



ज्ञानविविधा

कला, मानविकी और सामाजिक विज्ञान की सहकर्म-समीक्षित, मूल्यांकित, त्रैमासिक शोध पत्रिका

ISSN : 3048-4537(Online)

3049-2327(Print)

IIFS Impact Factor-2.25

Vol.-2; Issue-4 (Oct.-Dec.) 2025

Page No.- 41-46

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<https://journal.gyanvividha.com>

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The Primacy of Common Sense : G.E. Moore's Defense, the Hypocrisy of Abstract Theorizing, and the Context-Dependent Utility of Everyday Knowledge

Abstract : Common sense, the natural, effortless knowledge humans rely on for daily living, is often dismissed in philosophical discourse as naive or unreliable. This paper argues that common sense, rooted in evolutionary biology, holds profound value for survival and practical life, drawing heavily on G.E. Moore's defense of its self-evident truths. We explore the hypocrisy inherent in philosophers who construct abstract theories of reality yet live by common-sense principles, emphasizing the tension between theoretical rigor and practical necessity. We further evaluate whether a perfect but impractical theory outweighs an imperfect but useful one, concluding that utility trumps theoretical perfection. Additionally, we examine how common sense varies by context (e.g., Earth versus space) and propose that it exists in degrees, shaped by environment and experience. Common sense's value lies not in its truth quotient but in its survival-driven utility, warranting its central place in philosophical inquiry.

Keywords: Common Sense, G.E. Moore, Philosophical Hypocrisy, Context-Dependency, Evolutionary Utility.

Introduction : Common sense encompasses the shared, intuitive judgments that guide human behavior, such as trusting sensory perceptions or expecting cause

and effect (Reid, 1764/1997)¹. Philosophers like Descartes have questioned its reliability, favoring deductive certainty (Descartes, 1641/1984)², while others, notably G.E. Moore, defend it as a foundation for knowledge (Moore, 1925)³. This paper centers on Moore's arguments, critiques the hypocrisy of endorsing abstract theories while living by common sense, and evaluates the comparative value of perfect but impractical theories versus imperfect but practical ones. We also explore how common sense varies contextually (e.g., perceptions of Earth's rotation in space versus on Earth) and whether it operates in degrees. We argue that common sense's evolutionary roots and survival utility make it indispensable, and dismissing it for theoretical purity is a form of intellectual hypocrisy.

G.E. Moore's Defense of Common Sense : G.E. Moore, a 20th-century British philosopher, offered a robust defense of common sense in his seminal work, **A Defence of Common Sense** (1925). Moore argued that certain propositions—such as “I have a body,” “the Earth exists,” and “objects persist when unperceived”—are self-evidently true because they are universally accepted and form the basis of human experience (Moore, 1925)⁴. He famously held up his hand, declaring, “Here is one hand, and here is another,” to assert the undeniable reality of physical objects, challenging skeptics who question sensory evidence (Moore, 1925)⁵. For Moore, common-sense beliefs are more certain than the abstract arguments used to doubt them, as even skeptics rely on these beliefs in practice (Moore, 1925)⁶.

Moore's approach counters philosophical skepticism, such as Berkeley's idealism, which denies the independent existence of material objects (Berkeley, 1710/2008). He argued that denying common sense leads to absurdities, as philosophers cannot function without implicitly accepting it—for instance, navigating a room assumes the existence of physical objects (Moore, 1925)⁷. Moore's defense aligns with the evolutionary perspective that common sense reflects cognitive adaptations for survival, such as trusting sensory data to avoid danger (Campbell, 1974)⁸. His work underscores that common sense is not merely naive but a foundational framework for human life, rooted in how we are wired to interact with the world (Pinker, 1997)⁹.

The Hypocrisy of Believing One Thing and Living Another : The hypocrisy of endorsing abstract philosophical theories while living by common sense is a central issue in this debate. Philosophers like Descartes, who doubted sensory perception to achieve certainty, or Berkeley, who argued that reality depends on perception, still relied on common-sense assumptions in daily life—eating, sleeping, and avoiding physical harm (Descartes, 1641/1984; Berkeley, 1710/2008)¹⁰. This disconnect reveals a contradiction: theorists champion ideas that conflict with the practical knowledge they use to navigate the world (Reid, 1764/1997)¹¹. For example, a philosopher who questions the existence of an external world still looks both ways before crossing a street, implicitly trusting the common-sense belief that cars are real and dangerous (Moore, 1925)¹².

This hypocrisy highlights a broader tension between philosophy's pursuit of

ultimate truth and the lived reality of human existence. Evolutionary epistemology suggests that common sense evolved to prioritize survival over metaphysical accuracy (Campbell, 1974)¹³. For instance, the common-sense belief that a predator's roar signals danger prompts immediate action, regardless of philosophical debates about reality (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992)¹⁴. Philosophers who dismiss common sense as naive yet rely on it in practice undermine their own theories by demonstrating their dependence on survival-driven instincts (James, 1907/1975)¹⁵. This contradiction supports Moore's view that common-sense truths are more certain than speculative theories, as they are indispensable to human functioning (Moore, 1925)¹⁶.

Perfect Theory versus Imperfect Utility : The question of whether a perfect but impractical theory is more valuable than an imperfect but useful one lies at the heart of this inquiry. A perfect theory, such as a logically consistent metaphysical system, may offer intellectual clarity but lack applicability in daily life. For example, Kant's transcendental idealism, which posits that we cannot know "things-in-themselves" but only phenomena shaped by our minds, is philosophically sophisticated but offers little guidance for practical decision-making (Kant, 1781/1998)¹⁷. In contrast, an imperfect theory, such as the common-sense belief that the Sun rises in the east, is factually incorrect (the Earth rotates) but immensely useful for navigation and timekeeping (Kuhn, 1962)¹⁸.

Pragmatist philosophers like William James argue that the value of a belief lies in its practical consequences, not its theoretical perfection (James, 1907/1975)¹⁹. Common sense, though imperfect, enables humans to act effectively in uncertain environments—avoiding fire, sharing resources, or trusting social norms (Dewey, 1925/1981)²⁰. Behavioral studies support this, showing that heuristic-based judgments, akin to common sense, outperform complex analyses in time-sensitive situations due to their speed and utility (Gigerenzer, 2007)²¹. Thus, an imperfect but useful theory, grounded in common sense, is more valuable for human survival and daily living than a perfect but abstract one, as it aligns with our evolutionary wiring to prioritize actionable outcomes (Pinker, 1997)²².

Context-Dependency of Common Sense : The inquiry raises an intriguing point: common sense varies by context, such as perceiving the Earth's rotation in space versus the Sun's movement on Earth. On Earth, the common-sense observation that the Sun moves from east to west arises from sensory experience, guiding daily activities like farming or travel (Kuhn, 1962)²³. In space, however, astronauts directly observe the Earth rotating, making it common sense that the Earth, not the Sun, moves (Shepard, 1994)²⁴. This context-dependency highlights that common sense is not universal but shaped by environment and experience.

Evolutionary psychology suggests that common sense adapts to the specific challenges of a given context (Barkow et al., 1992)²⁵. For early humans on Earth, perceiving a moving Sun was sufficient for survival, as it informed seasonal and daily rhythms (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992)²⁶. In space, new sensory inputs (e.g., seeing Earth rotate) reshape common

sense to align with the environment, illustrating its plasticity (Shepard, 1994)²⁷. This adaptability underscores common sense's survival value, as it evolves to meet practical needs, even if it leads to differing beliefs across contexts.

Does Common Sense Have Levels or Degrees? : Common sense likely exists in degrees, varying in complexity and specificity based on individual experience, cultural context, and environmental demands. At its core, common sense includes universal instincts, such as avoiding pain or recognizing faces, which are hardwired by evolution (Pinker, 1997)²⁸. These basic levels are shared across humans, reflecting survival-driven cognitive adaptations (Campbell, 1974)²⁹. However, higher degrees of common sense emerge from specific contexts or expertise—for instance, a farmer's common-sense knowledge of weather patterns is more refined than a city dweller's, though both share the basic instinct to seek shelter in a storm (Gigerenzer, 2007)³⁰.

As the space example suggests, common sense adapts to new environments, forming specialized layers of practical knowledge. These degrees reflect the interplay of universal evolutionary instincts and context-specific learning, reinforcing common sense's role as a dynamic, survival-oriented tool rather than a fixed or universal truth.

Conclusion : Common sense, as defended by G.E. Moore, is a cornerstone of human cognition, reflecting evolutionary wiring that prioritizes survival over theoretical accuracy. Its value lies in its utility for navigating daily life, as seen in its context-dependent nature—whether perceiving a moving Sun on Earth or a rotating Earth in space. The hypocrisy of philosophers who champion abstract theories while living by common sense underscores the indispensability of these intuitive beliefs, as even skeptics rely on them in practice. An imperfect but useful theory, grounded in common sense, outweighs a perfect but impractical one, as its survival-driven utility aligns with human needs. Common sense exists in degrees, from universal instincts to context-specific knowledge, adapting to environmental and cultural demands (Nisbett, 2003)³¹. Some beliefs are “true” not because they capture ultimate reality but because they enable survival, making common sense a vital bridge between philosophy and lived experience. By giving common sense its rightful place, we honor its evolutionary and practical significance, affirming that its value transcends theoretical purity.

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