

Introduction: Common Notions. An Overview

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The notion of common notions plays a prominent, but sometimes confusing role in early modern philosophy. Notions are ‘common’ in more than one respect: they can commonly apply to several objects or states of affairs, and they can commonly occur in the minds of several thinking subjects and find approval by several thinkers. In many, but not all cases, notions are common in both senses; and the notions that are common in both senses are of particular interest because they shape how we think about the world and our place in it. A good way of illustrating this point is to give two lists of examples of concepts and propositions that were discussed in the early modern period as candidates for being subsumed under the heading of ‘common notions.’ The first list contains many of the relevant concepts of early modern philosophy, such as extension, number, figure, place, but also goodness, beauty, justice and natural law. And, of course, the notion of God.

The second list contains propositions, often classified as (first) principles, or the most general axioms of (early modern) sciences. Here are some examples: “The whole is not smaller than the sum of its parts,” “Nothing arises out of nothing,” “Nothing can bring itself into being,” etc. On the same list one can place moral maxims such as “One should take care of one’s parents,” or “All humans strive for what they take to be good.”

Almost each of the early modern philosophers had something to say about the items on these two lists. But what they had to say was very different. In fact, one can see various tasks for philosophical analysis deriving from

these two lists. One task is to explain how these notions are formed—should they be understood as the outcome of sensory information or should they be regarded as being innate? A further task is to analyze the different senses in which common notions can be said to be general—do they apply to all objects or situations of a certain realm or only some of them, and how? A different task is to analyze the different senses in which common notions can be in the minds of several persons—are they in the minds of all of them or only some of them, and if the latter, who counts, and why? Do they need to be present in the form of being thought about actually or is it enough to assume that they can be present in the form of dispositions? Another task is to analyze their functions in our cognitive processes—how do they relate to other concepts and propositions, and how can they be used in various forms of argumentation? How do they relate to non-discursive mental capacities, such as emotions and instincts? And to which degree should we rely on them in reasoning, and why? Yet another task is to determine the relation between common notions that we have formed in everyday life and philosophical thought—should philosophy replace our everyday common notions through a putatively better conceptual framework or does philosophy have (partly) to rely on the concepts and principles that we have already formed? To make things more complicated, given the heterogeneity of examples, all of these questions will plausibly have different answers for different common notions.

In the early modern period, there was a lively and variegated debate about these matters. Several strands can be distinguished in this debate. Perhaps the most visible strand (with the highest number of occurrences of the term “common notion”) is the Epicurean-Stoic theory of common notions as defeasible anticipations. But there were also highly sophisticated late Aristotelian theories of generalization, neo-Platonic theories of innate ideas and humanist accounts of the role of common linguistic usage in the interpretation of general terms. And in some thinkers—for instance in Melanchthon, Leibniz and Wolff—one finds syntheses of more than one of these strands.

1. *Common Notions as Defeasible Anticipations*

The Epicurean theory of common notions, which in antiquity became part of the Stoic tradition,¹ was taken up in early modern natural philosophy

¹ On conceptual history, see Johannes Schneider, “Notiones Communes,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Basel: Schwabe, 1984, vol. 6, pp. 938–940; on the Epicurean theory of common notions and its Stoic adaptation, see F. H. Sandbach, “Ennoia and Prolepsis in the Stoic Theory of Knowledge,” *Classical Quarterly* 24 (1930), pp. 44–51; Ralph Dory, “Ennoēmata, Prolēpsis, and Common Notions,” *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 7 (1976), pp. 143–148; Maryanne Cline Horowitz, “The Stoic Synthesis of the Idea of Natural Law: Four Themes,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 35 (1974), pp. 3–16, esp. 5–10; Victor Goldschmidt, “Remarques sur l’origine épicurienne de la ‘prénotion,’” in J. Brunschwig (ed.), *Les stoïciens et*

by Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655) and other early modern corpuscularian thinkers, such as Thomas White (1593–1676), Sir Kenelm Digby (1603–1665) and Walter Charleton (1619–1707).² In his *Animadversiones in decimum librum Diogenis Laertii* (1649), Gassendi treats the terms “common notions” (*notiones communes*), “anticipation” (*anticipatio*) and “foreknowledge” (*praenotio*) as synonyms.³ He clearly distinguishes between two senses in which notions can be said to be “common.” The first sense is *generality*.⁴ Gassendi is clear that, since different persons encounter different singular things, different persons form different general concepts. In this sense, not all general notions are in the minds of all humans.⁵ However, there is second sense of being “common”: some notions are not only general but also found in the minds of all rational beings. Gassendi sets this sense of being “common” apart from theories of innate ideas:

[E]ven if anticipations that are in us are said to be internal to us, they are this in such a way that we acquire them through the use of senses and do not have them from nature, or we can say that we have them only in so far as they are in us from some long time as we become informed through the things through which we began to live and sense; of this kind are the notions concerning fleeing pain and seeking pleasure...⁶

Gassendi is explicit that these notions can be called “common” in the sense that they are common to all humans with normal mental capacities.⁷ And, as the example of common notions concerning pleasure and pain suggests, what

leur logique, Paris: Vrin, 1978, pp. 155–169; Henry Dyson, *Prolepsis and Ennoia in the Early Stoa*, Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2009.

² For an overview of early modern usages of the concept of common notions, see Mogens Laerke, *Les Lumières de Leibniz. Controverses avec Huet, Bayle, Regis et More*, Paris: Garnier, 2015, pp. 138–140, 151–158; on Gassendi’s adaptation of Epicurus’s theory of “proleptical” notions, see Wolfgang Detel, *Scientia rerum natura occultarum. Methodologische Studien zur Physik Pierre Gassendis*, Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1978, pp. 33–38, 52–55; David K. Glidden, “Hellenistic Background for Gassendi’s Theory of Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49 (1988), pp. 405–424; on Digby’s use of common notions, see Andreas Blank, “Composite Substance, Common Notions, and Kenelm Digby’s Theory of Animal Generation,” *Science in Context* 20 (2007), pp. 1–20; on Charleton’s use of common notions, see Andreas Blank, “Atoms and Minds in Walter Charleton’s Theory of Animal Generation,” in Justin E. H. Smith (ed.), *The Problem of Animal Generation in Modern Philosophy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 124–145.

³ Pierre Gassendi, *Animadversiones in decimum librum Diogenis Laertii*, Lyon: Barbier, 1649, p. 136.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 137–138.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 136–137.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

makes them common to all humans is that they derive from experiences common to all humans.

From an epistemological point of view, Gassendi regards common notions in both senses as a second “criterion” (*criterium*) of truth that is meant to supplement the senses that function as the first criterion of truth. As he explains, a criterion is “an organon or an instrument of judging.”⁸ Being an instrument of judging, however, does not imply that the criterion itself should be regarded as being self-evident. Rather, Gassendi holds that those common notions that we should take to be evident are those that are confirmed by repeated sense experience.⁹ By contrast, he concedes that there are other common notions that do not pass this test and therefore should be regarded as mere suspicions (*suspiciones*) and false opinions. The revisability of common notions comes to the fore when Gassendi identifies common notions with Cicero’s notion of “presumption.”¹⁰ In the Roman-law tradition, arguments from presumption are based on assumptions that are taken to be true unless and until contrary evidence becomes available—an idea that was widely taken up in early modern argumentation theory.¹¹ Characterizing common notions as presumptions thus indicates that common notions should be understood as *starting points* for evaluating arguments—as starting points that can themselves be evaluated.

What makes the conception of common notions as presumptions plausible is the Epicurean insight that we need anticipation if we want to inquire, doubt or believe anything. In this sense, they can be regarded as “principles” of reasoning—not as something that cannot be questioned itself, but rather as something that makes the process of inquiry possible. As Gassendi points out,¹² from this perspective the figure of Torquatus in Cicero’s *De finibus* draws the distinction between insights that are conclusions of rational arguments and insights that require only attention (*animadversio*) and reminders (*admonitio*).¹³ According to this distinction, the former insights concern things that are taken (*iudicentur*) to be hidden or in need of disentanglement, while the latter insights are taken to be at hand or open to view. Emphasis on the idea of “being taken” to be hidden or open to view is significant here since even those insights that are taken to belong to the second category can turn out to be wrong. But as long as they are not refuted by other criteria of truth such as sensation, they can function as criteria of truth. As long as there is no contrary evidence, it is rational to trust our natural

⁸ Ibid., p. 120.

⁹ Ibid., p. 136.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See Andreas Blank, *Arguing from Presumptions. Essays on Early Modern Ethics and Politics*, Munich: Philosophia, 2019.

¹² Gassendi, *Animadversiones*, p. 140.

¹³ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum*, ed. Johan Nicolai Madvig, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 1.9.30.

cognitive capacities, without thereby taking the workings of our natural cognitive capacities to be infallible.

A similar view of common notions can be found in Thomas White:

What I have said about the notion of place has the same force in all meanings of the ten genera. For all of them have arisen from nature and are common to the entire human species, and their reasons have to be gathered from what humans commonly say about them, and not from opinions of scholars, or the figurative speech of orators.¹⁴

White gives the following example of how common notions could be revised when he discusses the contrast between the view that all events are contingent and the view that all events happen with necessity. He is clear that the first view corresponds to our common notions.¹⁵ However, his explanation is that, due to our inherent cognitive limitation, we know only a part of the causes of an effect, such that the occurrence of that effect seems uncertain and, hence, contingent to us. White argues that this view has to be overturned since the collection of all causes of an effect makes the occurrence of the effect necessary.¹⁶ Thus, what is needed for revising a common notion is an argument that shows in which sense our cognitive limitations lead to erroneous notions. Such a conception of the defeasibility of common notions implies that we are justified in relying on notions that come naturally to us, *as long as* no contrary considerations tell us why we have to give them up. This is why common notions can be used to eliminate certain philosophical hypotheses. Again, White gives a good example of this critical use of common notions when he criticizes the philosophical conception of freedom of the will as freedom in situations in which there is no preference for one of the available options, such that the will alone decides between these options. As he points out, such a philosophical conception clashes with the “common sense of humans” since humans can anticipate what someone will do, on the basis of the expectation that humans are motivated by similar reasons in similar situations.¹⁷

2. Common Notions: Innateness, Generalization, and Common Usage

In contrast to defeasible anticipations, innate ideas are taken to be certain, timelessly valid, and hence non-revisable. The claim that there are such ideas in the human mind is one of the hallmarks of the Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions. It is a claim that remained fairly constant even though the elaborate details of Neoplatonic metaphysics—such as the nature of emanative

¹⁴ Thomas White, *De mundo dialogi tres*, Paris: Dionysius Moreau, 1642, p. 28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 360.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 397.

causation and the nature of intelligible objects—remained a matter of controversy. The innateness thesis derives its plausibility from the intuition that not all common notions seem to be defeasible and that not all of them seem to have an obvious origin in sensation. At the beginning of early modern adaptations of theories of innate knowledge—after the Neo-platonic movement of the Renaissance that was not always unambiguously Christian—stands the strange union between Lutheran theology and an eclectic philosophy of mind that adopted both Aristotelian and Platonic elements. It is a strange union because, in Protestant metaphysics, Neo-platonic emanation theories were always seen as a challenge to the theological concept of creation.¹⁸ In spite of these worries, however, understanding the notion of God as an innate idea, together with Platonizing readings of Ciceronian concepts of *honestum*, justice and natural law, offered an intriguing way of arguing for the validity of certain theological and ethical conception across confessional divides. Already in late antiquity, one can find approaches that fused elements of the Platonic tradition with elements of the Stoic tradition.¹⁹ Such Platonizing readings of the common notions of Ciceronian moral philosophy can again be found in the work of reformers such as Philip Melanchthon and subsequently became influential through the work of theologians and moral philosophers such as Balthasar Meisner (1587–1626).²⁰ German philosophers with Reformed leanings, such as Bartholomäus Keckermann (1572–1609), Clemens Timpler (1562–1624) and Rudolph Goclenius (1547–1628) developed eclectic theories of justice that used aspects of the Aristotelian tradition to solve problems left open by the Platonic tradition, and aspects of the Platonic tradition to solve problems left open by the Aristotelian tradition.²¹ In the English context, the theory of common notions as innate ideas was propagated by thinkers such as Edward Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648) and taken up by Cambridge Platonists such as Henry More (1614–1687) and Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688).²² Lord Herbert's theory of truth, as well as his views concerning common notions in the religious beliefs on laypersons,

¹⁸ See Andreas Blank, "Existential Dependence and the Question of Emanative Causation in Protestant Metaphysics, 1570–1620," *Intellectual History Review* 19 (2009), pp. 1–13.

¹⁹ See Jean-Pierre Schneider, "Les 'notions communes' comme principes épistémologiques dans la tradition platonicienne tardive," *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 149 (2017), pp. 291–303.

²⁰ See Roberto Bordoli, "Observazioni sulle fonti Luterane della controversia 'de notitia Dei naturali insita in infantibus,'" *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia* 64 (2009), pp. 449–467.

²¹ See Andreas Blank, "Justice and the Eclecticism of Protestant Ethics, 1580–1610," *Studia Leibnitiana* 40 (2008), pp. 223–238.

²² Jacqueline Lagrée, "Lumière naturelle et notions communes: Herbert of Cherbury and Culverwell," in Marialuisa Baldi (ed.), *Mind Senior to the World. Stoicismo e origenismo nella filosofia platonica del seicento inglese*, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 1996, pp. 35–54; Sarah Hutton, "Reconciling Theory and Fact: The Problem of 'Other Faiths' in Lord Herbert and the Cambridge Platonists," in Douglas Hedley and Sarah Hutton (eds.), *Platonism at the Origins of*

became widely available in France through the translation by Marin Mersenne (1588–1648).²³ And Leibniz’s defense of innate ideas and his view of justice as being defined by eternal, immutable truths owes more than a small debt to the Platonic tradition.²⁴

One can see something very similar happening in connection with the concepts and postulates of mathematics. The alliance between Lutheran theology and reformed astronomy (what has been called the Wittenberg interpretation) led Melanchthon and his followers to claim two things. First, that mathematics was somehow woven into the pattern of Creation and that traces of this mathematical order have survived *in the heavens* while others have survived in the human mind. This makes some of the mixed-mathematical sciences, such as astronomy and harmonics, epistemically superior to other forms of knowledge. The second claim was that pure mathematics (i.e., arithmetic and geometry) are – to quote Melanchthon – the “two wings of the soul” with whose help the human intellect can remediate some of its inherent shortcomings.²⁵ This means not only that mathematics is a repository of undistorted common notions, but also that – in Platonic vein – pure mathematics has the power to activate the mind and make it better at grasping truth and at reaching certainty. These ideas, taken together, have made mathematics (pure as well as mixed) a very rich field of philosophical investigation. Mathematics was interesting for philosophers not only because its certainty and capacity to reach a consensus (because of the common notions involved in it) but also because some saw it as particularly compatible with theology and a superior form of religious life. In the preface to the *Astronomia nova*, Johannes Kepler claims that “God has granted the more penetrating vision of the mind’s eye” to the astronomer; and it is also the astronomer who has the “greatest ability and desire to celebrate his God above those things he has discovered.”²⁶

The hypothesis that common notions exemplify eternal ideas—understood as ideas in the divine mind—offered a powerful explanation for a number

Modernity: Studies on Platonism and Early Modern Philosophy, Dordrecht: Springer, 2008, pp. 93–111.

²³ See Jacqueline Lagrée, “Mersenne traducteur d’Herbert de Cherbury,” *Les Études Philosophiques* 1/2 (1994), pp. 25–40.

²⁴ See Patrick Riley, *Leibniz’s Universal Jurisprudence: Justice as the Charity of the Wise*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996; “Leibniz’s *Méditation sur la Notion Commune de la Justice*, 1703–2003,” *Leibniz Review* 13 (2003), pp. 67–82.

²⁵ This trope used by Melanchthon became widespread in the second part of the sixteenth century among practical mathematicians, astronomers and natural philosophers. For a discussion see Dana Jalobeanu, “Natural History of the Heavens: Francis Bacon’s Anti-Copernicanism,” in Wolfgang Neuber, Thomas Rahn and Claus Zittel (eds.), *The Making of Copernicus: Early Modern Transformations of a Scientist and his Science*, Leiden: Brill, 2015, pp. 64–87.

²⁶ See Johannes Kepler, *New Astronomy*, translated by William Donahue, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 66.

of observations: (1) some common notions seem to be universally valid; (2) some common notions seem to be self-evident; (3) common notions that exemplify characteristics (1) and (2) seem to be acceptable for anyone who thinks carefully about the matter. These observations do not fit well with the view of common notions as defeasible anticipations. Yet, in spite of the explanatory power of the innateness thesis, not all early modern philosophers were happy with its speculative nature. Moreover, many felt the need to formulate an epistemological account of how we gain access to the contents of common notions. Early modern Platonists often rejected the doctrine of reminiscence and replaced it with discussions of the ascent of the soul, and divine illumination.

Theological commitments played an important role in some of the early modern debates on common notions. In one of these debates, what was at stake was what we can call the “distortions” of common notions in the fallen mind. Can we find in the fallen mind some sparks and traces of the concepts and divine ideas, which were placed in Adam’s mind before the Fall? We have seen that, for some of the Lutherans, the concepts and truths of mathematics enjoyed this privileged status, which made them good starting points in a (Platonic) process of learning. On the other hand, for natural philosophers of Calvinist orientation, the doctrine of the total depravity of human mind strongly influenced their epistemology. In the *Novum Organum* Francis Bacon contrasts the “forms,” “ideas” and “concepts” in God’s mind with the “idols” and the “anticipations” plaguing the human intellect. We do have common notions both in terms of concepts and in terms of principles and axioms, but most of these are simply distorted and “idolatrous” reflections of the “ideas of the divine mind” (*divinae mentis ideas*).²⁷ Francis Bacon’s epistemology, however, makes an interesting use of common notions seen as mistakes shared by all. These are the idols of the tribe, “rooted in the very nature itself” and common “to the race of men.”²⁸ Unlike the other categories of the idols, the idols of the tribe, being shared, are easily recognizable; and mistakes in reasoning and demonstration due to the idols of the tribe are more easily detected than those provoked by the “individual” idols of the cave or the acquired idols of the theatre. In other words, at least some of the common notions have a very important epistemic function: they are mistakes we all make when placed in situations of discovery.²⁹

²⁷ Francis Bacon, *The Instauration Magna, Part II: Novum Organum and Associated Texts*, translated and edited by Graham Rees and Maria Wakely, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004, pp. 72–73. See *ibid.*, pp. 78–79, for a description of the idols in terms of obstructions that prevent new ideas to enter the mind, distort or color the formation of opinions.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 79–81.

²⁹ For a discussion, see Dana Jalobeanu, “Francis Bacon on Sophists, Poets and Other Forms of Self-Deceit (Or, What Can the Experimental Philosopher Learn from a Theoretically Informed History of Philosophy?),” in Alberto Vanzo and Peter Anstey (eds.), *Experimental*

Since the numerous theories of innateness were so diverse and so much in conflict, late Aristotelian theories of generalization continued to present a plausible alternative and remained of interest well into the seventeenth century. In antiquity, the Aristotelian tradition had its own view on notions that are both general and find the assent of all competent thinkers,³⁰ and the function of such commonly accepted general concepts and general principles remained an intensely researched field in late medieval and early modern Aristotelianisms. Such theories investigated the formation of concepts and principles (from experience) and their subsequent connection with a world of individual objects and states of affairs. As to the former goal, theories of abstraction described the process of identifying properties common to several objects or states of affairs; theories of induction described the process of finding regularities starting from singular instances; theories of sorites arguments identified ways of arguing from our intuitions concerning special cases to insights concerning more general cases (without incurring the sorites paradoxes);³¹ and theories of probability tried to analyze the relation between generalizations that are true for most but not all cases.

As to the meaning of general terms and propositions, late Scholastic thinkers developed highly technical accounts of the various ways in which these terms and propositions could relate to objects or states of affairs—a field of discourse that was subsumed under the heading of theories of *suppositio*.³² Although there is some uncertainty concerning the meaning of this concept, in medieval grammar and logic, a *suppositum* was usually taken to be a non-linguistic entity about which something is predicated.³³ As Sten Ebbesen paraphrases the basic idea, “the common term *supponit verbo*, i.e., provides the verb with a subject.”³⁴ Of course, this raises the question of how a general term introduces subjects about which something is predicated. In propositions that

Philosophy, Speculation and Religion in Early Modern Philosophy, London: Routledge, 2019, pp. 8–36.

³⁰ Dirk Obbink, “‘What All Men Believe—Must be True’: Common Conceptions and *consensio omnium* in Aristotle and Hellenistic Philosophy,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 10 (1992), pp. 193–231.

³¹ On the presence of such generalization strategies in Leibniz, see Andreas Blank, “Definitions, Sorites Arguments, and Leibniz’s *Méditation sur la notion commune de la justice*,” *Leibniz Review* 14 (2004), pp. 153–166.

³² On the medieval background, L. M. de Rijk, *Logica Modernorum: A Contribution to the History of Early Logic*. I. *On the Twelfth Century Theories of Fallacy*; II/1. *The Origin and the Early Development of the Theory of Supposition*; II/2. *Texts and Indices*, Assen: Van Gorcum, 1962–1967; Michael F. Wagner, “Supposition-Theory and the Problem of Universals,” *Franciscan Studies* 41 (1981), pp. 385–414.

³³ C. H. Kneepkens, “*Suppositio* and *Supponere* in 12th-Century Grammar,” in Jean Jolivet and Alain de Libera (eds.) *Gilbert de Poitiers et ses contemporains aux origines de la Logica Modernorum*, Naples: Bibliopolis, 1987, pp. 325–351.

³⁴ Sten Ebbesen, “Early Supposition Theory II,” *Vivarium* 51 (2013), pp. 60–78.

are true about all objects falling under the general term, the answer seems to be obvious—namely, all objects that fall under the term are given as the subject for a predicate. But in large classes of objects, it appears impossible to think about each object—which is the origin of the distinction between situations where a general term refers to objects “discretely” (*discrete*) and situations where a general term refers to objects “confusedly” (*confuse*), that is, without identifying each single object.³⁵ Things get more complicated with general terms in propositions that are true only in most cases. How do general terms in such propositions relate to those objects about which the predication is true? One route that was taken invokes the notion of vagueness—the basic idea being that the exact boundary of objects about which the predication is true is left open. Another possible route invokes the notion of probability—the basic idea being that the proposition is understood to apply to all objects that fall under the general term, but only with a certain degree of probability. This idea, in turn, opened a field of scholarly debate about the nature of probability hardly less sophisticated than contemporary debates about probability theory (although, of course, the mathematical tools in the late medieval and early modern period were less far developed).

The philosophical sophistication of late Aristotelian logic and semantics, however, belonged to the factors that prompted the critique of Humanist logicians. The view that common linguistic usage offers a clue for the understanding of general terms was always part of the Platonic and the Aristotelian traditions (think of Plato’s analysis of the concept of goodness or Aristotle’s analysis of the concept of wisdom);³⁶ but the topic of common usage (*usus communis*) became ever more prominent in Humanist theories of interpretation, such as those developed by Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457), Marius Nizolius (1498–1576) and Bartolomeo Viotti (d. 1568).³⁷ Very much like their contemporary counterparts, early modern theories of language and meaning struggled with two competing intuitions. On the one hand, the emphasis on the importance

³⁵ See E. J. Ashworth, “Priority of Analysis and Merely Confused Supposition,” *Franciscan Studies* 33 (1973), pp. 38–41.

³⁶ See, e.g., Nicholas White, “Plato’s Concept of Goodness,” in Hugh H. Benson (ed.), *A Companion to Plato*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, pp. 356–372; Joseph Owen, “Aristotle’s Notion of Wisdom,” *Apeiron* 20 (1987), pp. 1–16.

³⁷ On Valla’s views on common usage, see Mirko Tavoni, *Latino, grammatica, volgare. Storia di una questione umanistica*, Padova: Antenore, 1984, pp. 139–148; Lodi Nauta, *In Defense of Common Sense: Lorenzo Valla’s Humanist Critique of Scholastic Philosophy*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009, pp. 276–280; on Nizolius’s metaphilosophy, see Cristina Marras and Giovanna Varani, “I dibattiti rinascimentali su retorica e dialettica nella ‘Prefazione al Nizolio’ di Leibniz,” *Studi Filosofici* 27 (2004), pp. 184–216; Lodi Nauta, “Anti-Essentialism and the Rhetoricization of Knowledge: Mario Nizolio’s Humanist Attack on Universals,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 65 (2012), pp. 31–66; on Viotti’s metaphilosophy and its influence on the early Leibniz, see Andreas Blank, “Striving Possibles and Leibniz’s Cognitivist Theory of Volition,” *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 5 (2016), pp. 29–52.

of usage was motivated by the intuition that the function of linguistic expressions in communication is bound to commonly understood contents. On the other hand, early modern critics of such approaches have been quick to point out that usage often suffers from vagueness and ambiguity and sometimes expresses commonly shared prejudices and errors. This is why, even if common usage is an indispensable tool for determining the meaning of theoretical terms, common usage must itself be capable of being the object of criticism. This idea was most carefully worked out in early modern theories of legal interpretation, where the methodological notion of presumption was invoked to clarify the sense in which we can rely on common usage as a long as contrary evidence does not force us to revise our understanding.³⁸

3. Overview of Contributions

Evidently, a comprehensive treatment of these matters goes beyond the limits of what could be done within the confines of a single journal issue.³⁹ However, what the present special issue offers is a series of case studies that touch in various ways upon many of the issues just mentioned.

Günter Frank's article explores the pathways on which the conception of innate "natural notions" made its way into Lutheran and Calvinist thought, both on the continent and in England. He points to the importance of the interpretation of passages from Paul's Epistle to the Romans suggesting the possibility of natural knowledge of God. These Platonizing aspects of the biblical text is itself what made the enterprise of developing versions of Christianized Platonism plausible within an intellectual situation characterized by the pressures of confessionalization. Frank makes it clear how strongly the use of common notions in the work of Melancthon was shaped not only by neo-Platonic and Aristotelian psychologies, but also by Stoic influences, thereby mirroring eclectic approaches to common notions in ancient commentary traditions. In this respect, Frank takes up a crucial insight from Wilhelm Dilthey, who took the reception of the Stoic conception of common notions to be one of the formative influences on modernity, an influence that offered the theoretical resources for overcoming the divisive tendencies of the different confessions through a theology that was seen not only as natural but also as being capable of being commonly shared by members of different churches and religions. Frank offers a detailed genealogy of the early modern uses of common notions in forming a common

³⁸ See Andreas Blank, "Common Usage, Presumption and Verisimilitude in Sixteenth-Century Theories of Juridical Interpretation," *History of European Ideas* 43 (2017), pp. 401–415.

³⁹ A comprehensive treatment also would have to cover common notions in early modern philosophy of mathematics; for a start of these matters, see Matteo Favaretti Camposampiero, "Mereology and Mathematics: Christian Wolff's Foundational Programme," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 27 (2019), pp. 1151–1172.

theology, a genealogy that leads from attempt of integrating philosophy into the educational program of the early stages of the Lutheran Reformation to seventeenth-century British philosophy.

Miroslav Hanke's article offers an analysis of some of the intricacies of early modern Aristotelian theories of generalization. His focus is on propositions concerning what is "morally necessary." Intuitively, moral necessity is weaker than logical necessity (the contrary of what is morally necessary does not imply a contradiction) and also weaker than physical necessity (the contrary of what is morally necessary does not violate any laws of nature). To analyze the necessity at stake, the early modern Scholastics applied different theories of generalization. One strategy applied the theory of *suppositio*, especially the idea that some general terms introduce subjects of predication in a vague manner. For instance, saying that it is morally necessary for a certain sin to occur does not pick out any single individual in this population as the bearer of a certain sinful property. Another strategy appealed to an ontological analysis of the propensity of objects falling under a general term to display a certain behavior, where propensities are understood as immanent dispositions of the objects in question. A third strategy regarded propositions concerning what is morally necessary as statistical generalizations; for instance, "Mothers love their children" could, according to this strategy, be regarded as a statement about most mothers, or about certain frequencies of occurrences of motherly love in certain populations.

Mattia Mantovani's article takes up the topic of common consent in Herbert of Cherbury and follows it through Descartes and Locke. Lord Herbert took universal consent as an argument for innateness and tried to show that a small number of propositions in fact finds universal consent. While the only philosopher mentioned in Locke's critique of the idea that universal consent could count as a criterion for innateness is Lord Herbert, it is an open question whether Locke's critique should be read as a more general refutation of the theories of innateness (Leibniz, for instance, took Locke's critique to be more than an ad-hominem argument). That Locke's critique has more general implications could be taken to unproblematic when one thinks of positions that have substantial similarities with Lord Herbert's. But it is controversial whether Locke's critique could also be effective against Descartes's version of the theory of innate notions. Mantovani addresses this issue by considering how deeply Descartes's own views concerning common notions were shaped by a critique of Lord Herbert's views concerning the relevance of common consent. If Descartes rejects exactly the same aspects of Lord Herbert's views as Locke does, while still upholding an innateness thesis, Mantovani argues, it seems unlikely that Locke could be attributed with anything like a definitive refutation of the existence of common notions that do not derive from sensation.

Han Thomas Adriaenssen's article places Kenelm Digby's use of common notions between the use of common notions in late Aristotelian natural

philosophy, as exemplified in the work of Domingo de Soto (1494–1560), and Cartesian responses to arguments from common notions in natural philosophy, as exemplified in the work of one of the early Cartesians, Johannes de Raey (1622–1702). Digby is an interesting case. On the one hand, he was personally acquainted with Gassendi and refers to specific contents of Gassendi's *Animadversiones* several years before this work was published.⁴⁰ On the other hand, he tries to integrate a number of Aristotelian concepts—such as the concept of rarity and density—into his analysis of the nature of bodies. This is why Digby uses Gassendi's epistemology to reach conclusions that are, in part, quite far away from an Epicurean account of nature. Still, the corpuscularian aspects of Digby's philosophy of nature lead him to take certain theoretical conceptions to be supported by common notions, while Soto takes theoretical conceptions incompatible with Digby's to be supported by common notions, as well. Such situations indicate that arguments from common notions about issues in natural philosophy may be fraught with unsolvable difficulties. Adriaenssen discusses how persuasive such a line of criticism is.

Markku Roinila's article addresses the question of how common notions in Leibniz's practical philosophy relate to the role that Leibniz ascribes to the instincts. Leibniz makes some puzzling claims to the effect that moral truths could be known in two complementary ways—distinctly through reflection upon common notions, and confusedly (but no less reliably) through instincts. Roinila analyses Leibniz's views on the nature of the instincts—whose role guiding action so far has not yet received the careful attention from commentators that it deserves—and places these views on the nature of instincts into the larger context of Leibniz's extensive but sketchy remarks on the nature of affects and passions. This provides the grounds for an analysis of Leibniz's account of the cognitive function of the instincts, and to make clear how this function relates to the function that Leibniz assigns to common notions in practical reasoning—which in turn differs from the role of common notions in theoretical reasoning. As it turns out, even if the workings of the instincts differ from the processes of reflection that actualize common notions, for Leibniz instincts nevertheless provide cognitive resources that are common to all human beings with unimpaired cognitive powers and that lead to insights into moral precepts that have a common applicability and validity in human life.

Andreas Blank's article explores the argumentative grounds of Christian Wolff's claims concerning duties of esteem and traces them back along a long chain of deductive arguments to claims concerning common notions—especially the notions of perfection and obligation. These argumentative

⁴⁰ John Henry, "Atomism and Eschatology Catholicism and Natural Philosophy in the Interregnum," *British Journal for the History of Science* 15 (1982), pp. 211–239, p. 215, note 22.

connections will be placed in a metaphilosophical perspective. Again, a highly eclectic approach to common notions is characteristic of Wolff's thought; however, unlike his Lutheran predecessors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Wolff rejects an innateness thesis. What, however, can be found is the view of common notions as generalizations; the view of common notions as what is expressed in common linguistic usage; and the view that common notions can be revised, both in the sense that, for philosophical purposes, they need to be made clearer and more determinate, and that they can be replaced by better notions if they express prejudices. His defense of the view that we have not only the duty toward ourselves to do everything we can to be held in good esteem by others but also the duty toward others to do everything we can (and need to do) to ensure that others are held in the esteem that they deserve can function as a case study that illustrates how this process of clarification and (local) correction is meant to work.

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