

# Philosophy and Common Sense 2: Cultivating Curiosity

*Sebastian Sunday-Grève and Timothy Williamson  
discuss the relationship between curiosity and common sense*

## **Dig Deep or Travel Far?**

*Sebastian Sunday-Grève*

Timothy Williamson thinks that curiosity naturally leads to all sorts of enquiries including, soon enough, abstract questions of a proto-philosophical or proto-scientific sort. Here are some of his examples of such questions in the form in which they would typically be asked. What is water? What is earth? What is air? What is light? What is space? What is time? What is life? What is death? Williamson points out that initially no separation is felt between questions that are proto-scientific and ones that are proto-philosophical, and that many are actually both (for example, “What is time?”). He then turns to the question of what role common sense may play once philosophy has started.

Having previously observed that “curiosity drives us to ask such questions even when we have no idea how to go about answering them (e.g., what is time?),” Williamson notes that “common sense seems a good way to stop philosophy going crazy.” He rejects radical scepticism – the position that we cannot really know anything – as well as the phenomenalist view according to which all evidence can only consist of subjective appearances (“the phenomenal”)

such as its appearing to me now that there is something red in my visual field, etc., as opposed to (say) the fact that the traffic light is red. On this basis, he presents the plausible hypothesis, which he has defended at length in his work, that a subject’s evidence is precisely their knowledge. From this, and the obvious fact that everything that is known can in principle be used as evidence in philosophy, he concludes that common-sense knowledge can be so used.

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Although on this view the only part of common sense which our evidence includes is common-sense knowledge, in practice common-sense beliefs also come into play. This is because an individual may know something without knowing that they know

it (including in the case of common-sense knowledge), and an individual may not know something but falsely believe that they know it (including in the case of common-sense belief). In general, Williamson thinks that there are no infallible sources of evidence. He says:

*When the voice of  
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Instead of a hopeless search for infallible sources of evidence, we should concentrate on cultivating the ability to recognise our mistakes, where we have incorrectly treated something as part of our evidence. We accept the inevitability of sometimes making mistakes, and ready ourselves to correct them.

I find myself in full agreement with Williamson about these matters. So I would like to delve into them a little further by asking what is *the right mixture* of common sense and curiosity. And I want to ask this question in the same two ways in which Williamson asks where philosophy starts: on the one hand for an individual and on the other for a culture.

Suppose our thinking was essentially

the mediation between the voice of common sense and the voice of curiosity: for example, when the voice of curiosity pushes one towards more and more abstract theorising, the other voice will urge resistance to any conclusions that might be inconsistent with common sense, whilst any particular resistance may in turn be scrutinised, and by chance overturned, following the voice of curiosity, and so on. Now, for an individual considered in relative isolation, Williamson's account clearly recommends maintaining a more or less even balance between the two at any time. For a culture considered as a whole, you would naturally want the same. The interesting question is what we should say about individuals from a cultural point of view.

Consider for example our present culture (or subculture) of professional philosophy, which is in many ways a highly specialised discipline. Given the sheer size and complexity of many, if not all, important philosophical issues, it seems only appropriate that professional philosophers should be organised – as they are – according to some division of labour, including a division between those who, as it were, represent the voice of common sense and those who represent the voice of curiosity on any given matter. In many cases, this latter kind of division corresponds to familiar oppositions, including conservatism, dogmatism, realism, traditionalism, etc. on the side of common sense and anti-realism, progressivism, radicalism, scepticism, etc. on the side of curiosity. In general, all sorts of views and theories that conflict with common sense can be said to belong on the side of curiosity, with the corresponding opposite belonging on the side of common sense.



More, and more extreme, division of labour – and hence more, and more extreme, individual specialisation – along the dimension of common sense vs curiosity seems in principle desirable. At the same time, an extremist culture naturally requires moderation. So there should probably be a third type of specialisation along the same dimension which will be opposed to all extremes (except extreme moderation).

Thus, it seems that even in an extremely specialised philosophical culture that is *perfectly* balanced overall with regard to those who represent the voice of common sense and those who represent the voice of curiosity on any given matter, there will still be the need for individually balanced philoso-

phers if only to ensure efficient communication between the extremes. In fact, the point seems to hold generally regarding the question of specialisation along any dimension. So it is perhaps no coincidence that many of the most celebrated philosophers of the recent and distant past were not as specialised as the majority of professional philosophers are today and often less so than many of their contemporaries. But does this mean that philosophy departments should begin actively trying to counter the prevalent, and no doubt in many ways problematic, tendency of narrow specialisation by fostering generalism (as it were, a “generalist specialisation”)? Or can the discipline perhaps rely on a natural supply of individuals who

are exceptional in this respect, or on practitioners often enough naturally acquiring sufficiently broad knowledge of the subject in order to play the moderating part?

### **Curiosity, Hunger, and Everything**

*Timothy Williamson*

In “Dig Deep or Travel Far?”, Sebastian Sunday-Grève presents common sense and curiosity as two opposed voices. In his view, common sense speaks for conservatism and dogmatism, curiosity for radicalism and scepticism, and we should seek a happy medium between those extremes.

That is not how I see the relation between curiosity and common sense. I understand curiosity as the appetite for knowledge, and common sense as widely shared cognition. Thus widely shared methods for gaining knowledge – such as sense perception – are common-sense methods, which often result in common-sense knowledge, though when things go badly they can result in false common-sense beliefs. For example, like many other species of animal, we gain knowledge of our environment through sight, but we can also get false beliefs, when we experience visual illusions. Thus common sense is our widely shared way of satisfying curiosity. To put it another way, curiosity asks a question; common sense gives an answer. That relation is cooperative rather than competitive. How then can they be opposed tendencies?

Consider an analogy. *Hunger* is the appetite for *food*. The normal human way of satisfying hunger is by *eating*. How then can hunger and eating be opposed tendencies? Obviously, being hungry and eating are two contrasting *stages*, but hunger isn't *against* eating, it's *for* eating. Here hunger corresponds

to curiosity, food to knowledge, and eating to inquiring by common-sense methods. Just as the function of hunger is to make us ingest food, and eating is the normal human way to ingest food, so the function of curiosity is to make us acquire knowledge, and inquiring by common-sense methods is the normal human way to acquire knowledge.

*Curiosity asks a question; common sense gives an answer. That relation is cooperative rather than competitive. How then can they be opposed tendencies?*

Let's take the analogy further. Not everything humans can eat is food for humans. For instance, we can eat paper, grass, and poisonous mushrooms, but none of them is food for us, because they do not nourish us. Biologically, the function of hunger is not to make us eat any old thing, but to make us eat *food*, because it nourishes us. Something may *look* like food, and even taste like food, without really *being* food. Similarly, something may *appear* like knowledge without really *being* knowledge. Biologically, the function of curiosity is not to make us believe any old thing, but to make us acquire *knowledge*, because it is good for us. By contrast, when we are deceived, and acquire false beliefs which feel like knowledge, they

are not good for us. Knowing where you can get a drink helps you get a drink in a way in which having a false belief about where you can get a drink does not.

Of course, I am describing general tendencies, which have exceptions. False beliefs don't always harm; over-estimating your capacities may give you the self-confidence to succeed. Knowledge doesn't always help; when dealing with the Mafia, knowing too much can get you killed. Similarly, eating something which isn't food isn't always bad for you; a spy may save her life by swallowing a letter which reveals her identity. Eating food isn't always good for you; when you are ill, you may have digestive problems. Nevertheless, *normally*, it is food which nourishes you, and it is knowledge which is good for you to act on.

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Sebastian puts curiosity on the side of *scepticism*. His radical sceptic thinks that we cannot obtain knowledge. That corresponds to someone who thinks that we cannot obtain food. But hunger is not on the side of that idea. When food is unobtainable, hunger is futile. Similarly, when knowledge is unobtainable, curiosity is futile. Radical scepticism leads to incuriosity. That fits my experience; proponents of radical scepticism self-righteously proclaim their open-mindedness, but have no real interest in learning anything new or different – for learning is acquiring knowledge, so radical scepticism

implies that learning is impossible too. Curiosity is *against* radical scepticism.

Without scepticism, how can curiosity enable us to recognise the errors and limitations of common sense? That question sounds harder than it is, because the word “scepticism” is ambiguous. Sebastian defines radical scepticism as “the position that we cannot really know anything”. That is *global scepticism*, which is indeed useless for recognising the errors and limitations of common sense, because it entails that we cannot know what they are. By contrast, when we recognise a specific error or limitation of common sense, that is only a *local scepticism*, about that specific bit of common sense. Properly targeted, local scepticism serves curiosity's purpose, whereas global scepticism is an intellectual dead-end.

The belief that the sun travels right round the earth each day was once common sense – it was widely held. Indeed, that belief was widely taken to be knowledge. It was not abandoned because people felt like being sceptical about it just for the sake of being sceptical. It was abandoned because curiosity (and other reasons) drove people to develop increasingly accurate theories of the motions of heavenly bodies; those theories came into conflict with the common-sense belief and eventually drove it out. What exposes widely held pseudo-knowledge is not generic scepticism but the search for new knowledge, which often results in inconsistencies between the old and the new.

Despite the inconsistencies, the search for new knowledge is not totally alien to common sense. Natural science, including astronomy, depends on observation, which is itself a common-sense method. The way scientists reason to whatever hypothesis



they can think of that best explains their observations is a more or less extreme refinement of the way hunters from the stone age on have reasoned to whatever hypothesis they can think of about recent animal activity best explains their observations of tracks and traces on the ground and on vegetation. Despite its obvious fallibility, the combination of curiosity and common sense has considerable capacity for self-correction.

Sebastian notes the trend towards increasing specialisation in philosophy, and suggests a balance between specialists in curiosity and specialists in common sense. In my terms, that would be like a balance between specialists in asking questions and specialists in answering them. Many

children specialise in asking “Why?” and some adults specialise in wearily answering. But in science the two roles cannot be so easily separated. Progress does not come from people who endlessly ask random questions. It comes from asking *fruitful* questions, which can be answered, at least partially, starting from the intellectual and other resources available in the current state of inquiry. Moreover, it is the people who ask them who are most driven to answer them. Isaac Newton did not become a great scientist by asking “Why did the apple fall from the tree?” and leaving it to someone else to work out an answer. He worked out an answer himself.

Since many people bemoan increasing



specialisation in philosophy, it is worth saying something about the issue, although Sebastian himself is alert to the benefits of the division of labour. Obviously, increasing specialisation is not confined to philosophy; it is found in almost all active intellectual disciplines, and reflects the increasing volume of research. To work properly on a topic, one must keep up with numerous recent studies, which takes so much time that one cannot work properly on more than a few. Such increasing specialisation clashes with a stereotype of the philosopher as the person who, above all, sees everything as a whole.

The blame is often put on the artificial pressures of modern academic careers. But that facile diagnosis ignores the genuinely curiosity-driven pressures in favour of specialisation. When you ask a simple, general question, there is no guarantee that the answer will not depend on numerous sub-questions which can only be answered with proper understanding on the basis of specialised expertise.

Take the very question whether it is even meaningful to generalise about absolutely everything, all at once, without restriction. Some logical paradoxes, closely related to Russell's paradox in set theory, seem to show that the answer is "No". In reply, I have argued for the answer "Yes" by developing even worse paradoxes for the opposite view. Many ingenious and creative alternatives have been worked out by serious thinkers. Their advantages and disadvantages need to be explored and compared, which requires difficult technical work in logic. Only a narcissist would ignore all approaches but their own. The debate continues. Whoever is right, it is a close-run thing. This is not a matter of inauthentic games-playing. The

simplest, most natural-seeming approaches turn out to be logically inconsistent. The consistent approaches are much more complicated and involve unnatural-seeming restrictions on what can be said. That is what happens if, driven by curiosity, you try to ask a simple, general question, and then think hard about what you are doing.

*Sebastian Sunday-Grève is a German philosopher, who was educated at Oxford and is living in Beijing. He is a member of the Chinese Institute of Foreign Philosophy and an assistant professor at Peking University. He is editor of Wittgenstein on Philosophy, Objectivity, and Meaning (with James Conant; Cambridge, 2019) and Culture and Value after Wittgenstein (Oxford, forthcoming). He works on issues ranging from aesthetics and epistemology to logic and the philosophy of AI.*

*Timothy Williamson is the Wykeham Professor of Logic at the University of Oxford and a visiting professor at Yale. His recent books include Philosophical Method: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford, 2020) and an enlarged edition of The Philosophy of Philosophy (Wiley, 2021). In addition to logic, he works on epistemology, metaphysics and the philosophy of language.*