FOLLOW THE COMMON

One is apt to agree, upon first hearing it, with this fragment of Heraclitus:

We should not act and speak like those asleep.¹

One could understand this fragment to mean that we should not act and speak like those cut off from their senses, as are the asleep. We should follow what can be sensed. Hence, Heraclitus says in another fragment:

The things that can be seen, heard, and learned are what I prize the most.²

But Heraclitus goes on in another fragment to give us a more universal meaning:

For the waking there is one world, and it is common; but when men sleep, each one turns aside into a private [world].³

Heraclitus is saying more generally that those who turn aside from the one world, which is common to all of us, to a private world, are also like those who are asleep. We should not turn aside from this one common world to a private one which is to be like those asleep. Heraclitus is hinting here that truth is one and common to all who know it while the false is many and able to be private to those mistaken. Although many can share the same mistake, there are so many falsehoods that each one can have his own mistake. There is one true answer to what two plus two is and it (four) is common to all who know what two plus two is. But there can be many false answers so that everyone who is mistaken can have their own private falsehood (for example, three, five, six etc.).

Hence, in another fragment, Heraclitus urges us to follow what is common:

Therefore, we ought to follow what is common. Although reason is common to all, the many live as if having a private wisdom.⁴

²Heraclitus, DK 55

³Heraclitus, DK 89

⁴Heraclitus, DK 2

¹Heraclitus, DK 73

It is difficult to unfold all that is meant by *following the common*. But we must attempt to unfold it.

Perhaps we should first consider what it does not mean. Heraclitus does not mean that we should follow the crowd. As he teaches us in another fragment:

What mind or reason is in them? They believe the poets and take the crowd as their teacher, not knowing that "the many are bad while few are good." 5

One is a poet by the imagination, not the senses. And the crowd is led by false imagination. And it is the imagination rather than the senses which is active when men sleep. Thus the one man who is awake is better than the many who are asleep. And Heraclitus says this:

One man is ten thousand to me if he be the best.⁶

What then does it mean to follow the common? Part of its meaning is that we must follow the statements called the axioms and especially the first, the axiom about contradiction, which is the natural beginning of all of them. The axioms are common in two senses. They are common to all men. Hence, Boethius calls them the communes conceptiones animae. And they are about what is common to all things. Hence, Aristotle says that they all pertain to being as being, which is most common. (Hence, they are also common beginnings of all reasoning and of all reasoned out knowledge.) Parmenides, the first philosopher to speak explicitly of the axiom about contradiction and to insist upon following it, calls it common:

It is common to me where I begin for there I shall come back again.⁷

Perhaps it is fruitful, following the advice of Heisenberg, to see where the thought of Heraclitus and Parmenides seem to come together. Heraclitus said that to think or understand is common to all

⁵Heraclitus, DK 104 (quote is attributed to Bias)

⁶Heraclitus, DK 49

⁷Parmenides, DK 5

Thinking [understanding] is common to all.8

And Parmenides said:

For it is the same thing that can be thought [understood] and can be.9

Two men who understand the same thing seem to have the same understanding of it. But men who misunderstand a thing need not misunderstand it in the same way.

Another part of its meaning is that we must follow the common road in our knowledge. This is, of course, the natural road in our knowledge, the road from the senses into reason. Since every man is an animal with reason, the road from the senses into reason is common to all men. Hence, we come back again to the fragment quoted above:

The things that can be seen, heard, and learned are what I prize the most. 10

Empedocles also spoke of this road as the broadest road leading into the mind of man:

It is not possible to draw God near within easy reach of our eyes, or to take hold of him with our hands, which is the broadest road of persuasion that leads into the mind of man.¹¹

Perhaps we should also follow truth as a common good. If we pursue truth as a private good, we are driven from truth to falsehood. Augustine touches upon this in discussing the difficult interpretation of the words of Moses, which can be understood in more than one way, each of which says something true. Without knowing which sense or senses Moses intended, some writers wanted only their interpretation to be accepted, not because they had seen it to be the only true one, but because it was their own. In his *Confessions*, Augustine writes:

⁹Parmenides, DK 3

¹⁰Heraclitus, DK 55

⁸Heraclitus, DK 113

¹¹Empedocles, DK 133

Let no one now trouble me by saying, Moses thought not as you say, but as I say." For should he ask me, "Whence knowest thou that Moses thought this which you deduce from his words?" I ought to take it contentedly, and reply perhaps as I have before, or somewhat more fully should he be obstinate.

But when he says, "Moses meant not what you say, but what I say," and yet denies not what each of us says, and that both are true, O my God, life of the poor, in whose bosom there is no contradiction, pour down into my heart Thy soothings, that I may patiently bear with such as say this to me; not because they are divine, and because they have seen in the heart of Thy servant what they say, but because they are proud, and have not known the opinion of Moses, but love their own,-not because it is true, but because it is their own.

Otherwise they would equally love another true opinion, as I love what they say when they speak what is true; not because it is theirs, but because it is true, and therefore now not theirs because true.

But if they therefore love that because it is true, it is now both theirs and mine, since it is common to all the lovers of truth. But because they contend that Moses meant not what I say, but I what they themselves say, this I neither like nor love; because, though it were so, yet that rashness is not of knowledge, but of audacity; and not vision, but vanity brought it forth.

And therefore, O Lord, are Thy judgments to be dreaded, since Thy truth is neither mine, nor his, nor another's, but of all of us, whom Thou publicly callest to have it in common, warning us terribly not to hold it as specially for ourselves, test we be deprived of it. For whosoever claims to himself as his own that which Thou appointed to all to enjoy, and desires that to be his own which belongs to all, is forced away from what is common to all to that which is his own-that is, from truth to falsehood. For he that "speaketh a lie, speaketh of his Own." 12

¹²St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book Twelve, Chapter 25: "Nemo iam mihi molestus sit dicendo mihi: "non hoc sensit Moyses, quod tu dicis, sed hoc sensit, quod ego dico." Si enim mihi diceret: "unde scis hoc sensisse Moysen, quod de his verbis eius eloqueris?" Aequo animo ferre deberem, et responderem fortasse, quae superius respondi vel aliquanto uberius, si esset durior.

Cum vero dicit: "non hoc ille sensit, quod tu dicis, sed quo ego dico" neque tamen negat, quod uterque nostrum dicit, utrumque verum esse, o vita pauperum, Deus meus, in cuius sinu non est contradictio, plue mihi mitigationes in cor, ut patienter tales feram; qui non mihi hoc dicunt, quia divini sunt et in corde famuli tui viderunt quod dicunt, sed quia superbi sunt nec noverunt Moysi sententiam, sed amant suam, non quia vera est, sed quia sua est.

This is connected with the distinction between speaking *from oneself* and speaking *not from oneself*:

It has been said that some speak from themselves while some speak not from themselves.

Whoever strives to speak truth speaks not from himself.

For all knowledge of the truth is from another: either by way of learning, as from a teacher; or by way of revelation, as from God; of by way of discovery, as from things themselves, as is said in *Romans*, I, 20: *The invisible things of God are looked upon, being understood from the things which have been made*. Thus in whichever of these ways knowledge is had, it is not for a man from himself.

He speaks from himself who takes the things which he says neither from things nor from human teaching, but from his own heart; Jeremias XXIII, 16: *They speak the vision of their own heart*, Ezechiel XIII, 3: *Woe to the foolish prophets who prophesy from their own heart*.

Therefore to thus fabricate something from oneself is on account of human glory. For as Chrysostom says, who wishes to teach his own doctrine wishes this for nothing other than to acquire glory. And this is what the Lord says, proving his teaching to be from God. Who speaks from himself about the certain knowledge of truth which is from another, such a one seeks his own glory

"Alioquin et aliam veram pariter amarent, sicut ego amo quod dicunt, quando verum dicunt, non quia ipsorum, sed quia verum est: et ideo iam nec ipsorum est, quia verum est.

"Si autem ideo ament illud, quia verum est, iam et ipsorum est et meum est, quoniam in commune omnium est veritatis amatorum. Illud autem, quod contendunt non hoc sensisse Moysen, quod ego dico, sed quod ipsi dicunt, nolo, non amo, quia etsi ita est, tamen ista temeritas non scientiae, sed audaciae est, nec visus, sed typhus eam peperit.

"Ideoque, Domine, tremenda sunt iudicia tua, quoniam veritas tua nec mea est nec illius aut illius, sed omnium nostrum, quos ad eius communionem publice vocas, terribiliter admonens nos, ut nolimus eam habere privatam, ne privemur ea. Nam quisque id, quod tu omnibus ad fruendum proponis, sibi proprie vindicat, et suum vult esse quod omnium est, a communi propellitur ad sua, hoc est a veritate ad mendacium. Qui enim loquitur mendacium, de suo loquitur. (John 8, 44)"

because of which and because of pride, heresies and false opinions are introduced. 13

Speaking from oneself is an effect of inane glory, which is either the same as pride, or its immediate effect.

Loqui a se, to speak from oneself, seems to be the same as loqui ex propriis, to speak from one's own, from what is private to oneself. And this is disastrous for the mind:

Whoever besides God speaks from his own says what is false although not everyone who says what is false, says it from his own.

God alone is speaking from his own says the truth. For truth is the enlightenment of the understanding. God however is the light itself and from him all others are enlightened, as said above I, 9: *He was the true light which enlightens every man coming into this world.* Whence also he is truth itself, and others do not say the truth except insofar they are enlightened by him. Whence Ambrose says: "Every truth by whomever it is said, is from the Holy Spirit"

Thus therefore the devil when he speaks from his own says falsehood. Man also when he speaks from his own says what is false; but when he speaks from God, then he speaks the truth. *Romans* III, 4: *For 'God is truthful, but every man false*, as far as he is in himself.

¹³Thomas Aquinas, *Super Ioannem*, VII, Lectio VII, n. 1040: "Dictum est autem aliquos loqui a se, aliquos vero loqui non a se. Loquitur autem non a se quicumque studet loqui veritatem. Omnis veritatis cognitio ab alio est: vel per modum disciplinae, ut a magistro; vel per modum revelationis, ut a Deo; vel per inventionem, ut ab ipsis rebus, ut dicitur Rom. I, 20: Invisibilia Dei per ea quae facta sunt, intellecta conspiciuntur. Sic ergo quocumque istorum modorum cognitio aliqua habeatur, non est homini a se. A se autem loquitur qui ea quae dicit nec a rebus nec ex doctrina humana accepit, sed de corde suo; ler. XXIII, 16: Visionem cordis sui loquuntur, Ez. XIII, 3: Vae Prophetis insipientibus qui vaticinantur de corde suo. Sic ergo confingere aliquid a se ipso, est propter humanam gloriam: quia sicut Chrysostomus dicit, qui aliquam propriam vult instruere doctrinam, propter nihil aliud hoc vult quam ut gloriam acquirat. Et hoc est quod Dominus dicit, probans doctrinam suam a Deo esse. Qui a semetipso loquitur, de certa cognitione veritatis quae est ab alio, iste quaerit gloriam propriam propter quam et propter superbiam, haereses et falsae opiniones introducuntur."

But not every man who says what is false speaks from his own because sometimes he takes from another - not from God who is truthful, but from him who did not stand in the truth and first introduced the false.

And therefore he uniquely speaks from his own when he speaks falsely. III Kings, last 22: *I will go forth and I will be a false spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.* Isaias XXIX, 14: *The Lord mixed in*, that is permitted to mix, *in its middle the spirit of error.* ¹⁴

Thus seduction is more said to be a leading aside from the truth which is common:

It should be known that to seduce is to lead apart [aside] from. A man is able to be led apart from the truth or from falsehood. And in both ways someone can be called a seducer...However, he is more called a seducer who leads away from the truth and deceives because he is said to lead apart [aside] who is drawn from the common way. Truth however is a common way, but heresy and the way of the bad are certain diversions [turning aways]. 15

¹⁴Thomas Aguinas, *Super Ioannem*, VIII, Lectio VI, n. 1250: "guicumque praeter Deum loquitur ex propriis, mendacium loquitur quamvis non quicumque mendacium loquitur, ex propriis loquitur. Solus autem Deus loquendo ex propriis, loquitur veritatem. Veritas enim est illuminatio intellectus; Deus autem est ipsum lumen, et ab ipso omnes illuminantur, supra I, 9: Erat lux vera, quae illuminat omnem hominem venientem in hunc mundum: unde et est ipsa veritas, et alii non loguuntur veritatem nisi inquantum ab ipso illuminantur. Unde sicut Ambrosius dicit, 'omne verum a quocumque dicatur, a Spiritu sancto est'. Sic ergo diabolus cum loquitur ex propriis, loquitur mendacium; homo etiam, cum ex propriis loquitur, mendacium loquitur; sed cum a Deo loquitur, tunc loquitur veritatem; Rom. III, 4: Est autem Deus verax, omnis autem homo mendax, quantum est in se. Sed non omnis homo qui loquitur mendacium, loquitur ex propriis, quia quandoque hoc ab alio accipit: non quidem a Deo, qui est verax, sed ab eo qui in veritate non stetit et primo mendacium adinvenit. Et ideo ipse singulariter cum loquitur mendacium, ex propriis loquitur; III Reg. ult., 22: Egrediar et ero spiritus mendax in ore omnium Prophetarum eius; Is. XXIX, 14:

¹⁵Thomas Aquinas, *Super Ioannem*, VII, Lectio II, n. 1031: "Sciendum est autem, quod seducere est seorsum ducere: potest autem homo duci seorsum vel a veritate vel a falsitate: et utroque modo potest dici aliquis seductor...Magis autem seductor dicitur qui a veritate seducit et decipit: quia ille dicitur seorsum duci qui trahitur a via communi. Veritas autem communis via est; haeresis vero et via malorum diverticula quaedam sunt."

Dominus immiscuit, idest miscere permisit, in medio eius spiritum erroris."

Thomas compares heresy in theology and in philosophy:

The name *heresy* is Greek, and implies division according to Isidore (Book VIII *Etym. c. 3*). Hence the heretical are called divisive. And because in choice there comes to be a division of one from another, choice is called *prohaeresis* in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1094a 2)

Division however happens to some part by receding from the whole.

The first coming together of men is by way of knowledge because from this all others arise. Whence also heresy consists in a singular opinion apart from the common opinion. Whence also the philosophers, who had certain opinions apart from the common position of others, constituted private sects or heresies.

To the ninth it should be said that those who fabricated a new heresy sought some advantage, at least rule. For they wished to have followers.

And that they depart from the common way by lightness or perversity of soul proceeds in all from pride, which is the love of one's own excellence. 16

But Heraclitus added to the words about following the common a reference to reason:

Although reason is common to all, the many live as if having a private wisdom.¹⁷

Another fragment connects with this thought:

¹⁶Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Lib. IV Sententiarum*, Distinctio XIII, Questio II, Art 1, Responsio & Ad 9: "...nomen haeresis graecum est, et divisionem importat secundum Isidorum (lib. VIII *Etym.*, c. 3) Unde et haeretica divisiva dicuntur. Et quia in electione fit divisio unius ab altero, electio *prohaeresis* dicitur in I *Eth.* (1094a 2). Divisio autem contingit alicui parti per recessum a toto. Prima autem congregatio quae est in hominibus, est per viam cognitionis, quia ex hac omnes aliae oriuntur. Unde et haeresis consistit in singulari opinione praeter communem opinionem. Unde et philosophi qui quasdam positiones habebant praeter communem sententiam aliorum, sectas vel haereses proprias constituebant. Ad nonum dicendum quod illi qui haeresim confingunt de novo, constat quod aliquod commodum exspectant, saltem principatum: volunt enim habere sequaces. Hoc etiam in omnibus ex superbia procedit quae est amor propriae excellentiae, quod a communi via discedunt animi levitate aut perversitate."

¹⁷See DK 2 above.

To follow reason and to listen to reason seem to be almost the same. Or perhaps it could be said that we can follow reason only by listening to reason or after we have listened to reason. Sometimes we say in daily speech about someone that "he won't listen to reason". We do not say that he won't listen to *my reason*, but that he won't listen to *reason*. But what does this mean? Is there a reason other than my reason, your reason and the next man's reason? To listen to reason means to listen to what is common to my reason, your reason and the next man's reason. Someone might object to Heraclitus, asking why he speaks to us if he does not want us to listen to him, but to reason. But he is telling us to listen to him only insofar as he is listening to and following reason. In the same way, the saints might say: "Imitate not me, but Christ". But this does not preclude imitating the saints insofar as they imitate Christ.

In one other fragment, Heraclitus insists upon the importance of being strong in what is common to all:

Those who speak with understanding must be strong in what is common to all, as much as a city is strong in its law, and even more so. For all human laws are fed by one divine law which governs as far as it wishes and is more than sufficient for all. 19

The elevation and universality of Heraclitus' thought here is almost unbelievable. We can come up to an understanding of it, not entirely unworthy of it, only by dividing it.

First, "Those who speak with understanding" can be understood in general for those who understand in any matter or it can be taken by antonomasia for the wise. Since wisdom is the highest or greatest perfection of reason, and the perfection of reason is not in its thinking but in its understanding, clearly the wise most of all understand. Hence, Boethius said that wisdom proceeds *intellectualiter*.

If we consider "Those who speak with understanding" antonomastically for the wise, then it is most true that they "must be strong in what is common

¹⁸Heraclitus, DK 50)

¹⁹Heraclitus, DK 114

to all." But to see this, we must here divide the thought expressed by the words "common to all".

The words *common to all* can be divided into common *to all things* or common *to all men*. In both senses, the wise must be strong in what is common to all.

Wisdom is about what is common to all things in both ways that something can be common to all things. Something can be common to all things in the sense that it can be *said of* all things, or in the sense that it is a *cause of* all things. Wisdom, as Aristotle shows in his proemium to wisdom in the beginning of the *Metaphysics*, is both about what is said of all things (*being* and *one* as we find out later in Book Four) and the first cause, which is the cause of all things. And the first part of becoming strong in what is common to all things is to see that these are not the same, as Hegel and others have made the mistake of thinking. What is said of all is *not* the cause of all. Thomas distinguishes these two ways of being common in many places. For example:

But other is the commonness of the universal and the cause. For the cause is not said of its effects because the same is not a cause of itself. But the universal is common as something said of many; and thus it is necessary that it be in some way one in many, and not subsisting by itself apart from them.²⁰

The wise man is also strong in what is common to all men pertaining to knowing. All men by nature desire to know. But the strength of the wise man in this desire is well expressed by Democritus in one of his fragments:

I would rather discover one cause than be master of the kingdom of the Persians.²¹

But the wise man must also be strong in the common road of man which is the road from the senses into reason. (This is the common road of men because they are all by nature animals with reason.) For this is the road to wisdom, as Aristotle also shows in the Proemium to Wisdom at the beginning of his *Metaphysics*. And, as Aristotle shows in the fourth and fifth books of the *Metaphysics*, the wise man must also be strong in the axioms which are common to all men.

²⁰Thomas Aquinas, *In X Metaphysicorum*, Lectio III, n. 1964

²¹Democritus, Dk 118

Thus, in five ways at least, the wise, or those who most of all speak with understanding, must be strong in what is common to all.

But we can also take "Those who speak with understanding" in general, wherever men try to understand.

If the first beginnings of our knowledge are common to all men, and we come to know other things through these first beginnings, then it is necessary to become strong in these common beginnings so as to understand what follows from them. Thus those who speak with understanding must be strong in what is common to all. The man who is weak in the beginnings does not see what follows from them, or what is in agreement, or disagreement, with them.

There are also beginnings common to all men in a particular knowledge. (By particular knowledge, we mean knowledge whose subject is not most universal, as is the subject of wisdom.) For every reasoned out knowledge has its own road and beginnings about the things private to it. These are common to all those pursuing that knowledge.

But Heraclitus also seems to touch upon a comparison between the life of the mind which is ordered to understanding and the life of the city. Since man is by nature a social animal, both the life of his mind as well as his daily life is with other men. But it is not possible for men to live together in the same city without common laws. Likewise, the life of the mind together is not possible without some common beginnings. This can be seen in the conversations ordered to knowing.

In the conversation of the teacher and the student, the teacher should lead the student to know what he (the student) does not know through things which the student already knows. In that way, learning is recalling (not what you learn, but that through which you learn). But if the student can come to know what he does not know through what he does know, why does he need a teacher? The teacher knows things which the student does not know yet. But the teacher, as has been said, must lead the student through things the student knows already. In order to do this, the teacher must also know these same things. They are *common* to the teacher and the student. But the student does not yet see what follows from these things. But the teacher does. Hence, the teacher is stronger in what is common to himself and the student. If the student were to come to know these things by himself, he would have to be himself strong in what is common.

But in other conversations, where one man does not clearly know something of which the other is clearly ignorant, and which are more a common investigation, there is frequent disagreement. When two men disagree, each can say the other is mistaken because he disagrees. But such a disagreement cannot be resolved without finding something common to both by which they can decide who is right. Thus two scientists may have opposite hypotheses, but they need a common experiment to decide. If their hypotheses predict different results in the same experiment which they can both perform and see the same results, they may be able to decide between their hypotheses. But it is by something common to them.

But sometimes, some men may agree about something and others, on the opposite of this. And this, as Heraclitus teaches us, is like the laws commonly observed in one city being opposed to those in another city. The citizens of one city cannot say that the laws of the other city are bad because they disagree with theirs. For the citizens of the other city might make the same claim. One would have to have recourse to something more common, such as the divine or natural law. Likewise, then, in the life of the mind. One must be strong, not just in the opinions shared by one's group, but in those shared by all men. And this would be what is naturally understood by all men. Heraclitus then is saying that those who speak with understanding must be strong in what is naturally understood by men. Hence, the wise man most of all understands because he distinguishes the senses of the words in the axioms naturally known by all men and shows their order and defends the axioms against sophistical attacks.

When Heraclitus urges us to follow what is common to all men, are we to understand only what is *actually* common, or also what is *able to be* common.

In the beginning, we can follow what is actually common. But as we go forward, we must follow also what is able to be common. Euclid begins the *Elements* with some things that are actually common to all men. But the things we can see from these (after we have become strong in them) are not actually seen by all men since they have not become strong in what is actually common. But we come to know what is able to be common through what is actually common after one has become strong in the latter. The things which are able to be common are actually understood only by those who have becomes strong in what is actually common.

As we go forward in the knowledge which depends upon experience, we come to knowledge which depends upon private experience. Private experience should be distinguished from common experience. Common experience is the experience which all men have and cannot avoid having. All men have experienced change, place and time, whole and part, pleasure and pain, and many other common things. They cannot avoid having some experience of these things. Private experience is the experience which only some men have. It may be acquired by chance or prolonged observation or by experiment or by some other means. Would Heraclitus urge us not to pursue such knowledge because it is based on private experience? If Heraclitus were to urge this, he would be opposed to experimental science as well as many other kinds of knowledge. However, it is necessary here to distinguish again between what is actually common and what is able to be common. In one of his essays, the famous physicist Schrödinger states the following about the experiments the scientist will follow and those which he will not follow:

We may readily grant that a physical experiment, say, for simplicity's sake, a counting of stars, is independent of the question whether it is carried out by Mr. Wilson in New York or Fräulein Mueller in Berlin. The result will always be the same, provided of course that the requisite technical conditions are fulfilled. The same is true of all established experiments in Physics.

The first and indispensable condition that we demand of any process of experiment before it can be admitted into the regular procedure of physical research is that it will invariably reproduce the same results. We do not consider an experiment worthy of scientific consideration or acceptance unless it can fulfill this condition.²²

Before an experiment should be followed in physics, it must be *able to be reproduced with the same results.* When a number of competent scientists have performed the same experiment and gotten the same results, the scientist takes this as a sign that it is *able to be reproduced with the same results.* If the experiment is not able to be common in this way, it will not be followed by the scientist. Thus, even the scientist is following the common so far as possible. He is not able to follow what is *actually* common to all men. But he follows what is *able to be* common. It is, of course, better to follow what is actually common than what is able to be common, but we could not go very far if we stayed with

²²Erwin C. Schrödinger, *Science , Theory and Man.* Dover Publications Inc., N. Y., "Is Science a Fashion of the Times?", pp. 84-85

what is actually common, or what immediately follows from or can be seen from just what is actually common. Thus, Aristotle follows Heraclitus when he finds a common basis about change actually shared by all the natural philosophers in Book One of the *Physics* and later in the same book a common basis shared by all men about becoming. But he cannot continue to always find a common basis that is actually common. Hence, one must go on to the next best which would be something common in some qualified way, as he says in the *Eudemian Ethics:*

For it would be best if all men were seen to agree with what has been said; but if not, in some way all.²³

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²³ Eudemian Ethics, Book One, 1216b 27 - 30