Common Sense, Everyday Wisdom & Roadsigns

Let's take a basic philosophical method and apply it to the analysis of an everyday concept with which most of us have experience: common sense. According to Wiktionary and some other random dictionaries, common sense is described as "good sense and sound judgment in practical matters."

Any philosopher worth her salt* is going to ask a few questions about the ethical and evaluative elements embedded in these statement:

- What is *good* sense?
- What is *sound* judgment?
- What are *practical* matters?

The first two questions relate to evaluative dimensions of a person's ability to navigate the world successfully and, in some instances, ethically. In my part of the world, if I have *good* sense, I won't put a metal container into the microwave or cross a busy street on the red light or forget to put on a long undershirt on winter mornings when I'm going to be outside. If I have *sound* judgment, I might avoid the train station on the mornings when the local soccer team has a home game or I might wait to buy my car until I have enough money saved, rather than financing it.

If we think about these statements, however, we can see that they are *common* only to individuals with shared experiences and/or sets of values: those who've grown up with microwaves; those who have experience with city traffic regulated by certain signs and signals and believe in following the rules; or those who have either been nagged by their parents to put on the proper clothing in winter or are tired of getting colds. The traffic light example relates not only to the existence of rules or the knowledge of them but also to attitudes toward social responsibility and endangerment of others. The judgment in the last two situations depends on a series of attitudes. In the case of the train station, I will make different decisions based on my attitude toward soccer or sports fans, as well as my threshold of tolerance for public disturbances or feelings of personal safety. In the case of financing a car, my judgment depends not only on my personal finances and perceived need for the car but on my upbringing, the experiences of people I know in conjunction with debt, and my attitudes toward risk in general. All of these judgments or decisions are influenced to some degree by personal and cultural experience, attitudes or values.

Simple decisions have complex origins. In judging the common sense statements and behavior of others, effective intercultural communicators keep this complexity in mind.
OK…so common sense isn't necessarily common across cultures. but psychology should help us there, right? Human psychology is common to us all, isn't it?

Well, first let's look at an informal blog post on psychology and common sense by science writer Jamie Hale:

> For centuries scientists, science writers and philosophers have encouraged us to trust our common sense (Lilienfeld et al., 2010; Furnham, 1996). Common sense is a phrase that generally implies something everyone knows. One of the definitions of common sense given by Wikipedia is, “good sense and sound judgment in practical matters.”

Common sense psychology is a myth. What appears to be common sense is often common nonsense. Scott Lilienfeld, co-author of 50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology, says we should mistrust common sense when evaluating psychological claims (Lilienfeld et al., 2010).

Some examples of common sense psychology include:

- Working while in high school will help students build character and value money
- Children who read a lot are not very social or physically fit.
- People with low self esteem are more aggressive.
- The best way to treat juvenile delinquents is to get tough with them.
- Most psychopaths are delusional.
- We know what will make us happy.

However, not a single one of these is true. Scientific evidence refutes each of the common sense claims listed above.

**Considering the uncommonness of common sense…**

If we accept that judgments about common sense behavior are relative to cultural attitudes and personal experience and if the common sense of psychology is nonsense, what are we supposed to use as a basis for achieving harmonious, regulated social behavior? The fear of social chaos and loss of social identity is the basis for much resistance to the idea that truth or reality itself is relative. Those threatened by the apparent instability of a relative worldviews therefore tend to defend absolutist assertions or dogma. However, even this need for stability is cultural, since attitudes toward what is called *uncertainty avoidance* differ from culture to culture as well as from person to person. Some of us don’t mind uncertainty, while others of us are plagued by it. Some feel stress regarding physical uncertainty, while others worry mostly about economic uncertainty, or even intellectual uncertainty. Regardless of these fears, however, cultural relativity is all too unequivocally real.

Having established the potential uncertainty of everything we see or hear, however, we can now comfort ourselves with the thought that once we recognize the foundations of our systems of meaning and reality, we can depend on a lot! A good way of discovering these foundations is through cross-cultural comparison, for example, comparison of the symbolic codes that shape not only our communication norms, but also our understanding of everyday reality.
Codes of everyday wisdom

Everyday wisdom is not merely hidden beneath the surface of ideas about common sense behavior or in canons of homily and proverb, but is also explicitly presented in the form of informal, casually circulated words-to-live-by. While friendly advice (e.g., from neighbors or elders) and instances of formal guidance (e.g. from priests or psychologists) have always been a part of culture, the last century saw the explosive development of pop culture products designed to help people overcome adversity or bad habits and live better lives. In everything from long-time, traditional self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous to the popularization of Dale Carnegie’s *How To Win Friends And Influence People*, the endless spin-offs of Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, or Oprah’s inspirational tv-storytelling guests, US culture has developed an all-pervasive infrastructure of self-help culture. In the course of this explosion, many of the complex ideas in source narratives, theories, or programs often end up as overly simplified how-to-change-your-life lists on the web.

Here’s a random item from one such list on living a happy, productive life:

Do the most important thing first in the morning and you’ll never have an unproductive day.

As an individual who tends to be skeptical of homily- or rule-based wisdom, my first thoughts are these: Seriously? The *first* thing? Does that mean before coffee? Before showering? Before going to work? Is that even possible? And why should I listen to this person?

How is this guiding thought and my responses to it influenced by culture?

Underlying the idea of the statement is the value of *productivity*. A person’s goal in life is to be productive, and being productive in US culture will most likely bring work and *useful* tasks to mind. This connection privileges the manufacture of useful products above, say, spirituality. Even if I decide that the most important thing in my day is prayer or meditation, the goal explicitly stated in this sentence is *productivity*, not, for example, being a good person.

More subtle is that the statement also assumes hierarchical thinking and directed, linear activity. We do ONE thing after another and we prioritize our lists. The value of one thing at a time belongs to cultures with a *monochronic* attitude toward time. The idea of prioritizing belongs to a culture of discipline and hierarchical values. We don’t wake up and think, ”What am I best suited for at this moment?” We wake up and think ”What must I get done today”, thus also ascribing to a value toward *industry*, as well as productivity.

My skeptical response toward this idea is based on the values and attitudes of my various culture groups. My macro-cultures are American and German, my life being spent mostly in these two countries. Some of my micro-cultures are political, professional, and artistic, just to name a few. My training in linguistics and philosophy shapes the way I see or approach any theories of reality. My training in media and communication allows me to see the way my perceptions are shaped by the ways people communicate with me. My personal experience living in many countries, speaking multiple languages, and
having studied World Literature and Mythology has affected my fundamental system of belief and my values. My personal experience and my acceptance of or resistance to norms of these groups has a huge impact on the way I receive “rules” of any kind.

Cultural values and attitudes underlie codes of everyday wisdom, and the way we react to them is both cultural and personal. The nuances of my reality are real only to me. What about some of the codes we use to navigate the world? Are they just as relative to cultural frameworks?

International symbols: Signs may be global. Interpretation isn’t.

Most people will recognize the above sign as signaling one-way street. However, underlying this simple sign is much cultural information: I live in a place where traffic on public streets is regulated. If I don’t follow the signs, I may 1) receive criticism, 2) get a ticket, 3) get hurt or 4) endanger someone else. This particular sign tells me that this street is one-way and I may not drive down in the opposite direction. I must also heed the sign if I’m riding my bike on the street. If I’m a child and riding my bike on the sidewalk or I’m a pedestrian, I can ignore it.

Above and beyond the knowledge of signs, there are attitudes and practices in obeying them. Must I stop completely at a stop sign if I can see in all directions and nobody’s around? Can I squeeze through a traffic light after the light has turned red? In California, the practice is that 2-3 cars waiting to turn left will inevitably complete their turns after the light is red. Drivers in Germany will often drive too close to the car in front of them, closer than the law allows. Drivers in Italy will sometimes double park, even if they’re blocking traffic and there’s a parking space nearby. People from different cultures are not intimidated by different driving laws as much as by different driving cultures.

Language

If a simple road sign has this much information behind it, it’s easy to see the complexity and instability of evaluative words regarding complex human behavior: polite/rude, loud/soft, friendly/unfriendly, kind/mean. Like all words, evaluative markers do not have a unequivocal meaning but an ever-shifting territory of meaning. Words change meaning over time and across cultural territories.

In writing about Ferdinand de Saussure and the linguistic understanding coming out of Saussure's linguistic theory, Jonathan Culler focused to a great extent on the contingency of meaning, the idea that language does not merely describe a pre-existing reality, but that meaning is contingent. Sometimes, the differences in linguistic realities and the cultural contingency of meaning are clear. In English a friend and a boyfriend are distinguished by the noun while in German, the difference between ein Freund and mein Freund is distinguished by a modifier. Other differences may be those of usage. Although the words for acquaintance and friend/Bekannte and Freund exist in both German and English, Americans don’t often use the word acquaintance and generally
describe acquaintances as friends, signifying intensity of friendship with adjectives such as good, close, or best. What cultural values might underlie these differences? Part of the difference relates to different attitudes toward social relationships, toward intimacy, and formality. American culture is generally judged to be less formal than German culture. Americans and Germans have different areas that constitute the private and the public. Are political opinions, feelings, relationships, religious beliefs subjects discussed between friends? Between acquaintances? With strangers? While each of us makes choices to accept or reject norms related to such behavior, cultures generally have a fairly identifiable spectrum of norms.

But it’s not only this aspect of language that causes problems. According to Culler’s assessment of linguistic contingency, languages produce not only different words but unique systems of words that in their entirety describe different realities:

Not only does each language produce a different set of signifiers, articulating and dividing the continuum of sound in a distinctive way, but each language produces a different set of signifieds; it has a distinctive and thus "arbitrary" way of organizing the world into concepts or categories. (33)

Culler presents an example of this diversity in linguistic realities by comparing the French words revière and fleuve to the English river and stream. English designations for flowing bodies of water, for example, river and stream, are determined by size (width/depth) or swiftness of flow. Revière, however, is not determined by size but by the fact that it does not flow into the ocean, while a fleuve flows into the sea. Culler’s example demonstrates the idea that the criteria on which concepts are based in any given language are particular to that language and not based on preexisting delimitation of concepts in a pre-linguistic reality. In this sense, language can be seen to create reality/perception and concepts are revealed to be independent of a determining essence. Thus there is no essence to individual words but only delimiting distinctions on a continuum. Words are part of a system with its own internal relationships or structure. (34-35)

Idiom

Almost everyone has experienced the problem of idiom across cultures, but do we always consider what attitudes and values underlie idiom? In talking about common sense wisdom, I pulled out of a simple thought, attitudes toward productivity, monochronic time, logical linearity and others. Sometimes, however, the cultural meanings are attributed rather than inherent in the idiom. For example, Northern California is artichoke territory. Artichoke fields can be seen along stretches of Highway 1 and upon entering Watsonville, you can see a huge sign saying "The Artichoke capital of the world." As a result, it’s not surprising that one of the sayings, people used when I was a kid, was "Okey dokey, artichokey." When an African-American friend of mine recently said, "Okey dokey Smoky," I replied, "We used to say okey dokey artichokey," upon which she said, "Artichokes...white people food." I said, "What? You’re kidding! Most people where I come from eats artichokes." In looking at my friend’s reaction, it’s important to note that she was not imposing the white stereotype inherent in that thought but informing me of a racial stereotype that she had experienced on the East Coast within a particular social milieu. We talk continually about differences in racial experience, perception, issues, stereotypes and such and so this was an everyday part
of our ongoing conversation. The point I’m trying to make here is that I never would have seen artichokes as anything other than a regional food, also having experienced them as an everyday item of cuisine when I lived in Italy. Not only our use of words and idioms is cultural: the way we interpret everyday words and objects also belongs to culture. Our experience of language can be an intercultural experience.

At the end of this rather random set of examples lies the idea that even common sense is only common to a group that shares language, experience, and culture and that sense and reality itself are territories in motion, between speakers and across cultures.

Notes

* The figure of speech “to be worth one’s salt” is a cultural artifact of speech, arising from history, and has the same point of reference as the superstition requiring anyone who spills salt to throw a few of the spilled grains over a shoulder. Both come from the historical period where salt was not readily available and therefore a luxury.

To be ‘worth one’s salt’ is to be worth one’s pay. Our word salary derives from the Latin salarium, (sal is the Latin word for salt). There is some debate over the origin of the word salarium, but most scholars accept that it was the money allowed to Roman soldiers for the purchase of salt. Roman soldiers weren’t actually paid in salt, as some suggest. They were obliged to buy their own food, weapons etc. and had the cost of these deducted from their wages in advance. Phrase Finder

Works Cited
