

Being Human and Making Sense

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Making sense would seem to be a properly human judgment regarding human action and thought. But can we make sense out of making sense? What is the nature of the “sense” being made? What is nonsense? What is common sense? On what bases do we determine what “makes sense”? Is “making sense” essentially an epistemological notion, or is it also, or even primarily, a normative term? Does the fact that ordinary usage sidesteps the distinction tell us something about how we make sense of sense? Is the sense made something discovered by reason, or is it literally “made”, that is, determined by the linguistic and social practice of a given community? We might say that some line of reasoning doesn’t make sense, but can an action or series of actions be “nonsensical”? Is “senseless violence”, for instance, the same as “nonsensical violence”? Why don’t we talk about “nonsensical violence”? And given that we do talk about “senseless violence”, does that imply that there is such a thing as “sensible violence”? On what grounds do we make such a distinction? What is the relationship between thinking and making sense? Does making sense necessarily involve being able to give reasons or explanations? How do we learn to make sense? This course will attempt to untangle the ideas involved in the notion of “making sense” with respect to, but without relying on, theory-laden philosophical terms such as “subjectivity”, “rationality”, “intentionality”, and the like. We will read seminal texts regarding how we make sense that touch on moral, political and aesthetic questions from the perspective of philosophical anthropology, broadly construed, so as to better understand the fuller human issues underlying the more purely theoretical discourses concerning objectivity, relativism, etc.

A compendium with a selection of texts (Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Shaftesbury, Vico, Gadamer, Arendt, Lyotard) will be available at the start of the course.