PHILOSOPHY AND COMMON SENSE

The history of philosophy presents a singular spectacle; a number of problems recur in all eras; each of these problems inspires a number of solutions, always the same; philosophers share them; discussion takes place; all opinions are attacked and defended with the same appearance of truth: humanity listens, adopts no one's opinion, but keeps its own, which is what is called *common sense*.

Thus, to cite examples, all philosophical eras have brought back to the forefront the opposition ofmaterialism and spiritualism in metaphysics, that of stoicism and epicureanism in morality; none of these doctrines prevailed in a lasting way; none perished; all found illustrious and good-faith supporters, all exerted about the same influence; but, in the end, humankind, witnessing their debates, became neither materialist, nor spiritualist, nor stoic, nor epicurean; it remained what it was before philosophy, believing at the same time in matter and spirit, respecting duty and pursuing happiness all at once.

This spectacle, which inspires in the superficial observer contempt for philosophy, and which has provided skepticism with weapons that appear so formidable, is profoundly instructive for anyone who seeks in the events of the intellectual world the laws of the development of the human species, which are revealed there in a much truer and much broader way than in those of the political world; for the actions of men translate their ideas as their ideas translate the laws of their nature; and, of these two translations, the most immediate is also the most faithful and the clearest.

But this spectacle, to become instructive, needs to be understood, and to be understood, it needs to be studied. Now, it is still a completely new subject, one on which reflection has scarcely paused except in passing. The active development of the human species initially attracted everyone's attention, and this was to be expected: we are always struck by what is more external. The field of facts itself has been searched from every angle; all actions, all events, all dates have been meticulously examined: this is how the history of humanity began. But having gathered the facts, we feel the need to explain them, and delving deeper, people sought their causes in customs, religions and political institutions. The century of chronicles and erudition gave way to the century of Montesquieu and Voltaire. The necessity of going further began to be felt, calling enlightened minds higher and farther. Customs, institutions and dogmas, which explain the conduct and fate of peoples, are themselves only general facts, whose origin and succession need to be explained. And since these general facts are merely the expression of opinions successively adopted on moral, political,

and religious questions, this explanation can only be found in the history of humanity's intellectual development, a development that occurred by virtue of the very laws of our nature. It is there that we aspire, and there that any definitive explanation of historical events must go higher.

The history of philosophy is thus a new study, an important study, a study that eminently belongs to our time; and it is as curious as it is urgent to consider it, no longer as a catalogue of bizarre opinions completely foreign to the affairs of this world, born by chance in the heads of some men, at such and such a time, and in such and such a country, but as a progressive series of attempts, made to resolve the questions that most closely concern the interests of humanity, by all that it has produced of the most illustrious.

This is not the tableau that the history of philosophy presents at first glance to a superficial or prejudiced mind, but rather what an impartial and elevated perspective reveals. Indeed, in these problems that invariably present themselves to human thought, each time that philosophy awakens to activity after centuries of dormancy, it becomes impossible to ignore the supreme and fundamental questions that concern humankind above all else, questions upon which all others depend or before which they vanish; questions, in short, that contain, in their various guises, the enigma of this world. It is around these questions that philosophy has stirred since its inception, that is, since there have been thinking people; its systems are but diverse words offered to this enigma; its lengthy debates are but the solemn discussion of this great mystery; and its history faithfully represents the development of human intelligence on the quintessentially human problems.

Now, to return to our starting point, what is most striking in this philosophical development, what demands explanation above all, is the divergence and lack of consistency in its results. There is not a single important question on which philosophy agrees with itself; there is not one of its solutions that has been able to take hold in a lasting way and withstand the force of universal opinion, which has swept them all away. Nothing is stranger, at first glance, and nothing is more worthy of reflection than this inability of thought to settle on a point, than this contradiction between men of genius and the common people, between philosophy and common sense, on the points that most closely concern the interests of humanity. Plato and Aristotle, Zeno and Epicurus, Descartes and Hobbes, Leibniz and Locke, Kant and Condillac — that is to say, the most powerful intellects the world has produced — exhausted their powers on the nature of truth, goodness, and beauty, without being able to agree on a single result; and the common people who appear to have never once thought about it, have persisted in finding true what some had declared false, certain what others had judged doubtful, good and beautiful what their doctrines had stripped of these characteristics; what was a question for one seemed not to be one for the other; for while the philosophers exhausted

themselves in solving these great problems, the common people, without appearing to think about it, judged their solutions, admitted or rejected them, straightened or corrected them; while the philosophers argued or contradicted each other, the people seemed to doubt nothing, and alone, always in agreement with themselves, after having seen all the philosophical doctrines pass by, alone also did not change their own.

If philosophy were like the higher mathematics, where the common man understands nothing and takes no interest, one might mistake his resistance for indifference, or at least deny his right to intervene in the debate; but neither truth, nor goodness, nor beauty, nor any of the great objects with which philosophy deals, are beyond the grasp of common sense, since at every moment all men judge that something is beautiful, that something is true, that something is good; and nothing is less indifferent to them, since they concern themselves only with truth, justice, beauty and utility. One cannot deny humanity's competence since it judges; but how can one deny that of Plato, Descartes and Kant? They too were men, and moreover, men of genius; and yet their doctrines have not become the religion of the people; the religion of the people is older than philosophy; philosophy has not altered it. It has survived all systems, and this religion is *common sense*.

Should we conclude that nothing is certain, that it is an illusion of the common people to think they know what philosophers have not yet been able to demonstrate? But how can we explain the illusion of humankind? How can we admit an intelligent race, entirely destined by the Creator to believe in what is false? Or rather, must we infer that philosophers are fools who lose their reason by rising above common sense, and who become incapable of discerning the truth precisely because they seek it? But who would dare insult common sense enough to proclaim the folly of so many illustrious men, whom common sense itself has proclaimed the elite of humanity? Both hypotheses are equally repugnant, and the difficulty cannot be resolved either by skepticism or by contempt for philosophy.

No historical fact is as strange or as curious; none is more important to explain. Until its meaning is grasped, one cannot form a true idea of philosophy, nor of the importance that should be attached to its progress, nor of the perspective from which it should be considered and sought to serve in the civilized nations of Europe. We hope, therefore, that we will be forgiven if, in order to report to our readers on the current state of philosophy in France, we have yielded to the need to present some preliminary considerations on this subject.

We generally have a correct, but very superficial, idea of what we call *common sense;* and while repeating that there is a divergence between common sense and philosophy, we hardly think of comparing the nature of these two things, to discover where they touch and where they differ.

Everyone understands *common sense* to mean a certain number of principles or notions that are self-evident, from which all people derive the motives for their judgments and the rules of their conduct; and nothing is truer than this idea. But what is not sufficiently understood is that these principles are quite simply positive solutions to all the great problems that philosophy grapples with. How would we direct our conduct and what judgments would we be capable of if we could not distinguish good from evil, truth from falsehood, beauty from ugliness, one being from another and reality from nothingness; if we did not know what to make of what we see with our eyes, feel with our conscience and conceive with our reason; if we had no idea of the purpose of this life and its consequences, of the author of all things and of his nature? What would be the light of intelligence and how would human society function if there were even the shadow of doubt in the notions we possess on most of these points? Now what are these notions, so firmly and necessarily established in the minds of all men, if not a series of answers to these questions: What is truth? What is goodness? What is beauty? What is the nature of things? What is being? What is the origin and certainty of human knowledge? What is the destiny of man in this world? Is his entire destiny fulfilled in this life? Is this world the work of chance or of an intelligent cause? And, we ask, are these not all the questions with which philosophy is concerned? Are these not, at least in their germinal form, all the logical, metaphysical, moral, political and religious questions?

Common sense is therefore nothing more than a collection of solutions to the questions that philosophers grapple with: it is therefore another philosophy, prior to philosophy proper, since it is spontaneously found deep within every consciousness, independently of any scientific inquiry. Thus, there are two votes on the questions that concern humanity: that of the common people and that of the philosophers, the spontaneous vote and the scientific vote, common sense and systems.

We have a clear idea of common sense; let us now examine what the contradiction between common sense and philosophy consists of.

If we compare the common-sense solution to any given problem with the various solutions proposed by philosophers, we always find that the common-sense solution is broader than the philosophical solutions. Examples prove this: Zeno defined the good as *that which conforms to reason*; Epicurus, as *pleasant sensation*; Kant, *as that which is obligatory*. Common sense adopts all these opinions and therefore cannot be confined to any one of them. Spiritualists affirm the existence of the mind, materialists that of matter; but the former end up denying matter and the latter the mind. Common sense admits both matter and mind, and thereby contradicts both of these systems. Empiricists recognize no authority in matters of knowledge other than the eyes and hands; Descartes admits no authority other than consciousness; Plato and Kant give precedence

to reason or the conception of that which neither our senses nor our consciousness can grasp; common sense recognizes the authority of consciousness, the senses and reason all together. If we continue this parallel in all the other questions, the same result will always be found. Thus, we arrive at this important consequence: if common sense does not adopt the systems of philosophers, it is not because the systems say one thing and common sense another, but because the systems say less and common sense more. Delve into the heart of all philosophical opinions, and you will always discover a positive element that common sense adopts and by which they align with the conscience of humankind. Skepticism itself is not exempt from this general law. But this element is everything for the philosopher and not everything for common sense, and such is the true nature of the contradiction that divides them.

But if, on the one hand, all the questions that philosophy aims to resolve are already resolved in the depths of human consciousness; and if, on the other hand, the efforts of philosophy can never reach the scope of solutions found in common sense, what is the point of philosophical inquiry? Before their advent to philosophy, philosophers, by virtue of their humanity, possessed the light of common sense; they used it to judge and conduct themselves; and whatever the results of their scientific work, we do not see them abandoning it in the ordinary course of life, nor are they any more committed to their own doctrines than the rest of humanity. In practice, they acknowledge not only the existence but also the superiority of solutions found in common sense. What, then, can they possibly seek, and what is the purpose of their efforts? Let us try to explain.

The solutions of common sense are not explicitly established in the minds of men. If you ask the first comer if he has ever known what idea he forms of the good, or what he thinks of the nature of things, he will not know what you are asking him; if you try to explain the meaning of these two questions to him, unless you use all the art of Socrates, he will have difficulty understanding you. But try to question, with the Stoics, whether pleasure is a good, or to deny, with the spiritualists, the existence of bodies, and you will see him laugh at your folly and demonstrate on these two points the most unshakable conviction. It will be the same on every other question. Common sense is therefore a very real opinion, but one that dominates people almost without their knowledge; its existence is proven by the very fact that they judge and behave as if they possessed it; obscure in its entirety, no one could perceive it, nor explain it; but when a particular case presents itself, it is suddenly revealed by a clear, distinct, positive application, then it returns to the shadows: one senses it in every determination; But, outside of its application, it is as if it did not exist; and it is precisely this obscurity that renders it insufficient for thinking people. Reflection cannot be satisfied with this kind of inspiration, whose very nature is to be unaware of itself and not to think of knowing itself. If people are born with common sense, they are also born with the need to understand themselves: one

is no more natural than the other. Now, as soon as this need develops, there is something other than common sense in human consciousness; there is a beginning of clarity, a beginning of philosophy. But from then on, there are also points of clarity and points of obscurity in human consciousness, a predominance of the former over the latter, and consequently an alteration from the balance of common sense. From this springs the germ of the spirit of system; this germ has developed boldly in powerful intellects, which have been highly exclusive because they have been highly reflective; it scarcely develops in the mass of humankind, and that is why common sense retains all its dominion there. And yet, even there, its influence manifests itself in those oscillations that universal opinion undergoes from one century to the next, and which, without altering its stability, never leave it immobile.

Such is the origin of *philosophy*, but what is the origin of *common sense*? Where does this mysterious knowledge come from, which everyone carries within themselves and which no one remembers having acquired, so vast that it contains and surpasses all philosophical doctrines, so full of authority that it judges them and outlives them, and, at the same time, so obscure that the humanity that possesses it is forced to relearn it? We are touching on the very heart of the matter, and we will invoke neither the memories of Plato, nor the innate ideas of Descartes, nor the forms of understanding of Kantian philosophy to resolve it. A very simple fact of human nature explains the whole mystery.

The difference between *seeing* and *looking* has long been recognized, since every language has two words to express these two modes of vision. As soon as my eye is open to the outside world, all the objects it encompasses appear to me simultaneously and without my intervention. In this passive and total view is contained all that I can know of the scene before my eyes; but everything is contained confusedly and obscurely, because I have not yet looked. Now, what do I do when I look? Instead of passively receiving the manifestation of the object, I go to it; I become active and freely active. But to what end? If the object had not first struck me, I would have no idea of it and would not even think to look at it: sight therefore necessarily precedes looking; it is its indispensable condition. Looking, therefore, does not reveal to me what it perceives; it merely notices what was already known. But what it grasps was known only indistinctly; it grasps it distinctly. It thus clarifies the knowledge we already possessed, and that is its entire function.

But how does it clarify? If it embraced everything, it would distinguish nothing. It is therefore forced to take each part of the whole one after the other in order to know them clearly: analysis is its method, just as synthesis is that of sight.

But in thus traversing the various parts of the whole, the gaze either omits some or sheds uneven light on those it has grasped, giving some more importance and others less than they naturally possess; thus, sometimes it

mutilates the picture, sometimes it alters its truth, and most often it does both. Sight, on the contrary, like a faithful mirror, reflects it as it is; breadth and fidelity are its characteristics, but it is obscure; the gaze is clear, but it is narrow, and never fails to disfigure the object it studies.

Now, this twofold way of knowing is not, as has been thought, a law of the organ of sight, which our body imposes on our intelligence; it is the law of the intelligence itself; and what proves this is that it always proceeds in the same way, whether it becomes aware of what is happening within us, or whether it rises to the conception of that which is invisible to our eyes and imperceptible to our consciousness.

In other words, the look is not the beginning of intelligence, nor is philosophy the beginning of humankind. Before we seize hold of the intellect and voluntarily direct it to the examination of a certain part of reality, all of reality, or at least all that it contains that is visible and conceivable to humankind, was already manifested within it. From the very beginning of life, our understanding is incessantly affected by all things, and we have the dim feeling or perception of all that we are given to know. Thus, truth, goodness, beauty, the nature of things — the whole object of philosophy — are continually, faithfully, but obscurely revealed to humanity; and from this come those vague notions, those confused but profound beliefs, those indistinct but powerful feelings about the highest matters, which ferment silently in all classes of society and govern it in every age; from this, in short, comes the whole of common sense.

But the elite of humanity is not content with these obscure insights, these vague persuasions: it aspires to understand what everyone believes; it aspires to clear solutions to the great human questions, and with this begins philosophy or science. Science is nothing other than the successive clarification of the different points of this immense store of ideas, accumulated in the intellect through the manifestation of things; and what brings about this clarification is the look after the view, in other words, liberty questioning the understanding on a question, asking itself what it knows and forcing itself to clarify its knowledge. To philosophize is to learn; to learn is not to know, but to note what one already knew. And how can one want to learn if one is ignorant of what one wants to learn?

Thus, the questions spontaneously and eternally posed, spontaneously and obscurely resolved, simply by the fact that human intelligence was confronted with things, are voluntarily posed and deliberately stirred up by philosophy. The look succeeds the view, reflection succeeds feeling, free analysis succeeds involuntary synthesis and each instrument manifests its properties in the knowledge it yields. The characteristic of primitive sight is its breadth and obscurity; free observation distinguishes, but it is narrow. Therefore, philosophy, even if it clearly perceives what it grasps, perceives only points;

common sense, which has seen nothing clearly, has seen everything. Philosophy, which perceives only points, distorts their natural proportions, breaks their dependence on the whole; common sense, which sees everything, leaves to each thing both its relationships and its proportions; the parts of truth that philosophy illuminates, common sense recognizes. But on the day the weary philosopher presumes to proclaim that the part he has brought to light is the whole, common sense, which has a sense of the whole, does not recognize it in this mutilated image and denies philosophy.

Such is the course of philosophy, and such is the meaning of the spectacle it has presented to this day. If the same questions have reappeared in every era, it is because they contain, in their various facets, the problem of life, and because humankind can only be interested in things that affect it. If the same solutions have always been reproduced, it is because they were the true elements of the complete solution, and because human intelligence cannot escape the circle of reality. If these solutions are constantly contradicted, without any triumphing or perishing, is that because all, being diverse elements of truth, recommend themselves equally to common sense, and none, representing the whole truth, could be accepted in its place. If common sense and philosophy could not agree, it is not because there are two truths, one for philosophers and the other for the common people, but because there are two ways of approaching truth: one that encompasses all truth, enough to recognize it when presented, enough to feel when it is mutilated, but not enough to fully grasp and express it; while the other, which grasps and expresses it, cannot fully comprehend it.

But the divorce between philosophy and common sense is not inherently permanent. If philosophy had presented itself for what it is, it would long ago have been admitted to the rank of the reasonable sciences that common sense can acknowledge; but it is so young that it is still unaware of itself, its purpose, and its destiny. Until now, it has not defined itself precisely; it has not yet grasped its task, its means, or its limitations. The world awaits its explanation in order to judge it, and its self-knowledge in order to recognize it. The moment when a science, after struggling for a long time in its cradle, after marking its recent existence with vigorous and incoherent attempts, finally becomes conscious of itself, calms down, restrains itself, fixes its goal, its sphere, its method and begins to show that it understands and governs itself through wise and systematic research — this moment, which has almost arrived for the natural sciences, is still awaited by philosophy. Until now, everything in philosophy has been spontaneous and personal; there have been philosophers: Plato, Descartes, Locke, Kant; each in their own way cast brilliant views on the intellectual and moral world; but these views await a science to receive and classify them, for philosophy does not yet exist.

The day when philosophy, reflecting on itself and the history of its early attempts, recognizes that its boldest efforts have thus far only succeeded in

highlighting a few common-sense beliefs; the day it finds the reason for this in the fact of human nature — that it is not the intellect that discovers reality, but reality that reveals itself to the intellect, so that the most powerful geniuses can only have the advantage over the common people of better understanding a few aspects of this shared revelation — then philosophy will recognize its destiny and finally resign itself to it. To clarify, through reflection, the obscure intuitions that everyone receives in the presence of things — that is all it can do and consequently all it will want to do. Without knowing it, until now, and despite its ambition, it has done nothing else; but it will change its method and its spirit. It will know that every idea, being necessarily in us the reflection of some reality, every idea, in its primitive naivety, is necessarily true; it will know that there are no falsehoods except the analyses of science, and that if they are false, it is because they are incomplete; it will therefore be less hasty in declaring science complete and the world explained; instead of making systems, it will make observations; instead of being exclusive, it will become tolerant and will finally take on the characteristics of maturity; for in the life of a science, the spirit of system is a sign of youth, like the inclination to become infatuated in that of man.

Theodore Jouffroy.

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