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Bertrand Russell and Karl Jaspers on Nuclear Weapons

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Abstract: In *Common Sense and Philosophy* (1959) Bertrand Russell argues against nuclear weapons on the basis of common sense. One year earlier in 1958, Karl Jaspers had argued in his *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Mankind* against nuclear weapons explicitly not on the basis of common sense but on the basis of philosophy. They both arrive at the same conclusion, the encouragement of a popular demand for disarmament but, apparently, by entirely different means. In this paper, I argue that, despite appearances to the contrary, aside from their shared conclusion, it is possible to find common ground between these two philosophers.

Keywords: Nuclear disarmament; common sense; applied philosophy; practical reasoning; Ockham's razor; reason; metaphilosophy; Cold War.

Introduction

Bertrand Russell and Karl Jaspers were members of two different philosophical traditions. Russell was notably a founder of the analytic school of philosophy, much of which attempted to follow his advice that, "all sound philosophy should begin with an analysis of propositions."[1] By contrast, Jaspers accords less importance to the philosophical discovery of new theoretical truths and more importance to philosophy's role in self-discovery. According to Jaspers:

> Philosophizing does not provide man with new, precise knowledge; it does not add a new science to the rest. It offers no suggestions, plans, or programs. But it can arouse the inner disposition from which these tangibles derive their guiding sense.[2]

In general, the Continental tradition, of which Jaspers was a member, would be more willing (in contrast to the analytic tradition) to acknowledge that philosophy might play a role in self-discovery—either individual self-discovery or obtaining knowledge of the human condition. However, in Russell's philosophy self-discovery does not play any significant role.

Moreover, Russell seems to have been completely unaware that Jaspers had written a book that called for the abolition of nuclear weapons not from a common-sense point of view but from a philosophical point of view. His ignorance of Jaspers' book is unsurprising, as when Russell and Jaspers published their arguments against nuclear weapons the gap between the analytic and Continental traditions was at its widest.

However, this makes the search for common ground between Russell and Jaspers all the more interesting. It is also of interest in that, to the current day, the relationship between common sense and philosophy remains vague and largely unexamined; and, despite the gap between analytic and Continental

[1] Bertrand Russell, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*, Cambridge, UK: The University Press 1900, p. 8.

[2] Karl Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1961, p. 209. [Henceforth cited as *FM*]

philosophy having grown narrower in recent years, it is still as common as ever to hear talk of either common sense trumping reason or *vice versa*.

I will argue here that thinking of either one as a trump card is mistaken. Philosophy and common sense are not continuous with each other, yet there is not necessarily any logical conflict between them either, nor are they confined to non-overlapping domains. Rather the difference between them can best be described as a difference of focus. However, at their best, both are reasonable positions to uphold.

Bertrand Russell on Common Sense

In his book, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Russell suggests that philosophy is of value to everyone, as a protection from the prejudices of common sense. He writes:

> The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason. To such a man the world tends to become definite, finite, obvious; common objects rouse no questions, and unfamiliar possibilities are contemptuously rejected...Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. Thus, while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they may be; it removes the somewhat arrogant dogmatism of those who have never travelled into the region of liberating doubt, and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect.[3]

Yet, in later life, after he had largely given up philosophy in favor of journalism, he was happy to portray himself as a spokesperson for common sense. His position seems to have been the same as that of Karl Marx, namely that

> The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.[4]

To the end of changing the world, Russell was quite happy to speak on behalf of common sense.

In criticizing nuclear armament, he believed that common sense coincided with reason, but he was adamant that what he was doing was not philosophy. Indeed, he would not have bestowed the name of philosophy upon any of his journalism. For all of his journalism had an ethical slant and, in the words of Charles Pigden, Russell

> was not sure whether ethical propositions rose to the dignity of knowledge.[5]

As expressed in the title of his book, *Common Sense and Nuclear War*, he was explicit that on the subject of nuclear weapons, his voice was the voice of common sense and not the voice of philosophy.

Philosophy and common sense were, for Russell, entirely different matters; and since philosophy's task was not to effect change in the world, he argued against nuclear weapons by way of using common sense—all the while attempting to stir an answering common sense on the part of his readers.

Karl Jaspers on Reason

Jaspers, like Russell, attempts to initiate a political change at an individual level. But whereas Russell argues that each human should listen to and cultivate the inner voice of common sense, which in this instance he sees as coinciding with reason, Jaspers argues that every human being should both listen to and cultivate reason—in the manner of philosophers. Only by adhering to this practice can there be any hope of surviving the threat posed by nuclear weapons. If human beings were to become more reasonable—that is to say, more philosophical—the chance of the political situation becoming more amenable to reason would increase. Those already pursuing philosophy can lead the way, yet their role can only be to awaken that which is already latent. Jaspers argues that

> reason is the essence of true humanity. If the philosopher's thoughts were not everyone's business—if their object could not be awakened in every mind because it is present in every mind—he could not be what he is meant to be: a trail blazer for man, a teacher of what man is and can be, what he is capable of and where he stands in the universe. [*FM* 316]

[3] Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, London, UK: Williams & Norgate 1912, pp. 242-4.

[4] Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Marx, Engels, The German Ideology*, Moscow, RU: Progress Publishers 1976, pp. 615-7, here p. 617.

[5] Charles Pigden, "Russell's Moral Philosophy," *Stanford Encylopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2024 Edition), eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/russell-moral/.

Neither Russell nor Jaspers rely upon the authority of their philosophical reputations to convince their readers (although in both cases that was most likely a factor in them being published). Both books stand autonomously, without references made to their other respective work. In fact, neither one of the books makes any reference to any other works at all. Jaspers explains:

> My book should not be taken for a prophetic call; it carries no authority but that of rational thought which is given to all human beings. It appeals from reason to reason—but to the grand reason, not to the mere intellect. I should like it to reach those everywhere who do their own thinking. [*FM* vii]

Again and again, Jaspers seeks to persuade his readers that reason is human beings' only hope for improvement of the status quo,

> for reason can pervade all organizations, strengthening each one and itself as well. It lives in the churches, in government, in the family, in schools and universities, in all social structures within all nations. It turns to those, not to deny their historic reality but to return them to their original truth, but also to put them on its own terms, on the terms of unreserved reason. [*FM* 317]

He argues that, in the threat to humankind's very existence, we must re-examine our very essence, of which reason is our most precious resource. Reason is a subject upon which Jaspers is passionate. For example, Jaspers elaborates:

> Reason is more than the sum of acts of clear thinking. These acts, rather, spring from a life-carrying basic mood, and it is this mood we call reason.
>
> It does not come over us as a gay or somber attitude toward life; it is not subject to the fluctuations of vitality, although they may disturb it. It does not occur as a vital process.
>
> This rational mood is not inborn. It is acquired under favorable conditions, although its meaning is not bound to these premises of its realization. It can grow only in a quiet, ceaseless struggle; it must be constantly wrested anew from unreason...
>
> It is as strong in youth as in old age, but in all phases of life it is in danger of failing. It is never perfected.
>
> It exists only in common. The individual cannot be rational by himself. [*FM* 218]

He admits that political change, of the sort that can avoid self-destruction, cannot be brought about by just one person and yet it can only begin at the level of each individual exercising their reason in the company of others. Only in this way can a society become more reasonable—more philosophical. As mentioned above, to be reasonable seems, for Jaspers, to be almost synonymous with being philosophical. Only by this radical turn to philosophy is there any hope that a nuclear catastrophe might be averted.

There is no easier way, for:

> To the question, "What am I to do?" no practical instructions are available, only answers that will illuminate demands which everyone must make upon himself. [*FM* 326]

Jaspers lists several conditions that one must meet in order to attain guidance by reason:

> I am to think...possibilities through, to make room for knowing my own will...truthfulness calls for distrust, but for a distrust arising from trust in the possibility of freedom...I am to change my life. Without this change I shall not be worthy of trust and capable of unreserved communication...I am to make my own choices...I am to realize that my purpose—saving the life of mankind—cannot be attained as a purpose, only as a result. [*FM* 326]

In these ways, reason will be able to flourish and humans might avoid catastrophe. While all humans must become philosophers in their individual spheres, this does not necessarily mean becoming academic philosophers. Jaspers writes:

> A way of thinking that belongs to no department and does not surrender to any—this is a kind of philosophy we may expect of everyone. It may be dormant, but in the true human being it can be raised to bright consciousness and critical assurance. [*FM* 9-10]

Jaspers is careful not to claim that humans will succeed in avoiding self-destruction, yet he does not doubt that reason is our best hope of avoiding it.

Jaspers on Common Sense

Jaspers views common sense as essentially a substitute for reason. This can be inferred from the simple fact that he discusses it under the heading "Substitutes for Reason" in Chapter 15 of *The Future of Mankind*, alongside political realism and religion.

Although he admits that common sense can be "pervaded by reason" (*FM* 247)—that is to say, there are instances in which it can be reasonable, nevertheless, except under the most stable of conditions, it is liable to be misleading. Jaspers elaborates:

> In part, common sense is an ethos of undefined rules—of tact—that has become a matter of course in the framework of existing orders and conventions. It is limited by confidence in the existence of such orders, and therefore possible only under stable, accustomed conditions. It offers formulas for the moderation that justifies a host of firm rules by such indefinite maxims as "One shouldn't...That isn't done...This is the thing to do."
>
> Yet common sense means more—not just the rules of a given society, but something common to mankind. Even then it presupposes an undefined order, a propriety in the nature of things, a valid standard. To recognize this concretely without knowing it in general is what constitutes common sense. [*FM* 248]

Jaspers notes that common sense

> protects us from general principles which, though correct, are destructive in application being abstract and blind to reality. [*FM* 247]

It does so by an automatic reliance upon formulaic maxims, but this is of course far from the practice of philosophical reasoning.

Nonetheless, Jaspers believes there are circumstances in which it can be pervaded by reason. This is made clear in the following passage in which he argues that one should conceive of the commanding authority of common-sense reasoning in a two-fold manner:

> It may envision itself as complete, as the court of last resort—and then, on its premise of being right, it neglects what does not fit into its orders...On the other hand, common sense may transform itself from an authority into a path. Then it becomes reason, as in the "common sense maxims" formulated by Kant: "First, think yourself; second, think in every other person's place; and third, always think in agreement with yourself." [*FM* 248]

As an authority, common sense is inward-looking, ignoring (or dismissing) what it does not understand; but, as a path, it is outward-looking, attempting to be universal. Presumably then—although Jaspers does not spell it out—it is in that these maxims are both normative and universalizable, that he would say that here common sense is pervaded by reason.

Summarizing their agreement and disagreement, Jaspers and Russell both distrust common sense, insofar as they see it as fundamentally unphilosophical and unreasonable; yet both admit that there are times when common sense is pervaded by reason. That is why, in order to change the world, Russell is prepared to speak on behalf of common sense when arguing away from epistemology and metaphysics. However, Jaspers does not do so. To him, the maxims of everyday morality may be a matter of common sense but, in his view, the maxims of everyday morality will not suffice in order to change the world. Thus, in order to change the world, Jaspers prefers to speak on behalf of philosophy. This is what I find to be the essential difference between the two philosophers regarding their respective understanding of common sense and its application to changing the world for the better.

Reconciling Russell and Jaspers

Against Russell and Jaspers, an objection can be raised that although it is common to think of common sense as a substitute for reason, it is, in fact, no more nor less than a cautionary or conservative repercussion of reason. For example, John Coates writes in this regard:

> Common sense is like the loyal opposition in parliamentary democracies—annoying in its constant criticism and in the inertia it adds to the intellectual enterprise, yet important over the long haul in catching unnoticed error...Common sense merely points to the rational procedure of tenaciously holding on to our current beliefs until enough evidence is mustered to warrant their abandonment.[6]

Furthermore, although it may tend to conservatism in certain situations—for example, in the points raised by the opposition in a parliamentary democracy—it does not, as Jaspers believed, invariably protect one

> from general principles which, though correct, are destructive in application, being abstract and blind to reality. [*FM* 247]

For in fact the prime and most widespread example of the conservatism of common sense is also a philosophical example—philosophical in that it is made explicit (in writing) in philosophy—the principle of Ockham's razor, commonly formulated as: entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity. Russell formulated the principle as:

> Wherever possible, substitute constructions out of known entities for inferences to unknown entities.[7]

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[6] John Coates, *The Claims of Common Sense: Moore, Wittgenstein, Keynes and the Social Sciences*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1996, pp. 1, 5.

[7] Bertrand Russell, "Logical Atomism (1924)," in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, London, UK: Routledge Classics 1985, pp. 126-50, here p. 130.

As far as William of Ockham himself is concerned, George Hughes notes that Ockham may have simply quoted "a well-known saying rather than saying anything original" since only the following short sentence on the subject can be found in his writings,

> it is pointless to do with more things what can be done with fewer.[8]

Indeed, it is a principle that plainly applies just as well to, say, mending a shoe as it does to metaphysics. Although there may very well be differences between philosophy and common sense, with the example of Ockham's razor in mind, it is not at all obvious that one can examine their foundations and, on that basis, pronounce that at a fundamental level either one of these trumps the other.

Jaspers claims that common sense can function as a court of last resort as well as a path or guide to action (*FM* 248). For example, common sense dictates that I stop a small child from picking up a bag of rat poison—thereby preserving the peaceful status quo. In this instance, common sense is both my guide to action and my court of last resort that orders me to neglect what does not fit into its orders (for there is no time for debate). In this instance, common sense is, in the words of Henry David Thoreau,

> as invaluable as the virtue of conformity in the army and navy.[9]

Indeed, it may well be that the most widely agreed examples of common sense would be those in which, as in this example, common sense is both a path and a court of last resort.

But what philosophers, of all sorts, probably find most grating in arguments that turn to the authority of common sense is that common sense is so often cited as incontrovertible, whilst yet its use is so often question-begging. Thus, it is seen as both a body of knowledge respected by all right-thinking people and an infallible means of arriving at the truth, available to all right-thinking people. But who are these right-thinking people? Why, the people who we recognize as having common sense, of course. Such arguments are, of course, perfectly circular and yet, rhetorically, they are often found to be persuasive.

Common sense is seen as the ability, common to the entire human race, to recognize self-evident truths. This is how it was used by Thomas Paine in his argument for American independence in *Common Sense* (1776). But to many of his readers, Paine's argument was not in fact common sense—it was not self-evident—until they had read his pamphlet.

Moreover, curiously, as Sophia Rosenfeld argues, no one had common sense—in its modern sense—until the Enlightenment. She writes:

> The concept of a collective common sense—sometimes in alliance with the idea of the rational individual, sometimes in conflict—played a vital, if often tacit, role in the construction of democracy's popular, as opposed to constitutional, face. In this regard, common sense seems much like sympathy and natural sentiment, those now widely discussed eighteenth-century emotional inventions that were also seen as important sources of social bonds and communally produced truth in the Age of Revolutions.[10]

So, common sense is not, as is often suggested, valid at all times and in all places. The Romans had the concept of *sensus communis*, meaning the shared values of a community, but they did not have quite the same conception of it as current Western societies. Immanuel Kant writes that critics of David Hume

> found a more convenient method of being defiant without any insight, namely, the appeal to common sense...by means of which the most superficial ranter can safely enter the lists with the most thorough thinker and hold his own.[11]

Yet, although examples of the abuse of common sense are not hard to find, they do not undermine its legitimacy, as implementing the cautionary or conservative aspect of reason, for instance, as in the principle of Ockham's razor.

The exercise of common sense is understandably of most use when it involves drawing back from an unexpected danger, often almost automatically. A modicum of reason is involved in these actions but not

[8] George Hughes, "Ockham's Razor," in *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Mautner, London, UK: Penguin Books 2005, p. 440.

[9] Henry D. Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Boston and Cambridge, MA: James Munroe and Company 1849, p. 407.

[10] Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2011, pp. 5-6.

[11] Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, transl. Paul Carus, ed. Lewis White Beck, Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill 1950, p. 7.

one of deliberation. Philosophy, with its liberal use of hypotheticals, seems, by comparison, more interested in seeking out previously unforeseen dangers in order to avoid them. Yet even in the common sense example of stopping the small child from picking up a bag of rat poison, there is a hypothetical scenario involved.

In summary, it may not be possible to draw a distinct line between philosophy and common sense, in the ways suggested by Russell and Jaspers. Common sense and philosophy may not be continuous with each other as, for instance, Thomas Reid believed, but that is not to say that they necessarily conflict with each other. It might be more accurate to say that they have a different focus: common sense, at its most uncontentious, is an excellent device by which to draw back from unexpected danger; whereas philosophy seems to be more like a device by which to reach out and deliberate about that which may not have been previously foreseen.

A difference in focus would explain the broad applicability of common sense, ranging from daily matters-of-course to specific philosophical problems such as Hume's problem of induction. A difference in focus would also explain why the principle of Ockham's razor can be a principle that is common to both. For, although they have a different focus, they may both manifest reason.

However, as distinguished in this way, there seems to be no meta-level from which to differentiate between common uses and philosophical ones, or from which to assign common sense to one sphere of life and philosophy to another. So, then when should one resort to common sense, and when should one resort to philosophy? While it is an easy task to give examples for each one of the two domains, it is difficult to give a definitive rule by which to divide them. This may be because one person's far-off danger is the next person's imminent catastrophe. Of course, there will often be much common ground on what constitutes an imminent catastrophe, yet personal attitudes toward risk vary, nonetheless.

With this in mind, and returning to Russell and Jaspers, there is no meta-level from which to judge whether Russell was right to argue with common sense against nuclear weapons as opposed to Jaspers who chose to argue with philosophy against nuclear weapons. However, it needs to be pointed out that the route of common sense and the route of philosophy can both be effective and can both manifest reason.

Indeed, reason is the common ground between both books under discussion. A reader who sees nuclear weapons as representing immediate and urgent danger may find Russell's common sense message more effective, whereas a reader who does not see the danger in quite such urgent terms may find Jaspers' philosophical message more effective. Nonetheless, one does not need to choose between them.[12]

[12] My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for the helpful comments.