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## LESS SCIENCE, MORE *SENSUS COMMUNIS*

LOUW FEENSTRA  
JOHANNES BORGSTEIN

It is a thousand times better to have common sense without  
education than to have education without common sense.  
R. G. Ingersoll

Objectivity is a subjective invention of man.  
Santiago Genovés

### INTRODUCTION

*Ludus Vitalis* has proposed two questions: (1) Are the citizens in conditions to incorporate the scientific spirit (a compromise with knowledge, an objectivity regime, to attend to what is not obvious, etc.) into their public deliberations? (2) Is this a requirement for democracy?

We understand the 'this' of the second question as 'incorporation of the scientific spirit into public deliberations'. If the definition of scientific deliberation would read like 'to think or act in the systematic or accurate way of the sciences', our primary reaction to each of Ludus' two questions is 'no'. We very much doubt if any specimen of *Homo sapiens*, and certainly no scientist is able to deal consistently in such a way with public affairs. Each and every specimen of our species, scientist or not, is in the first place a body with its many (basic) drives, motives and feelings that come foremost.

### THE BRAIN IS PART OF THE BODY

Drives, motives and feelings usually can be rationalized in a more or less scientific way, but science has not much influence on their origins or the way any individual acts. Drives, motives and feelings are generated in the whole entity of the body-including-the-brain. They are directly or indirectly triggered by stimulation of each and every sense which leads to a combined percept in the brain, originally considered by Aristotle to be a specific centre—nowadays taken not as some specific area but as part of a network—that coordinates the influx of the senses. Following Aristotle's *koinè aísthésis*, translated to the Latin as *sensus communis*, the origin of its derivate *common sense* that is ascribed to Thomas Paine <sup>1</sup>. Common sense

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Department of Neuroscience, Erasmus University Medical Center, Rotterdam, The Netherlands. / L.Feenstra@erasmusmc.nl  
Hospital Tergooi Blaricum, Netherlands. / borgstein@me.com

seems to be both more and less than scientific deliberations. *More* as it brings in drives and feelings leading to build a more balanced view than the pure scientific one. *Less* as it also fetches primitive emotions that occasionally may lead to very 'unscientific' conduct. Common sense is aware of that risk and may prevent detrimental conduct.

Science basically reads up, predicts and describes processes, analyses causes and constructs (hypothetical) remedies. But can it conduct behaviour of a person or people? Plato's *Politeia* was not based on common sense, but Hobbes' *Leviathan* was. *Politeia* and *Utopia* are merely footnotes in some philosophical texts or subject of ethereal study, but Hobbes is still considered as the real start of political philosophy. His realistic views took the line of human drives and these were definitely not utopian.

#### SCIENCE AND BEHAVIOUR

Never before in human history has so much science been accumulated on a global scale and at the same time the world has rarely seen so many weird (understood as not-scientific, but hardly wonderful) results of polls in such a short time. Modern democracy with the one-man-one-vote plight? Not much good really. Some consequences come to mind, alphabetically Brexit, Erdogan, Hitler and Trump. Referenda and polls tend to count numbers only, and anywhere between thirty or fifty percent of the people is enough to 'count' as the general population. Demagogues well trained in television-tricks or even classical rhetoric are quite able to feed the population at large and convince them to gladly swallow double talk, half-truths and even full lies, or as Orwell coined them: *NewSpeak* and *DoubleThink*. Some (scientifically minded) political analysts may—albeit after the polls—explain the results, but rarely predict them correctly. Scientific training rarely seems to guide people in their daily life decisions or is of the slightest use in the way populations construct their societies.

Let us now see if scientists fare any better, i.e., if places with a high percentage of scientific employees are run in a (slightly) more civilized way. The senior author has been active in Academia from the moment he approached it as a student, to well into retirement. A psychologist once remarked that the kind of people working there are by and large like those on the street but have on average a little more intelligence. She added that therefore they usually are better at camouflaging the basic drives of their species. We agree.

However be that as it may, all academics have seen as much overt fights, battles and war in the meeting rooms in Academia than outside these institutions. Surely, drives, motives and feelings are always there and they frequently clash. Generally, however, disagreements are settled in the framework of some modern adaptation of the *agora*. More e-mails, more

tweets, more discussions, more listening, more debates, admittedly more arguments and finally more agreements generally based on reasonable gives and takes. Depending on the topic, some science may be involved, but reason and common sense have more to do with it than science. While there is undoubtedly considerable underhanded manoeuvring and bullying, we have so far not been aware of any bombing kills, pleas for killing or arresting opponents, irrational crucifixion or senseless beheadings inside Academia.

So, in spite of Thomas More's commemoration this year, *Utopia must remain utopic*. While science might be of slight assistance for a more civilized conduct by some, as argued above, it is no panacea, and its advantages are probably overshadowed by the other side of the coin, the scientific studies of human behaviour that are such a help to the keen political dictator.

#### FROM THE *SENSUS COMMUNIS* TO COMMON SENSE

(Leonardo da Vinci called it *senso commune*, but he was a notoriously poor latinist)

The *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (1995) states that common sense defies definition. In the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* there is no entry of *Common sense* while *Sensus communis* is mentioned fifty five times. Philosophy has paid relatively scant attention to common sense. In general, common sense was met with some respect by empiricists and with considerable scorn by philosophic idealists and rationalists. It is probable that empiricists and scientists are generally better connected with day-to-day life than idealists and the humanities. For instance, Thomas Reid <sup>2,3</sup> was a stout defender, and G .E. Moore wrote *A Defence of Common Sense* <sup>4</sup>.

*Sensus communis* as Aristotle saw it (though he called it κοινή αἴσθησις, as Latin had not yet been invented) was the centre or confluence of the brain, which today we would call "network", where all sensorial information (Aristotle recognised only five senses, today we find at least three times more <sup>5</sup>) arrives, is connected, and leads to a coherent overall perception.

Neuroscientists consider the brain as an information processing organ. Cognition may be seen as the summation of all processes by which sensory input is transformed, reduced, elaborated, stored and recovered. By far the larger portion of all this processing proceeds unconsciously, or sub-consciously.

The behaviour of a person is essentially steered by the goings-on of that very brain, behaviour being initiated by it. Only a small part of that information may be scientific but most is based on experiences of many varied kinds. We may consider the old Aristotelian concept of *sensus*

*communis* as the network in the brain that is fed with information of all senses and connected by memory regions and all other subdivisions of cognition. The 'output' of the brain as demonstrated by the behaviour of its owner will be guided by much more than only scientific knowledge. Probably the better part of this behaviour is taken as 'common sense'. Now what is common sense?

#### COMMON SENSE

Some sceptics will be inclined to say that common sense is neither common nor sense. And nobody will act on it continually. In line with the above statement that the term defies *definition* we may however cautiously venture a *description*.

Common sense is a mixed bag or a Wittgensteinian cloud of meanings that contains perception, practical knowledge/attitude, understanding, good-sound-prudent-sensible judgment/decisions, reason/reasonable, reliable/reliability. Like Saint Augustine's classical description of 'time', everybody understands the meaning of 'common sense', but nobody is able to formulate a better definition than recognising it in 'life' as it shows up. The few philosophers playing with it virtually tore it to pieces by analysing it to death, so we had better leave it at that.

Most people we suspect will share our opinion that common sense has a better chance to provide for some kind of an *agora* than pressure groups in society, to bring us a more, well... some more sensible democracy than the examples of Brexit-stan and Trump-county in the year 2016.

Perhaps all politicians should be subjected to a basic and compulsory course in analytical and precise thinking to have a slightly better appreciation of facts and facts gathering. In short, some slight degree of rationality might help ensure a better class of politics.

#### REFERENCES

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- 5 Feenstra L. (V). *From Sensory Biology to a Philosophy of Perception*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014.