Common-Sense Thinking and Decision Making

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Abstract: This article explores the nature, structure, and significance of common-sense thinking (CST) as a core human reasoning ability distinct from other intelligence measures. CST is defined as the dynamic, situation-responsive application of common-sense knowledge, rather than the mere possession of static facts. Two distinct modes of CST are proposed: System A, which handles rapid, intuitive responses based on accumulated background knowledge, and System B, which enables flexible, reflective, and adaptive reasoning in novel or complex scenarios. The discussion contrasts CST with academic intelligence, highlighting that high IQ or academic achievement does not guarantee practical judgment. Related constructs such as practical intelligence, fluid and crystallised intelligence, executive functions, and rationality are examined to frame CST within psychological research. The article argues that CST underpins success in many professional domains, including leadership, management consulting, and education, where it manifests as practical judgment, adaptive decision-making, and situational awareness. Furthermore, CST is positioned as a necessary but not sufficient tool, with structured decision-making methods needed when intuitive reasoning reaches its limits. The relationship between CST and scientific thinking is also explored, showing how disciplined forms of common-sense reasoning have evolved into formal inquiry methods. Ultimately, CST emerges as a foundational yet underappreciated component of human rationality, bridging intuitive insight and deliberate analysis, and representing an enduring cornerstone of effective decision-making across personal, professional, and societal contexts.

Keywords: Common-Sense Thinking, Practical Intelligence, Decision Making, Adaptive Reasoning, System A and System B Thinking, Cognitive Flexibility

1. Introduction

This article is ultimately about common-sense decision making. But to discuss that, we need to first understand the underlying concept of common-sense thinking. So, what is common-sense thinking (CST)? It is sometimes thought of as an all-purpose ability to make sound judgements in everyday situations, transcending any one domain of knowledge. In simple terms, it could mean using sound and prudent judgement based on a simple perception of the situation or facts. This goes besides formal education or specialised training. It is partly an innate capacity to draw on basic, widely shared knowledge and intuition to solve real-world problems. For example, what about knowing not to touch a hot stove or to save money for a rainy day? It does not require high academic training, but rather a general awareness learned through experience. Still, it is not CST. Common sense is thought of as *all the knowledge about the world that we take for granted but rarely state out loud*, i.e. the broad background understanding that any typical person has accumulated by adulthood. It includes a grasp of physical realities, social norms, and practical consequences. The concept of common sense encompasses all this, but much is common-sense knowledge, i.e. the facts and relations that are shared static knowledge of a general nature. The stove example above is common-sense static knowledge but does not require much dynamic thinking to be applied. So while certainly common-sensical, it is not what we mean by CST.

The relation of CST (process) to the broader concept of common sense (outcome) is similar to the relation between design and design thinking. Design is defined as the purposeful arrangement of elements to achieve a desired function, outcome, or experience, balancing constraints, requirements, and sometimes creativity. Design thinking, however, is the process of design distilled from its many instantiations and codified as a method. So design focuses on creating for a known problem within defined constraints, applying conscious thought to achieve a functional solution. Design thinking, on the other hand, approaches more general problems through human-centred inquiry, by uncovering underlying needs before proposing solutions. Analogously, CST is the core process when applying common-sense knowledge to a non-trivial situation.

Despite its name, common sense is not actually so common or easy to pin down. Psychologists and philosophers note that what counts as common sense varies with context, culture, and experience. Still, most would agree it involves some kind of ability to adapt one's thinking to a variety of real-world contexts, using a blend of prior knowledge, inference, and good judgement. In the sections below, we explore how researchers define this general-purpose reasoning ability, how it differs from other forms of intelligence such as street smart and how it manifests in fields like psychology, management, education, and decision-making. We also look at attempts to study and cultivate common-sense thinking and compare it to related constructs such as practical intelligence, fluid intelligence, cognitive flexibility, and executive function.

2. The Nature of CST

It is important to distinguish between two kinds of CST. This distinction bears some resemblance to Kahneman's recent (2011) thinking systems 1 and 2, where 1 is the fast, precompiled knowledge and 2 is the slow, constructed knowledge that has to be assembled when needed. In a similar but not analogous way, there are two distinct ways of common-sense thinking. Let us call them System A and System B. System A is the everyday common-sense thinking that seems effortless and that most people display a good command of. Using System A thinking seems almost trivial and is done without most people ever consciously reflecting on it. This is not to suggest that System A operates without calculations or contemplation; that would be incorrect. Rather, these processes often occur rapidly and largely at a subconscious level. For example, if you drop a knife, your immediate reflex is to catch it. However, your consequential System A quickly projects the likely outcomes of doing so. If the knife has a sharp edge, System A "sees" the risk of injury and advises against catching it. It can be almost like a visual slide show or film with a few frames. If it instead is a table knife, you may get a little messy but not hurt by catching it. Rather, if the floor is scratch-prone, you prevent a dent if you catch or at least deflect the table knife. System B, on the other hand, are more complex realisations of where things would go if a decision is made in a specific manner or if events unfold in a particular way. While most people are reasonably good at System A CST, being a master of System B CST thinking is more unusual, even among people with high academic degrees and/or high IQ. Failure to distinguish those two different manifestations of CST is a major factor behind the sometimes confused discussions and debates on common sense and the lack of it in some contexts.

At its core, CST is the human capacity to make sensible presumptions about everyday situations and react with appropriate judgement. This means having a vast store of background knowledge about how the world works, from physical principles (e.g. that heavy objects can crush lighter ones) to social expectations (e.g. understanding other people's likely intentions and beliefs). Cognitive scientists often point out that a typical seven-year-old already possesses an enormous amount of this common-sense System A knowledge about objects, people, animals, and basic routines of life. Unlike encyclopaedia facts or academic theories, System A

knowledge deals with general truths (water quenches thirst, friends expect loyalty, a dropped glass will likely break) that are broadly true across contexts. However, this knowledge is not automatically transformed into effective and efficient System B thinking.

System B is the reasoning part of common sense: the ability to use that background knowledge in a flexible, situation-appropriate way. CST System A is largely intuitive and fast. We draw almost immediate conclusions that feel obvious without any analysis. For instance, if we see someone shivering in light clothing, we immediately infer they are cold and ought to put on a jacket. Such inference appears effortless. We effortlessly understand narratives and predict likely outcomes in daily life because of an underlying web of common-sense understandings (sometimes called folk psychology and naïve physics in cognitive science).

It is important to note that common sense is not infallible. It can be biased or mistaken in novel scenarios. But as a cognitive ability, it is essentially our general-purpose tool for navigating life's myriad unstructured problems. Unlike formal logical reasoning, which uses abstract rules, common-sense reasoning tends to be contextual, experience-guided, and pragmatic. It might tell us, for example, that if a deal sounds too good to be true, it probably is. This is a conclusion drawn from diffuse real-life examples rather than a mathematical proof. In summary, common sense is the blend of general world knowledge and practical reasoning that allows humans to operate across domains with a baseline of good judgement.

3. Beyond Book Smartness

CST can be contrasted with the type of intelligence measured in school exams or IQ tests, sometimes called book smarts or academic intelligence. High IQ or academic prowess does not guarantee strong System B common sense in real life. Cognitive psychologists have long observed that some people who excel in analytical problem-solving can still make poor everyday decisions or show startling lapses in overall judgement. For example, Sternberg (1997) noted that cleverness is far from enough to excel at real-world tasks. He described observing many individuals with high IQ scores and advanced degrees who nevertheless made a mess of basic tasks in jobs or relationships due to a lack of practical sense. Other research backs up this distinction. Stanovich (2009) and others who study reasoning have found that standard IQ tests fail to capture many good-thinking skills needed for rational decision-making in daily life. Those tests focus mostly on abstract problem-solving and knowledge recall, which correlate with academic and professional success up to a point. But they fall short of the full set of skills that would come under the rubric of 'good thinking. When researchers specifically test people's reasoning and judgement in practical scenarios, high-IQ individuals do not necessarily outperform others. In other words, someone can be a brilliant mathematician or physicist, yet still lack what we call System B common sense. For example, in bad cases, they might be gullible, struggle with basic personal finance, or miss obvious social cues. Charlton dubbed such cases "clever sillies," suggesting that some very bright people overthink problems and override behaviours that are actually common-sense (Charlton, 2009). They might devise convoluted solutions where a simple, sensible approach would do, indicating a disconnect between analytic intelligence and practical reasoning.

From a research standpoint, System B common sense aligns more with what psychologists call practical intelligence. Sternberg (1997) argues that practical intelligence is largely distinct from the analytical intelligence that IQ tests measure. Practical intelligence is about applying knowledge to real-world situations effectively, something Sternberg says depends greatly on tacit knowledge. The kind of know-how one picks up informally through experience. Unlike

solving a geometry puzzle (where all needed information is given and the task is clearly defined), System B common-sense problems can be messy and tacit. You have to know which details matter, draw on unstated background facts, and infer possible consequences. Such abilities are shaped by experience rather than textbook learning. It is been found that measures of tacit knowledge and practical intelligence correlate only weakly with traditional IQ (Cianciolo et al., 2006). In practice, this means a person's score on an IQ test does not strongly predict how well they can navigate everyday challenges or employ good common sense. For instance, Sternberg and colleagues developed tacit knowledge inventories (questionnaires about how to handle realistic work and life scenarios) and discovered that performance on these had little relation to conventional intelligence scores (Sternberg, 1997). This provides evidence that common-sense thinking is a separate cognitive domain. One might be high in both academic smarts and common sense, but one can also be strong in one and weak in the other.

Thus, academic intelligence reflects the ability to learn, analyse, and solve difficult problems, often in specialised domains, whereas common-sense intelligence (and thus thinking) reflects the ability to reason effectively across everyday situations. The academically bright individual might master calculus or symbolic logic, but the System B common-sensical individual excels at reading the room, spotting practical pitfalls, and making prudent decisions without needing a formula. In short, there is a lot more to being a good thinker than having a high IQ (Frederick, 2009). Common sense in a System B sense encompasses that lot-more, i.e. the real-world judgement calls and adaptive thinking that standardised tests do not capture.

4. Street Smartness

Another term often mentioned alongside common sense is *street smart*. Street smart usually refers to practical savvy in navigating real-world challenges, especially in rough or unpredictable environments. It is related to traditional common sense but with much more emphasis on shrewdness and situational awareness. One way to differentiate them is that System A common sense is a baseline ability to make quick basic sound judgements (the common knowledge that any person should have), while street smarts is like a more elaborate version of that ability, often gained by dealing with difficult, high-stakes situations, although not being System B-level. Street smarts can be seen as a System A common sense trimmed by survival skills and experiences, particularly in unfamiliar or risky situations. The trimming is more about extending the knowledge base than the thinking. A street-smart person typically knows how to read social cues, avoid dangers or scams, and get by in the real world using resourcefulness and instinct. In essence, street smarts is common sense in action under challenging conditions. It is the quick intelligence you would want if you were lost in a city at night or negotiating a deal at a shady marketplace.

Both common sense and street smarts rely on the accumulation of tacit knowledge, the unspoken lessons one learns from life experience. Tacit knowledge was defined by Polanyi (1966) as knowledge that *we know more than we can tell*. It is knowledge that is not formally taught or easily written down, yet it guides our actions. Sternberg's research emphasises that tacit knowledge is a key foundation of practical common sense (Sternberg, 1997). For example, through experience, a manager learns the unwritten rules of motivating employees, or a traveller learns to intuitively tell which neighbourhoods are safe. These lessons become part of an internal repertoire of knowledge. Tacit knowledge is often procedural (knowing how to do something) rather than declarative (knowing that a fact is true). Someone with rich tacit knowledge in a domain might not be able to articulate all their rules of thumb, but they just know what

approach will likely work because they have internalised patterns from experience. This kind of know-how is what allows an experienced teacher to handle an unruly class using simple presence and understanding, or a seasoned doctor to make a quick diagnosis that an intern would miss. Tacit knowledge for practical intelligence tends to be acquired on one's own, without the support of formal instruction, and it remains unspoken and poorly conveyed relative to its importance for practical success.

In everyday terms, basic common sense could be thought of as the System A application of the broad tacit knowledge that nearly everyone is expected to have, while street smarts is specialised tacit knowledge for navigating particular real-world contexts. Both differ from theoretical knowledge in that they are context-dependent, learned informally, and often tied to action. An academically brilliant person might know the theory of combustion, but it is System A that advises you not to pour water on a grease fire. Similarly, a street-smart individual might not compute probabilities explicitly, but they have an instinct for when someone is trying to con them, drawn from years of dealing with people. Researchers have tried to capture this knowing-how aspect through situational judgement tests and scenarios, validating that it contributes to success at work and life independently of traditional IQ. All this underscores that common sense is rooted in experience-based intuition as much as or more than abstract reasoning.

5. Analytical Thinking

It is illuminating to contrast common sense with analytical thinking. Highly analytical thinking proceeds from explicit principles and rigorous steps, for example deducing a conclusion from premises in mathematics or following a scientific method. System B, by contrast, is often informal and driven by context. Humans often rely on heuristics (mental shortcuts or rules of thumb) that usually, but far from always, yield reasonable results. These heuristics are essentially distilled common-sense observations. For instance, one heuristic is the representativeness heuristic: judging likelihood by how representative something is of a known pattern (which is why a person might intuitively suspect a cheating scenario if something feels off). Such gut feelings are not foolproof or strictly logical, but they are part of our common-sense toolkit that works well in typical situations. Decision scientists like Gigerenzer (1999) have argued that simple heuristics can be surprisingly accurate and useful, dubbing them fast-and-frugal ways of reasoning that often beat out complex analyses in real-world environments. In many cases, common sense aligns with practical logic, a kind of rough-and-ready reasoning that, while not rigorous, is well suited to everyday life's requirements.

As seen above, common sense also includes commonly held knowledge, which is something static and different from thinking, which is dynamic. History is full of examples where common-sense beliefs turned out wrong under scientific scrutiny (e.g. the once-common-sense idea that the sun revolves around the Earth).

6. Psychological Theories

Researchers from both psychology and cognitive science have proposed various theories and models to explain what underlies common-sense thinking. Here are a few key frameworks and constructs that relate to this domain-general reasoning ability:

Practical Intelligence: Sternberg's triarchic theory of intelligence breaks intelligence into analytical, creative, and practical components (Sternberg, 1997). Practical intelligence is defined as the ability to adapt to, shape, or select environments to meet one's goals. It involves

applying knowledge to real contexts and is measured via tacit knowledge and situational judgement. Sternberg and Wagner's studies showed that practical intelligence is distinct from analytical IQ. For example, a tacit knowledge test for business managers might ask what the best way is to handle an employee problem, measuring insight gained from experience rather than academic knowledge. They found that such practical know-how could predict success better than IQ scores could (Giancarlo et al., 2006). In educational settings, Sternberg demonstrated that teaching and testing for practical intelligence (e.g. asking students to solve practical problems) can identify talents that standard tests miss. Practical intelligence is thus a psychological cousin to common sense. It formalises the concept as a measurable skill set based on real-world problem-solving and wisdom-in-action.

Fluid vs. Crystallised Intelligence: There is a well-established difference between fluid intelligence (the capacity to solve novel problems, think logically and see patterns in new information) and crystallised intelligence (accumulated knowledge and facts). Common sense draws on both in different ways. When encountering a new situation, one uses CST (fluid reasoning) to interpret it flexibly (like solving a new puzzle) but also pulls heavily from crystallised knowledge of similar past situations and general world facts. In fact, the resulting common sense could be seen as an interplay of fluid problem-solving with crystallised life knowledge. A person with high fluid intelligence might learn rules quickly, but without sufficient worldly experience (crystallised content), they could still make unwise choices. Conversely, someone with vast experience (high crystallised knowledge) but very low fluid reasoning might struggle to apply that knowledge in new ways. Traditional IQ tests emphasise fluid reasoning in abstract contexts, whereas common sense emphasises applying learning to concrete reality. In other words, intelligence must be put in service of common-sense goals and values to be meaningful.

Cognitive Flexibility and Executive Functions: From a cognitive psychology perspective, executive functions (higher-order control processes managed by the frontal lobes) are important for CST. Executive functions include abilities like working memory (holding and mentally manipulating information), inhibitory control (suppressing impulses or irrelevant info), and cognitive flexibility (shifting one's thinking or approach as needed). Cognitive flexibility, in particular, is key to applying CST across domains. It allows a person to adjust to new rules or to see a problem from multiple angles. For instance, take an example from classical thinking: imagine driving in a foreign country. One must suppress the habit of driving on the familiar side of the road (inhibition), keep track of new signage (working memory), and flexibly adapt to different traffic rules and behavioural norms. This is a very practical mix of executive skills that manifest as using your cognitive abilities to avoid accidents. Some experts even colloquially equate strong executive functioning in daily life with having good common sense: the ability to organise oneself, make sensible decisions, and self-correct. Indeed, deficits in executive function (such as in ADHD or frontal lobe injuries) might appear as poor judgement or common-sense abilities. The person might know the right thing to do but fail to do it, or act impulsively against their better knowledge. Thus, while common sense is not usually defined in neuropsychological terms, its exercise likely depends on an intact and active executive system enabling us to plan, foresee consequences, and adapt strategies on the fly. This aligns with the idea that metacognitive skills (thinking about one's thinking, as executive processes do) could support better CST.

Rationality and the Reflective Mind: Stanovich has argued for a model separating intelligence from rational thinking. He notes that standard intelligence (the algorithmic mind) does not guarantee what he calls rationality, the ability and disposition to think logically when it matters, avoid cognitive biases, and make decisions that align with one's goals (Stanovich,

2009). In effect, he is pointing to a common-sense component of cognition: being able to reason through everyday problems and not be led astray by irrational quirks. He coined the term *dysrationalia* for the failure to behave rationally despite adequate intelligence. In a sense, that could be interpreted as a lack of CST capability. To capture this, Stanovich and others have developed tests of reflective thinking (like the Cognitive Reflection Test, which checks if people can override a gut response with a more reasoned answer). These tests reveal that many intelligent people still answer incorrectly on trick questions that require basic CST because they miss obvious considerations in a rush to intuitive answers. Stanovich proposes a Rationality Quotient to sit alongside IQ, essentially measuring common-sense reasoning and decision-making quality. Although this work uses the term rationality rather than common sense, it covers much of the same territory: judgement, avoidance of illogical thinking, and prudent decision-making in real-world contexts. The findings reinforce that rational common sense is an independent cognitive domain, one that can and should be measured and taught, because it impacts life outcomes significantly.

Each of these four frameworks, practical intelligence, fluid/crystallised intelligence, executive function, and rational thinking, sheds light on aspects of the elusive common-sense ability. They suggest that common sense is a composite of cognitive skills: part experiential knowledge, part flexible problem-solving, part self-regulation and rational judgement. No single theory (yet) fully encapsulates common sense, but together they paint a picture of a mental toolkit that allows individuals to learn from experience, adapt to diverse situations, and make sound decisions that pure analytic intellect or rote knowledge alone might not guarantee.

7. Scientific Thinking

The connection between CST and scientific thinking is deeper than it might first appear. Although science is often viewed as a domain of formal methods, systematic experimentation, and mathematical abstraction, its origins and everyday practice are rooted in a refined version of common-sense reasoning. Historically, the scientific method did not emerge out of nowhere as a set of strict procedures. Rather, it evolved as a codification of certain insights and practices that, when used consistently and critically, tended to produce reliable knowledge about the world. In this sense, the methods of science can be seen as being based on disciplined and institutionalised common sense.

Throughout the history of science, figures like Bacon, Galilei, and later philosophers such as Popper sought to articulate systematic ways of thinking that corrected the natural biases of ordinary human reasoning. Yet even in these efforts, the underlying goal was to refine and formalise the types of inference that had long been employed informally: making careful observations, testing explanations against evidence, and preferring simpler, more coherent accounts over complicated or ad hoc ones. Popper's notion of falsifiability, for example, can be understood as a formalised expression of the common-sense idea that a good theory should be testable against reality and should risk being wrong. Likewise, Kuhn's analysis of scientific revolutions reveals that paradigm shifts occur not purely through formal derivations but through communities of scientists gradually finding that older models no longer make sense of emerging phenomena. What Kuhn termed a crisis in a scientific paradigm is essentially a moment where the structured and institutionalised common sense embodied in a scientific worldview begins to break.

Moreover, scientific reasoning often relies heavily on what might be called educated intuition, especially at the frontiers where formal theory runs thin. Nobel Prize laureate Feynman

emphasised the importance of *guessing* in scientific discovery, followed by rigorous testing. This sequence, first the informed conjecture and then the empirical scrutiny, mirrors the flow of CST: proposing plausible explanations based on prior experience and correcting them in light of reality. In some ways, the scientific method represents an institutionalisation of critical CST, where practices such as peer review, replication, and methodological scepticism serve to protect the community from individual biases while maintaining the adaptability and pragmatic spirit of common-sense reasoning.

Importantly, even the methods taught in scientific education rely on foundational cognitive moves that are not alien to everyday reasoning but are sharpened versions of them: observing patterns, inferring causes, proposing tentative explanations, and adjusting beliefs based on new information. Scientific literacy, at its best, is not the memorisation of facts but the cultivation of a refined common-sense view of nature or society. In this light, science does not replace or transcend common sense but seeks to correct its errors systematically while preserving its most vital strength: the capacity to make reasonable judgements in the face of uncertainty. Seen from this perspective, the history and philosophy of science can be read as a long project of making the common sense of the world more precise, more reliable, and more self-correcting without losing its essential character as a deeply human way of knowing.

Pólya's *How to Solve It* (1945) offers an example of how refined CST underlies even the formal disciplines of mathematics and logical problem-solving. Although the book is situated within the context of teaching students how to tackle mathematical problems, the strategies Pólya outlines are recognisable as structured forms of intuitive reasoning, not rigid formal algorithms. Techniques such as guess-and-check, considering a simpler problem and working backwards from the goal, and draw-a-figure reflect deeply human, experience-based ways of thinking that predate and transcend formal schooling. Pólya's heuristics are essentially an attempt to make tacit common sense explicit and systematic, turning everyday problem-solving instincts into teachable methods.

Importantly, Pólya never claimed that his heuristics guaranteed success. Rather, he acknowledged that intelligent problem-solving is an art that requires judgement, flexibility, and an ability to adapt strategies to the context at hand. In this way, his framework mirrors the nature of CST. It is not about slavish rule-following but about intelligently navigating uncertainty, using a combination of accumulated experience, flexible reasoning, and practical intuition. Where formal logic demands strict proofs and certainty, Pólya's heuristics embrace provisional, adaptive reasoning. A form of critical CST applied within a disciplined domain.

Seen in this light, *How to Solve It* represents the same spirit found in the history and philosophy of science: the effort to refine, discipline, and enhance common sense without discarding its core strength, which is its capacity to make plausible, adaptive judgements under incomplete information. Pólya's work thus stands as a bridge between everyday reasoning and systematic inquiry, illustrating how even the most revered intellectual practices are, at their heart, elaborations on the general human faculty for seeing, guessing, testing, and adjusting that constitutes true common-sense thinking.

In modern cognitive science and educational theory, the ideas that Pólya anticipated have been developed into concepts such as adaptive expertise and situational judgement. Adaptive expertise refers to the capacity to apply knowledge flexibly and creatively across new situations, rather than merely reproducing learned routines. Researchers like Hatano and Inagaki (1986) have distinguished between routine experts, who excel at applying standard procedures in familiar contexts, and adaptive experts, who can innovate and modify their methods when faced

with novel challenges. This distinction mirrors precisely what Pólya sought to cultivate: not the mere execution of formal procedures, but the intelligent adaptation of reasoning strategies to fit the problem at hand.

Similarly, the study of situational judgement (the ability to size up ambiguous, real-world situations and choose effective courses of action) captures another dimension of refined common sense. In fields as diverse as management, education, and medicine, situational judgement tests are used to measure practical reasoning skills that go beyond pure analytical intelligence. These skills depend not just on knowing explicit rules, but on having an intuitive grasp of context, relevance, and human factors, all hallmarks of CST.

Pólya's heuristics, when viewed through this lens, can be seen as early efforts to scaffold the development of adaptive expertise and situational judgement in students. Rather than seeking to replace intuition with formulaic logic, he sought to elevate intuition to a higher level of conscious skill, fostering the ability to recognise patterns, shift perspectives, and improvise solutions based on a practical understanding of the structure of problems. In doing so, Pólya's work underscores a broader truth: that the highest forms of expert thinking are not divorced from common sense, but are its disciplined extensions. They represent the culmination of human practical intelligence, honed through reflection, abstraction, and application, but still fundamentally rooted in the general cognitive capacities that allow us to navigate the ordinary complexities of life.

Thus, whether in the foundations of scientific inquiry, in the heuristics of problem-solving, or in the emergence of adaptive expertise, it becomes clear that CST is not a primitive stage to be outgrown, but the enduring bedrock upon which a lot of reasoning rests. Even the most refined intellectual practices remain, at their core, extensions of the general human ability to perceive, infer, and adapt to the complexities of the real world. Far from being a lesser form of intelligence, common sense constitutes the deep architecture of rationality itself. A universal resource that continues to shape both our everyday judgements and our greatest achievements.

8. Professional Domains

CST is highly useful in many professional and real-world domains, sometimes even more so than technical expertise. Here we explore how this general reasoning ability manifests in a few specific areas: consulting, education, and leadership.

8.1 Leadership

In the realm of leadership, CST is often mentioned as an essential trait, sometimes under labels like practical wisdom, good judgement, or business sense. Many high-profile leaders are celebrated not just for their technical or creative brilliance, but for their down-to-earth judgement and ability to make sensible decisions amid complexity. In management theory, there is a growing realisation that effective leadership requires using common sense to guide decisions in addition to data and analyses (Lancaster, 2011). This includes understanding people's motivations, balancing short-term and long-term considerations, and knowing when an action simply feels right or wrong on a human level.

Recent research into common-sense leadership has tried to unpack what this means. In a qualitative study of senior executives, participants described common-sense leadership as a multi-faceted approach requiring flexibility, practical decision-making, and a moral compass (Webber et al., 2012). Leaders felt that common-sense decision-making often involves ethical judgement, for instance sometimes superseding organisational performance and profitability to

do the right thing. In other words, a leader with common sense knows that purely following spreadsheet logic might not be wise if it violates basic ethical or human principles. These leaders emphasised integrating people considerations with business needs and using plain logic in communication. Common sense in leadership might manifest as an ability to cut through jargon and complexity to communicate a clear vision and to make decisions that align with both practical reality and core values. It is the opposite of getting lost in abstract strategy while ignoring on-the-ground facts.

It is said that good leaders have a gut instinct that filters all the data and gives them the answer, highlighting the role of intuitive judgement. That gut instinct often amounts to refined common sense, the product of deep experience and a sense of what usually works or fails in human organisations. Leadership training programs today often include scenarios and simulations to develop this judgement. Concepts like situational leadership implicitly rely on common sense: the leader must assess the situation's unique context and apply the appropriate style. In entrepreneurship, investors often say they back founders who have great business sense, a colloquial term for a form of practical intelligence. This can mean knowing your customer on a mental level or being able to pivot strategy when market feedback dictates rather than dogmatically sticking to a previous plan.

One interesting notion is *critical* common sense, denoting an advanced form of CST in leadership. This idea, discussed by some leadership scholars, suggests that while common sense is generally good, leaders sometimes need to question naive common sense, especially in unprecedented situations, effectively applying common sense to common sense itself. For example, it might be considered common sense in an organisation to always do things a certain way, but a wise leader knows when that old common sense no longer applies and a new approach is needed. This merges creativity with common sense. Leaders who excel seem to know when to trust the usual rules of thumb and when to break from them, a synthesis of practical intuition and adaptive thinking.

In summary, leadership across sectors consistently calls for keen CST. Whether it is a school principal handling a crisis or a big company CEO setting a strategy, those regarded as wise leaders tend to display sound judgement, adaptability, and the ability to relate decisions to real-world impacts. They use common sense when algorithms or pure theory run out. A common-sense approach in leadership is an often overlooked but vital complement to analytic and visionary skills. It grounds leadership in reality and earns trust from others who feel the leader gets it on a fundamental, human level.

8.2 Management Consulting

Top management consulting firms (like McKinsey, BCG, and Bain) pride themselves on hiring bright analytical minds, but they also emphasise common-sense problem-solving as a critical skill. In fact, much of the famed consulting problem-solving approach can be seen as structured common sense. Anyone who has ever done a job interview with one of the tier-one management consulting firms knows how much emphasis they put on this kind of problem-solving ability. Consultants break down complex business problems into simpler parts and apply logical reasoning, but they also rely on broad, cross-domain thinking and practical judgement. Many case interview experts note that many, if not most, cases can be solved with common sense and some very basic business concepts. In other words, beyond knowing specific formulas, a candidate needs the general common-sense ability to sanity-check numbers, identify what truly matters, and apply simple logic to business scenarios. For example, if a case question asks why a company's profits are down, a common-sense approach might first separate potential causes (lower

revenue vs. higher costs). This is a straightforward step that any reasonable person might take, definitely without an MBA.

Consultants themselves acknowledge the importance of intuitive reasoning. McKinsey consultants often tackle unfamiliar decision problems by remembering that, as with any other problem, common sense goes a long way in analysis. This points to a balance: common sense provided the initial guidance (basic, sensible factors to consider), and then a formal tool added clarity. In everyday consulting work, a lot of the heavy lifting is done by asking common-sense questions: What would a customer likely prefer? Where are we obviously losing money? Is this plan practically feasible on the ground? Such questions draw on a broad understanding of human and economic behaviour, not just textbook frameworks. Successful consultants are often those who combine analytical prowess with a strong dose of practical intuition – they can crunch data but also have a feel for which direction will yield a useful answer. The ability to see the forest for the trees, simplify complexity, and apply everyday logic to business problems is what makes consulting recommendations both intelligent and implementable. After all, a solution that looks brilliant on paper but violates common sense will not fly in the boardroom.

8.3 Education and Teaching

In education, the role of common sense is a subject of frequent commentary. Teachers often observe that students may excel at exams yet falter at applying knowledge to real-life tasks, which is essentially a lack of practical reasoning or common sense. Educators therefore strive to develop not just students' academic skills but also their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, essentially trying to inculcate CST and judgement. For instance, a science teacher might push students not just to memorise formulas but also to use common-sense thinking to estimate answers. Does 500 kg seem like a reasonable weight for a balloon? Probably not. There is an increasing focus on real-world problem-based learning to bridge this gap. Some curricula include what can be called practical intelligence for school, lessons where students must use reasoning in everyday scenarios (budgeting a project, interpreting current events logically, etc. These efforts are informed by research like Sternberg's, which showed that teaching practical thinking strategies can improve students' adaptive skills.

On the flip side, educational psychologists have documented a phenomenon where high academic achievers may lack common sense. This can manifest as brilliant students who struggle with basic decision-making outside the classroom. The stereotype of the absent-minded professor embodies this: someone who is a genius in their field but forgets to lock their door or manage daily tasks. While it is a stereotype, it has some basis in observation. The structure of formal education rewards abstract reasoning and memory more than practical judgement, so it is possible to advance far academically without having any real-world problem skills. To counter this, some universities include experiential learning (internships or team projects) where students face messy, unstructured problems that demand common sense.

There is also recognition that common sense has a cultural dimension in education. Educators talk about instilling common-sense values like courtesy, responsibility, and healthy scepticism. A student with common sense not only knows facts but also understands which facts apply in a given situation and has the good judgement to act on them appropriately. Developmental psychology shows that children begin forming common-sense understandings of both physics and psychology from a very young age. The role of schooling in general should be partly to enrich and fine-tune these common-sense notions, since quite often naive common sense is incorrect scientifically, and partly to ensure students carry their reasoning abilities outside the school context. In summary, educators should view CST as an important life skill. The

ultimate goal is to produce graduates who are not only knowledgeable but can also think on their feet and navigate novel situations wisely. But it is not only about navigating situations or generating solutions to problems, i.e. some active productive mode. It is as much the ability to recognise a good solution when one is presented. As an old saying, often attributed to Alfred North Whitehead, goes: "Education is useful just in so far as it helps students to use their common sense."

9. Descriptive Decision Theory

The field of descriptive decision theory has made vital contributions to our understanding of human reasoning, yet it presents an incomplete and in some ways misleading account of the true capacities of practical thought. By documenting the many systematic biases and heuristics that distort decision-making, descriptive theory paints a portrait of the human mind as deeply flawed, prone to consistent errors, and unreliable when faced with uncertainty. From the availability bias to the anchoring effect, from loss aversion to the bandwagon effect, a vast catalogue of cognitive distortions has been assembled. In this view, human decision-making appears fragile and persistently irrational, a far cry from the idealised rational agent assumed in classical economics.

Yet this diagnosis, while illuminating, overlooks a critical reality: despite these cognitive vulnerabilities, individuals who master the art of common-sense thinking routinely make good decisions, navigate complexity effectively, and avoid the worst failures of judgement. Far from being helpless victims of bias, skilled practical reasoners exhibit a robust capacity to see through misleading cues, resist groupthink, and balance competing factors prudently. In everyday life as well as in professional domains, such individuals consistently achieve decisions that, while not flawless, are adaptive, context-sensitive, and rational in the broadest sense. This practical success cannot be fully explained within the framework of descriptive decision theory as it currently stands. It is not enough to trap laboratory subjects in contrived setups to declare decision-makers gullible or incompetent.

The problem is not that descriptive theory identifies non-existent phenomena. Biases are real, and their mechanisms are well documented. The problem lies in the implicit extrapolation from observed biases to a general incapacity for good judgement. Many studies in behavioural economics and psychology highlight the errors made by experimental subjects under controlled conditions, but they rarely capture the broader ecological validity of real-world reasoning, where individuals often have time to reflect, where experience shapes intuitions, and where social and environmental feedback corrects mistaken inferences over time. The laboratory isolation of cognitive phenomena, while necessary for experimental control, abstracts away many of the natural safeguards and adaptive mechanisms that practical reasoning employs.

CST, properly understood, is one of these adaptive mechanisms. It is not merely the use of heuristics in place of analysis; it is the skill of deploying heuristics judiciously, recognising when intuition is sufficient and when greater care is required. It is the ability to identify when a judgement is potentially contaminated by bias and to apply corrective strategies without needing formal debiasing interventions. In short, it is an operational meta-cognition that allows individuals to navigate their own cognitive vulnerabilities through reflection, experience and learned prudence.

The mastery of CST thus represents an informal debiasing competence, one largely absent from the models of descriptive decision theory. Where laboratory subjects often succumb me-

chanically to framing effects or the bandwagon effect, experienced common-sense thinkers often do not. They sense, at a practical level, when popular opinion is a poor guide to truth; they intuitively sense that the immediate availability of examples does not necessarily reflect base rates; they question first impulses when stakes are high or context is unfamiliar. Their reasoning is not bias-free in a strict sense, but it is bias-resistant in a functional sense: it produces sensible, adaptive outcomes despite underlying cognitive limitations.

This observation reveals a profound gap in descriptive decision theory. While it has been brilliant at mapping the pitfalls of human reasoning, it has been less attentive to the skills and habits that allow individuals to circumnavigate these pitfalls in naturalistic environments. The experimental emphasis on error has obscured the more important fact that common-sense thinking, as a cultivated skill, can greatly mitigate the incidence and severity of biases. Practical wisdom, long discussed in the philosophical tradition, re-emerges here as a missing piece in the psychological account of decision-making.

Moreover, the very structure of many old biased experiments makes it unsurprising that subjects fall into error. When participants are asked to respond quickly to artificial and decontextualised problems, stripped of meaningful feedback and experiential grounding, they default to fast and heuristic-driven responses. Such settings suppress the natural corrective dynamics that occur in more ecologically valid environments. In everyday life, individuals often deliberate, consult others, reflect on past mistakes, and adjust their judgements dynamically. These are all processes that descriptive theory's experimental designs tend to minimise or exclude.

In real-world settings, common-sense thinkers deploy a blend of intuition, experience, and situational awareness that functions as a self-correcting mechanism. They are attuned to the signals that suggest when a decision requires slower thinking, broader consultation, or more careful analysis. They sense when an emotional event might unduly influence risk assessment, an anchor value is arbitrary, or conformity pressures are leading away from substantive evaluation. This capacity does not eliminate bias altogether, but it substantially reduces its impact on important decisions. It reflects a kind of practical metacognitive intelligence that has been largely underappreciated in psychological models of reasoning.

This critique does not deny the immense value of biases and heuristics research. It has revealed vulnerabilities that must be taken seriously, especially in institutional and policy contexts. However, to understand human decision-making in full, we must complement this pathology-focused view with a skills-focused view: an account of how reasoning succeeds as well as how it fails. CST, considered a disciplined use of practical reason, is a central part of this success story. In particular, recognising when to move beyond intuition and engage in structured decision-making methods is a key marker of this mastery. As discussed earlier, CST includes the ability to discern when a problem exceeds the reach of informal judgement and calls for explicit structuring, weighting, and trade-off analysis. Individuals who possess this discernment avoid both over-reliance on gut feeling and naive trust in formalism. They do not mistake the presence of a spreadsheet for the presence of wisdom, nor do they trust instinct in matters demanding deliberate evaluation. They know, at a practical level, when to shift from heuristic to structured modes of thought.

In this respect, CST functions not just as a first-order decision-making skill, but as a meta-decision skill: it governs the choice of the decision-making mode itself. It is what alerts the thinker that the present situation requires a shift from intuition to structured analysis, from informal reasoning to formal evaluation. Those who lack this meta-skill either over-trust their

intuition, even when it is inappropriate or retreat into premature formalism without understanding its limits. Both errors can be potentially catastrophic and avoiding them is a sign of mature practical intelligence.

Thus, far from being rendered obsolete by the discoveries of descriptive decision theory, CST emerges as its necessary complement. It is the art of navigating human cognitive imperfection, not by attempting to eliminate heuristics and biases entirely, an impossible and misguided project, but by learning to anticipate, detect, and counteract their worst effects through flexible, experience-based reasoning. In this light, CST is not the antithesis of rationality, but its indispensable companion in the real world.

Any complete theory of human decision-making must therefore account for the existence, development, and role of CST as a resilient form of practical rationality. To focus solely on human biases without recognising the natural mechanisms of bias resistance that common sense provides is to tell only half the story. It is to see the flaws of human thought without appreciating its remarkable adaptive capacities. These are capacities that, when cultivated, allow individuals to make good decisions even in a world riddled with uncertainty, complexity, and the ever-present lure of error.

Recognising the complementary roles of CST and structured decision methods naturally raises the question of cultivation. If practical reasoning is a skill that can resist cognitive bias through experience and reflection, and if structured analysis can extend and support that reasoning when complexity demands it, then the art of good decision-making must involve the deliberate development of both faculties. It is not enough to teach formal techniques without strengthening common-sense judgement, nor is it sufficient to trust intuition without tools for its disciplined extension. The highest forms of practical intelligence arise where CST and structured analysis are used together, each reinforcing the strengths and compensating for the limits of the other.

10. Structured Decision Analysis

Kahneman describes humans as cognitive misers. We conserve mental effort, which is why we often default to intuitive common sense, but this also means we might accept a superficially plausible answer without deeper analysis. Common sense might advise sticking with what always worked, whereas a structured analysis might reveal that a change in strategy is needed. The ideal is to use CST as a first guide while also being willing to step back and think more systematically when the situation requires it, especially for complex or high-stakes decisions.

While CST forms an indispensable tool for sharp reasoning, it is not an all-purpose tool. There are many domains and situations where the complexity, uncertainty, or stakes of a decision exceed the capacities of intuitive judgement, even when that judgement is finely tuned. In such cases, more structured, systematic forms of decision-making are necessary to extend and support human reasoning. Among these methods, structured decision analysis, including frameworks like pro and con lists and more formal methods such as decision analysis, represents efforts to move beyond the limits of common sense without discarding its essential insights.

At its best, CST allows individuals to make prudent, adaptive judgements across a wide variety of real-world contexts. Yet, CST typically operates by drawing analogies to familiar patterns, using heuristics or analogies and relying on tacit knowledge. These strengths become weaknesses in situations that are completely novel, highly complex, severely multi-dimensional, or where intuitive judgement is clouded by cognitive biases. In such environments, the human mind struggles to hold all relevant factors in working memory, to weigh competing

values objectively, and to foresee longer-term consequences. What feels intuitively obvious may lead to serious errors if the situation deviates from the everyday cases for which CST was evolutionarily and culturally tuned.

The practice of structured decision-making arises precisely from recognising these limits. A simple but effective example is the creation of pro and con lists. When faced with a difficult decision, the individual externalises the competing considerations, listing potential benefits and drawbacks explicitly. This basic structuring of a problem already extends the mind's reach. It counteracts the tendency to focus only on emotionally salient factors, and it makes it easier to compare alternatives with greater detachment. Even this primitive form of structuring represents an important cognitive step. It shifts the decision situation from an unstructured, intuition-driven process to a structured analysis.

In more sophisticated settings, structured decision-making evolves into methodologies like probabilistic (PDA) or multi-criteria (MCDA) decision analysis. There are essentially two factors that complicate CST in more complex situations. The first one is the *P-factor*: Some event is not bound to happen. There is a probability for it to happen that must be considered. The other one is the *M-factor*: The alternative actions available have more than one important aspect or perspective to view them from, i.e. they should be considered under multiple criteria. PDA and MCDA provide methods to handle decisions involving either uncertain events or multiple, often conflicting objectives, where trade-offs must be evaluated and prioritised. In an MCDA process, the decision-maker explicitly defines criteria, assigns weights to reflect their relative importance, scores alternatives against these criteria, and applies systematic procedures to synthesise an overall ranking or choice. This approach allows for a transparent, replicable analysis that goes far beyond what unaided intuition can typically achieve, particularly in complex policy, engineering, and business contexts.

What links these methods back to the core discussion of CST is the important role of metacognition: the ability to reflect on the adequacy of one's own cognitive processes. Individuals who possess strong CST are not only better at everyday judgements but are also more likely to recognise when a situation exceeds the bounds of unaided intuition. They understand, often without needing any formal training, that certain types of problems require stepping back, structuring the decision, and applying systematic methods to avoid foreseeable errors. In contrast, individuals who lack CST capabilities, whether due to deficits in practical reasoning, cognitive inflexibility, or insufficient experience, are often blind to the limits of their intuition. They may persist in treating complex, high-dimensional decisions as if they were everyday choices, relying on gut feeling where disciplined analysis is necessary.

This distinction has profound implications. A well-calibrated common sense is not the enemy of structured decision-making; it is its prerequisite. It is common sense that alerts the decision-maker to the need for structure by signalling when a decision is too complex, too uncertain, or too important to be left to instinct alone. Without this recognition, no amount of available methodology will be invoked, and the decision will proceed in an unstructured, error-prone fashion. Thus, structured decision-making and CST should not be seen as opposed or sequential stages, but as mutually reinforcing faculties. Common sense detects when structure is needed, while structured methods extend and refine the reach of practical reasoning.

In this view, pro and con lists and MCDA are simply stops along a spectrum of cognitive scaffolding. The pro and con list externalises considerations but leaves weighting and synthesis informal, relying on the decision-maker's ultimate intuition. MCDA formalises the weighting and aggregation steps, explicitly recognising that human intuitions about trade-offs are often

inconsistent and subject to various bias effects. Yet both these methods are rooted in the recognition of a common-sense truth: that complex decisions often defeat unaided intuition, and that systematic reasoning is necessary to extend our minds' reach.

Importantly, the shift from common sense to structured decision-making is itself a sign of adaptive expertise. Expert decision-makers are not those who slavishly follow procedures, nor those who trust instinct blindly, but those who know when and how to balance intuitive judgement with structured analysis. In real-world decision environments, skilled decision-makers constantly move back and forth across this boundary. They use intuition to generate hypotheses and structure problems, then apply structured methods to test and refine their judgements, and then return to intuitive thinking to interpret results in the light of the context. Decision methods like MCDA serve as cognitive amplifiers. They are external supports that enhance the natural faculties of reasoning when those faculties alone are insufficient.

11. Conclusion

CST emerges as a multifaceted, deeply human cognitive ability. A form of intelligence-for-life that cuts across domains. Unlike specialised expertise or high-level analytical reasoning, common sense is domain-neutral. It draws on a broad base of everyday knowledge and flexible thinking strategies that can be applied to almost any real-world situation. We have seen that psychologists and cognitive scientists approached this concept through ideas like practical intelligence (tacit knowledge gained from experience), rational reasoning ability, cognitive flexibility and executive control. All of these contribute pieces to the puzzle of how humans manage to, more often than not, make reasonable decisions in an incredibly complex world. Indeed, what is obvious to us (do not leave a baby unattended, double-check that the stove is off, and treat others as you would want to be treated) is often only obvious because our minds are equipped with CST and knowledge and intuitions that we largely take for granted.

It is also clear that CST is valued in nearly every arena of life. Employers seek employees with good judgement and initiative and educators aspire to teach it alongside academic subjects. We also find that while common sense correlates with general intelligence to a degree, it is not the same thing. It is quite possible to nurture and develop one's common sense through experience, reflection, and learning from mistakes, regardless of one's formal IQ or education. As the old saying (attributed to Voltaire) goes, "Common sense is not so common." This tongue-in-cheek remark highlights that having sound practical judgement is a distinctive strength. Those individuals or professionals who do possess robust CST tend to stand out as grounded, reliable decision-makers who can navigate uncertainty and avoid obvious pitfalls.

Research into this general-purpose reasoning ability continues to evolve. Psychologists push for testing and teaching rational thinking skills as part of education, while intelligence researchers incorporate practical and wisdom-based skills into broader definitions of intelligence. CST can be viewed as the art of being sensible, that remarkable human knack for drawing the right conclusion from incomplete information, guided by experience and intuition more than by formal rules. It is at once humble (often appearing as good old common sense) and profound (underlying our greatest practical innovations and daily survival). By studying it empirically and appreciating its role alongside other types of intelligence, we gain insight into what it really means to be smart in a holistic sense: not just scoring well on tests or possessing knowledge, but being able to apply reason and knowledge wisely in the real world.

A failure to recognise the limits of intuition is a recurrent theme in the literature on cognitive biases and decision errors. Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011) highlights numerous

ways in which even intelligent individuals fall prey to systematic biases when they rely solely on intuitive System 1 thinking. Biases such as confirmation bias, availability bias, and anchoring distort judgements, particularly when problems are complex or unfamiliar. Structured decision-making methods are, in part, defences against these failures. They force explicit enumeration of alternatives, criteria, and trade-offs, counteracting the narrow focus and emotional distortions of intuitive judgement. At the same time, it is important to recognise that structured methods cannot eliminate the need for judgement altogether. Every structured decision method depends on judgements about how to frame the problem, what to include, and how to interpret results. These meta-decisions still require a form of practical reasoning that, at its best, is grounded in refined common sense. Structured methods can improve reasoning in decision making but cannot replace it. Their effectiveness depends on the wisdom with which they are applied.

Thus, CST and structured decision analysis are not competitors but complements. CST enables individuals to recognise when structure is needed and the structured methods enhance and discipline practical reasoning when intuition alone would falter. People who lack good CST either remain trapped within intuition, blind to its limits, or apply structured methods mechanically without appreciating when they are appropriate. True cognitive sophistication involves mastering both modes: knowing when to trust intuitive judgement and when to engage the structured, deliberate machinery of analysis. In this light, structured decision-making can be seen not as a replacement for CST but as its natural extension. As a way of amplifying human practical intelligence to meet the demands of an increasingly complex and uncertain world.

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