

Common sense

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Common sense, as described by [*Merriam-Webster*](#), is defined as [beliefs](#) or [propositions](#) that most people consider [prudent](#) and of sound [judgment](#), without reliance on [esoteric knowledge](#) or study or research, but based upon what they see as [knowledge](#) held by people "in common". Thus "common sense" (in this view) equates to the knowledge and [experience](#) which most people already have, or which the person using the term believes that they do or [should](#) have. According to [Cambridge Dictionary](#), the phrase is good sense and sound judgment in practical matters ("[the basic level of practical knowledge and judgment that we all need to help us live in a reasonable and safe way](#)").

Whichever definition is used, identifying particular items of knowledge as "common sense" is difficult. [Philosophers](#) may choose to avoid using the phrase when using precise language. But common sense remains a perennial topic in [epistemology](#) and many philosophers make wide use of the concept or at least refer to it. Some related concepts include [intuitions](#), [pre-theoretic belief](#), [ordinary language](#), the [frame problem](#), [foundational beliefs](#), good sense, [endoxa](#), [axioms](#), [wisdom](#), folk wisdom, [folklore](#) and [public opinion](#).

Common-sense ideas tend to relate to events within human experience (such as [good will](#)), and thus appear commensurate with [human scale](#). Humans lack any common-sense intuition of, for example, the behavior of the

universe at subatomic distances [see [Quantum mechanics](#)], or of speeds approaching that of light [see [Special relativity](#)]. Often ideas that may be considered to be true by common sense are in fact false.

Aristotle

According to [Aristotle](#), the common sense is an actual power of inner sensation (as opposed to the external five senses) whereby the various objects of the external senses (color for sight, sound for hearing, etc.) are united and judged,^[1] such that what one senses by this sense is the substance (or existing thing) in which the various attributes inhere (so, for example, a sheep is able to sense a wolf, not just the color of its fur, the sound of its howl, its odor, and other sensible attributes.) It was not, unlike later developments, considered to be on the level of rationality, which properly did not exist in the lower animals, but only in man; this irrational character was because animals not possessing rationality nevertheless required the use of the common sense in order to sense, for example, the difference between this or that thing, and not merely the pleasure and pain of various disparate sensations.^[2] This also contributes to the understanding held by the Scholastics that when one senses, one senses something, and not just a diversity of sensible phenomena.

Common sense, in this view, differs from later views in that it is concerned with the way one receives sensation, and not

with belief, or wisdom held by many; accordingly, it is "common", not in the sense of being shared among individuals, or being a genus of the different external senses, but inasmuch as it is a principle which governs the activity of the external senses.^[3]

Locke and the Empiricists

[John Locke](#) proposed one meaning of "common sense" in his *[An Essay Concerning Human Understanding](#)*. This interpretation builds on [phenomenological](#) experience. Each of the senses gives input, and then something integrates the sense-data into a single [impression](#). This something Locke sees as the common sense — the sense of things in common between disparate impressions. It therefore allies with "fancy", and opposes "[judgment](#)", or the capacity to divide like things into separates. The French theologian [Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet](#) arguably developed this theory a decade before Locke.^[4] Each of the [empiricist](#) philosophers approaches the problem of the unification of sense-data in their own way, giving various names to the operation. However, the approaches agree that a sense in the human understanding exists that sees commonality and does the combining: "common sense" has the same meaning.

Epistemology

Appeal to common sense characterises a general epistemological orientation called [epistemological particularism](#) (the appellation derives from [Roderick Chisholm](#) (1916–1999)). This orientation contrasts with

epistemological Methodism. The particularist gathers a list of propositions that seem obvious and unassailable and then requires consistency with this set of propositions as a condition of adequacy for any abstract philosophical theory. (Particularism allows, however, rejection of an entry on the list for inconsistency with other, seemingly more secure, entries.) Epistemological Methodists^[citation needed], on the other hand, begin with a theory of **cognition** or justification and then apply it to see which of our pre-theoretical beliefs survive. Reid and Moore represent paradigmatic particularists, while **Descartes** and Hume stand as paradigmatic Methodists. Methodist methodology tends toward skepticism, as the rules for acceptable or rational belief tend to be very restrictive (for instance, Descartes demanded the elimination of doubt; and Hume required the construction of acceptable belief entirely from impressions and **ideas**).

Particularist methodology, on the other hand, tends toward a kind of conservatism, granting perhaps an undue privilege to beliefs in which we happen to have confidence. One interesting question asks whether epistemological thought can mix the methodologies. In such a case, does it not become problematical to attempt **logic**, **metaphysics** and epistemology with the absence of original assumptions stemming from common sense? Particularism, applied to ethics and politics, may seem to simply entrench prejudice and other contingent products of social inculcation (compare **cultural determinism**). Can one provide a principled **distinction** between areas of inquiry where reliance on the dictates of common sense seems legitimate (because

necessary) and areas where it seems illegitimate (as for example an obstruction to intellectual and practical progress)? A meta-philosophical discussion of common sense may then, indeed, proceed: What is common sense? Supposing that one cannot give a precise characterization of it: does that mean that appeal to common sense remains off-limits in philosophy? What utility does it have to discern whether a belief is a matter of common sense or not? And under what circumstances, if any, might one advocate a view that seems to run contrary to common sense? Should considerations of common sense play *any* decisive role in philosophy? Common sense in politics is the same as: ordinary, status quo, non-innovative, safe (popular) ideas. If not common sense, then could another similar concept (perhaps "intuition") play such a role? In general, does epistemology have "philosophical starting points", and if so, how can one characterize them? Supposing that no beliefs exist which we will willingly hold come what may, do there though exist some we ought to hold more stubbornly at least?