CHAPTER IX

THE POTENTIALITY OF COMMON SENSE

(1) The adamantine core of common sense

Berkeley was not actuated by any sentimental attachment to common sense. Rather did he regard criticised common sense as something ultimately inescapable, try as we may. In men at their best the nature of common sense is most patent. But the force of common sense is most clearly exhibited at the opposite pole: that men at their worst and most perverse cannot escape it. They betray its presence at every moment in practice. (cf. VI, 3.) Long ago, Plato pointed to something analogous in his argument for the primacy of morality: robbers are immoral in their external dealings, but must perforce be moral in their internal dealings. (Rep. 351 f.) St. Augustine summed up the situation on one pungent phrase: “No vice, however unnatural, can pull nature up by the roots” (De Civ. Dei, xix, 12).

When we examine the nature of inescapable common sense, we perceive to begin with that it has the quality of circumspection; it takes a synoptic view, at least incipiently; it puts things in their right relative perspective, at least in local circumstances. These are not attributes of merely casual opinion, even if that opinion be held for a time by all men. “Common sense is so uncommon” Voltaire remarked 1 with sufficient flippant truth to give us pause if we are tempted to equate common sense with universal opinion. Not vulgar belief or opinion, but the hard inescapable core of something beyond opinion, the residue of general consensus when all that is partial and ephemeral is shed, the underlying universality discovered when men are driven down to their roots: this is the first mark of that common sense which Berkeley believes to be the proper focus of the understanding.

Some men, in a spirit of intellectual pride and self-sufficiency affect

1 Stolen from Buffier, *Elemens de Metaphysique*, vi. (as noticed by Hamilton, *Reid* ii, 758 b)
to ignore common sense. Their pretentions might be borne as harmless whimsies if, as Hylas observes,

"their paradoxes and scepticism did not draw after them some consequences of general disadvantage to mankind. But the mischief lieth here; that when men of less leisure see them who are supposed to have spent their whole time in the pursuits of knowledge, professing an entire ignorance of all things, or advancing such notions as are repugnant to plain and commonly received principles, they will be tempted to entertain suspicions concerning the most important truths, which they had hitherto held sacred and unquestionable." (HP. I, p.p. 171–2.)

Such a spectacle demands a thorough renovation of academic philosophy. Men of common sense must be rescued from blind guides through whose ministrations a man’s last state is worse than his first.

(2) Common sense as inchoate wisdom

We have already referred (VIII, 4) to Berkeley’s apologia in the Preface to the Three Dialogues. Let us consider again the passage:

"It is like coming home from a long voyage: a man reflects with pleasure on the many difficulties and perplexities he has passed through, sets his heart at ease, and enjoys himself with more satisfaction for the future."

The image of "home" suggests a state of enjoyment and relaxation: an enjoyment to which we are entitled because we have worked hard for it in our long voyage abroad; a relaxation which is not that of abdication, but of consummation, of calm plenitude. It is the state which Aristotle calls schola; a term translated into English by that sadly attenuated word "leisure": but the kind of leisure which Aristotle has in mind is not a mere interval of unemployment; it is a masterly state of awareness concomitant with work and giving meaning to work. Our work is not fruitful and meaningful if we allow it to become an end in itself. It is joyful only when it proceeds from the leisured mind and returns for the enrichment of that leisure\(^1\): A state of affairs seen on the level of Nature, which, on the plane of Grace is summed up in the maxim (commonly attributed to St. Benedict) of Laborare est Orare.

The state of leisure is the state of wisdom or of reason or of contemplation. There are many paths by which we may reach this state; many elements which contribute to its attainment. The intellectual element is but one; nevertheless in some degree it is essential, and in an age of intellectual agitation the intellectual element may be the

\(^1\) See the work of Josef Pieper referred to above (VII, 3), Leisure the Basis of Culture.