

# **The sensus communis and its Subjective Aspects. From Aristotle and Cicero via Aquinas to Kant.**

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## Abstract

The history of the “sensus communis” is a complex one. Cicero was an influential starting point, and the notion made its way into the English “common sense” and “moral sense” as well as into the German “Gemeinsinn” and “gemeiner Menschenverstand” (sound understanding). Kant in his third *Critique* gave a new interpretation relying on the “free play of our faculties” (imagination and understanding), which underlies the judgment of taste. I will show that this new interpretation ties the inter-subjective aspect of the sensus communis (between you and me, basically derived from Cicero) back to an intra-subjective one (within myself). I will refer to Aquinas and his translation of Aristotle’s “koine aisthesis” as “sensus communis”. Aristotle spoke of “koine aisthesis” in his *de anima* as a midpoint in our mind, or soul, where the various perceptions through our five senses meet and become united. He also spoke of our becoming aware of our perceptions. Here we find tentative beginnings of a theory of consciousness. Aristotle’s “sensus communis” is based on “common sensibles” (koine aistheta), objects that belong to more than one sense and that are similar to primary qualities. Tying all this together, the social (Cicero and English and Scottish traditions) and the perceptual (Aristotle), we will see that Kant, maybe without knowing, created systematic and historical connections back to Aristotle.

The issues involved in the history of the “sensus communis” are many. They are complex and have created a rich texture. From this I will chose only one strand, which connects Aristotle and Kant via Aquinas. Systematically, it connects the intra-subjective and the inter-subjective. Kant took the sensus communis mainly from the Latin (“sensus communis”) and English (“common sense”) traditions, which were mainly epistemological and moral, and he gave it a new sense in his aesthetics, in his third *Critique*. He connected it to perception and, maybe unknowingly, back to Aristotle.

Part One.

Aristotle in *de anima* speaks of something he calls “koine aisthesis” (κοιν—αἰσθησις). The word “aisthesis” refers to perception and “koine” means “common”. So we have “common perception”. Thomas Aquinas wrote a commentary to Aristotle’s *de anima*, and he translated “koine aisthesis” as “sensus communis”. In fact, Aquinas did not read Greek. He followed a Latin translation. The term “sensus communis” for Aristotle’s “koine aisthesis” was not his creation. But what exactly did Aristotle mean by “koine aisthesis”? Was “sensus communis” a good translation?

In *de anima*, Aristotle speaks of objects of the senses, of “that which is perceived” (τὸ αἰσθητὸν). He distinguishes between three kinds of such objects: proper, common, and accidental. White and sweet we perceive with different senses, or sense organs: our eyes and our tongue. White and sweet are “proper” (ἰδία) to their senses: the eyes for the white and the tongue for the sweet. Each has its own sense. Error is impossible. If you see white, you see white and no sense can contradict that.

Objects of the second group are movement, rest, shape, magnitude, number and unity. Each of them we perceive with more than one sense. They are therefore called “common sensibles” or “common objects of perception” (κοινὰ αἰσθητὰ). We see and feel shape, for instance. Here one thing, shape, is perceived by two different senses: vision and touch, eye and hand. Shape is a “common sensible”. It is “common” (κοινόν) to vision and touch. Aristotle still thinks that objects of this kind are, like proper ones, directly perceived (καθ’ αἶψαν). Aquinas makes a comment here that is interesting with respect to what I want to say about Kant’s re-interpretation of the *sensus communis*. But before turning to this, I would like to give a fuller picture of Aristotle’s “*sensus communis*”.

Aristotle claims that we have a “common faculty” or “common sense” (κοιν—αἰσθησις) for the common sensibles (κοινὰ αἰσθητὰ). This is not a special sense, as proper sensibles each have their special sense. Common sensibles are merely “accompanying” (κολουθοῦντα) proper sensibles, and they are “common” (κοινὰ) to the senses for these very proper sensibles. It is actually useful for us that they belong to more than one sense, because this allows us to correct our judgments about them. For instance, we can see and feel a certain shape, and if vision leads us into an illusion and into making a wrong judgment, we can use touch to correct ourselves.

There is more to Aristotle’s “common sense”. It helps us to become aware of the *differences* between the proper sensibles, and it helps us to become aware *that* we perceive. We somehow “see” that we see and hear and touch and taste. There must be

a *higher unit*, where the different perceptions meet, and where we “perceive” and “assert” the differences. It must be *one* thing that judges and distinguishes (κρῖνειν) between the many. Here thinking and perceiving meet and Aristotle’s “sensus communis” plays a role in this. Today we might also want to speak of consciousness at this point.

Let this be enough of Aristotle for now and let us turn to Aquinas, who comments on Aristotle’s “common sensibles” in terms of the “sensus communis”: “The *common sense* [sensus communis] is a certain power at which all sensory alterations terminate. ... It perceives the sensory alterations themselves and distinguishes between sense objects of different senses. For it is through the *common sense* [sensus communis] that we *perceive that we see* and distinguish between white and sweet” (Aquinas-Pasnau, p. 206). Aquinas makes heavy use of the “sensus communis”, more than Aristotle, so it seems to me. Pasnau here translates Aquinas as saying that we “perceive that we *see*” (Pasnau apparently reads: *percipimus nos videre*). But the Latin text actually says “*percipimus nos vivere*”, which means “perceive that we *live*”. Apparently Pasnau thinks that Aquinas meant “*videre*” and not, as the text says, “*vivere*”. If Aquinas really meant “*vivere*”, then he went beyond Aristotle. Later we will see how this connects to Kant’s re-interpretation of the *sensus communis*, when he says the subject “feels itself” (*sich selbst fühlt*, par. 1 of the third *Critique*).

I need one more passage from Aquinas to give a better picture of how he understands the *sensus communis*: “So that we might know the nature of taking pleasure and being sad, Aristotle adds that to take pleasure and to be sad is to *act by the sensory middle* [agere sensitiva medietate] – i.e., it is a certain action of a sensory power that is called the *middle* [medietas] insofar as the *common sense* [sensus communis] is related to the proper senses as a kind of *midpoint*, just as a center is related to the lines terminating at it. Not every action of the sensory part involves taking pleasure or being sad, however, but only that which concerns what is good or what is bad insofar as they are of that sort; for the good of a sense (whatever is suited to it) causes pleasure, whereas the bad (whatever is repugnant and harmful) causes sadness. And following from being sad or taking pleasure is avoidance and appetite (i.e., desire)” (Aquinas-Pasnau, 382).

The *sensus communis* unites the senses. It is a center relative to them. It is their midpoint, an endpoint of the lines of perception, from the senses to thought (brain). Related to this is a midpoint between the extremes of what is good and what is bad for us, what suits us and what does not and therefore causes pleasure or displeasure

(sadness, pain). The midpoint of perception (the five senses) and the midpoint of desire (pleasure and displeasure) are related.

Now we can turn to Kant. He knows of the Latin “sensus communis” and of the English and Scottish “common sense” and “moral sense”. In German, he speaks of “gesunder Verstand” (sound understanding), “gemeiner Verstand” (common understanding), “gemeinschaftliches Gefühl” (common feeling), and “Gemeinsinn” (common sense). In all this, first, he wants to draw a separating line between understanding and feeling. “Gemeiner Verstand” (common understanding) and “Gemeinsinn” (common sense) should be kept apart (par. 20). The former is an understanding, the latter a feeling. Second, Kant wants to identify the *sensus communis* with this “Gemeinsinn” and not with “gemeiner Verstand” (common understanding).

He repeats this later on, in paragraph 40. There he says that “gemeiner Menschenverstand” (common human understanding), is often seen as “merely healthy” (bloß gesund) and “not yet cultivated” (noch nicht kultiviert), and often has “the unfortunate honor” (kränkende Ehre), as he says ironically, to be called “Gemeinsinn (*sensus communis*)”. In the text, Kant inserts “*sensus communis*” in brackets after “Gemeinsinn”, as he did already in paragraph 20.

Kant in fact wants to protect the common and healthy understanding against any identification with a mere feeling. He thinks higher of it. A common and healthy understanding, even if it is not yet cultivated, is still healthy and valuable. “Cultivation” can go many ways and Kant is skeptic about it, so it seems to me. He keeps the “common understanding” apart from the “*sensus communis*” (Gemeinsinn), which he takes as a feeling. Also “moral sense” should be distinguished from this feeling. A *sensus communis* as a feeling or a sense cannot, for Kant, be a basis for morality or understanding.

It is in paragraph 20, where Kant derives and explains, en passant, the *sensus communis* within the framework of his aesthetics, right after he has equated it with “Gemeinsinn” and identified it as a feeling: It is the *result*, or “effect” (Wirkung), he claims, of the “free play of our cognitive powers”. This of course is the free play that underlies our judgment of taste. Thus the *sensus communis* has been given an a priori basis within Kant’s aesthetics. It is the result of something that underlies our judgment of taste and our claim to universal (inter-subjective) validity. Whenever we make a judgment of taste, we actually *create* the *sensus communis*!

Later, in paragraph 40, Kant modifies, or further specifies, the “sensus communis” as “the *idea* of a communal sense [gemeinschaftlicher Sinn], i.e., a faculty for judging that in its reflection takes account (a priori) of everyone else’s way of representing in thought, in order as it were to hold its judgment up to human reason as a whole and thereby avoid the illusion which, from subjective private conditions that could easily be held to be objective, would have a detrimental influence on the judgment”. Here justice is done to the Latin and English and Scottish traditions.

Although the *sensus communis* is a mere feeling, this feeling results from the free play of our faculties of cognition that underlies our judgment of taste, and part of this play is a reflection about the universality of its elements and thereby includes a reflection about others. It is through this rich and a priori basis of the judgment of taste that Kant allows for bridges to understanding and morality (beauty as the symbol of morality). Together with the *sensus communis*, the possibility of a bridge to morality and inter-subjectivity is created in the free play. The English-Scottish “common sense” then makes sense. It is derived and not presupposed in Kant, and as a feeling is distinct from the understanding. The connections to morality would have to remain indirect.

The point I am trying to make here is that Kant in his third *Critique* gives an intra-subjective explanation of the inter-subjective *sensus communis* (from the Latin, English and Scottish traditions), an explanation that is based on our perception and our faculties of understanding and imagination (and thereby related to Aristotle). Aristotle in *de anima* is concerned with different perceptions and their coming together in one unit, a unit Aquinas translated as “*sensus communis*”. In the Latin and English and Scottish traditions this aspect is hardly visible, but Kant explained the *sensus communis* in terms of perception again. Of course he also added other ingredients of taste, such as disinterestedness and a claim to universality.

Aristotle was not interested in “aesthetics” as a theory of beauty but as a theory of perception. He had epistemological and psychological interests. Nevertheless, both he and Kant based their accounts on perception and our awareness of it. The free play renders itself most naturally to this. Just think of synaesthesia, simultaneous perceptions, where the senses mix and reflect each other in aesthetic contemplation. Furthermore, Aristotle tied this up with pleasure and displeasure, and so did Kant. Aristotle saw “suitability” as the reason for some kind of pleasure in perception: If an object suits our senses, we see it with pleasure. There are traces of this in Kant as well.

Although his theory of free play requires also disinterestedness and universality (reflecting about others), his notion of purposiveness comes close to Aristotle's notion of suitability again. This becomes particularly apparent when we look at Kant's earlier notion of purposiveness, where he had not yet separated subjective and objective purposiveness.

There is another connection related to this. Kant's notion of purposiveness is concerned with form, which basically comes down to space and time. It is shape and not color that Kant has in mind when he speaks of objects of visual beauty. Regarding color he suggests that we might think of light as having pulse (as Euler suggested) and thereby obtain the formal aspect needed for purposiveness of form. Looking at Aristotle again, we see that shape and movement are objects of perception of his second kind: *koine aistheta*, common sensibles, objects common to several senses. Psychologically they are secondary, whereas proper objects, *idia aistheta*, such as color, are psychologically primary. We perceive the common objects through perceiving proper objects. But ontologically things are the other way around. Common objects, such as movement and shape, are ontologically primary and make up the secondary qualities, such as color and sound, which are based on movement (frequency). These ontologically primary objects in turn are based on relations of space and time. They are the Aristotelian common sensibles and for them we have a *sensus communis*.

Here Aristotle and Kant meet, because Kant bases the *sensus communis* on the free play and this in turn on purposiveness of form (time and space). The Aristotelian common objects are based on movement (time and space). They are more objective than the proper ones and render themselves easily to Kant's notion of form. They are inter-subjective and communicable, whereas proper sensibles are related to what we now call *qualia*. Kant in his justification of the claim for universal communicability of judgments of taste makes use of these formal and universal aspects of time and space.

Historically, the notion of the *sensus communis* has a strong strand related to inter-subjectivity. Cicero was influential here. He thought of rhetoric, where one needs to develop a sense of what others might want to hear and how one succeeds in winning others over. This requires an understanding of the particular culture and society one happens to be living in. Shaftesbury realized that any society has its limitations and prejudices. One should be sensitive to society, yes, but one should also be critical and keep some distance. The *sensus communis* in this enriched understanding is not only common to a particular society, but also contains a critical

element that can be held against it. This is further developed in the spirit of the enlightenment in Kant. Besides this critical turn, Kant somewhat idiosyncratically saw the *sensus communis* as a feeling that can be explained through his aesthetic theory. He gives the notion an aesthetic turn. He does not presuppose but derives it. The inter-subjective element (what is common to different people in society) is given an intra-subjective explanation (the free play within a single person). This intra-subjective free play reflects about the points of views of others and thereby incorporates the inter-subjective dimension. The others are reflected upon as possible and one abstracts from one's own personal interests. Thereby only universal elements remain and humanity is seen in a universal light.

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