

COMMON SENSE AS A CULTURAL SYSTEM

BY CLIFFORD GEERTZ

Very early on in that album of notional games and abrupt metaphors he called *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein compares language to a city:

Do not be troubled by the fact that [some reduced languages he has just invented for didactic purposes] consist only of imperatives. If you want to say that they are therefore incomplete, ask yourself whether our language is complete--whether it was before the symbolism of chemistry and the notation of the infinitesimal calculus were annexed to it, for these are, so to speak, the suburbs of our language. (And how many houses or streets does it take before a town begins to be a town?) Our language can be seen as an old city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of modern sections with straight regular streets and uniform houses.¹

If we extend this image to culture, we can say that anthropologists have traditionally taken the old city for their province, wandering about its haphazard alleys trying to work up some rough sort of map of it, and have only lately begun to wonder how the suburbs, which seem to be crowding in more closely all the time, got built, what connection they have to the old city (did they grow out of it? has their creation changed it? will they finally swallow it up altogether?), and what life in such symmetrical places could possibly be like. The difference between the sorts of societies anthropologists have traditionally studied, traditional ones, and the sorts they normally inhabit, modern ones, has commonly been put in terms of primitivity. But it might rather be put in terms of the degree to which there has grown up around the ancient tangle of received practices, accepted beliefs, habitual judgments, and untaught emotions those squared off and straightened out systems of thought and action--physics, counterpoint, existentialism, Christianity, engineering, jurisprudence, Marxism--that are so prominent a feature of our own landscape that we can't imagine a world in which they, or something resembling them, do not exist.

We know, of course, that there is little chemistry and less calculus in Tikopia or Timbuctoo, and that bolshevism, vanishing-point perspective, doctrines of hypostatic union, and disquisitions on the mind-body problem are not exactly universally distributed phenomena. Yet we are reluctant, and anthropologists are especially reluctant, to draw from such facts the conclusion that science, ideology, art, religion, or philosophy, or at least the impulses they serve, are not the common property of all mankind.

And out of that reluctance has grown a whole tradition of argument designed to prove that "simpler" peoples do so have a sense for the divine, a dispassionate interest in knowledge, a feel for legal form, or a for-itself-alone appreciation of beauty, even if these things are not immured in the neat, compartmentalized realms of culture so familiar to us. Thus Durkheim found elementary forms of religious life among the Australian aborigines, Boas a spontaneous sense of design on the Northwest Coast, Levi-Strauss a "concrete" science in the Amazon, Griaule a symbolic ontology in a West African tribe, and Gluckman an implicit *jus commune* in an East African one. Nothing in the suburbs that was not first in the old city.

Yet, though all this has had a certain success, in that hardly anyone now conceives of primitives, insofar as they use the term at all any more, as simple pragmatists groping for physical well-being through a fog of superstition, it hasn't stilled the essential question: wherein lies the difference--for even the most passionate defenders of the proposition that every people has its own sort of depth (and I am one of them), admit that there is a difference--between the worked-up shapes of studied, and the roughcast ones of colloquial, culture.

It is going to be part of my argument here that this whole discussion has been generally miscast, and that the issue is not whether there is an elementary form of science to be found in the Trobriands or an elementary form of law among the Barotse, or whether totemism is "really" a religion or the cargo cult "really" an ideology (questions which seem to me to turn so completely on definitions as to reduce without residue to matters of intellectual policy and rhetorical taste); but to what degree aspects of culture are systematized at all in such places, the degree to which there are any suburbs. And in attacking that problem, an effort more promising than searching for essentialist definitions of art or science or religion or law and then trying to decide whether the Bushmen have any, I want to turn to a dimension of culture not usually conceived as forming an ordered realm in the way these

more familiar districts of the soul do. I mean "common sense."

There are a number of reasons why treating common sense as a relatively organized body of considered thought, rather than just what anyone clothed and in his right mind knows, should lead on to some useful conclusions; but perhaps the most important is that it is an inherent characteristic of common-sense thought precisely to deny this and to affirm that its tenets are immediate deliverances of experience, not deliberated reflections upon it. Knowing that rain wets and that one ought to come in out of it, or that fire burns and one ought not to play with it (to stick to our own culture for the moment) are conflated into comprising one large realm of the given and undeniable, a catalog of in-the-grain-of-nature realities so peremptory as to force themselves upon any mind sufficiently unclouded to receive them. Yet this is clearly not so. No one, or no one functioning very well, doubts that rain wets; but there may be some people around who question the proposition that one ought to come in out of it, holding that it is good for one's character to brave the elements-hatlessness is next to godliness. And the attractions of playing with fire often, with some people usually, override the full recognition of the pain that will result. Religion rests its case on revelation, science on method, ideology on moral passion; but common sense rests its on the assertion that it is not a case at all, just life in a nutshell. The world is its authority.

The analysis of common sense, as opposed to the exercise of it, must then begin by redrawing this erased distinction between the mere matter-of-fact apprehension of reality--or whatever it is you want to call what we apprehend merely and matter-of-factly--and down-to-earth, colloquial wisdom, judgments or assessments of it. When we say someone shows common sense we mean to suggest more than that he is just using his eyes and ears, but is, as we say, keeping them open, using them judiciously, intelligently, perceptively, reflectively, or trying to, and that he is capable of coping with everyday problems in an everyday way with some effectiveness. And when we say he lacks common sense we mean not that he is retarded, that he doesn't grasp the fact that rain wets or fire burns, but that he bungles the everyday problems life throws up for him: he leaves his house on a cloudy day without an umbrella; his life is a series of scorplings he should have had the wit not merely to avoid but not to have stirred the flames for in the first place. The opposite of someone who is able to apprehend the sheer actualities of experience is, as I have suggested, a defective; the opposite of someone who is able to come to sensible conclusions on the basis of them is a fool. And this last has less to do with intellect, narrowly defined, than we generally imagine. As Saul Bellow, thinking of certain sorts of government advisors and certain sorts of radical writers, has remarked, the world is full of high-IQ morons.

This analytical dissolution of the unspoken premise from which common sense draws its authority--that it presents reality neat--is not intended to undermine that authority, but to relocate it. If common sense is as much an interpretation of the immediacies of experience, a gloss on them, as are myth, painting, epistemology, or whatever, then it is, like them, historically constructed and, like them, subjected to historically defined standards of judgment. It can be questioned, disputed, affirmed, developed, formalized, contemplated, even taught, and it can vary dramatically from one people to the next. It is, in short, a cultural system, though not usually a very tightly integrated one, and it rests on the same basis that any other such system rests: the conviction by those whose possession it is of its value and validity. Here, as elsewhere, things are what you make of them.

The importance of all this for philosophy is, of course, that common sense, or some kindred conception, has become a central category, almost the central category, in a wide range of modern philosophical systems. It has always been an important category in such systems from the Platonic Socrates (where its function was to demonstrate its own inadequacy) forward. Both the Cartesian and Lockean traditions depended, in their different ways--indeed, their culturally different ways--upon doctrines about what was and what wasn't self-evident, if not exactly to the vernacular mind at least to the unencumbered one. But in this century the notion of (as it tends to be put) "untutored" common sense--what the plain man thinks when sheltered from the vain sophistications of schoolmen--has, with so much else disappearing into science and poetry, grown into almost the thematic subject of philosophy. The focus on ordinary language in Wittgenstein, Austin, Ryle; the development of the so-called phenomenology of everyday life by Husserl, Schutz, Merleau-Ponty; the glorification of personal, in-the-midst-of-life decision in continental existentialism; the taking of garden-variety problem solving as the paradigm of reason in American pragmatism-- all reflect this tendency to look towards the structure of down-to-earth, humdrum, *brave type* thought for clues to the deeper mysteries of existence. G.E. Moore, proving the reality of the external world by holding up one hand and saying here is a physical object and then holding up the other and saying here is another, is, doctrinal details aside, the epitomizing image of a very large part of recent philosophy in the West.

Yet though it has thus emerged as a focus of so much intense attention, common sense remains more an

assumed phenomenon than an analyzed one. Husserl, and following him Schutz, have dealt with the conceptual foundations of "everyday" experience, how we construe the world we biographically inhabit, but without much recognition of the distinction between that and what Dr. Johnson was doing when he kicked the stone to confute Berkeley, or Sherlock Holmes was doing when he reflected on the silent dog in the night; and Ryle has at least remarked in passing that one does not "exhibit common sense or the lack of it in using a knife and fork. [One does] in dealing with a plausible beggar or a mechanical breakdown when [one has] not got the proper tools." But generally, the notion of common sense has been rather common-sensical: what anyone with common sense knows.

Anthropology can be of use here in much the same way as it is generally: providing out-of-the-way cases, it sets nearby ones in an altered context. If we look at the views of people who draw conclusions different from our own by the mere living of their lives, learn different lessons in the school of hard knocks, we will rather quickly become aware that common sense is both a more problematical and a more profound affair than it seems from the perspective of a Parisian cafe or an Oxford Common Room. As one of the oldest suburbs of human culture--not very regular, not very uniform, but yet moving beyond the maze of little streets and squares towards some less casual shape--it displays in a particularly overt way the impulse upon which such developments are built: the desire to render the world distinct.

II

Consider from this perspective rather than the one from which it is usually considered (the nature and function of magic), Evans-Pritchard's famous discussion of Zande witchcraft. He is, as he explicitly says but no one seems much to have noticed, concerned with common-sense thought--Zande common-sense thought-- as the general background against which the notion of witchcraft is developed. It is the flouting of Zande notions of natural causation, what in the mere experience of the world leads to what, that suggests the operation of some other sort of causation--Evans-Pritchard calls it "mystical"--which in fact rather materialistic concept of witchcraft (it involves a blackish substance located in an individual's belly, and so on) sums up.

Take a Zande boy, he says, who has stubbed his foot on a tree stump and developed an infection. The boy says it's witchcraft. Nonsense, says Evans-Pritchard, out of his own common-sense tradition: you were merely bloody careless; you should have looked where you were going. I did look where I was going; you have to with so many stumps about, says the boy--*and if I hadn't been witched I would have seen it*. Furthermore, "all cuts do not take days to heal, but, on the contrary, close quickly, for that is the nature of cuts." But this one festered, thus witchcraft must be involved.

Or take a Zande potter, a very skilled one, who, when now and again one of his pots cracks in the making, cries "witchcraft!" Nonsense! says Evans-Pritchard, who, like all good ethnographers, seems never to learn: of course sometimes pots crack in the making; it's the way of the world. But, says the potter, I chose the clay carefully, I took pains to remove all the pebbles and dirt, I built up the clay slowly and with care, and I abstained from sexual intercourse the night before. And *still* it broke. What else can it be but witchcraft? And yet another time, when he we's ill--feeling unfit, as he puts it--Evans-Pritchard wondered aloud to some Zandes whether it may have been that he had eaten too many bananas, and they said, nonsense! bananas don't cause illness; it must have been witchcraft.

Thus, however "mystical" the content of Zande witchcraft beliefs may or may not be (and I have already suggested they seem so to me only in the sense that I do not myself hold them), they are actually employed by the Zande in a way anything but mysterious--as an elaboration and defense of the truth claims of colloquial reason. Behind all these reflections upon stubbed toes, botched pots, and sour stomachs lies a tissue of common-sense notions the Zande apparently regard as being true on their face: that minor cuts normally heal rapidly; that stoves render baked clay liable to cracking; that abstention from sexual intercourse is prerequisite to success in pot making; that in walking about Zandeland it is unwise to daydream, for the place is full of stumps. And it is as part of this tissue of common-sense assumptions, not of some primitive metaphysics, that the concept of witchcraft takes on its meaning and has its force. For all the talk about its flying about in the night like a firefly, witchcraft doesn't celebrate an unseen order, it certifies a seen one.

It is when ordinary expectations fail to hold, when the Zande man-in-the-field is confronted with anomalies or

contradictions, that the cry of witchcraft goes up. It is, in this respect at least, a kind of dummy variable in the system of common-sense thought. Rather than transcending that thought, it reinforces it by adding to it an all-purpose idea which acts to reassure the Zande that their fund of commonplaces is, momentary appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, dependable and adequate. Thus, if a man contracts leprosy it is attributed to witchcraft only if there is no incest in the family, for "everyone knows" that incest causes leprosy. Adultery, too, causes misfortune. A man may be killed in war or hunting as a result of his wife's infidelities. Before going to war or out to hunt, a man, as is only sensible, will often demand that his wife divulge the names of her lovers. If she says, truthfully, that she has none (I don't know what the Zande common-sense view concerning the veracity of women is, but if mere asking seems enough it must be unusual) and he dies anyway, then it must have been witchcraft--unless, of course, he has done something else obviously foolish. Similarly, ignorance, stupidity, or incompetence, culturally defined, are quite sufficient causes of failure in Zande eyes. If, in examining his cracked pot, the potter does in fact find a stone, he stops muttering about witchcraft and starts muttering about his own negligence--instead, that is, of merely assuming that witchcraft was responsible for the stone's being there. And when an inexperienced potter's pot cracks it is put down, as seems only reasonable, to his inexperience, not to some ontological kink in reality.

In this context, at least, the cry of witchcraft functions for the Azande as the cry of *Insha Allah* functions for some Muslims or crossing oneself functions for some Christians, less to lead into more troubling questions--religious, philosophical, scientific, moral--about how the world is put together and what life comes to, than to block such questions from view; to seal up the common-sense view of the world--"everything is what it is and not another thing," as Joseph Butler put it-- against the doubts its inevitable insufficiencies inevitably stimulate.

"From generation to generation," Evans-Pritchard writes, "Azande regulate their economic activities according to a transmitted body of knowledge, in their building and crafts no less than their agricultural and hunting pursuits. They have a sound working knowledge of nature in so far as it concerns their welfare.... It is true that their knowledge is empirical and incomplete and that it is not transmitted by any systematic teaching but is handed over from one generation to another slowly and casually during childhood and early manhood. Yet it suffices for their everyday tasks and seasonal pursuits." It is this conviction of the plain man that he is on top of things, and not only economic things, that makes action possible for him at all, and which--here through invoking witchcraft to blunt failures, with us by appealing to a long tradition of cracker-barrel philosophizing to commemorate successes--must therefore be protected at all costs. It has, of course, often been remarked that the maintenance of religious faith is a problematic matter in any society; and, theories of the supposed spontaneity of primitives' religious impulses aside, that is, I think, true. But it is at least as true, and very much less remarked, that maintaining faith in the reliability of the axioms and arguments of common sense is no less problematical. Dr. Johnson's famous device for silencing common-sense doubts--"and that's an end on the matter!"--is, when you get right down to it, not that much less desperate than Tertullian's for halting religious doubts--"*credo quia impossibile*"--and "witchcraft!" is no worse than either of them. Men plug the dikes of their most needed beliefs with whatever mud they can find.

All this comes out rather more dramatically when, instead of confining oneself to a single culture looked at generally, one views several at once with respect to a single-problem focus. An excellent example of such an approach can be found in an article in the *American Anthropologist* of a few years back by Robert Edgerton on what is now called intersexuality, but is perhaps more commonly known as hermaphroditism.

Surely if there is one thing that everyone takes to be part of the way in which the world is arranged it is that human beings are divided without remainder into two biological sexes. Of course, it is recognized everywhere that some people--homosexuals, transvestites, and so on--may not behave in terms of the role expectations ascribed to them on the basis of their biological sex, and more recently some people in our society have gone so far as to suggest that roles thus differentiated should not be assigned at all. But whether one wants to shout "*vive la différence!*" or "*à bas la différence!*", the sheer existence of *la différence* is not subject to much discussion. The view of that legendary little girl--that people come in two kinds, plain and fancy--may have been lamentably unliberated; but that she noticed something anatomically real seems apparent enough.

Yet, as a matter of fact, she may not have inspected a large enough sample. Gender in human beings is not a purely dichotomous variable. It is not an evenly continuous one either, of course, or our love life would be even more complicated than it already is. But about 2 or 3 percent of human beings are markedly intersexual, a number of them to the point where both sorts of external genitalia appear, or where developed breasts occur in an

individual with male genitalia, and so on. This raises certain problems for biological science, problems with respect to which a good deal of headway is right now being made. But it raises, also, certain problems for common sense, for the network of practical and moral concepts woven about those supposedly most rooted of root realities: maleness and femaleness. Intersexuality is more than an empirical surprise; it is a cultural challenge.

It is a challenge that is met in diverse ways. The Romans, Edgerton reports, regarded intersexed infants as supernaturally cursed and put them to death. The Greeks, as was their habit, took a more relaxed view and, though they regarded such persons as peculiar, put it all down as just one of those things--after all, Hermaphroditus, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite who became united in one body with a nymph, provided precedent enough--and let them live out their lives without undue stigma. Edgerton's paper indeed pivots around a fascinating contrast among three quite variant responses to the phenomenon of intersexuality--that of the Americans, the Navaho, and the Pokot (the last a Kenyan tribe)--in terms of the common-sense views these people hold concerning human gender and its general place in nature. As he says, different people may react differently when confronted with individuals whose bodies are sexually anomalous, but they can hardly ignore them. If received ideas of "the normal and the natural" are to be kept intact, something must be said about these rather spectacular disaccordances with them.

Americans regard intersexuality with what can only be called horror. Individuals, Edgerton says, can be moved to nausea by the mere sight of intersexed genitalia or even by a discussion of the condition. "As a moral and legal enigma," he continues, "it knows few peers. Can such a person marry? Is military service relevant? How is the sex on a birth certificate to be made out? Can it properly be changed? Is it psychologically advisable, or even possible, for someone raised as a girl, suddenly to become a boy? ... How can an intersexed person behave in school shower rooms, in public bathrooms, in dating activities?" Clearly, common sense is at the end of its tether.

The reaction is to encourage, usually with great passion and sometimes with rather more than that, the intersexual to adopt either a male or female role. Many intersexuals do thus "pass " for the whole of their lives as "normal" men or women, something that involves a good deal of careful artifice. Others either seek or are forced into surgery to "correct," cosmetically anyway, the condition and become "legitimate" males or females. Outside of freak shows, we permit only one solution to the dilemma of intersexuality, a solution the person with the condition is obliged to adopt to soothe the sensibilities of the rest of us. "All concerned," Edgerton writes, "from parents to physicians are enjoined to discover which of the two natural sexes the intersexed person most appropriately is and then to help the ambiguous, incongruous, and upsetting 'it' to become at least a partially acceptable 'him' or 'her.' In short, if the facts don't measure up to your expectations, change the facts, or, if that's not feasible, disguise them."

So much for savages. Turning to the Navaho, among whom W.W. Hill made a systematic study of hermaphroditism as early as 1935, the picture is quite different. For them, too, of course, intersexuality is abnormal, but rather than evoking horror and disgust it evokes wonder and awe. The intersexual is considered to have been divinely blessed and to convey that blessing to others. Intersexuals are not only respected, they are practically revered. "They know everything," one of Hill's informants says, "they can do the work of both a man and a woman. I think when all the [intersexuals] are gone, that it will be the end of the Navaho." "If there were no [intersexuals]," another informant said, "the country would change. They are responsible for all the wealth in the country. If there were no more left, the horses, sheep, and Navaho would all 'go. They are leaders, just like President Roosevelt. " Yet another said, "An [intersexual] around the hogan will bring good luck and riches. It does a great deal for the country if you have an [intersexual] around." And so on.

Navaho common sense thus places the anomaly of intersexuality-- for, as I say, it seems no less an anomaly to them than it does to us, because it is no less an anomaly--in a quite different light than does ours. Interpreting it to be not a horror but a blessing leads on to notions that seem as peculiar to us as that adultery causes hunting accidents or incest leprosy, but that seem to the Navaho only what anyone with his head screwed on straight cannot help but think. For example, that rubbing the genitals of intersexed animals (which are also highly valued) on the tails of female sheep and goats and on the noses of male sheep and goats causes the flocks to prosper and more milk to be produced. Or that intersexed persons should be made the heads of their families and given complete control over all the family property, because then that too will grow. Change a few interpretations of a few curious facts and you change, here anyway, a whole cast of mind. Not size-up-and-solve, but marvel-and-respect.

Finally, the East African tribe, the Pokot, adopt yet a third view. Like the Americans, they do not regard intersexuals highly; but, like the Navaho, they are not at all revolted or horrified by them. They regard them, quite matter of factly, as simple errors. They are, in what is apparently a popular African image, like a botched pot. "God made a mistake," they say, rather than, "the gods have produced a wondrous gift," or, "we are faced with an unclassifiable monster."

Pokot regard the intersexed person as useless--"it" can't reproduce or extend the patriline as can a proper man nor can it bring in brideprice as can a proper woman. Nor can "it" indulge in what the Pokot say "is the most pleasant thing of all," sex. Frequently intersexed children are killed, in the offhand way one discards an ill-made pot (so, too, are microcephalics, infants without appendages, and so on; so, too, grossly deformed animals), but often they are allowed, in an equally offhand way, to live. The lives they live are miserable enough, but they are not pariahs--merely neglected, lonely, treated with indifference as though they were mere objects, and ill-made ones at that. Economically they tend to be better off than the average Pokot because they have neither the ordinary kinship drains on their wealth nor the distractions of family life to hinder their accumulation of it. They have, in this apparently typical segmentary lineage and bridewealth sort of system, no place. Who needs them?

One of Edgerton's cases admits to great unhappiness. "I only sleep, eat, and work. What else can I do? God made a mistake." And another: "God made me this way. There was nothing I could do. All the others [are] able to live as Pokot. I [am] no real Pokot." In a society where common sense stamps even a normally equipped childless man as a forlorn figure and a childless woman is said to be "not even a person," an intersexual's life is the ultimate image of futility. He is "useless" in a society that values the "useful," as, in its cattle-wives-and-children way, it conceives it, very highly.

In short, given the given, not everything else follows. Common sense is not what the mind cleared of cant spontaneously apprehends; it is what the mind filled with presuppositions--that sex is a disorganizing force, that sex is a regenerative gift, that sex is a practical pleasure--concludes. God may have made the intersexuals, but man has made the rest.

III

But there is more to it than this. What man has made is an authoritative story. Like *Lear*, the New Testament, or quantum mechanics, common sense consists in an account of things that claims to strike at their heart. Indeed, it is something of a natural rival to such more sophisticated stories when they are present, and when they are not to the phantasmagoric narratives of dream and myth. As a frame for thought, and a species of it, common sense is as totalizing as any other: no religion is more dogmatic, no science more ambitious, no philosophy more general. Its tonalities are different, and so are the arguments to which it appeals, but like them--and like art and like ideology--it pretends to reach past illusion to truth, to, as we say, things as they are. "Whenever a philosopher says something is 'really real,'" to quote again that great modern celebrant of common sense, G.E. Moore, "you can be really sure that what he says is 'really real' isn't real, really." When a Moore, a Dr. Johnson, a Zande potter, or a Pokot hermaphrodite say something is real, they damn well mean it.

And what is more, you damn well know it. It is precisely in its "tonalities"--the temper its observations convey, the turn of mind its conclusions reflect, that the differentiae of common sense are properly to be sought. The concept as such, as a fixed and labeled category, an explicitly bounded semantic domain, is, of course, not universal, but, like religion, art, and the rest, part of our own more or less common-sense way of distinguishing the genres of cultural expression. And, as we have seen, its actual content, as with religion, art, and the rest, varies too radically from one place and time to the next for there to be much hope of finding a defining constancy within it, an ur-story always told. It is only in isolating what might be called its stylistic features, the marks of attitude that give it its peculiar stamp, that common sense (or indeed any of its sister genres) can be transculturally characterized. Like the voice of piety, the voice of sanity sounds pretty much the same whatever it says; what simple wisdom has everywhere in common is the maddening air of simple wisdom with which it is uttered.

Just how to formulate such stylistic features, marks of attitude, tonal shadings--whether you want to call them--is something of a problem, because there is no ready vocabulary in which to do so. Short of simply inventing new terms which, as the point is to characterize the familiar not to describe the unknown, would be self-defeating here,

one can only stretch old ones in the way a mathematician does when he says a proof is deep, a critic does when he says a painting is chaste, or a wine connoisseur does when he says a Bordeaux is assertive. The terms I want to use in this way with respect to common sense, each with a "-ness" added on to substantivise it, are: natural, practical, thin, immethodical, accessible. "Naturalness," "practicalness," "thinness," "immethodicalness," and "accessiblensness" are the somewhat unstandard properties I want to attribute to common sense generally, as an everywhere-found cultural form.

The first of these quasi-qualities, naturalness, is perhaps the most fundamental. Common sense represents matters--that is, certain matters and not others--as being what they are in the simple nature of the case. An air of "of-courseness," a sense of "it figures " is cast over things --again, some selected, underscored things. They are depicted as inherent in the situation, intrinsic aspects of reality, the way things go. This is true even with respect to an anomaly like intersexuality. What divides the American attitude from the other two is not that people with bisexual organs seem that much more peculiar to us, but that the peculiarity seems unnatural, a contradiction in the settled terms of existence. Navaho and Pokot take, in their different ways, the view that intersexuals are a product, if a somewhat unusual product, of the normal course of things--botched pots, gifted prodigies--where the Americans, to the degree their view is being properly portrayed, apparently regard femaleness and maleness as exhausting the natural categories in which persons can conceivably come: what falls between is a darkness, an offense against reason.

But naturalness as a characteristic of the sorts of stories about the real we call common sense can be more plainly seen in less sensational examples. Among the Australian Aborigines, to choose one more or less at random, a whole host of features of the physical landscape are considered as resulting from the activities of totemic ancestors--mostly kangaroos, emus, witchety grubs, and the like--performed in that time-outof-time usually glossed in English as "the dreaming." As Nancy Munn has pointed out, this transformation of ancestral persons into natural features is conceived to have occurred in at least three ways: by actual metamorphosis, the body of the ancestor changing into some material object; by imprinting, the ancestor leaving the impression of his body or of some tool he uses; and by what she calls externalization, the ancestor taking some object out of his body and discarding it. Thus, a rocky hill or even a stone may be seen as a crystalized ancestor (he did not die, the informants say, he ceased moving about and "became the country"); a waterhole, or even a whole campsite, may be seen as the impress left by the buttocks of an ancestor who in his wanderings sat down to rest there; and various other sorts of material objects--string crosses and oval boards--are considered to have been drawn by some primordial kangaroo or snake out of his belly and "left behind" as he moved on. The details of all this (and they are enormously complicated) aside, the external world as the Aborigines confront it is neither a blank reality nor some complicated sort of metaphysical object, but the natural outcome of transnatural events.

What this particular example, here so elliptically given, demonstrates is that the naturalness, which as a modal property characterizes common sense, does not rest, or at least does not necessarily rest, on what we would call philosophical naturalism--the view that there are no things in heaven and earth undreamt of by the temporal mind. Indeed, for the Aborigines, as for the Navaho, the naturalness of the everyday world is a direct expression, a resultant, of a realm of being to which a quite different complex of quasi qualities--"grandeur," "seriousness," "mystery," "otherness"--is attributed. The fact that the natural phenomena of their physical world are the remains of actions of inviolable kangaroos or thaumaturgical snakes does not make those phenomena any less natural in aboriginal eyes. The fact that a particular creek was formed because Possum happend to drag his tail along the ground right there makes it no less a creek. It makes it, of course, something more, or at least something other, than a creek is to us; but water runs downhill in both of them.

The point is general. The development of modern science has had a profound effect--though perhaps not so profound as sometimes imagined--upon Western common-sense views. Whether, as I rather doubt, the plain man has become a genuine Copernican or not (to me, the sun still rises and shines upon the earth), he has surely been brought round, and quite recently, to a version of the germ theory of disease. The merest television commercial demonstrates that. But, as the merest television commercial also demonstrates, it is as a bit of common sense, not as an articulated scientific theory, that he believes it. He may have moved beyond "feed a cold and starve a fever," but only to "brush your teeth twice a day and see your dentist twice a year." A similar argument could be made for art--there was no fog in London till Whistler painted it, and so on. The naturalness common-sense conceptions give to ... well, whatever they give it to--drinking from fast-running creeks in preference to slow-running ones, staying out of crowds in the influenza season--may be dependent on other sorts of quite unordinary stories about the way things are. (Or, of course, may not: "Man is born to trouble as the sparks

fly upward" depends for its persuasiveness on one's merely having lived long enough to discover how terribly accurate it is.)

The second characteristic, "practicalness," is perhaps more obvious to the naked eye than the others on my list, for what we most often mean when we say a man, an action, or a project displays a want of common sense is that they are impractical. The man is in for some rude awakenings, the action is conducing towards its own defeat, the project won't float. But, simply because it seems so more readily apparent, it is also more susceptible to misconstruction. For it is not "practicalness" in the narrowly pragmatical sense of the useful, but in the broader, folk-philosophical sense of sagacity that is involved. To tell someone, "be sensible," is less to tell him to cling to the utilitarian, as to tell him, as we say, to wise up: to be prudent, level headed, keep his eye on the ball, not buy any wooden nickels, stay away from slow horses and fast women, let the dead bury the dead.

There has been, in fact, something of a debate--part of the larger discussion concerning the cultural inventories of "simpler" peoples I mentioned earlier--as to whether "primitives" have any interest in matters of empirical fact that do not bear, and rather directly bear, on their immediate material interests. This is the view--that is, that they do not--to which Malinowski largely held and which Evans-Pritchard, in a passage I deliberately elided earlier, affirms concerning the Zande. "They have a sound working knowledge of nature insofar as it concerns their welfare. Beyond this point it has for them no scientific interest or sentimental appeal. "Against this, other anthropologists, of whom Lévi-Strauss is if not the first anyway the most emphatic, have argued that "primitives," "savages," or whatever have elaborated, and even systematized, bodies of empirical knowledge that have no very clear practical import for them. Some Philippine tribes distinguish over six hundred types of named plants, most of these plants being unused, unusable, and in fact but rarely encountered. American Indians of the northeastern United States and Canada have an elaborate taxonomy of reptiles they neither eat nor otherwise have very much traffic with. Some southwestern Indians--Pueblans--have names for every one of the types of coniferous tree in their region, most of which barely differ from one another and certainly in no way of material concern to the Indians. Southeast Asian Pygmies can distinguish the leaf-eating habits of more than fifteen species of bats. Against Evans-Pritchard's primitive utilitarian sort of view--know what it profits you to know and leave the rest to witchcraft--one has Lévi-Strauss's primitive intellectual one--know everything your mind provokes you to know and range it into categories. "It may be objected," he writes, "that science of this kind [i.e., botanical classification, herpetological observation, etc.] can scarcely be of much practical effect. The answer to this is that its main purpose is not a practical one. It meets intellectual requirements rather than or instead of satisfying [material] needs."

There is little doubt that the consensus in the field now supports the Lévi-Strauss sort of view rather than the Evans-Pritchard sort--"primitives" are interested in all kinds of things of use neither to their schemes nor to their stomachs. But that is hardly all there is to the matter. For they aren't classifying all those plants, distinguishing all those snakes, or sorting out all those bats out of some overwhelming cognitive passion rising out of innate structures at the bottom of the mind either. In an environment populated with conifers, or snakes, or leaf-eating bats it is practical to know a good deal about conifers, snakes, or leaf-eating bats, whether what one knows is in any strict sense materially useful, because it is of such knowledge that "practicalness" is there composed. Like its "naturalness," the "practicalness" of common sense is a quality it bestows upon things, not one that things bestow upon it. If, to us, studying a racing form seems a practical activity and chasing butterflies does not, that is not because the one is useful and the other is not; it is because the one is considered an effort, however feckless, to know what's what and the other, however charming, is not.

The third of the quasi qualities common sense attributes to reality, "thinness," is, like modesty in cheese, rather hard to formulate in more explicit terms. "Simpleness," or even "literalness," might serve as well or better, for what is involved is the tendency for common-sense views of this matter or that to represent them as being precisely what they seem to be, neither more nor less. The Butler line I quoted earlier--"everything is what it is and not another thing"--expresses this quality perfectly. The world is what the wide-awake, uncomplicated man takes it to be. Sobriety, not subtlety, realism, not imagination, are the keys to wisdom; the really important facts of life lie scattered openly along its surface, not cunningly secreted in its depths. There is no need, indeed it is a fatal mistake to deny, as poets, intellectuals, priests, and other professional complicators of the world so often do, the obviousness of the obvious. Truth is as plain, as the Dutch proverb has it, as a pikestaff over water.

Again, like Moore's over-subtle philosophers discoursing musefully on the real, anthropologists often spin notional complexities they then report as cultural facts through a failure to realize that much of what their informants are

saying is, however strange it may sound to educated ears, meant literally. Some of the most crucial properties of the world are not regarded as concealed beneath a mask of deceptive appearances, things inferred from pale suggestions or riddled out of equivocal signs. They are conceived to be just there, where stones, hands, scoundrels, and erotic triangles are, invisible only to the clever. It takes a while (or, anyway, it took me a while) to absorb the fact that when the whole family of a Javanese boy tells me that the reason he has fallen out of a tree and broken his leg is that the spirit of his deceased grandfather pushed him out because some ritual duty towards the grandfather has been inadvertently overlooked, that, so far as they are concerned, is the beginning, the middle, and the end of the matter: it is precisely what they think has occurred, it is all that they think has occurred, and they are puzzled only at my puzzlement at their lack of puzzlement. And when, after listening to a long, complicated business from an old, illiterate, no-nonsense Javanese peasant woman--a classic type if ever there was one--about the role of "the snake of the day" in determining the wisdom of embarking on a journey, holding a feast, or contracting a marriage (the story was actually mostly loving accounts of the terrible things that happened--carriages overturning, tumors appearing, fortunes dissolving--when that role was ignored), I asked what this snake of the day looked like and was met with, "don't be an idiot; you can't see Tuesday, can you?" I began to realize that patentness, too, is in the eye of the beholder. "The world divides into facts" may have its defects as a philosophical slogan or a scientific creed; as an epitomization of the "thinness"--"simplicity," "literalness"--that common sense stamps onto experience it is graphically exact.

As for "immethodicalness," another not-too-well-named quality common-sense thought represents the world as possessing, it caters at once to the pleasures of inconsistency which are so very real to any but the most scholastic of men ("a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds," as Emerson said; "I contradict myself, so I contradict myself. I contain multitudes," as Whitman did); and also to the equal pleasures, felt by any but the most obsessional of men, of the intractable diversity of experience ("The world is full of a number of things"; "life is one damn thing after another"; "if you think you understand the situation, that only proves you are misinformed"). Common-sense wisdom is shamelessly and unapologetically ad hoc. It comes in epigrams, proverbs, *obiter dicta*, jokes, anecdotes, contes morals--a clatter of gnomic utterances--not in formal doctrines, axiomized theories, or architectonic dogmas. Silone says somewhere that southern Italian peasants pass their lives exchanging proverbs with one another like so many precious gifts. Elsewhere the forms may be polished witticisms *à la Wilde*, didactic verses *à la Pope*, or animal fables *à la La Fontaine*; among the classical Chinese they seem to have been embalmed quotations. But whatever they are it is not their interconsistency that recommends them, but indeed virtually the opposite: "Look before you leap," but "he who hesitates is lost"; "a stitch in time saves nine," but "seize the day." It is, indeed, in the sententious saying--in one sense, the paradigmatic form of vernacular wisdom--that the immethodicalness of common sense comes out most vividly. In witness of which, consider the following bundle of Ba-Ila proverbs I excerpt from Paul Radin (who excerpted them in turn from Smith and Dale):

Get grown up and then you will know the things of the earth.
 Annoy your doctors and sicknesses will come laughing.
 The prodigal cow threw away her own tail.
 It is the prudent hyena that lives long.
 The god that speaks up gets the meat.
 You may cleanse yourself but it is not to say that you cease to be a slave.
 When a chief's wife steals she puts the blame on the slaves.
 Build rather with a witch than with a false-tongued person, for he destroys the community.
 Better help a fighting man than a hungry man, for he has no gratitude.

And so on. It is this sort of potpourri of disparate notions--again not necessarily or even usually expressed proverbially--that not only characterizes systems of common sense generally, but that in fact recommends them as capable of grasping the vast multifariousness of life in the world. The Ba-Ila even have a proverb expressing this: "Wisdom comes out of an ant heap."

The final quasi quality-final here, surely not so in actuality--"accessibility," more or less follows as a logical consequence once the others are acknowledged. Accessibility is simply the assumption, in fact the insistence, that any person with faculties reasonably intact can grasp common-sense conclusions, and indeed, once they are unequivocally enough stated will not only grasp but embrace them. Of course, some people--usually the old, sometimes the afflicted, occasionally the merely orotund--tend to be regarded as rather wiser in a "I've been through the mill" sort of way than others, while children, frequently enough women, and, depending upon the

society, various sorts of underclasses are regarded as less wise, in a "they are emotional creatures" sort of way, than others. But, for all that, there are really no acknowledged specialists in common sense. Everyone thinks he's an expert. Being common, common sense is open to all, the general property of at least, as we would put it, all solid citizens.

Indeed, its tone is even anti-expert, if not anti-intellectual: we reject, and so, as far as I can see, do other peoples, any explicit claim to special powers in this regard. There is no esoteric knowledge, no special technique or peculiar giftedness, and little or no specialized training--only what we rather redundantly call experience and rather mysteriously call maturity--involved. Common sense, to put it another way, represents the world as a familiar world, one everyone can, and should, recognize, and within which everyone stands, or should, on his own feet. To live in the suburbs called physics, or Islam, or law, or music, or socialism, one must meet certain particular requirements, and the houses are not all of the same imposingness. To live in the semi-suburb called common sense, where all the houses are sans facon, one need only be, as the old phrase has it, sound of mind and practical of conscience, however those worthy virtues be defined in the particular city of thought and language whose citizen one is.

IV

As we began with an alley-and-avenue pictograph from Wittgenstein, it is only appropriate that we end with one, this one even more compressed: "In the actual use of expressions we make detours, we go by side roads. We see the straight highway before us, but of course we cannot use it, because it is permanently closed." [2](#)

If one wants to demonstrate, or even (which is all I have been able to do) to suggest, that common sense is a cultural system, that there is an ingenerate order to it capable of being empirically uncovered and conceptually formulated, one cannot do so by cataloguing its content, which is wildly heterogeneous, not only across societies but within them--antheap wisdom. One cannot do so, either, by sketching out some logical structure it always takes, for there is none. And one cannot do so by summing up the substantive conclusions it always draws, for there are, too, none of those. One has to proceed instead by the peculiar detour of evoking its generally recognized tone and temper, the untraveled side road that leads through constructing metaphorical predicates--near-notions like "thinness"--to remind people of what they already know. There is something (to change the image) of the purloined-letter effect in common sense; it lies so artlessly before our eyes it is almost impossible to see.

To us, science, art, ideology, law, religion, technology, mathematics, even nowadays ethics and epistemology, seem genuine enough genres of cultural expression to lead us to ask (and ask, and ask) to what degree other peoples possess them, and to the degree that they do possess them, what form they take, and given the form they take, what light has that to shed on our own versions of them. But this is still not true of common sense. Common sense seems to us what is left over when all these more articulated sorts of symbol systems have exhausted their tasks, what remains of reason when its more sophisticated achievements are all set aside. But if this is not so, if knowing chalk from cheese, a hawk from a handsaw, or your ass from your elbow ("earthiness" might well have been adduced as another quasi quality of common sense) is as positive an accomplishment, if perhaps not so lofty a one, as appreciating motets, following a logic proof, keeping the Covenant, or demolishing capitalism--as dependent as they are upon developed traditions of thought and sensibility--then the comparative investigation of "the ordinary ability to keep ourselves from being imposed upon by gross contradictions, palpable inconsistencies, and unmask'd impostures" (as a 1726 "Secret History of the University of Oxford" defined common sense) ought to be more deliberately cultivated.

Should this be done it should lead, for anthropology, to some new ways of looking at some old problems, most especially those concerning how culture is jointed and put together, and to a movement (one actually already well begun) away from functionalist accounts of the devices on which societies rest towards interpretive ones of the kinds of lives societies support. But for philosophy, the effects may be even graver, for it should lead to the disarrangement of a half-examined concept lying very near its heart. What for anthropology, that most Fox-like of disciplines, would be but the most recent in a long series of shifts in attention, could be, for philosophy, that most Hedgehogish, a plenary jolt.

- 1 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York, 1953), p. 8; I have slightly altered the Anscombe translation.
- 2 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*; p. 127.

Common sense as a cultural system, in: *The Antioch Review*, Volume 50, Number 1-2 Winter 1992; Section: The Fourth Decade 1971-1980; (= reprinted from Volume 33, Number 1 Spring 1975).

cf. *Local knowledge: further essays in interpretive anthropology*. New-York/N.Y./USA etc. 1983: Basic Books, pp. 73-93 (= revised version).

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