Against Philosophical Proofs Against Common Sense[*]

Louis Doulas and Evan Welchance

1. A Philosophical Proof Against Common Sense

Many philosophers think that common sense knowledge survives sophisticated philosophical proofs against it. It's much more certain that *things move* that it is that the premises of Zeno's counterarguments are true. What goes for Zeno's arguments against motion arguably goes for philosophical arguments against causation, time, tables, human beings, knowledge, and more.

Recently, however, Bryan Frances (forthcoming) has advanced a philosophical proof that he thinks common sense can't survive.[1] His proof exploits various philosophical paradoxes to show how common sense engenders contradiction. Consider, for example, the following set of sentences:

- Anyone with less than 1¢ is not rich.
- If anyone with less than 1¢ is not rich, then anyone with less than 2¢ is not rich.

  ……
- If anyone with less than $(10^{14} - 1)$¢ is not rich, then anyone with less than 10^{14}¢ is not rich.
- It's not the case that anyone with less than 10^{14}¢ is not rich.

This is the Sorites Paradox. These claims ("the Cs") are mutually inconsistent. The final claim contradicts the conclusion derived from the antecedent claims, "Anyone with less than 10^{14}¢ is not rich." So one of the Cs must be false. And yet, Frances argues, all of them are *commonsensical*. So a common sense claim is false. So philosophy can overturn common sense and thus common sense methodology is unstable. QED.

This is Frances's philosophical proof against common sense, albeit in highly schematic form. His *official* proof, however, is highly elaborate

[*] Forthcoming in *Analysis*.

[1] See also Doulas (2020) for another kind of philosophical "proof" against common sense.

and features six detailed premises. We refrain from reproducing them here. Since our contentions are with Frances's first premise, that's what we'll focus on:

> (1) There exists an interpretation and group of familiar elementary inference rules of sentential logic such that (i) each so-interpreted *C* is commonsensical, and (ii) from just the so-interpreted *C*s there is a derivation of a pair of contradictory claims using just those rules of inference.

Frances analyzes *commonsensicality* in the following way: *P* is commonsensical for a certain large community at a time *t* iff virtually all members of that community at *t* who understand *P* well are strongly disposed to give *P* a high credence (forthcoming 2). For Frances's proof, the relevant community is the contemporary philosophical community: common sense *amongst contemporary philosophers*. Moreover, one needn't be a complete specialist to "understand *P* well," but neither must one be completely naive. (This is an important point and one we will return to in §2.) For example, Frances says that despite *seeming* obviously true, the proposition "There are twice as many positive integers as there are even positive integers" doesn't count as commonsensical for contemporary philosophers because enough of us have some acquaintance with elementary number theory to reject it on that basis (forthcoming 2).[2]

As it turns out, Frances thinks that the only *competent* way of rejecting the soundness of his proof is to reject (1); but "(1) is about as certain as any philosophical claim ever gets" (forthcoming 4).

We disagree. We maintain that condition (i) is false. In particular, there are middle *C*s such that it *isn't* the case that virtually all philosophers would assign them a high credence. Frances's argument is therefore unsound. This is what we'll argue in the next section (§2). We then go on to dispute an alternative implication of the proof and close by issuing Frances a dilemma (§3).

[2] According to Frances, better candidates for philosophical common sense might include propositions about Liar sentences like "If 'A isn't true' is true, then A isn't true" or claims about material composition such as "If a tree is composed of atoms, then there is a group of atoms that composes it."

2. *Against the Proof*

Again, we think that condition (i) is false, which means that we deny that some *C* is commonsensical; say, some middle *C*. But, says Frances (forthcoming 2–3), denying *any* middle *C* would entail the falsity of a proposition that is eminently commonsensical:

> (R) There are not two people who differ by only a few cents and yet just one of them is rich.

∼(R) is entailed by the denial of any middle *C*. But Frances claims that ∼(R) goes against common sense. If asked to judge one way or another, virtually all contemporary philosophers will be strongly disposed to assign (R) a high credence. So, virtually all contemporary philosophers will also be strongly disposed to assign high credences to the middle *C*s rather than their negations. Thus, the middle *C*s are all commonsensical (again, *amongst contemporary philosophers*).

But consider now the prevalence of vagueness in natural language. Virtually all contemporary philosophers are familiar with the concept of *borderlinearity*. There are certain amounts of pennies such that, if a person possessed that number of pennies, they wouldn't be definitely rich nor definitely not rich. Let $i¢$ (where $1 < i < 10^{14}$) be a constant which denotes such an amount. Thus, the following statement is vague:

> (I) Anyone with less than $i¢$ is not rich.

(I) involves a borderline case of richness, so it's not the case that virtually all contemporary philosophers who understand (I) will be strongly disposed to give (I) a high credence. They won't be sure whether anyone with less than $i¢$ is rich or not. If anything, they'll most likely be disposed to give (I) a middling credence.[3]

[3] Bacon (2018) argues that agents can have precise credences in vague statements; Field (2000) and Schiffer (2003) have argued otherwise. Additionally, Rinard (2015) contends that credences in statements involving borderline cases are indeterminate, falling within a range. We wish to remain neutral on whether or not the credence one assigns to (I) is a precise credence in a vague statement, or a function of credences to (I)'s precisifications. It could even be an imprecise credence. But surely *if* one can have some credence in a vague statement, whatever its nature, then it should be middling. If credences in vague statements aren't allowed, then so much the worse for Frances's analysis of commonsensicality—for Frances is committed to all of the middle *C*s having *high* credences.

But there will also be middle *C*s in the Sorites which involve borderline cases of richness:

> (I′) If anyone with less than $(i-1)¢$ is not rich, then anyone with less than $i¢$ is not rich.

Because it's a middle *C*, Frances must maintain that (I′) is commonsensical; to deny it would mean to deny (R), which clashes with common sense on his account. But recall why Frances excludes propositions like "There are twice as many positive integers as there are even positive integers" from counting as commonsensical despite *seeming* obviously true: enough contemporary philosophers have some acquaintance with elementary transfinite number theory to know that such propositions are false. Thus, in Frances's terms, such propositions aren't commonsensical, for virtually everyone within the contemporary philosophical community who understands them will be strongly disposed to assign them a *low* credence—namely, 0.

We contend that (R) is like the proposition about integers above. Enough contemporary philosophers have the requisite amount of acquaintance with different theories of vagueness[4] to know that, according to those theories, (R) is false despite *seeming* obviously true. Indeed, many of those theories seek to explain why (R) seems true, despite its falsity. Thus, (R) *isn't* a proposition such that virtually everyone within the contemporary philosophical community who understands it will be strongly disposed to assign it a high credence. Hence, (R) isn't commonsensical in Frances's sense.

Frances reasons in the following way: ∼(I′) implies ∼(R). But ∼(R) goes against common sense. So (I′) is commonsensical. However, if (R) isn't commonsensical in Frances's sense, as we've argued, then ∼(R) doesn't go against common sense. This undermines his motivation for maintaining that (I′) is commonsensical.

Moreover, (I′) is vague. Note first that the consequent of (I′)—namely, (I)—is vague; (I) involves a borderline case of richness. We claimed above that (I) warrants a middling credence. But if (I′)'s antecedent is either definitely true or vague, then for all we know (I′) could have a

[4] The main theories currently on the table are supervaluationism, epistemicism, and onticism. According to both supervaluationism and epistemicism, (R) is false. It may even be false on certain ontic accounts.

true antecedent and a false conclusion. Given that (I′) is a vague claim, it too would seem to warrant at most a middling credence. It would certainly be inadvisable to assign (I′) a *high* credence. Thus, it's not the case that virtually all philosophers who understand (I′) would be strongly disposed to give it a high credence. So (I′) isn't commonsensical. Therefore, Frances's first premise is false.

Even if one was inclined to assign (I′) a high credence on the basis of (R), we don't think that *virtually all* philosophers would be strongly disposed to do so. We think our reasons for assigning (I′) a middling credence are compelling; they stem from a prior understanding of borderlinearity. Plus, many contemporary philosophers think that (R) is false. So we think that others would judge similarly. But barring *virtual unanimity* on (I)'s credence, it shouldn't be counted as commonsensical on Frances's analysis. So even if our reasoning isn't unanimously held, Frances's argument still fails.

Frances has a trick up his sleeve: his *revenge* proof (forthcoming 4–5). He argues that his first premise, i.e., (1) above, is commonsensical: virtually all members of the contemporary philosophical community agree that there is a way of interpreting the Sorites claims such that they're all commonsensical and lead to paradox. We've argued that Frances's first premise is false. But then, Frances retorts, we've shown that (1) is a false common sense claim. Even further, there's a good philosophical *argument* to the effect that some commonsensical claim isn't true—i.e., the conclusion of his first argument. So, he claims, his conclusion still stands.

For this argument to run, Frances has to maintain that (1) is commonsensical relative to the contemporary philosophical community. He claims that to deny this is "…to deny a stubborn, empirical, nonnormative fact … that the vast majority of philosophers familiar with the sorites think that the Cs can have their obvious logical characteristics and still be commonsensical" (forthcoming 5).

But this reply doesn't work. Frances claims that virtually all philosophers who understand (1) would be strongly disposed to give it a high credence. But (1) implies the controversial claim that (I′) is commonsensical. Philosophers do often talk of the Sorites as if all of its premises are "commonsensical." But clearly they're not all using the word "commonsensical" in Frances's sense. As discussed above, there are strong

considerations to which many philosophers would agree in favor of attributing a middling credence to (I′). So it's not the case that virtually all philosophers would be strongly disposed to maintain that all of the Cs are commonsensical. So (1) isn't commonsensical.

3. *Kinds of Common Sense*

If Frances's argument had worked, what would it have shown? His conclusion, recall, is that some common sense propositions are false.

But *which* common sense propositions? Frances carves up common sense into different categories. There are common sense propositions such as "Some people are rich" or "Here is a hand" which make up the *Everyday Life Claims* (ELCs). And then there are common sense propositions such as the Sorites Cs and mereological ones like "If a tree is composed of atoms, then there is a group of atoms that composes it" which make up the *Philosophical Claims* (PCs).[5]

Does Frances's proof target ELCs or PCs? As Frances sees it, he needn't settle the matter. For if his proof entails that there are false PCs, then most of us are bad at philosophy since "a great many of us endorse those false claims in our work" (forthcoming 7). And if his proof entails that there are false ELCs, then Moorean methodology is unstable[6] and must therefore be abandoned.

So Frances presents us with a challenge. In this section, we'll show how that challenge falls short. First, we'll argue that Frances's proof only entails that there are false PCs and that this renders his proof dialectically ineffective against the Moorean. We'll then show why this doesn't imply that philosophers are bad at philosophy. This leaves Frances with a challenge of his own.

[5] Frances also mentions two other categories of commonsensical claims—*Elementary Logic Claims* and *Interpretation Claims*—but we ignore them here as they aren't directly relevant to our argument.

[6] Officially, Frances says "unreliable," but it's too quick to conclude that Moorean methodology is unreliable simply because some ELCs (or PCs, for that matter) are false. Similar reasoning about perception would yield the implausible conclusion that perception is unreliable because it occasionally leads us astray. We therefore take Frances's argument to be showing how Moorean methodology is *internally inconsistent*, or "unstable."

We think that Frances's proof only targets PCs. Here's our argument:

1. Consider a set of commonsensical claims which lead to paradox. If Frances's argument is sound, then at least one of the Cs is false.
2. The Cs will either consist of PCs alone or PCs and ELCs.
3. If the former, then a PC is false.
4. If the latter, then a PC is false.
5. Therefore, if Frances's argument is sound, then a PC, not an ELC, is false.

We take 4 to be the most controversial premise here.[7] Below we motivate it and along the way show how Frances's proof is dialectically ineffective against the Moorean *even if successful*.

Premise 4 says that if the Cs consist of either PCs or ELCs, then a PC is false. Why? It comes down to the fact that PCs aren't the paradigm of common sense for the Moorean. Indeed, the Moorean should be willing to grant that there are plenty of false propositions that are (or were) commonsensical in Frances's sense. Take, for instance, the proposition *the Sun orbits the Earth*. Surely, this proposition was commonsensical in Frances's sense for most Eleatics. So it was commonsensical (again, in Frances's sense) for that community at that time. The Moorean will think the same goes for many other commonsensical beliefs that we now consider false.

The Moorean can grant this because they don't think such propositions belong to common sense's "Hard Core."[8] Hard Core propositions are such that they count as commonsensical for *everyone*, no matter the culture or epoch they happen to inhabit. Thus, the Hard Core isn't just commonsensical at certain times for certain communities. Rather, propositions that belong to the Hard Core are, we might say, the "most" commonsensical; the greatest amount of people—philosophers *and* non-philosophers alike—assign them the highest credence.

Notice that propositions like "Things move" and "Here is a hand" are ELCs. So it's clear that ELCs belong to the Hard Core. But do

[7] One might also question 2. But we think 2 is reasonably justified by induction: as far as anyone can tell no paradoxical set of Cs has consisted of ELCs alone.

[8] The term originates with Kelly (2008: 54).

PCs? We doubt it.[9] To illustrate, consider what we take be some commonsensical PCs:

- there aren't different ways of being;
- there are no vague objects;
- it's impossible for an object to have a determinable but no determinate of that determinable;
- no two things of the same sort can coincide.

We take these claims to have once been considered commonsensical amongst philosophers. Arguably, this isn't the case anymore. Many of the claims above have now been shown to be highly implausible, if not outright false.[10] Indeed, it might be part of future *philosophical* common sense to believe the negations of these propositions. But unlike PCs, ELCs don't "shift" in this way. So even if Frances is right that there are false common sense propositions, they just aren't the kind of common sense that Mooreans are attempting to defend from attack.[11] So, even if Frances's proof *is* successful, it would be dialectically ineffective against the Moorean.

Now, even if Frances's proof leaves the Moorean approach untouched, it has serious consequences for philosophical theorizing across the board: if PCs alone are to blame, then most of us are bad at philosophy. At least so claims Frances.

But we think that this conclusion is too hasty. Philosophy is, after all, a highly speculative endeavor. Surely most philosophers would be unsurprised to learn that many of the philosophical claims they've endorsed in their work are false or inconsistent, even ones considered *commonsensical amongst philosophers* (just see the list above). Moreover, if the average philosopher isn't a Moorean—nor sympathetic to common sense in general—then it would hardly be a surprise for them

[9] See Lycan (2007: 95, fn. 30).

[10] See Turner (2010) and McDaniel (2017) for the first claim; Evans (1978), Hawley (2002), van Inwagen (2009), and Barnes (2010) for the second; Wilson (2013) for the third; and Fine (2000) for the fourth.

[11] Additionally, there are paradoxes which have all "commonsensical" premises (in some sense of the word) and an absurd conclusion, so some element of "common sense" so construed must be false. But this sense of "commonsensical" is not the same one that the Moorean is defending. See also Quine (1966) and Lycan (2010).

to learn that some of their philosophical beliefs are inconsistent or false given that, in principle, *most* of their beliefs (if not all of them) are subject to revision.

Does this mean that philosophers are bad at their jobs? We're skeptical. True, we often think of success as a function of how well one does something or how reliably one arrives at the truth. An archer that hits a bullseye time and again is *good* at archery, not bad at it. A mathematician able to prove many incredibly difficult theorems is *good* at mathematics, not bad at it. Is the metric not the same in philosophy?

We're not so sure. In fact, it seems that being good or bad at philosophy isn't necessarily a function of reliably getting at the truth. One can imagine a particularly creative philosopher whose views are often false yet whose perspective is always enlightening. Such a philosopher would be *good* at philosophy in our books. Of course, if one can get at the truths, more power to you. But failing to do so doesn't make you a philosophical failure. So, even if Frances's proof is successful, it wouldn't necessarily show that philosophers are bad at their jobs; for it's unclear that what it means for philosophers to be *good* at their jobs is to always be tracking the truth.

If all of this is right, then Frances is in a jam: If his proof targets PCs, then even if it's successful, it's dialectically ineffective against the Moorean. But if his opponent *isn't* the Moorean, it could only be the non-Moorean philosopher who probably doesn't assign common sense much weight in the first place, which would make the results of his proof, even if successful, unsurprising. So his proof misfires in both directions.

What sort of argument *would* work against the Moorean? In light of our present discussion, we speculate that such an argument would have to be one that featured all Hard Core propositions as premises. But an argument like *that*, we submit, has yet to be advanced.[12]

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