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The “Evolutionary Argument” and the Metaphilosophy of Common Sense

Introduction

In the previous chapter an attempt was made to provide an account of the metaphilosophy of common sense, to present in schematic form what I called the common sense project, and to list a number of putative common sense beliefs. In this chapter I want to address the second of the principal tasks of the common sense project, namely, to provide an argument to justify the view that common sense beliefs ought to be treated as default positions. I have already argued, on what might be called “internal” grounds, that this distinctive approach to the business of philosophy makes sense given the nature of the philosophical enterprise. If strictly philosophical problems are co-ordination problems, then it behoves the philosopher to seek to resolve the tensions between reputable opinions while preserving as many of those opinions as possible. It also follows that common sense beliefs will have a greater claim on the philosopher than philosophical theories and arguments.

But what if one is unimpressed by this account of the nature of philosophy? What happens if it becomes impossible to secure widespread agreement on the nature of the philosophical enterprise? Is there anything else that can be offered in support of the common sense position? It is because worries of this kind are difficult to quell that I want to develop an additional line of support for the view that common sense beliefs ought to be treated as default positions.

I suggest, however, that we need to approach our problem afresh from an entirely different angle. For reasons that will become clear in due course, an “external” argument, an argument based on non-philosophical considerations, will be the focus of our efforts to develop an additional line of support for the metaphilosophy of common sense.
In particular, I revisit an old argument based on evolutionary biology and psychology which, its supporters allege, gives reason to suppose that our pre-theoretical intuitions, beliefs and concepts are at least approximately true or adequate. In its standard form this evolutionary argument (EA) faces many serious objections. But I will show that a revised version of EA, placed in a new context and employed to different ends, is not vulnerable to the standard criticisms levelled against arguments of this general type. And as we shall see, it lends crucial external support to the metaphilosophy of common sense.

**Preliminary scene setting**

Since I am now approaching matters from an entirely different perspective, some preliminary scene setting is in order. Consider the following two pairs of arguments:

**A1**
1. If Hume’s epistemological principles are correct, then I do not know that this object in my hand is a pencil.
2. Hume’s epistemological principles are correct.
3. I do not know that this object in my hand is a pencil.

(3), of course, is just one of the sceptical conclusions, or “philosopher’s paradoxes”, for which Hume is justly (in)famous. Now consider the closely related argument from Moore:

**A2**
1. If Hume’s epistemological principles are correct, then I do not know that this object in my hand is a pencil.
2. I “do” know that the object in my hand is a pencil.
3. Hume’s epistemological principles are false.¹

Both arguments are equally valid from a formal point of view, and both share the central premise. At issue, of course, is the strength of our commitment to the second premise of each argument. How is one to choose between them? The question is clearly quite urgent given the significant differences in the respective conclusions to which they lead. And the urgency extends beyond this particular case, for stand-offs of this sort occur regularly in philosophy, stand-offs, that is, between those inclined to accept what they take to be “plain common sense” on the one hand, and those willing to forgo such intuitions in the light of