

Common Sense Is Not So Common

Adam Ludke

Department of English, Anoka Ramsey Community College

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Prof. Chris McCarthy

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Growing up, I remember always asking why I can't play with balls in the house, or why I wasn't allowed to eat candy for breakfast. My father always gave me the same answer, "It's common sense." Now that I'm older, I look back on it with a clear idea of what he meant, but I was always confused as a child for why he gave that reasoning. In "Appeals to common sense don't convince anyone" from *Star Tribune*, F.D. Flam (2024) talks about how the statements or ideas we think are common, are not actually common. They give quite a few examples politically talking about how electees will appeal to the belief of common sense. They also give an example of a study that was done with thousands of people to show few people had the same ideas. I agree that common sense is not as common as many people think, I also agree that it is used to appeal to a lot of people to make them feel wrong. On the flip side, I disagree with his belief that it is nonexistent and meaningless. In addition to that, unlike him I believe that with everything we learn growing up, common sense does still have value and is possible to be used as reasoning.

When I decided to investigate how common sense really worked, I realized a lot of authors have come to the consensus that it is not actually as common as we think. I have come to agree with this idea after researching more about it. A good piece of evidence to show this though is from the article "We can't trust common sense, but we can trust science" by Peter Ellerton (2016). He has a quote that is said to come from Albert Einstein, "[...] common sense is actually nothing more than a deposit of prejudices laid down in the mind prior to the age of eighteen." This quote shows us that what we think is common sense is just the ideas we have produced as individuals growing up in the society around us. This quote especially emphasizes that as we grow up, we tend to agree and believe with what we see around us. In other words, individually we make sense of what we see and hear, and collectively think that everyone has

grown up in a similar way. Because this quote says that our idea of common sense comes from what we make sense of in the world around us, it disproves the idea that we have a collective idea of common sense. From day to day, we already disagree with a lot of people's thoughts and ideas, and common sense is no different. One individual may think one thing is right, or obvious, whereas another may disagree. Since these people are different it shows that they don't believe the same things, which goes directly against common sense. This is all to say that common sense is not common throughout the population, but it is more akin to what we think are shared beliefs.

Another point that Flam talks about a lot is how the idea of common sense is used to appeal to people. The idea behind common sense is that everyone believes in it. I am sure when you have done something in life you now see as dumb, that you have heard the phrase "Use common sense." It makes us feel like idiots at that moment, because now it seems so clear to us. A good quote of this is said by Magda Osman (2024), in the article "Politicians love to appeal to common sense – but does it trump expertise?" from *The Conversation*: "So why do politicians love to talk about common sense so much? To me it seems like a convenient way to shut off doubts and questions." (Osman, 2023) In the quote there are 2 separate ideas. First, it shuts off doubts, and secondly it shuts off questions. The reason for this is that if you wanted to doubt it, then you would not be a part of the "Common" anymore. People by nature do not want to be apart from the group, and especially do not want to be ostracized for it. Politicians, and many others around the world, pull on this by making people feel like they would be outside of the collective if they believe something different than the statement. This relates back to Flam's idea that common sense is used to appeal to people. It is used to make people want to share their ideas. This is all like people being a part of a bandwagon. Many people will follow the collective

group, but if the claim of somebody else makes them feel like they are not with the collective, then many times it will get people to share the same ideas.

Throughout the article Flam talks about how common sense is completely nonexistent except for as he says, “the only beliefs people shared were concrete observations of the world — that gravity makes things fall, that triangles have three sides.” (Flam, 2024) While I believe many beliefs may not be as common as we think, I believe there is some evidence as to how common sense exists. One good example of this is said by John Staughton in his article “What Is Common Sense... Really?” from *Science ABC*: “If you are cooking dinner in a large pot and pick it up after it has been on the hob, you will burn yourself. If you do this, one might say that you lack “common sense.” (Staughton, 2019) This saying refers to the idea that if something is hot, do not touch it. It is a survival instinct you could imagine, and if we allow common sense to be included in things such as that, then there are many possibilities for it. As you can imagine, when something hurts most people try to stop whatever it is that’s causing it. This could be shown as an example of common sense, as it’s an experience that is learned by everyone themselves, as most people get hurt somehow. This all explains that while there are few common statements between people, there are actions or ideas that many people follow instinctively. I’m sure everyone has got burnt at some point, as well as knowing of gravity. Both give examples that some things in this world are for the majority shared experiences. What this really means is that everyone will feel pain when touching something hot, just like how everyone will see things fall when they drop them. It gives us an example of what common sense can truly be seen as. While there are many beliefs that aren’t common between people, there are a few that are shared. This shows that while common sense is not as common as we might think, it is still important and plays a significant role in our daily life.

In addition to not touching a hot pan, I am sure you have heard to not stick something metal into an outlet. It's common sense, right? Flam argues that common sense should be avoided being used in arguments, and we should base our arguments on science and facts. We established that a lot of statements you may think would be common sense, it is not actually as common as you may think. Because of this we should avoid using it in an argument as people may think differently. While that is true, there still are many arguments we can look back on where common sense may play a significant role. For example, if someone would ask why not to touch a hot pan, or why not to go to work late, and many other things, there is this common theme of it being obvious that you should avoid it. Another saying from John Staughton is: "In all of the definitions, from thousands of years ago to today, a common through-line is awareness. It suggests self-awareness and an awareness of others that facilitates our decision-making as we move through the world." (Staughton, 2019) This quote shows what has been found as the most important aspect of common sense is the awareness of ourselves and others. Referring back to the examples from earlier, as said in the definition by Staughton, we should be able to rely on our self-awareness, to make sensible decisions. When working in a professional workplace, it is only natural to see the theme of being on time, responsible, and on task. It is an example of learning common sense, which is akin to learning to be more aware. There is also the counter-reasoning that a lot of people may lack this self-awareness. That is expected as you must learn what you need to be aware of in your situation. It also proves the idea that common sense isn't as common as many people believe because a lot of the awareness people develop may be different. This definition given shows that common sense can be a strong argument because having awareness is expected in the world we live in. As defined common sense is awareness, and you could argue

that one should be more aware of their surroundings, just as you could argue to use common sense, and rely on what you have learned.

Flam's ideas are similar to mine. I agree that common sense is not as common as some people may think. Beyond that, I also agree that it is often used to appeal to make people agree with them. However, I still do think that it exists in many ideas and places and can be used as a convincing argument. I have heard a lot of people throughout my life say I am smart with books, but not with common sense. Through my research on common sense, I have come to learn that the reason they believe that is because they have grown up learning and believing in different things. Others may know one thing clearly, which may not be obvious to me. This can be common throughout many people and relationships. It is important to realize that we all have grown and experienced life differently. Next time you find yourself saying or hearing "Use common sense" think about how it may not be as common as you could imagine, and everyone will get to where they need to go somehow.

References

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Authors Note:

This topic was a little tough to come up with at first, but overall, it was by far the most interesting one to write. When I started writing the essay, I didn't believe I would find so much support for common sense not being common. My biggest struggle for this essay was making it flow nicely. I started out with an interesting essay, but as I read it over, I found it to be very choppy and hard to read. The first change I wanted to make was the transitioning. This was tough as I found quite a few mistakes, the second change I decided to add was to make it more personal, as I wanted it to reflect more of my experience with common sense. Lastly, I wanted this to be persuasive, and I found some of my elaboration to be unconvincing, so I decided to add

more and reword some of it. Overall, I'm very happy with how the essay turned out, and I learned a lot writing this essay.