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ONE RULE FOR LIFE

Reclaiming Common Sense: Finding Truth in a Post-Truth World, by Robert Curry.
Encounter Books, 112 pages, \$19.99

ALTHOUGH I ENJOYED JORDAN PETERSON'S runaway bestseller *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (2018), I thought it was needlessly long and complex. In *Reclaiming Common Sense: Finding Truth in a Post-Truth World*, Robert Curry offers a far simpler approach. It turns out there is just one rule for life and one antidote for chaos: common sense.

Despite the role that common sense played in Peterson's various defenses against chaos, the subject did not appear in his index. This omission is the best argument for the necessity of Curry's project. Everyone who has benefited from Peterson would benefit from reading this compact book.

Curry is a thoughtful patriot with an uncommon common touch. He is not an academic and, fortunately for us, he does not write like one. *Reclaiming Common Sense* is his second book. His first, *Common Sense Nation* (2015), showed that the American Founders saw mankind as naturally capable of discerning self-evident truths using common sense. In this new work, Curry traces the origins of that worldview to some largely forgotten Scottish philosophers, most notably the 18th-century luminary Thomas Reid, who was the first to analyze and understand it fully. In Reid's words:

If there are certain principles, as I think there are, which the constitution of our nature leads us to believe, and which we are under a necessity to take for granted in the common concerns of life, without being able to give a reason for them; these are what we call the principles of

common sense; and what is manifestly contrary to them, is what we call absurd.

By revisiting Reid's work, in particular his *Inquiry into the Human Mind* (1764), Curry reaffirms our species's shared capacity for self-government and independent thought.

DEMOCRATIC SELF-GOVERNMENT WAS an idea—a theory—before it was a reality. This theory was justified by self-evident truths discoverable by common sense. The most important of these is world-famous: "All men are created equal." This insight, once democratized and capitalized upon, unleashed the greatest period of human flourishing and prosperity the world has ever seen. Before the 1760s, humanity's GDP remained largely stagnant and unchanged across the ages. Thereafter, the growth of human wealth resembled the trajectory of a rocket blasting off into the stratosphere.

But there is more to man than economics. Reid's insight was remarkable because it elevated not only the common man's material capacities, but also his moral faculties. Reid, more than John Locke, used common sense to unite reason and experience as the twin sources by which man distinguishes virtue from vice, right from wrong, and good from bad. Curry's use of Jane Austen in this context is masterful: whereas Peterson's book tapped into bro culture, *Reclaiming Common Sense* uses Austen's novels to illustrate the value of feminine intuition, sense, and sensibility.

Curry goes on to demonstrate that common sense can rebut Romanticism and its

postmodern offspring, including deconstructionism. Curry compares deconstructionism to dreaming—a mental state in which common sense is demonstrably suspended. Philosophical daydreaming, like real dreaming, does not respect the limits of reality. And reality—when viewed through its human receptor, common sense—creates a feedback loop for the mind. It keeps our species mentally awake and morally responsible.

BOOK LIKE *RECLAIMING COMMON Sense* could have been of great use to me as a graduate student when I tried to rebut premodern utopian thinkers like Plato. *The Republic*—with its rule by the wise and its shocking communism of women and children—revealed to me the danger that reason without common sense poses to the political community. My professor at the time, Mary Nichols, took an interesting position on the issue in her sterling book, *Socrates and the Political Community* (1987). She argued that Plato was being ironic in order to show what horrors could be condoned in the name of philosophy. My response was: if Plato intended to be ironic, only a chosen few people got it.

The joy of reading Curry is immediate and long-lasting. To open his book is to enter the company of a philosophically inclined American dedicated to preserving the country's best intellectual traditions. His compelling prose illuminates what's at stake when common sense is no longer common.

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