

COMMON SENSE, seek no other sense."

These notes are remembrances from and additions to what I said 9Feb86 when a scholar who's writing a book on interpretation asked me about the meanings of "plain" and "common" in the rule I quoted to him (and that is this thinksheet's title). HISTORY of the rule, in reverse: (1) I learned it when studying with a Biblical Seminary of New York teacher in 1937; (2) That teacher learned it from Wilbert Webster White, the school's founder (in 1900), for whom the saying was a centerpiece of what he called "Inductive Bible Study," to teach which he founded the school; (3) WWW had learned the saying (or at least the sentiment) from Wm. Rainey Harper while being the latter's assistant in Semitic studies at Yale U. In 1890, WRH founded the U. of Chicago and WWW went off into the pastorate (10 years later founding the BSNY). PELL-MELL NOTES:

1. The saying's mood is (1) positively, an American-pragmatic affirmation of pre-quantum science's objective ideal to "let the facts speak for themselves," Louis Agassiz style; and (2) negatively, a rebuke to tendentious, eisegetic Biblical interpretation, ie, letting the doctrine control the text.

2. The saying is NAIVE in imagining(1) that the scientific method can bring us (in studying LA's fish, or the Bible) to "Just the facts, Mam" (the Ding an sich, untarnished by the observer's breath), and (2) that the then objectively observed data will constellate themselves into meaning and value. These two assumptions are now--in the light of subsequent epistemology, semasiology, and psychosociology of knowledge--seen to rest on a network of subassumptions (a "paradigm") dialectical to other networks of subassumptions. The old picture tempted us with dogma and arrogance: our new picture, while gifting us with a humility not previously available, tempts us to solipsism, cynicism, despair of knowing and affirming. But the saying signals timeless truths for confronting fundamentalisms as well as anti-intellectualism.

3. The saying is SOPHISTICATED in (1) resisting blind dogmatic reading of the Bible ("If the Saint James Bible was good enough for Paul and Silas, it's good enough for me"), (2) its anti-elitism (Harper & White having begun, with Yale as base, lay-and-clergy correspondence courses in Hebrew & Greek, a wall-less education process that was to bloom at the U. of Chicago under Harper and then under Shailer Mathews, whom I remember in his last days), (3) its anti-academicism without derogation of the academy, and (4) its intelligent populism (obliquely connecting with Tom Paine's COMMON SENSE).

4. Simple words are, upon analysis, the least simple! Because they are the most connotated, their clusters of nuances are like clouds obscuring the sun of definite meaning. "God" and "man" (the "lower" end of the divine-human relationship) are luminous clouds, so some propose eliminating "God" (viz, atheists of all sorts) and some propose eliminating "man" in this generic sense (viz, ritualistic feminists, who hate also "the common man," which I must use because "the common person" means, in the earliest level of my language-learning, a vulgar person, ignorant or disdainful of the pieties). ("The ordinary person" is no help: who wants to be called "ordinary"? It's almost like saying "your run-of-the-mill homo sapiens"!). (Significant is the fact that our language has no nonoffensive, nonawkward way of referring to this reality. I think the significance has to do with language itself rather than only with some languages, including ours. Perfect language is as evanescent an ideal as the perfect person or logic or science or sense.)

5. What eyes do we (are we to) read "sense" with? Body eyes, soul eyes, family eyes, church eyes, school eyes, community eyes, nation eyes, world eyes. Leaders seeking semantic control try to convey the "natural

OVER

law" notion to cover the life-areas they want to control. So the Medieval Church tried to represent its order as (1) providential, (2) cosmic, and (3) validated by human experience--the three sections of my #1910--all of it "natural"! (And natural-law thinking still controls Rome's thinking about sex, including abortion.) Since the Enlightenment, we have progressively escaped from the tyranny of this artificial "natural": much that was seen as "eyes" is now seen as "colored glasses" or "lenses." "Common sense" cannot be seen with the naked eye, nor can "plain sense"! And it would be ignorant or deceptive to claim otherwise. But we must not abandon the underlying concern and reality: "the common man" has a way of seeing that sophisticates have, to a greater or less degree, forgotten; and it is that way that properly claims the denotatum "common sense."

6. Common-man common sense is always strong (because gut-centered) and often wrong (eg, the sun "rises," and the crops wouldn't come up if the proper sacrifices were unperformed or improperly performed, or the notion of the absolute as available). (UNcommon sense is usu. weak as incentive to action, strong in theory-production, and ambiguous as wisdom.) Academics tend to delude themselves into thinking that humans can sense-make FROM ABOVE, sending idea-signals downward from the neocortex (my "upper coil")--something that actually can be done only coercively, thus, "ideo-logy." Psychoneurologists are confirming the centuries-old suspicion that humans are moved ca. 4/5th by feeling and only ca. 1/5th by reason (cognition, intellection): emotional states can be aroused without cognition, so events are analyzable on the level of sensation before conscious perception--eg, a visual sensation traveling through a single neuron from the retina to the hypothalamus, where it evokes an emotional response before the signal reaches the neocortex, where reason has its opportunity to shape the entity (50PTFeb86). Confrontation with the new, if it proves nonharmful, conditions our reaction from (to use my words) cold threat to warm promise, so we approach rather than withdraw ("the Stockholm syndrome," captive coming to love, or at least tolerate, captor). P.51: "Eventually the cognitive structure that was involved in forming an attitude drops off, and all that remains is the attitude. So attempts at persuasion that attack the cognitive elements involved in forming an attitude will no longer work....There are some basic processes in behavior that are as fundamental as biological processes" (Robt. B. Zajonc)....Reagan's '86 State of the Union was a masterpiece of attitude-formation (cheerleading on his coast-to-coast football field) by attention-control (exclusive attention to "up-beat" evidence, in violation of his Constitutional duty to tell it like it is, - as well as +, defining the national situation, or "state"). An analyst President who says (as did Jimmy Carter) "You're sick" can't garner the votes an orator President who says "You're healthy" can. The uncommon sense it takes to face painful problems is overwhelmed by the false common sense that evades, blocks out, "brackets" the painful (a play that leads to schizophrenia, the splitting of consciousness off from reality)....The ideal we might call "Ronald Carter," combining the strength of common-man common sense (which knows ya gotta be optimistic enough to get ya outa bed in the morning) and course-correcting-from-reality that only critical thinking can provide. Here the basic movement is FROM BELOW (gut-oriented, orator-responsive, impulsive, intuitive), and human maturity depends on its being met by a correlative movement FROM ABOVE (neocortex-oriented, analytic, critical). "Religion" originates and is renewable only FROM BELOW, but tends to fall into ideological captivity FROM ABOVE (eg, fundamentalism, scholasticism, propositionalism). In ideological captivity, religion is unconscious that what appears to be "common sense" is only the ideology's internal

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logic (circular both in the straight-line syllogistic sense and in the systems sense of Gödel's Proof); and thus also unconscious that what appears to be the "plain meaning" of the religion's texts, myths, and rituals is plain, ie, obvious, mainly because these particular materials affirm-confirm the way the devotee sees and lives in the world (world-picture, world-view, ethic, politic) and makes sense (in terms of both values and virtues) of both this seeing (vision) and living (action). (Bibliographical: Many writings pop here into my head, beginning with Joachim Wach's masterful 2-vol. DAS VERSTÄNDNIS: Levi-Strauss, Eliade, Ricoeur, Sartre, Gadamer, even Rahner.) (Baby Doc has just left Haiti, 7Feb86, having failed to manipulate voodoo as well as did his father Papa Doc, who as an MD working in the countryside learned that Haiti, though 90% Catholic, is 100% voodoo--so, beginning in 1957, he ruled Haiti by ploys based on voodoo, which is 100% gut-oriented, power FROM BELOW, only partly in the sense Bonhoeffer used "from below." Here, on a smallish half-island, we have religion become ideology become tyranny....Pre-Christian Afro-religion, and Islam, are two inferior religions when seen in human-rights perspective. We have become so mesmerized by the notion of "moral equivalence" among religions and nations that it's at least impolite to call anybody's religion or government inferior. In the case of Haiti, the oldest Black government in the world, both the religion and the government were inferior--for which statement some would call me a racist!..Another irony: Rome did not commit "cultural imperialism" against the natives (as Protestant missions are accused of doing), preferring to tolerate their voodoo; so the natives were, as Protestantism sees it, only half-converted, and thus easily dupable by Papa Doc; and in S. Africa, foreign nations as well as church bodies are trying "cultural imperialism" in efforts to coerce the government into Western-style, one-person-one-vote democracy! * A weird & hypocritical "missionary" activism, bloated with arrogance and blindness--yet, according to the 1985 Religious News Association, the #1 "religious news" in '85 USA! (Thank God: For the past 5 days, the old red&blue Haitian flag has replaced the Duvalier voodoo-colors red&baack flag.) (*Eg, my own UCC (1) pushes anitapartheid as #1 factor in US decision-making vis-a-vis S. Africa and (2) insists, in a wide survey of its leadership (KYP Feb/86 p.3) that "Mission activities should not address the moral development of other peoples"--an instance of unwitting hypocrisy.)

7. The "plain" sense of a text, and a "commonsensical" reaction to an entity (situation, idea, proposal, relation, event), are negatively related as refusals to believe that further thought would erode the certainty that sits atop the pyramid of plausibility. Sam. Johnson's kicking a stone to refute Berkeley was an instance both of misunderstanding (viz, of Berkeley's idealism) and of consequent inauthentic triumphalistic "common sense"--and the problem of common sense is well posed by the fact that Boswell's report of the incident is usu. put down to SJ's credit instead of (as it should be) to his shame. SJ was eisegeting Berkeley text in the naive way of the fundamentalist, though he was capable of being wrong also in the sophisticated way of the person whose consciousness has been warped toward the explicative and against the receptive (on which see Schleiermacher's radical ideas for educational reform in SOLOQUIES, in PÄDAGOGIK, and passim in ON RELIGION, eg, p.186: taught "to analyze and explain everything," our consciousness "knows nothing of...illuminating truth or of such a genuine spirit of discovery as exists in the vision of a child"). Note the ambiguity of "common sense": it hovers between childlike acceptance of experience (ie, uncritical consciousness) and street-smart utilitarian everyday analytic consciousness (viz, "It's only logical!"). For common

sense in this sense, there's no nuanced space between it and "nonsense," which accordingly is the common antonym of "common sense." Augustine's "I believe because it is absurd" is a flat challenge to this uncritical feeling of nonsensicality. See the expansiveness of "common sense": Berkeley was as determined to be on its side as was Johnson. In his *PHILOSOPHICAL COMMENTARIES*, No.751, and in his *THREE DIALOGUES*, Berkeley combined our two words in the phrase "plain common sense."....Hume was paradoxically good news to common sense in that philosophers reacting against him (Kant, Thos. Reid, Henry Sidgwick, G.E. Moore, Wittgenstein) worked from a conscious-deliberate commonsensical base; but Hume saw himself in commonsensical opposition to Descartes and Berkeley..."Plainly," "plain and simple" cannot be said of either plain or common: both are COMPLEX down-to-earth words, as a potato is down to earth and simple to you till you try to grow it and have to learn to "think" like it.

8. This thinksheet is getting unplain, uncommon, unsimple!

This visual attempts a keyboard for the melody I've been playing. Our two "senses" are on the vertical, and our three "moods" or "angles" are on the horizontal. My description of the latter indicates what the hearer-reader is "up to" at the moment: #1, receiving, the open-and-ready mood, uncritical (pejoratively: "naive," "precritical," "ordinary," "common-man"); #2, idea-getting, on the hunt for the makings of concepts or propositions (pejoratively: "academic," "scholastic," "intellectualistic," "fundamentalist," "dogmatic"); #3, integrating the fruits of receptivity and critical consciousness, of lower and upper coils, of right and left "brains." In addition to receiving, conceiving, contemplating, all three moods/angles intend ACTION if the hearer-reader is a devotee instead of only a dilettante or only a scholar....#2 & #3 are the two types of

sophistication. Roughly, #2 is the philosopher, the sytematic thinker, who when building in the interest of the Gospel/Church is the systematic theologian--who, however, in personal life, may be #3, the artist, whose palette "nuances" (literally, "mixes colors") in the interest of the artifact, in this case the artist-devotee-theologian's own life and work. ...ABC are the three types of sense an interpreter, in the various moods and from the various angles, may call "common," though "A" is the "plain" meaning of "common." So also DEF can all be "plain" meanings of a text depending on the interpreter's mood/angle, though "D" is the "common" meaning of "plain."....Combinations of vertical/horizontal? Examples: (1) Traditional RC ethics-morality is "BE," #2 being natural-law thinking, according to which the "law of nature" (in Arist.-Thomistic form) defines "common sense" as "B" and the "plain sense" of the text as "E"; (2) Protestant obscurantism is also "BE," #2 being a more or less unconscious ideo-grid of interarticulated ideas derived from the history of and making sense within some particular Prot. stream that teaches its devotees to use the particular "common" sense ("B") for understanding the particular "plain" sense of the text ("E")....Where am I? When I pray the text, letting it address me in hope of hearing God speak to me through it, I am "AD." As critical Bible-reader, I must add "BE" but without either forgetting "AD" or failing to anticipate "CF." As a human being who is a Christian, I try to put it all together in "CF." And I believe in the possibility, and urgency, of a systematic hermeneutic that is ever mindful, humbly, of the depths and simplicity of "AD" and ever watchful of the hubris tendencies of "BE" without falling into either antiintellectualism or mysticism. For me, those are the parameters: the particulars I've addressed in many other thinksheets.

MOODS^{or}angles

1. RECEPTIVE
2. CONCEPTUAL
3. CONTEMPLATIVE

A B C
D E F

COMMON
of interpreter
PLAIN
of text