

Reply to Derek Ross' "Ambiguous Weighting and Nonsensical Sense"
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Derek G. Ross' essay in the 26(1) issue of *Social Epistemology* is a timely and important contribution to the study of environmental rhetoric, with interesting conceptual/theoretical, methodological, and practical implications. My purpose in this reply for *Social Epistemology's* Review and Reply Collective is to emphasize the insights and import of Ross' study by highlighting what to me are its most salient aspects and pointing out how these could serve as points of further discussion and inquiry. I specifically focus on Ross' interpretation and analysis of the 'Common Sense' commonplace, and on an alternative way of interpreting the prevalent use of this commonplace in environmental discourse.

Central to Ross' project is an interesting move that brings together a traditional concept of rhetoric—*topoi*, or commonplaces—with a methodology different from those generally practiced in rhetorical studies, yet fitting to the essay's conceptual ideas. Unlike more traditional rhetorical criticism that tends to take unique and exceptional (in terms of artistry, inventiveness, and other characteristics of rhetorical practice) artifacts as its text, Ross uses interview data to investigate the characteristics of the most common responses to issues of the environment. This approach is as well-justified as it is used rarely. In line with Leff's (2006) concerns about our treatment of topical invention, Ross approaches commonplaces primarily as generative sites of invention and only secondarily as theoretical principles; thus, he sets out to determine how people on the average *use* certain symbolic and argumentative grounds to know about, judge, and act on complex environmental issues. Here, *topoi* become not only sites of argumentative invention but also more broadly sites of epistemological invention. Ross researches specific *topoi* within specific domains and situations of epistemic action and as generative of those actions, rather than simply classifying and categorizing the commonplaces used in a set of texts. His approach demonstrates compelling possibilities for gaining new insights into environmental rhetoric. Some of these insights are evident in Ross' study and need no repeating here; instead, I focus on what I believe is a missed opportunity in Ross' analysis, and develop an alternative perspective on his findings.

Ross' discussion of the 'Balance' commonplace exemplifies the strengths of his conceptual and methodological approach. I would, however, be interested to see him discuss the second commonplace, 'Common Sense,' either more extensively or from a different perspective. Ross is correct, in my view, to identify 'Common Sense' as a central and important commonplace of environmental discourse; his data certainly shows the prevalence of arguments grounded in the *topos*, and we can look beyond the environmental arena to politics, culture, and other institutions to find similar uses of this commonplace. But I believe that his conceptual equivocation of 'Balance' and 'Common Sense' shortchanges the contribution his study could make. To Ross, both *topoi* "suggest that members of the decision-making public have either *all* information on *all* aspects of complex situations and can objectively work through the many permutations inherent in pursuing a chosen path" (p. 116). The concept of 'common sense' provides (in name and in its conceptual history) an epistemic starting point for decision-making that is distinctly different from that of science (where objectively working through causal processes indeed requires understanding of all available information on all aspects of a situation) and instead is

located in a communal, public, democratic framework. Importantly, however, 'common sense' need not be limited to the individual. If we turn to Vico (as Ross does, too), we find that 'common sense' (Vico's *sensus communis*) represents a shared type of knowledge from which both sense-making and decision-making occur. 'Common sense' gains purchase in knowledge that is *shared* in the present as well as *developed* over time, and thereby able to provide the epistemic 'material' against which particular, local, current choices, situations, or acts are judged (see e.g., Morrison 1978, 591; Schaeffer 1996, 10; Verene 1981, 147; Vico 1968, 67, 104-106).

The crux of the 'Common Sense' commonplace thus revolves around how we conceptualize knowledge, both where it originates from and how it is used. Because of the kind of knowledge common sense partakes of, I argue that contrary to Ross' claim, the two *topoi* are not "unavoidably conflated as they share a kind of reasoning not necessarily mediated by empirical evidence or objectivity" (p. 117). Common sense requires a kind of objectivity: not one grounded in technical fact but instead in intersubjective agreement, and shared social and historical understanding. From an epistemological perspective, common sense requires an awareness of social knowledge; this is not the objective knowledge of science or Cartesian reasoning, but neither is it the radical subjectivity Ross suggests. Rather, it is closer to Vico's sense of truth we find in the *verum-factum* principle (see e.g., Miner 1998, 53-73) or Aristotle's reasoning through practical wisdom (*phronesis*, as opposed to the demonstrable knowledge we get through *apodeixis* in *episteme*).¹ It is a type of knowledge contained in the communicative relations between people and within historical knowledge, not in the causal relations between empirical objects. Thus, looking at the data on p. 132, I don't interpret the use of 'Common Sense' to suggest "personal experience, personal need, and a single entity's actions on the world,"² but how one's subjective experience of the world exists relative to the common experiences of the world shared by relevant groups and publics.

These tensions around claims to different types of knowledge raise the question of what type of knowledge—and thus, what epistemic approach to environmental issues—is most relevant to the domain of Ross' study. A good argument can be made that in large part, it's technical, empirical knowledge of the kind that Ross favors. But I contend that approaching the 'Common Sense' *topos* from this alternative perspective on the *locus* of its knowledge-claims would give Ross the opportunity to move beyond the strictly critical conclusion he develops. Such an alternative perspective would suggest that the use of this commonplace by the public may demonstrate not only and exclusively "reductionist arguments that may limit a public's ability to fully understand the complexities of any given situation" (p. 137).

Specifically, I disagree with Ross' claim that "common sense sees use as a decision-making heuristic by a public attempting to work with common social representations of science," which in their constitution and reasoning are inferior to science proper (p. 122). To me, the use of this

¹ I turn to Vico and Aristotle because they are most closely connected to the two key ideas at discussion here: common sense and commonplaces, respectively.

² To address Ross' quote about Vico's concept of 'common sense' on p. 122, I would conjecture that "judgment without reflection" is more in reference to Vico's opposition to Descartes' ideas than a commentary on the capricious nature of reasoning through common sense.

topos by the public suggests that there is an alternative epistemological framework through which publics (that are not scientifically accredited) make decisions about environmental matters; it may suggest, for example, that there are alternative ways to traditional notions of expertise in which publics think about the concept, value, and *locus* of expertise (i.e., of what ought to constitute the most relevant criteria and most fitting shared place of knowledge and understanding for decision-making about matters like the environment). Put differently, the use of the 'Common Sense' commonplace need not suggest primarily that publics find "a place of shared understanding" (p. 116) relative to [faulty or inadequate] "common social representations of *science*" (p. 122, my emphasis), but that publics try to find a place of shared understanding to address complex technical questions relative to issues of *public goods*. Thus, the use of the 'Common Sense' *topos* to me suggests not a binary opposition between 'common sense' and 'science'. It instead suggests a primary orientation toward questions of emergent knowledge and decision-making about *public goods* ("how do we productively deliberate about complex matters that affect us all?"); questions that then depend on the alignment of scientific knowledge with phronetic practice ("how do we integrate and deploy scientific knowledge in our understanding and acting-on complex public matters?"). This is a difference more in analytic perspective than in substance between my approach and Ross'; yet, it's a difference that leads to different conclusions.

Thus, I don't want to suggest that Ross' interpretation of the 'Common Sense' *topos* or the conclusions he draws from it are wrong; indeed, I believe that a cavalier use of 'common sense' and 'balance' as grounds for arguments can and probably often does create artificial limits and boundaries to doing the difficult civic work of truly informing ourselves about the matters that affect us all.³ What I want to suggest is that we can also find alternative, and maybe more hopeful reasons for the prevalent use of the 'Common Sense' *topos*. These reasons go beyond the cost-benefit rationales Ross proposes, and the "overly-simplified places from which a public seeking a voice of authority can begin their knowledge-making and decision-making process" (p. 137). They point to a latent public desire (or more realistically, a desire by some publics) to be able to move past the use of purely scientific, technical concepts and processes as epistemological gate-keepers for decision-making about complex matters. The use of the 'Common Sense' *topos* points to a recognition that in a democratic polity, even complex scientific matters—even those as complex as the environment—affect us all and therefore ought to be made available to deliberative testing, contesting, and decision-making by a larger population. Only then can legitimate and believable (i.e., reason-able and justifiable) civic actions and choices be directed toward the resolution of those scientific problems and issues. The environment is a particularly fitting example, as unlike many other scientific domains, it directly relates to the public good and public affairs *as well as* to more strictly delineated scientific domains of practice. This, of course, takes us back to Ross' own conceptual starting-point in rhetorical theory, which revolves around precisely these kinds of democratic and deliberative commitments.

³ As Ross states, the use of the commonplace can be "particularly problematic [...] because internalized sense-making criteria may be based on dated world-views" (p. 131).

The alternative perspective I sketched out here should not be understood as implying that empirical evidence and other characteristics or outputs of scientific reasoning have no place in civic deliberations. Rather, I want to argue that the prevalent use of the 'common sense' *topos* suggests a desire to recognize other types of epistemic action as *also* valid in deliberations about the environment. Starting from commonplaces like 'Common Sense' (with all the heuristic benefits they carry) may yield more productive and sustainable discussions about these issues. I see benefits in this approach particularly in relation to environmental discourses, as I don't believe we should separate "environmentalism" from "environmental science" in quite the same way Ross does. Certainly, "environmentalism needs to make sense based on our held-in-common beliefs" (p. 123). But it also needs to provide an entry point for intervention and action that Ross' view of the prevalent 'common sense' approach does not provide. Contra Ross, I would thus not separate 'Common Sense' as "rhetorical component" from 'Common Sense' as a "decision-making heuristic" as cleanly (p. 123). Instead, we can understand the use of the commonplace as a rhetorical component that facilitates finding a shared understanding of the common stakes we have in environmental issues. This need not exclude "environmental science," nor should it. But it can integrate environmental science into a communicative framework, placing necessary scientific facts into phronetic practice to allow people to make sense of such facts relative to the historical and current developments, tensions, and exigencies that are mediated by the realities of scientific discovery as well as by the realities of social, cultural, or political interests. This again should not be understood as a way of softening scientific fact, but instead of integrating scientific facts and discoveries into the broader ecology of decision-making criteria within which they need to be understood and used.

It's in this sense that I suggested earlier Ross may have missed an opportunity, and it's also in this sense that I revise that earlier statement and instead suggest that Ross opened an opportunity that is not yet fully explored. His thorough and creative methodological approach to his study is precisely what makes it possible for me to consider this topic from the vantage point I discussed in the preceding paragraphs. Thus, I don't mean to offer a binary choice between two mutually exclusive insights; rather, I attempt to offer an alternative perspective with the hope and intention of generating points of discussion about this particular topic as well as more broadly about the relationship between civic publics and complex scientific bodies of knowledge and norms of practice.

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