CHAPTER VIII

THE RÔLE OF COMMON SENSE

(1) The defence of common sense

The metaphysical extravagances of the Seventeenth Century provoked a reaction. Men such as Fenelon and Buffier in France, Berkeley in Ireland, Reid and his circle in Scotland, and, in a paradoxical way, David Hume, rose up to advance the claims of common sense. But they did so in radically different ways: and it soon became apparent that some of the proffered explications of common sense had within them vices similar to those which they were intended to extirpate.

Should we declare the dictates of Nature to be clear, distinct, and self-evident truths? This would create an alliance with the Cartesian philosophy: the citadel of error in the opinion of other advocates of common sense. Should we ascribe the authority of these dictates merely to the consensus of opinion, whether cultivated or vulgar? This would invite the reproach of appealing basely to popular acclaim.

1 There is, as yet, no adequate history of common sense in philosophy; Sir William Hamilton sketched the outline of such a history in the long Note A of his edition of Reid. (From what we have already said on the subject, it will be evident that at a deeper level the history of common sense in philosophy would be a history of philosophy).

At the beginning of the 18th Century the French Jesuit, Buffier, treated common sense explicitly in an able and entertaining fashion. A group of 18th Century Scots philosophers, Reid, Oswald and Beattie, publicly defended their allegiance to common sense. (See S. Grave, The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense, Oxford 1960). Reid and Beattie, both of whom occupied University Chairs, were influential; Oswald, the lonely Minister of Methven, because of the homespun quality of his work, has been much under-rated. Dugald Stewart and Hamilton kept the topic of common sense alive into the next century. The Scottish common sense philosophers had some vogue in France in the 19th Century under the aegis of Victor Cousin; common sense found an eloquent expositor in Jouffroy (the translator of Reid).

J. S. Mill's Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy (1865) effected, in Britain, a return to favour of the scientific (and apparently anti-common sense) principles espoused by Priestley and Hartley; from about the middle of the 19th Century common sense is little heard of in British philosophical circles. G. E. Moore's various writings, notably his Defence of Common Sense (1925), mark a turn of the tide; since that time the topic has been, tacitly, the focus of much philosophic endeavour in Britain. (Cf. VI, 1).


G. Ardley, Berkeley's Renovation of Philosophy
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Should we class the dictates with innate impulsions, with instincts, with intuitions, with occult pronouncements? Such a course would lay the philosopher open to the charge that he is multiplying principles in an arbitrary fashion, and is thus leading us into a wilderness of futility, a wilderness in which dogmatism will inevitably breed scepticism.¹

The defence of common sense in the Eighteenth Century commenced as a counter to the alliance of metaphysical dogmatism and scepticism. The defence, in its various forms, was soon discovered to be in peril of becoming another kind of alliance of dogmatism and scepticism. Some of the defenders of common sense found difficulty in escaping the charge that they were themselves but inverted sceptics, if not dangerous enthusiasts; as eager as their predecessors, in Locke's words, to "cram their tenets down all men's throats whom they can get into their power, without permitting them to examine their truth or falsehood."² In this mêlée, where extremes meet, the charges of scepticism and dogmatism become polemical epithets, and common sense a pawn in the game.

Berkeley's attitude to common sense was subtly different from that of his contemporaries; he was concerned to say moderate and conciliatory things; but his mild accents were not understood in the storm raging around him. In order to see Berkeley in better perspective, let us first look at two contrasting schools of thought on the nature and function of common sense.

Hume, as we have seen, put forward a dichotomy: either metaphysics, or common sense. He believed that by exhibiting the futility of the received metaphysics (which he perversely identified with all metaphysics), the virtue of common sense would emerge in its own right. In short, he sought to abolish metaphysics in order to liberate the dictates of Nature; as Kant, at a later date, would seek to abolish reason in order to make room for faith. Hume urges attention to the spontaneous and unanalysable dispositions to be found in the breast of any man of refined sensibilities; he believes that the daily practice

¹ Cf. Priestley's remarks VI 1.
² Locke, Essay IV, iii, 20, cf. I, iii, 25 etc. J. W. Yolton in his John Locke and the Way of Ideas (Oxford 1956) has examined the moral and religious controversies in the England of Locke's day; he has shown how prevalent was the appeal to innate principles by theologians, and how Locke's polemic against innate ideas was directed to this domestic tyranny. Since it is but a short step from "innate" principle to "common sense" principle, we may, from Yolton's enquiries, better appreciate the dismay which men like Priestley felt on witnessing what seemed to be a Scots resurgence of old and discredited doctrines.

Yolton, by his researches, has brought the figure of Locke to life, and has banished the old stylised figure of the Descartes-Locke-Berkeley-Hume succession. Similarly the figure of Berkeley can be made to live, only by seeing Berkeley in the context of his contemporaries.