Attitudes Towards Common Sense in Ancient Greek Philosophy

Broadly speaking, there are two contrasting attitudes towards common sense prevalent in ancient Greek philosophy. On the one hand, there is a dismissive attitude: common sense, understood as what people in general routinely think, is regarded as simply misguided and out of touch with the way things really are. On the other hand, there is a tendency to regard human beings as such as having cognitive capacities that can afford them correct insights – if only they will let these capacities operate as they could or should, without being distracted or misled by various factors that throw them off course. Although these two attitudes are in a clear tension with one another, we frequently find them together in the same philosophers. Indeed, it is not too much to say that we find both strands present, to varying degrees, almost throughout the history of Greek philosophy. Perhaps this is not surprising, at least as regards the early period. In as much as philosophers claimed to be doing something new and distinctive, they inevitably defined themselves to some extent in opposition to what they took to be the ordinary views of the people around them. Yet as long as they wanted to be heard and understood, there was a limit to how far the rejection of common sense could go without becoming self-defeating.

In the course of Greek philosophy, we also see the emergence of theorizing about common sense – that is, theories explaining how human beings come to have the (at least roughly correct) picture of the world that they attain by adulthood. Such theorizing is not fully explicit until the post-Aristotelian period, but there are hints of it in both Plato and Aristotle; and it fits more naturally with the second of
the two attitudes I have sketched than with the first. Less common – although we see elements of this as well – are explanations for why, as the first of these two attitudes presumes, human beings are so likely to develop mistaken ideas about the world.

In what follows, I pursue these themes chronologically. Given the space available, I confine myself to major philosophers who give these matters substantial and explicit attention. These include a selection of thinkers from the Presocratic period, as it usually called (section 1), Plato (section 2), Aristotle (section 3), the Stoics and the Epicureans (section 4), and the Pyrrhonian sceptic Sextus Empiricus (section 5). As already suggested, by ‘common sense’ I shall mean simply the views commonly and unreflectively held by people in general, without regard to their source or subject. This is no doubt a somewhat broader and less precise conception of common sense than those discussed in many essays in this volume. But this is what a wide variety of Greek philosophers have something to say about, and this, if anything, is what gives them a place in a volume about philosophical treatments of common sense.

1. Early Greek Philosophy

In the earliest period of Greek philosophy it is clearly the first of the two attitudes I have distinguished, the dismissive one, that is the more visible. As early as Xenophanes (c. 570-c.478 BCE) we find ordinary people’s views about the gods subjected to withering criticism. The ordinary view, ascribed to Homer and Hesiod, but also to ‘mortals’ (brotoi) in general, is stigmatized for its anthropomorphism, as well as for the immorality (by humans’ own standards) that the gods are depicted as
displaying (DK 21B11-17). The correct view, according to Xenophanes, is quite different: god\(^1\) is quite unlike humans, either physically or mentally, ordering the world not by moving around – that would not befit a being of this stature – but by a kind of telekinesis. We only have a few lines (DK 21B23-6), and the details are not explained, but the contrast is clear: there is the mistaken, everyday view of the divine, and then there is the correct view, and the two are more or less diametrically opposed to one another.

There is much more of this kind of attitude as the tradition develops; the singling out of the views of ‘mortals’ for criticism or ridicule becomes a familiar trope. The very first sentence of Heraclitus’ book lambasted human beings in general (\textit{anthrôpoi}) for failing to comprehend the central principle of the universe – what he calls the \textit{logos} – even when he explains it to them (DK 22B1); another remark a little later\(^2\) expands on this by saying that although this \textit{logos} is ‘common’ (\textit{xunos}) to everyone, ‘most people live as if they had private insight’ (\textit{hós idian echontes phronēsin}, DK 22B2). At least ten further fragments continue this theme of the cluelessness of almost everyone\(^3\), especially for their failure to grasp the \textit{logos} (DK 22B72) – including, again, Homer and Hesiod (DK 22B40, 42, 57). The closest we come to an explanation of their lack of understanding is a fragment where we

\(^1\) Xenophanes says ‘one god, greatest among gods and humans’ (DK 21B23.1). The first two words sound monotheistic, which would heighten still further the contrast with ordinary views of the time. But the rest of the line seems to contradict this. For brief discussion see Lesher 1992: 96-102.

\(^2\) Our information on the placing of these two fragments comes from Sextus Empiricus, \textit{M} 7.132-3; except for these two, we have no reliable information about the order of the surviving fragments in Heraclitus’ book.

\(^3\) The only named persons receiving his praise are Bias of Priene (DK 22B39), generally included as one of the Seven Sages, and a certain Hermodorus, apparently of his own town of Ephesus (DK 22B121).
are told that 'they trust the people’s singers and take the crowd as their teacher, not knowing that most people are bad and few are good' (DK 22B104); but if this is meant as an explanation (assuming that, as commonly in Greek philosophy, goodness and badness have a cognitive as well as an ethical dimension), it scarcely advances beyond tautology.

Parmenides, too, makes the mistaken views of ‘mortals knowing nothing’ (DK 28B6.4) a central focus of his work. There is the true path of wisdom, leading to insights concerning the unchanging character of what truly is; and then there are ‘the opinions of mortals, in which there is no true trust’ (DK 28B1.30). One of the most baffling aspects of the work is that it seems to advance both of these, even while emphasizing that the second is not to be trusted. While the interpretation of Parmenides’ thought is deeply controversial, for this and other reasons, I think we can venture to say that the mistake of mortals consists in their taking the everyday world of changing objects at face value and as being without qualification real. And in Parmenides’ case we do have something of an explanation of this error: it stems from an uncritical reliance on the senses as opposed to reason (DK 28B7).

Xenophanes, Heraclitus and Parmenides are probably the most outspoken among the early Greek thinkers in their denunciations of common sense, although they are not the only ones⁴. But at least in the case of Heraclitus and Parmenides, and perhaps in Xenophanes’ case too, one can also find signs of the second, more

⁴ Empedocles and Anaxagoras both criticize ordinary people for speaking as if things come into being and perish. In reality, what look like the coming into being and perishing of ordinary objects are the mixing and separation of elements that themselves enjoy permanent existence (DK 31B8-12, 59B17). But the error involved here does not appear to be particularly deep, and correcting it does not seem to require wholesale revision of everyday views.
conciliatory attitude I identified at the outset. In addition to all the disparaging remarks, the fragments of Heraclitus include the following: ‘thinking (to phronein) is common to all’ (DK 22B113) and ‘All humans have a share in knowing themselves and thinking soundly (sôphronein)’ (DK 22B116). At least in the second of these, the emphasis seems to be more on how to act than on the nature of the world; sôphronein, ‘thinking soundly’, is the verb corresponding to sôphrosunê, the word for one of the central Greek virtues, which is usually translated ‘moderation’ or ‘temperance’, and the reference to ‘knowing themselves’ supports the idea of a mainly practical orientation. Nonetheless, we have here a much more positive estimation of the shared intellectual capacities of humans in general than we might have expected from the dismissive fragments. It is purely a matter of guesswork how these and the dismissive fragments might have been combined in Heraclitus’ thinking. Nonetheless, it does look as if the condition of being out of touch with how things are – the normal human condition, according to the two opening fragments and others like them – is not necessarily the whole story concerning common sense, and is perhaps not even inevitable or permanent.

In Parmenides, too, there is at least a serious question how deep the error of ordinary people is supposed to go. While many scholars have taken Parmenides to be arguing that the everyday world perceived by the senses is simply an illusion, and ordinary thinking therefore mistaken through and through, this is by no means the only possibility. On one alternative view, the mistake of ‘mortals’ is to suppose that the world as shown us by the senses is the only reality there is, and that it can be understood on its own terms. In fact, there is a deeper level of explanation
afforded by true reflection about what is, and this is what one would need to employ for a proper understanding of the world as we perceive it. If this is the case, mortal beliefs are not irretrievably misguided; they could in principle be corrected\(^5\). On another reading, ordinary thinking is indeed misguided, but it is not \textit{wholly} misguided; to the extent that the world shown us by the senses can be understood as a \textit{likeness} of what truly is – and to some extent it can – ordinary thinking has some degree of closeness to the truth\(^6\). Generally speaking, the more positive the role one can find for the second half of Parmenides’ poem, the one expounding ‘the opinions of mortals’, the more one will be able to rescue common sense, which treats the world revealed by the senses as unproblematically real, from the complete obloquy to which it initially seemed to be consigned.

Even in Xenophanes’ case, there is perhaps a hint of a more positive conception of common sense. It is not on the specific subject of divinity (the subject of his critical comments), but has to do with inquiry quite generally. A two-line fragment reads ‘Not from the beginning did gods reveal all things to mortals, but in time by investigating they discover better’ (DK 21B18). The fragment has often been read as celebrating the progress of knowledge from one generation to another. But that would be reading a lot into the word ‘in time’ (\textit{chronôi}), and I prefer to read Xenophanes as endorsing individual \textit{investigation}, which has to be patient and time-consuming – the contrast being with instant (‘from the beginning’) divine revelation,

\(^5\) So Curd 1998: esp. ch.3. Curd also provides a useful summary of previous interpretations.

\(^6\) So Johansen 2016. As Johansen points out, this reading brings Parmenides into a certain proximity with Plato’s picture of cosmology in the \textit{Timaeus}. 
which is impossible\(^7\). And the actual or potential recipients of truth are given simply as ‘mortal[s]’ (thnêtoi), not some limited group possessed of special insight. There seems to be at least a suggestion that all of us have the capability for some level of understanding – at any rate (and here is maybe a connection with the negative strand we looked at earlier), if we can let go of misguided notions about the gods\(^8\).

2. **Plato**

Contempt for the views of ‘the many’ is a recurring theme in the dialogues of Plato. In the *Crito*, probably one of Plato’s earliest works, Crito worries that he will look bad in most people’s eyes if he does not help Socrates to escape from prison; it will seem as if he was not willing to bribe the officials to let him go. Socrates’ response is, who cares what most people will think? An obvious response, which Crito delivers, is that Socrates of all people should care, seeing that a jury of ordinary people has convicted him and sentenced him to death. But Socrates replies that ‘the many’ are in fact without any genuine power either for good or for bad, since they are incapable of making someone wise or foolish (44b-d). And this introduces a point that will be central to the dialogue: that what matters most – perhaps the only thing that truly matters – is the state of one’s soul. Later, in constructing his argument against escaping, Socrates says that we should not concern ourselves with the opinions of people in general, but only of those with understanding (46d-47a); who these people are (or whether they even exist) is not made clear, but ordinary people are clearly assumed to lack such understanding. Since just actions benefit, and

\(^{7}\) For this reading see Lesher 1991.

\(^{8}\) The mistake implied in this fragment is the idea that gods speak directly to humans. But that might easily connect with the anthropomorphism that was central to his critique of ordinary views about gods.
unjust actions harm, the agent, this means that the opinions of the many concerning what one should do are of no consequence; what is important is the opinion of the person who understands justice and injustice (47c-48a). And this is so even though the decision of the many can lead to one’s death, because it is not living that is most important, but living well (48a-b). The view cries out for elaboration and support, which in this dialogue it does not receive; we have to wait until the Republic for that. But it is both extreme in itself and explicitly developed by way of a rejection of ordinary opinion as a source of insight.

Socrates propounds similar views in the Gorgias, and again draws attention to their conflict with common sense. Reacting to Socrates’ argument that one is worse off doing injustice than suffering it, Polus says ‘Don’t you think you have been refuted, Socrates, when no human being would say the kind of things you are saying?’ (473e4-5) Socrates replies that he is uninterested in putting the matter to a majority vote; the only ‘witness’ who matters is the person with whom he is having a discussion (474a-b). But the Gorgias emphasizes how Socrates’ extraordinary ideas fail to win people over at a gut level, despite the arguments; Polus’ final reaction to Socrates’ position is that it is absurd, despite apparently being consistent with things said earlier (480e1-2)⁹, and Callicles, entering the conversation just afterwards, observes that if Socrates is right, ‘our whole human life will be turned upside down’ (481c3-4) – an outcome that he is never willing to accept over the many twists and turns of argument that follow.

---

⁹ The Greek here, tois mentoi emprosthen isôs soi homoleitai, is difficult; it is not quite clear whether Polus is agreeing about the consistency with earlier points or is only observing that the position no doubt strikes Socrates as consistent. The soi (‘to you’) seems to point towards the latter, but it is an unusual construction.
The *Republic*, too, takes up the challenge of arguing that one is better off being just rather than unjust, for reasons that have to do purely with the state of one’s soul rather than because of the rewards and punishments usually bestowed by society. And here too the view is presented as plainly contrary to common sense, which would hold that justice is a regrettable, though necessary, constraint on our behavior (358a). In the *Republic*, as I said, we get some real argument for the position that is maintained without support in the *Crito*. And in the *Republic*, we get some indication of what a truly knowledgeable person would be like; it would be a philosopher who has penetrated far beyond ordinary thinking to a grasp of the ultimate nature of things, as embodied in the Forms, and who is therefore equipped to rule a community the likes of which has never existed and quite possibly never will exist. These are the only people who can appropriately be put in charge, and the rest must be content to follow their directives.

I have picked three dialogues treating related topics, in which the dismissal of common sense is particularly obvious; much more could be said along these lines with reference to other topics and other dialogues. But in Plato, as in the early thinkers we considered in Section 1, rejection of common sense is not the whole story. For another prominent idea in several of Plato’s works is that ‘learning is recollection’; that is, that we are all possessed at birth of a stock of knowledge, and that what we call learning is really the retrieval of the knowledge that is already inside us. In the *Meno* this idea is invoked to explain how a young boy, a slave in Meno’s household who has never been taught geometry, is nonetheless able to grasp the truth of a certain geometrical result (82b-86b). In the *Phaedo* it is used as part of
an argument for the soul’s existence before birth: we have concepts such as perfect equality, and we can be reminded of these concepts by encountering approximations to them (such as sticks or stones that are in a rough and ready way equal, but not perfectly so), but we never encountered pure instances of them in this life – so we must already have had them prior to this life (72e-77a).

Now here we seem to have a powerful affirmation of a kind of common knowledge – a range of general concepts and/or reasoning abilities – that is shared by all of us\(^\text{10}\). How widely this knowledge is supposed to extend is not clear; in the Meno Socrates says the soul has learned ‘everything’ (81c6-7), but this is hardly informative without further specification. Another question is what it will take to bring this knowledge to a fully explicit state. The Meno and the Phaedo pick cases where it is successful. But in the Meno the process is explicitly said to be incomplete; by the end of the scene the boy only has (correct) opinions, not knowledge, although Socrates adds that he would be able to reach full knowledge through further iterations of the same kind of questioning (85c9-d1)\(^\text{11}\). More importantly, this whole episode in the Meno is designed to reassure Meno that inquiring into the nature of virtue is indeed worthwhile, despite the lack of (explicit) knowledge on either his or Socrates’ part; the knowledge is in us, if only we can dig it out. But while in the geometry case Socrates can lead the boy with appropriate questions, there is no such helpful interlocutor showing the path in the case of virtue. In ethics, as opposed

\(^{10}\) ‘Learning is recollection’ also appears in the Phaedrus. The picture here is not incompatible with what I have just suggested, but the emphasis in the Phaedrus is much more on a distinctive philosophical use of recollection. For this reason I do not focus on this dialogue.

\(^{11}\) Plausibly, by coming to understand the principles of geometry and becoming able to apply these principles without leading questions from someone else.
to mathematics, Socrates is very good at exposing problems in ideas offered by others, but he insists (in the *Meno* and in many other dialogues) that he does not himself have anything positive to offer; nor does he ever identify anyone else who does.

Thus we arrive at a picture of a common sense with a curious status. It is buried within all of us, and seems to offer us the prospect of coming to understand a great many important subjects, if only we can achieve access to it. But there is a serious question whether we can do this. This duality seems to be reflected in the way many of the dialogues are framed. Socrates’ discussions are frequently with figures who, while no doubt educated as one would expect of an upper-class Greek of the time, are not, as we might say, full-time intellectuals. The search is frequently for the nature of some virtue or other characteristic that is of special interest or relevance for the person or persons concerned (courage for Laches, friendship for Lysis, piety for Euthyphro, etc.). And unless one thinks that the purpose of these dialogues is purely destructive, showing these characters that they do not know what they are talking about, the assumption behind asking them about these qualities seems to be that they (and by extension, a good many other people) have something of value to contribute on topics of importance. And yet many of these dialogues lead to no firm conclusions, and certainly not to a grasp of the nature of the quality under examination. The knowledge buried inside us thus seems destined to stay wholly inactive, at least on the topics Socrates cares most about.

The idea that we unknowingly have a higher level of understanding (if that is what we should call it) that may sometimes be at odds with what we presently think
is alluded to periodically in the *Gorgias* – although here ‘learning is recollection’ is not an explicit theme. Socrates claims that tyrants have the least power of anyone and do not do what they want; when Polus protests, Socrates replies that this is what ‘Polus says’ too (466d6-e4). That is, if Polus will properly consider the consequences of his deepest commitments, he will see that this is what he must say, despite its being absolutely antithetical to what he now says. And equally, if the tyrant will consider the consequences of his deepest commitments, he will see that, contrary to his usual self-conception, the things he really wants are not available to him in his current condition. Later, too, Socrates says that Callicles equates the pleasant and the good, while he himself does not, and adds ‘And I think Callicles doesn’t either, when he sees himself correctly’ (495e1-2). However, as we saw, neither Polus nor Callicles is brought to a genuine acknowledgement of what, according to Socrates, they ‘really think’.

We can therefore distinguish two types or levels of common sense in Plato. There is what most people normally say and think, and this is frequently treated with the greatest suspicion. And then there is a deeper level of common sense gestured at in some of Plato’s works, a common sense that (leaving aside the more fanciful elements) we can call innate, and that is shared by all of us. The trouble is that these two levels are frequently at odds with one another, and the deeper common sense, which is the one that would deserve our trust, is difficult if not impossible to bring to the surface, at least on the ethical questions that Socrates devotes his life to. The *Gorgias*, which I have relied on in considering both levels, is perhaps the dialogue where this tension is most apparent. As for why the misguided
common sense should so regularly win out, this is not clear; to point to the pernicious influence of society is hardly helpful, seeing that society is composed of human beings all of whom, according to the ‘learning is recollection’ story, have the deeper common sense within them. But the fact is that the dialogues as a whole do not seem to be optimistic about the deeper common sense gaining a hold on our thinking and action; ‘learning is recollection’ is only mentioned in three dialogues, and never in ways that point to significant progress in our (surface-level, explicit) understanding.

3. Aristotle

Aristotle’s orientation on this matter is rather different; if we wanted to name the major Greek philosopher who came closest to deserving the label ‘philosopher of common sense’, Aristotle would be the winner. He clearly thinks that there is such a thing as the collective wisdom of humanity; we frequently see an assumption on his part that what people generally think must be more or less on the right lines. This is most explicit when it comes to ethical questions. Having offered an initial specification of the good for human beings in book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he immediately adds ‘But we must examine it not only from our conclusion and the points from which our argument takes off, but also from the things that are said about it; for with a true account the realities are in harmony, while with a false one the truth is quickly in conflict’ (1098b9-12). The ‘things said’ – that is, the things commonly said in the wider society – are therefore taken as a check on the correctness of his argument; and the second half of the sentence is especially remarkable in its unstated assumption that ‘the realities’ (*ta huparchonta*) and ‘the
truth’ of the situation are reliably captured in these ‘things said’. The next several chapters then consider the issue in light of a number of commonly held views; for example, that the fortunes of one’s descendants would make no difference at all to how one’s life is rated is dismissed because it is ‘contrary to the opinions’ – that is, again, commonly held opinions (1101a24). Similarly, in his discussion of pleasure in book 10 of the same work he rejects the suggestion that pleasure is not a good on the basis that it conflicts with a universally shared view. ‘What seems so to everyone, that we say is so’, he declares; ‘there is no way the person who does away with trust in this will have anything more trustworthy to say’ (1172b36-1173a2).

But this tendency in Aristotle is not confined to ethics. In the first chapter of the Rhetoric, while introducing the topic of methods of persuasion and who is likely to be best at spotting them, he asserts quite generally that ‘human beings are naturally oriented well enough (hikanôs) towards what is true and mostly hit upon the truth’ (1355a15-17). And the same assumption seems to be behind the famous sentence that opens the Metaphysics: ‘All human beings by nature desire to know’ (980a21). For it is plain from the following discussion that he takes this desire to be one that is regularly satisfied, at least at a basic level. It is not just that we want to know; the world cooperates, and we are the kind of beings equipped for it to do so. The everyday mindset of people in general, including their ability to learn from experience, has a natural orientation towards seeing the world as it actually is.

All this is very different from the ridiculing of ordinary views that was so prominent in Plato or Parmenides; clearly Aristotle has a kind of respect for common sense that is not matched even on the most conciliatory readings of their
views on this subject. Still, we should be careful not to exaggerate the point; here too some important qualifications must be made. First, despite the seeming universality of several of the passages quoted just now, it is far from clear that the common sense to which Aristotle gives credit is the common sense of everyone whatever. At least on some topics – or perhaps, in some frames of mind\(^{12}\) – it looks as if he rather has in mind the views of a restricted group of people: not necessarily philosophers or other theorists, but at least people who have been well brought up and have received a good general education. Again in book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he says that ‘the person who is going to be a good enough listener about fine and just things, and generally about political matters, must have been raised in fine habits’ (1095b3-5). The reason is that in studying these questions, one has to begin with an adequate sense of what things are in fact fine, just, etc. That is the starting-point towards understanding why they are so; and the person who has been well brought up (but not, it is suggested, anyone else) will occupy that necessary starting-point. And this is immediately reinforced when Aristotle gives an initial review of views concerning the good. One of these, that the good life is the life of enjoyment (*apolaustikon*) – which seems to mean, the life devoted to various forms of physical gratification – is ascribed to ‘the many’, and is immediately dismissed as slavish and subhuman (1095b19-20). Another view, ascribed to ‘the refined’ (*charientes*, 1095b22), is treated with much more respect, even though it too is said to be in

\(^{12}\) The project of attempting to render everything in Aristotle consistent can, I think, be taken too far. The works of his that we have are not finished treatises, and were surely composed over a considerable period of time; it would be by no means surprising if they revealed conflicting inclinations concerning how much credit to give the views of the average person.
need of some modification. Thus, when a few chapters later, Aristotle turns to the question of ‘the things that are said’ about the good, we may well suspect that the people by whom these things are ‘said’ are a relatively restricted sector of society. Similarly, in his discussion in book 3 of what kinds of things are appropriately wished, he asserts that it is the excellent person (spoudaios) who is the criterion in these matters; ‘for the excellent person judges everything correctly, and in each case what is true is apparent to him’ (1113a29-31). By contrast, people who are less than excellent do not see things straight. So if Aristotle does endorse a kind of common sense, it is considerably less expansive than one might have expected from the remarks we considered at the start of this section. And the dismissive kind of attitude that I identified at the outset is by no means absent in his case.

The other caveat about Aristotle and common sense is this. It has sometimes been held that Aristotle’s philosophical method involves starting with ordinary opinions. These opinions may be refined in the course of the inquiry, and some may even be rejected, but the idea is that one begins by collecting the ordinarily held views on some topic, on the assumption that this will be a good initial pointer to the correct theory that one aims to develop. One will also collect the views of those who have previously studied the topic, and those whose views are for any other reason thought to be especially authoritative; so it is not as if ordinary opinions are the only starting-point. But they are, according to this reading, at least among the ideas that one should begin by reviewing. This method has sometimes been called the ‘endoxic’ method, and it has been thought to be especially clearly on display in a much-discussed passage at the start of Nicomachean Ethics book 7; here Aristotle
says that, on the subject of *akrasia* or weakness of will, we must begin by reviewing how things appear, the goal being as far as possible to vindicate the *endoxa*, the ‘reputable opinions’, on the subject (1145b2-7). Now, a thorough discussion of Aristotle’s methodology is far beyond the scope of this paper. I will simply point out that this kind of interpretation of his method has recently been subjected to extensive and well-reasoned criticism\textsuperscript{13}. According to the critics, the passage in the *akrasia* discussion is nowhere near as representative as it has sometimes been taken to be, and even the discussion of *akrasia* itself by no means conforms to the large-scale endorsement of widely held, or even reputable, opinions on the topic that the opening methodological remarks might have led one to expect. Thus, to return to a phrase that I floated at the beginning of this section, if by ‘philosopher of common sense’ one means a philosopher whose methods in some way involve building on common sense, there are real limits to how far it is applicable even to Aristotle.

4. **Stoics and Epicureans**

The Stoics had a theory of concept formation that bears importantly on our topic. According to one of the fullest reports of this theory, in a passage of Aetius, a newborn human being ‘has the leading part of the soul like a papyrus all ready for writing on’ and ‘on this writes each one of the concepts [*ennoiôn*]’. This naturally reminds us of the *tabula rasa* in Locke\textsuperscript{14}, and the theory certainly has an empiricist side; the ‘writing’ of the concepts on the soul occurs by means of the clustering of many similar perceptual impressions [*phantasiai*]. Thus the concept of the horse

\textsuperscript{13} Frede 2012; Davia 2017.

\textsuperscript{14} See Locke 1997: books I and II.
develops from our seeing and remembering many different horses; and concepts in
general are regarded as generic impressions imprinted in the memory (Plutarch,
*Comm. not.* 1084F-1085B). However, it is not accidental, and not merely a matter of
experience, which concepts do in fact develop. Human nature, which, like everything
else in the Stoic universe, is teleologically designed, plays a part in this too. Now,
Aetius also says that some concepts develop by nature alone, while others need
human instruction; the term *ennoia* includes both categories, but the former are also
called *prolepseis*, usually translated ‘preconceptions’. He also says that, according to
the Stoics, our rationality is ‘completed from our preconceptions’; exactly what this
amounts to is perhaps not quite clear, but evidently these preconceptions are a
crucial component in what it is for us to be rational. According to Diogenes Laertius,
(7.54), Chrysippus actually named preconceptions as one of the criteria of truth. But
even if this was not a standard Stoic claim, it is clear that preconceptions play an
indispensable role in our ability to discern the truth. For it is our rationality that
puts us in a position to distinguish true from false, in particular by the special type
of impression that they call ‘apprehensive’ (*katalēptikē*), which is most commonly
cited as the Stoic criterion of truth – that is, an impression that is in some sense
guaranteed to be correct. Not all our impressions are apprehensive, but it is clear
from the way the Stoics present this idea that apprehensive impressions are
supposed to be a regular feature of everyone’s orientation to the world.  

---

15 The nature and source of the guarantee of correctness is controversial. For
relevant texts and basic discussion, see Long and Sedley 1987: sections 39 and 40.
See also Hankinson 2003.
In their notion of *prolēpsis* or preconception, the Stoics are close to the Epicureans; indeed, the term first seems to appear in Epicurus (e.g., *Kuriai Doxai* 37, 38). According to the Epicureans, as Diogenes Laertius tells us, *prolēpsis* is ‘a sort of apprehension or correct opinion or concept [ennoian] or universal thought stored away inside, that is, a memory of what has often been revealed externally, for example “This is a human being”; for as soon as “human being” is said, its shape is thought of in virtue of preconception’ (10.33, cf.31). Diogenes also attributes to Epicurus the view that *prolēpsis* is one of the criteria of truth (10.31); and Epicurus appears to expand upon this point when he says that one must have a clear conception of what one is talking about before one can successfully pursue any inquiry (*Letter to Herodotus*, DL 10.37, cf. Sextus Empiricus, *M* 11.21).

The Stoics and Epicureans certainly do not agree on everything. The Epicureans think that sense-perception is, as such, inerrant, and that error is introduced by the interpretations we make of what we are perceiving\(^\text{16}\) – whereas the Stoics certainly do allow that there are mistaken sense impressions. And the Epicureans do not believe in a teleologically ordered universe. But the two schools seem to be at one in their admission of preconceptions as built up through experience and as a source of correct insight. And to that extent, they seem both to be representative of the second and more positive of the two attitudes I identified at the outset. Collectively these preconceptions seem to add up to something we could well call common sense; they are shared by all rational beings, and they are capable of playing an important role in revealing to us how things are.

---

\(^{16}\) For relevant texts and discussion, see Long and Sedley 1987: section 16.
Once again, though, as with Aristotle, we find that this seemingly optimistic outlook is tempered by other considerations. The Stoics pose as an ideal the sage [sophos], the person who never assents to any impressions other than ‘apprehensive’ ones, and who therefore never makes a mistake. Such a person would be a paragon of both virtue and wisdom, and these two things are scarcely distinguishable in the Stoic outlook. Not surprisingly, the sage is at best extremely rare, and perhaps even non-existent. But while this by itself might seem unproblematic – of course perfection is not likely to be actually achieved – the Stoics also adopt a rigid either/or mentality; those of us who are not sages (that is to say, all of us) are instead gripped by vice and ignorance. One might respond that surely there are degrees of vice and ignorance, but the Stoics will not accept this; anything less than (complete) virtue or wisdom is vice or ignorance, pure and simple. As Plutarch (Comm. not. 1063A-B) explains the view, someone just below the surface of the ocean is just as drowned as someone hundreds of fathoms down; and similarly, you remain an unqualified fool and sinner right up to the point of attaining the opposite states. Of course, this way of putting it does allow that some people may be closer to attaining success than others; and there is reason to think that the Stoics had more to say about progress towards virtue than our sources make it seem17. All the same, the kind of common sense recognized by the Stoics, consisting in the natural ability to grasp a great many truths, turns out to be regarded as, in itself, a wholly unimpressive achievement; so long as one is still subject to error, either epistemological or ethical, one is a fool or a sinner. To get beyond this state, one

17 On progress in Stoicism, see Inwood and Donini 1999: esp. section X.
needs to achieve an absolutely unshakeable understanding of the nature of the world, the nature of the good, and one’s own place in the teleological order of things. Though no Stoic pretended to have reached that pinnacle, their exposition of this ideal, and their all-or-nothing attitude towards it, seem to give them a place (alongside everyone else we have considered) among the detractors of common sense; despite the apparently optimistic picture of concept development that we saw just a moment ago, this is quite inadequate to lead us to the condition that is the true fulfillment of human nature.

The Epicureans are not as extreme in their demarcation of wisdom and folly. But it is clear that for them too, the common sense embodied in the concepts we acquire, and the truths they allow us to grasp, do not suffice to rescue us from disastrous error. According to Epicurus, if you recognize that the world consists of atoms and void, and that we ourselves are composed of atoms and void, you will understand that the many natural phenomena, such as earthquakes or thunderstorms, that are commonly regarded as divine punishments are no such thing, and that you yourself have nothing to fear from death. Almost no one besides the Epicureans themselves understands these things (or many other important points connected with them). And so the Epicureans too qualify as detractors of common sense as well as exponents of a kind of common sense; despite being able to grasp much that is true, ordinary thinking is off track in crucial respects.

In neither the Stoic nor the Epicurean case is there much explanation of why there is so much error. (And given that for the Stoics, this is, by divine design, the best of all possible worlds, the phenomenon may seem especially troubling in their

‘Believe that god is an immortal and blessed animal’, he says, ‘as the common conception [*noësis*] indicates; and do not attach to him anything alien to his immortality or unsuitable to his blessedness’. Most ordinary opinions about the gods utterly fail in this respect, he continues; ‘For the declarations of the many about the gods are not preconceptions [*prolēpseis*] but false suppositions’. Hence the pernicious ideas current in society, such as that gods care about human beings and punish them for wrongdoing, etc. Thus it looks as if one source of error, at any rate, is that people do not appreciate what their preconceptions actually entail and what they do not; in this particular case, if they properly followed out the true implications of the preconception of god as immortal and blessed, as the Epicureans themselves have done, there would be no problem. Of course, that still leaves the question why these preconceptions, which seem to put us in a position to discern the truth, should also be open to such radical misinterpretation.

5. **Sextus Empiricus**

I close with a word on Sextus Empiricus, the only Greek sceptic of whom we have substantial surviving writings. Sextus not infrequently expresses a preference for the everyday ideas of ordinary people over the theoretical abstractions of non-sceptical philosophers (or dogmatists, in his terminology). For example, in his discussion of signs – that is, means of inferring from the observed to the unobserved

---

18 With one exception noted below, I do not attempt to reconstruct the attitudes towards common sense of either the earlier Pyrrhonians or the sceptical thinkers of the Academy; the evidence is just too sketchy.
Sextus expresses suspicion of signs of the kind employed by the dogmatists, which allegedly give them an insight into the underlying (and never directly observable) nature of things, but happily accepts signs of the kind employed by ordinary people, where something observed serves as a sign of something currently unobservable, and where there has been a regular observed connection between objects of the two types – for example, smoke as a sign of fire. Commenting on this, Sextus proclaims himself on the side of ordinary life and against the dogmatists’ dubious theorizing (PH 2.102, cf. M 8.156-8). Similarly, in his work on the specialized sciences (Adversus Mathematicos 1-6), he several times contrasts an everyday activity – reading and writing, observation of the sky for predicting the weather, or the playing of musical instruments – with theoretical counterparts of these – grammatical theory, astrology, and music theory (M 1.49-56, 5.1-2, 6.1-3); he has no problem with the former and his scrutiny will be directed to the latter. In addition, in explaining how a sceptic can act, Sextus says that among the kinds of appearances the sceptic can use to guide decisions and actions are ‘the handing down of laws and customs’ (PH 1.23-4). Without endorsing them as the naturally right way to behave, the sceptic treats the everyday practices of his society as a guide to what to do.\footnote{In this respect Sextus may be at odds with the supposed founder of Pyrrhonian scepticism, Pyrrho of Elis; while much of what we hear about Pyrrho may be invention or embellishment, many of the anecdotes passed down about him do suggest a radically unconventional lifestyle (e.g., Diogenes Laertius 9.62-9).}

In a variety of ways, then, Sextus presents himself as in tune with common sense, unlike philosophers of a non-sceptical persuasion. But in Sextus too there are other indications that point in a different direction. His usual procedure is to create oppositions among opinions and impressions on any given subject, leading to
suspension of judgment about the truth of the matter. Much of the time the items placed in opposition are philosophical theories. But often they are everyday impressions of things; this is particularly obvious in the case of the Ten Modes, or standardized sets of oppositions, that he ascribes to the earlier sceptics (PH 1.35-163). And in several cases the views of ordinary people on some topic are explicitly included among these oppositions. This is true, for example, of the existence of the gods (common sense says yes, M 9.50), the reality of motion (common sense affirms it, PH 3.65, M 10.45), and the reality of place, where part of the case in favour of this consists in everyday observations (PH 3.120, cf.3.135). But if this is so, then Sextus’ attitude towards common sense is not, or not always, one of uncritical acceptance; instead, he suspends judgment about these matters. One might suggest that he can distinguish between an everyday kind of belief in these things, and the assertion that they really exist in nature, and that his suspension of judgment applies only to the latter; and indeed, in the case of place, he does distinguish between a rough-and-ready sense of place and a philosophically precise sense (PH 3.119, M 10.15). But if he is going to invoke ordinary views among the opposing considerations that lead to suspension of judgment, it is not clear that this distinction can be sustained; if ordinary views are among the mass of opposing views whose juxtaposition contributes to suspension of judgment, they must also be among the views on which judgment is suspended. And this is quite explicit in the case of ordinary views about what things are good or bad; it is not only philosophers, but also ordinary people, who believe that certain things are really, or by nature, good and others bad, whereas the sceptic suspends judgment about this (PH 1.30).
So in Sextus, too, we find a duality of attitude about common sense. Much of the time he appears to be sympathetic to common sense; but on several occasions he treats it as one more element, alongside philosophical theories, to be placed in opposition with a view to suspension of judgment. The latter attitude is not exactly the same as the outright rejection of common sense that we have seen, in certain contexts and to varying degrees, among all the other philosophers considered here. But it suggests just as high a level of suspicion of common sense as he shows towards any of the theories of the dogmatists. And for a sceptic, that is as close to dismissal as one is going to get.

6. Conclusion

So the verdict seems clear, across a wide range of thinkers: when it comes to common sense, Greek philosophy is deeply ambivalent. Aristotle may be the most sympathetic to common sense, and some of the Presocratics perhaps the most dismissive; but in their combination of some level of sympathy and some level of dismissiveness, the Greeks philosophers are remarkably consistent.

References


---

20 Thanks to the editors, Rik Peels and René van Woudenberg for some very helpful comments on a previous version of this paper.


