential to reintroduce students to the metaphysics and theology of classical theism by teaching natural theology, which is, by definition, neither a denominational nor creedal subject, being, as it is, open to natural reason without the aid of special revelation.

Capstone courses included moral philosophy as well. In these courses, students were taught practical duties—to God, to humanity, and to ourselves. And students were also taught rhetoric, how to write and speak well, which in the age of artificial intelligence will be a signature way in which schools or institutes of classical and civic education can distinguish themselves from other liberal arts colleges, by reviving the humane and classical art of communicating persuasively. The classical and civic education—the great hope of common sense in higher education reform today—can find ways to reintroduce the content of these capstone courses (the metaphysics and theology of classical theism, practical duties rooted in natural law, and rhetoric) as mandatory for its graduates. This bigger curricular adjustment, moreover, must be accompanied by a pedagogical mindset in which faculty members view themselves not as neutral observers or arbiters of various philosophical perspectives but as participants in philosophical controversy. This is how the Common Sense philosophers thought of themselves. And they used the classroom as a venue in which to introduce students to truths necessary for the pursuit of the common good.

Conclusion

According to Philip N. Cohen, common sense in contemporary political discourse entails a “repudiation of scientific authority.”¹⁰¹ Populist politicians use the phrase “common sense” to weaken “any collective sense of empirical reality” and assert themselves as the arbiters of truth.¹⁰² This analysis misses the mark. As Scottish and American educators in the eighteenth century understood, there is a metaphysics of common sense that uses common judgment as a starting point to get us closer to reality. As Reid

remarked, “Philosophers should be very cautious in opposing the common sense of mankind; for, when they do, they rarely miss going wrong.”¹⁰³

The regnant philosophy in higher education—critical theory—has gone wrong. Having permeated the university, the media, and both public and private corporations, it has led legions of DEI consultants to declare, among other things, that being on time for an appointment and learning mathematics are associated with white supremacy.¹⁰⁴ This is a sign of metaphysical lunacy that must be counteracted with common sense. The metaphysics of common sense, which underlay the Scottish philosophy of Common Sense, represents a return to basics, an education in the essential principles of thought and action that make self-government possible.

The metaphysics of common sense familiarizes us with the natures of things, which is the end of education. Academic institutes devoted to classical and civic education, then, should not shy away from teaching the principles of common sense, which are accessible to all, understandable by all, and acted upon by all, whether they acknowledge it or not. These principles are neither original nor innovative, but they are necessary for conducting our affairs well, privately and publicly. Critical theory is disordered and unfit to serve as a public philosophy. Higher education reform can serve the common good by restoring common sense—a proper public philosophy—to the academy.

Notes

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