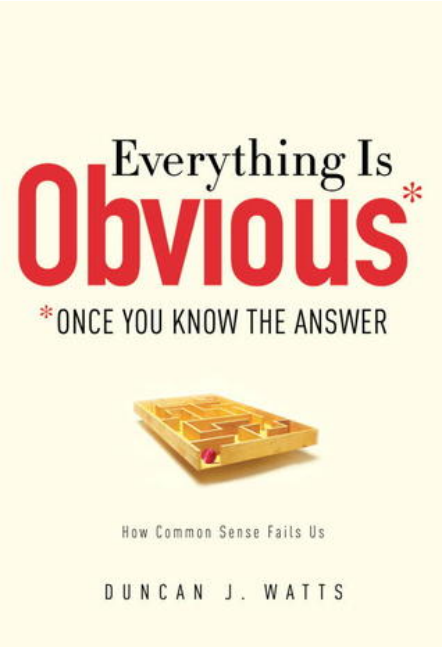

Everything is Obvious: Once You Know the Answer

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Why is the Mona Lisa the most famous painting in the world? Why did Facebook succeed when other social networking sites failed? Did the surge in Iraq really lead to less violence? How much can CEO's impact the performance of their companies? And does higher pay incentivize people to work hard?

If you think the answers to these questions are a matter of common sense, think again. As sociologist and network science pioneer Duncan Watts explains in this provocative book, the explanations that we give for the outcomes that we observe in life—explanation that seem obvious once we know the answer—are less useful than they seem.

Drawing on the latest scientific research, along with a wealth of historical and contemporary examples, Watts shows how common sense reasoning and history conspire to mislead us into believing that we understand more about the world of human behavior than we do; and in turn, why attempts to predict, manage, or manipulate social and economic systems so often go awry.

It seems obvious, for example, that people respond to incentives; yet policy makers and managers alike frequently fail to anticipate how people will respond to the incentives they create. Social trends often seem to have been driven by certain influential people; yet marketers have been unable to identify these "influencers" in advance. And although successful products or companies always seem in retrospect to have succeeded because of their unique qualities, predicting the qualities of the next hit product or hot company is notoriously difficult even for experienced professionals.

Only by understanding how and when common sense fails, Watts argues, can we improve how we plan for the future, as well as understand the present—an argument that has important implications in politics, business, and marketing, as well as in science and everyday life.

Everything is Obvious: Once You Know the Answer Details

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Watts

From Reader Review Everything is Obvious: Once You Know the Answer for online ebook

Gerard Cronin says

A welcome antidote to Malcolm Gladwell's lazy but satisfying answers. But, it ends abrup

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John says

This book has a brilliant first half where it shows that common sense is a questionable appeal, a dubious guide to action, and a disastrous foundation to policy, while the second half has some key advice but fails to take the truly courageous step, unlike Kahneman, of telling us how to practically distrust ourselves. What this volume serves up instead, the measure of continually analyzing the communication patterns of the internet will literally serve as the telescope that will lead to the remaking of social science, and that we should use it to react continuously to the present, is both sound strategic advise and the path to personal pathology. Maybe this particular narrative is cleverer than I'm giving credit for, providing the ambitious with a recipe for behaving as though they had developed a sense of self-skepticism.

Cheryl says

Ack. I'm convinced that commonsense reasoning fails us. I'm convinced that policy makers should hire social scientists who actually use rigorous methodology instead of intuition and uncontrolled experiments. But I was convinced of that already.... I thought this was actually going to give us some answers. And I didn't find any that actually helped me understand anything... but I've been reading a lot of modern psychology books already....

Bonus point for the snaps on Gladwell. Subtractive points for blinkers to his own demographic and culture. Half a point down for basically giving the bulk of each chapter to the common logical fallacies that many of learned in college Freshman English and many more of us can readily research. Half a point down for not enough everyday examples that most of us can actually relate to & appreciate. Bonus point for organization, including a reference summary at the end (at least of my edition).

Example of a key logical fallacy that too many of us, including me, are too vulnerable to: "If we want to do why some people are rich, for example,... it may seem sensible to look for rich people... and identify which attributes they share. But what this exercise can't reveal is that if we instead looked at people who aren't rich... we might have found that they exhibit many of the same attributes." Watts doesn't go on to suggest an answer, really, but the point is that luck and context have a huge but often underappreciated influence.

A motto that I taught my children since they were tiny is "wishing doesn't make it so." Watts explains how many of us often (he says simply an absolute "we" but I know enough to qualify) tell stories / develop narratives / commit post hoc and other logical fallacies "because this is how we'd *like* the world to work, not because that is how it actually works.... Commonsense explanations therefore seem to tell us *why* something happened when in fact all they're doing is describing *what* happened.

I love the quote Watts used from Alexander Pope: "Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night: God said, Let Newton be! and all was light."

I do give Watts credit for his first training as a physicist. As I've said in other reviews, I don't trust science books that are written by journalists rather than by actual scientists. There not always as engaging as this, but they are more valuable.

I also am sceptical about science books more than a few years old. If you do want to read this, do so soon, before what he says becomes dated.

Aaron Arnold says

This is frequently described as a book on common sense, which it is, but more importantly it's an investigation on human cognitive limits more generally and also a call to radically restructure the discipline of sociology in light of modern advances in technology. Sociology often gets made fun of in the hierarchies of academic disciplines, but Watts argues that there are reasons why sociology seems so vague and unscientific: not only are sociological problems very complicated in ways that physics problems like orbital mechanics are not, but in addition to the fact that only now do we have the ability to run experiments to truly test our long-held prejudices about ourselves and how society works, our problem-solving skills are themselves subject to those same prejudices. It's a tall order, and though inevitably the chapters pointing out problems are stronger than the chapters suggesting ways to do better, I think this is an excellent synthesis of a lot of good information and a solid guide to outlining future research directions.

That human beings have cognitive biases is well-known, especially to readers of any Dan Ariely or Daniel Kahneman book, but the thing about them is that even if you know what they are and how they work, you're almost guaranteed to fall prey to them constantly anyway. "Common sense" is a powerful tool for navigating the complexities of life, but common sense is often just shorthand for a set of fallible mental shortcuts whose workings are almost invisible to us, and whose failures are only excusable by the fact that everyone else has all the same failures too. We use many heuristics to guide us through life, and those rules of thumb are often incoherent (Watts gives examples of proverbs that contradict each other like "look before you leap" vs "he who hesitates is lost"). This extends even down to the level of deeply held and supposedly universal beliefs about justice - when you play the ultimatum game or other simple exercises in game theory with people from different cultures, people behave in strikingly different ways due to cultural norms, and those cultural norms are themselves very difficult to clearly articulate or justify. His brief discussion of the extent to which what we think of as universal institutions like the market system vary dramatically throughout time reminded me a bit of Karl Polanyi's insights about how embedded capitalism is within culture and how unnatural in a way that is.

But the main issue is that "common sense" simply isn't designed to solve the kinds of sociological problems we now find ourselves encountering. Here Watts goes on a brief tour of some sociocultural phenomena like performance-based financial incentives, and how baffling the evidence is that they do anything at all. Not only are the effects relative to your peers (i.e. a $10,000 bonus can still be disappointing if everyone else got $20,000), but they're also relative to where you were before, and the bar for what prompts additional effort can keep being raised. Even high-value bonuses in both relative and absolute terms can have little effect on performance if what's being measured is unclear or easily gamed (think teachers being paid more for student achievement or Wall Street bankers paid for paper profits), and yet even after mounds of evidence undermining the case for simple performance metrics, it is guaranteed that you will hear someone think that

the "common sense" insight that paying someone more will automatically result in better quality is essentially irrefutable.

Other examples are no less interesting. Watts poses some simple questions about the Mona Lisa: what makes the Mona Lisa the most famous painting in the world? Would the Mona Lisa's qualities have been apparent at 1700 when it was painted? What are the features that we currently consider it as having that no other painting does? Are there other paintings that share similar qualities, whether by da Vinci or someone else? Why aren't they as famous? Steady investigation shows that attempts to justify the painting's #1 ranking are either specious, examples of circular reasoning - "the Mona Lisa is the best because it has the qualities of the Mona Lisa [e.g. style, composition, brushwork, the smile, etc] and not something else" - or simply arbitrary, because as he shows, the Mona Lisa was not actually acclaimed with its current status as Best Painting Ever until a dramatic theft attempt in the early 20th century. The real reason it's the Primo Painting is basically that SOME painting has to be, and it really is arbitrary to some extent which one ends up with the top spot.

This has dramatic implications for any field where ranking depends on somewhat subjective factors (i.e. almost all fields). Music immediately leaps to mind, and Watts relates experiments he's run where people are asked to rank random songs both independently and also with the ability to see what other people have ranked those songs. Unsurprisingly, herd behavior and "trendiness" arises immediately when the equivalent of a Billboard chart is introduced to the experiment, which is something I've noticed myself when using software like last.fm that provides statistics on the music I listen to. Social network technology can just as easily be used to reinforce traditional hierarchies as to eliminate them. People ending up liking things simply because other people like them, and the implication is that many universally acclaimed bands are acclaimed not so much for any intrinsic merit as simple network effects. The same logic, with the slight complication of timing, extends to other "why this and not that" cases like Facebook's success and MySpace's failure, Minitel and the Internet, VHS and Betamex, etc etc. A slight initial random push might be enough to one product the edge over another in the cumulative advantage race, and only retrospectively are people able to offer countless competing and equally arbitrary theories on what that initial push was.

One implication of this line of reasoning that seems to disturb people is that a lot of life, including huge multi-billion dollar phenomena like why Harry Potter is so popular and not so many other superficially very similar YA series, is basically random. To put it another way, outcomes in a wide range of human endeavors that seem to depend greatly on human initiative follow simple statistical distributions that can also describe things like the outcomes of coin flips. What does that say about the common sense understanding of our own "specialness" or of our intuition that the world is divided into a few very influential people and many ordinary people? What does that say about our ability to predict the future to the extent that we follow strategies that leverage "specialness", as in trying to find "the next Harry Potter" or "the next Apple", or by trying to advertise to influential people in the hopes that they will influence their followers? After all, if you knew just the right social levers to push, you could do just about anything. Since we all know that special people are out there, waiting to be found, how do we identify their specialness and find them?

The problem is that in many cases, the special people, or the levers of history, are only able to be identified after the fact. As an example, Watts picks on Malcolm Gladwell for trying to figure out why Paul Revere is so famous while a guy named William Dawes, who went on a seemingly very similar ride at the same time, is virtually unknown today. Gladwell says that Revere was a "connector", a man unusually well-suited to his task of warning all the people on his route as opposed to the undistinguished Dawes; Watts says that nothing about Revere's current fame was destined at all, and if their routes had been swapped there's absolutely no reason to think that we wouldn't have identical "one if by land, two if by sea" poems about Dawes instead. Revere was simply in the right place at the right time, and it was only after the fact that people decided there must have been something unusual about him and his place in such a dramatic event in US history. The same

story holds true with music or books: every book publisher in the world would love to be able to find "the next JK Rowling", but all save the lucky one couldn't even find the original JK Rowling, who was rejected many times. To many ostensibly well-trained people, there just wasn't anything about her work that seemed to stand out among the countless manuscripts of fantasy young adult novels they read every year (related quick prediction: Rowling's new non-fiction novel is probably pretty decent, but has a 0% chance of ever being placed in the canon alongside her Harry Potter work).

This is at root due to the fact that our brain is hard-wired to look for patterns and narratives even in realms where those metaphors are fundamentally inapplicable. History is another great example. Take the idea of the storming of the Bastille being a central event in the French Revolution, worthy of becoming the central national holiday of France. Could someone have known at the time that that particular event among all the chaos of the Revolution would have been so influential? Obviously not, but this means that all history is essentially a competition in storytelling, and that prediction in the Laplacian sense of perfect foreknowledge is impossible even if Newtonian physics were true. This notion has obvious relevance for important institutions like futures markets or business more generally. Rather than repeat myself, I'll just say that in the business sections Watts reiterates that people fall prey to all the same issues of mis-narrating history, learning the wrong lessons from the past, engaging in circular reasoning about why certain things are successful, believing that people are more special than they are, and assuming due to the halo effect that what is doing well now must have all sorts of other great attributes. (As a related note, David Romer had an excellent paper in 2006 called "Do Firms Maximize? Evidence from Professional Football" discussing how coaches systematically fail to maximize their expected points by failing to go for it on 4th down, simply because there are prevailing irrational norms about what constitutes acceptable risk; this predates the infamous Patriots 4th-and-2 against the Colts in 2008 but is still worth reading).

I'm not sure that all types of prediction are necessarily equal; off the top of my head, I would say that a book like The Limits to Growth, with its carefully-sourced numbers and logical formulae, should be looked at as a more credible forecast than a hedge fund prospectus. However, even if most attempts at predicting the future fail, and it seems best to just stick to simple models like always betting on the home team (which at a 58% success rate is within 3% of the best and most sophisticated algorithms you can concoct), there are important things you can do to reduce the failures, and hence resolve some of the issues raised in the rest of the book. It's not like you can act like the future is completely random; we have a drive to speculate for a reason. Here is where Watts is, predictably as it were, a little less helpful. Some useful sanity-check tools are aggregation of knowledge as opposed to relying on too few sources of information, encouraging experimentation rather than blindly staying the course, relying on local knowledge where possible rather on too much top-down direction (here Watts has a more level-headed take on this Hayekian principle than Tim Harford did in Adapt), and always trying to rely on measurement when rather than on intuition and "common sense" even if this is ultimately a somewhat Sisyphean goal.

With that, Watts transitions to the Big Picture. Knowing that common sense can mislead us is all when and good, but what new principles can we use to guide us in the future? Societies are big and complicated things, and merely saying that we can't trust common sense isn't good enough, especially when it comes to subjects like justice and fairness. So Watts moves in the direction of Justice as Fairness, explicitly advocating a Rawlsian view of designing institutions to maximize equity, contra Nozick. I agree with him, and I agree that the concepts explored in the book support the idea that social institutions should be designed with the least-well-off in mind, as well as that the "lemon socialism" behavior of the wealthy lately of acting like you are a special person on the upside and a helpless victim on the downside is both offensive and unjust. Acknowledging that we are members of a society and not a million Masters of the Universe is an old insight, but well-placed here, because now that we are beginning to have the technology to measure and analyze trends and social movements in great detail and in real time, we are also beginning to be able to subject

foundational questions of justice to statistical analysis. Alexander Volokh had a great law review article in 1997 titled "n Guilty Men" which analyzed different societies' takes on the concept of "it is better to let X guilty people escape justice than to let one innocent person be punished" - Watts would argue that we are getting to the point where we could try to actually calculate that normative value.

Obviously that grandiose dream has many precedents - Watts mentions Auguste Comte, as one of many - and even more detractors. The idea that you could calculate something like justice seems absurd. Yet it certainly seems like more and more touchy subjects of the past are being re-examined with something approaching a scientific spirit. Dan Ariely and Michael Norton published a study in 2005 titled "Building a Better America-One Wealth Quintile at a Time" that polled people about income inequality that asked people what they thought a fair distribution should be. The results showed that most people, even rich people, supported a much more equal society than the one we have now. What role should that result play in discussions over redesigning the tax code? Is the only appropriate avenue for discussion about income during salary negotiations between each individual un-unionized employee and a hiring manager, or can/should we design broader institutions to better-implement more scientific notions of justice? These and many other questions that before belonged in the backs of philosophy and sociology books are finally able to be looked at with data, analysis, and experimentation - this book is a great overview of some good questions and hints of their answers. I'll be thinking about it for a while.

Ethan says

Deep. A bit philosophical. Takes on 'common sense' explanations of social phenomenon like influencers and tipping points. Also describes some of his own very cool research (though you gotta go elsewhere for more details of it).

A couple of my favorite nuggets:

When a forest fire breaks out, we never wonder what made that spark so unique. We only wonder how much dry tinder was lying around the forest and how long the drought had been. But when a video goes viral or a brand takes off, we ONLY wonder what made that thing so unique. When in truth, ANY video or brand could've taken off because the proverbial forest was ready to burn.

Social scientists have physics envy. And physicists often disparage social scientists for their lack of rigor, theory, and laws. Well, in truth, social science is NOT rocket science.... it's harder. In rocket science you get to replicate experiments in very controlled environments where you can isolate every variable. And when you build a rocket you can ensure the fuel is pure, the metal is precisely engineered, the o-rings are exactingly elastic. When you build a school you have almost NO control. So how are you supposed to engineer education?

Paula says

Whenever I hear (or read) an otherwise intelligent person deriding a social psych experiment-- e.g., "I can't believe someone had to *research* whether the media causes poor body image in teenage girls! Everybody *knows* it does!"--I weep for humanity. The tools of social science are imprecise, and what "everybody knows" is often wrong, or not proven by studies, or rendered inconclusive by the data. That's why we do

studies, that's why we keep the research and the conversation going when studies contradict each other, and why we need to keep recalibrating our tools*.

(*Heh.)

It is a great relief to read anything by sociologist Duncan Watts, the world's eminent expert on social networks, who makes a good case for not accepting "common sense" wisdom to explain human behavior. People, especially in groups, are far more unpredictable than authors like Malcolm Gladwell, with his tipping points and blinks, would have you believe.

Watts is a swell writer--presenting vivid examples in a voice that's one part scholarly, one part folksy (but not condescending).

❁Aimee❁ Just one more page... says

The book started out with a lot of stories and fascinating new ideas. While we are wired to try to predict outcomes, we really can't do as well as we think. If you're skeptical, you'll become a believer pretty quickly while reading.

What we think is "obvious" is really only that way after the fact. He illustrates this fact by pretending to give some outcome to a situation where the reader can easily assign reasons why the outcome happened. Then he said the opposite outcome was really true, and again, the reader can find reasons why the opposite outcome could be true. This happens more often than you think.

He says we need to apply this to business and daily life. Really the only thing we have been able to predict has been things like science and mathematics that we can replicate over and over. Social, business, predicting how thing will turn out just can never be replicated over and over with the same results. Success is often good planning, but heavily reliant on luck and circumstances.

So how can businesses succeed over time? One way is to plan for many possible outcomes --- but even this is certainly fallible -- just better planning. In reality, probably the best way is to constantly reevaluate based on current information and data, and tweak your plan frequently with the newest data.

The author gets his point across better when he tells stories. He started out with a bang in this book. I think if one read the first part of the book until bored, and then skimmed Part 2 looking for ways businesses and people can be more successful would be fine. At some point, the stories trail off and theory becomes dominant which made it more difficult to stay engaged. The book could have been edited down, kept only the main points, and made sure to break it up with more stores, and it would have been better.

Deb says

Well, that's just obvious!

It's just common sense, right? Think again!

This book explores the three main types of common sense errors: systemically flawed mental models of individual behavior, even more flawed models of collective behaviors, and misrepresentations of past events which result in us learning less from history than we think we do. The book does a powerful job in exposing the reality that common sense convinces us that we know more than we really do. (Warning: this truth may be more than you really want to know.)

Although common sense does help us *explain* the world, it is not so great at helping us *understand* it. The author highlights this dilemma by noting that:
"Bad things happen not because we forget to use our common sense, but rather because the incredible effectiveness of common sense in solving the problems of everyday life causes us to put more faith in it than it can bear." (p. 23). For example, we often try to explain successes by describing intrinsic attributes, rather than actually identifying the complex set of factors that actually led to the success. This circular reasoning comes in the formula of "X succeeded because X had the attributes of X." Illustrative examples of common sense explanations that use this type of circular reasoning include:
---"The Mona Lisa is the most famous paining in the world because it has all the attributes of the Mona Lisa"
---"Harry Potter was successful because it had exactly the attributes of Harry Potter, and not something else."
---"People have stopped buying the gas-guzzling SUVs because social norms now dictate that people shouldn't buy gas-guzzling SUVs."
---In general: "X (fill in the blank with whatever success you are trying to explain) happened because that's what people wanted; and we know X is what they wanted because X is what happened."

Another common-sense-centric problem explored in this book is the the micro-macro problem (also known as emergence) where we attempt to go from the micro choices of individuals to explain the macro phenomena of the social world. In our attempts to do so, we use use "social actors" ("what families choose," "what the market wants,") as a way to aggregate individual behaviors, but doing so fail to account for the complex entanglement of situational, contextual, and interactional influences that ultimately determine group behaviors and outcomes. The reality is that knowing the individual does not allow us to predict the group's collective behavior. As the author nicely summarizes:
"Just as you can know everything about the behavior of individual neurons and still be mystified by the emergence of the consciousness in the human brain, so too could you know everything about individuals in a given population--their likes, their dislikes, experiences, attitudes, beliefs, hopes, and dreams--and still not be able to predict much about their collective behavior." (p. 79)

And, when we can't explain an outcome in terms of the special attributes, another common sense fallback is to subscribe to the "law of the few" and conclude the outcomes resulted from a contagion social process started by a small number of influential or "special" people. A classic example of this reasoning (which Gladwell fans will immediately recognize) is:
"A few special people revived the fortunes of the Hush Puppies shoe bran because a few people started buying Hush Puppies before everyone else did."
But, it turns out that this explanation is just another example of circular reasoning and that "in claiming that 'X happened because a few special people made it happen,' we have effectively replaced one piece of circular reasoning with another." (p, 107). This is another trap where common sense explanations--constructed after we know the outcome itself--simply describe, and not explain.

Other common sense traps we fall into when trying to explain "the obvious" include: creeping determinism (our tendency to perceive what actually happened as having been inevitable), hindsight bias (our after-the-fact tendency to believe that "we knew it all along"), sampling bias (focusing on what did happen and paying too little attention on most of what did not happen), the post-hoc fallacy (inferring cause-effect relationships when in fact factors were just a sequence in unrelated events), and confusing stories with theories as a way of

using common sense to try to explain the world.

Commonsense is extraordinarily good at navigating particular (isolated) circumstances in our every day business and allows us to "skip from day to day and observation to observation, perpetually replacing the chaos of reality with the soothing fiction of our explanations. And, for everyday purposes, that's good enough, because the mistakes that we inevitably make don't generally have any important consequences. Where these mistakes do start to have important consequences is when we rely on our common sense to make the kinds of plans that underpin government policy or corporate strategy or marketing campaigns." (p. 157) Common sense approaches fail here as these cases affect large numbers of people over extended periods of time and require solutions that need to work consistently, reliably associate cause and effect, differentiate scientific explanation from mere story telling, and differentiate predictions that can be made reliably from those that can not.

As the author suggests, it is in these social world situations where "uncommonsense" is called for. He proposes a shift from a "predict and control" model for anticipating the future to a "measure and react" strategy of dealing with the present as it actually unfolds, explaining:
"We cannot suppress our commonsense intuitions any more that we can will our heart to stop beating. What we can do, however, is remember that whenever it comes to questions of business strategy or government policy, or even marketing campaigns and website design, we must rely less on our common sense and more on what we can measure." (p. 212)

And, to help us accurately measure what's real in such social world situations, we need to be mindful of the commonsense traps that often get in the way, including The Halo Effect (our tendency to generalize our evaluations about one particular feature of another person to judgments about other their other, often unrelated, features), believing that success is always a reflection of talent (when in fact is often a result of other contextual factors and luck), and the myth of the corporate savior (our tendency to emphasize the influence of special individuals in directing the course of incredibly complex organizations and events).

The reality is that social science is complex, and what seems obvious really isn't so obvious at all:
"When you think about the sheer complexity of human behavior, this approach to doing social science seems kind of implausible...Individual behavior is complicated by dozen of psychological biases, many of which operate outside of our conscious awareness and interact in as-yet-unknown ways. And...when individuals interact with one another, their collective behavior may simply not be derivable from their individual attributes and incentives, no matter how much you know of them....The social world, in other words, in far messier than the physical world, and the more we learn about it, the messier it is likely to seem." (pp. 252-262)

The author's solution to understanding and navigating the messy world of social science is the realization that:
"We will probably never have a science of sociology that will resemble physics...The less we worry about looking for general laws in social science, and the more we worry about solving actual problems, the more progress we are likely to make." (p, 262)
An obvious conclusion.*
*Once you already know the answer.

Atila Iamarino says

Ótima introdução às ciências sociais para mim, que não tinha contato. Muito legal como ele separa o que parece óbvio do que é comprovado de fato, e como dá perspectivas do que realmente podemos saber sobre o futuro e sobre o comportamento humano. Vai bem além do que se propôs.

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blah says

Reasons why I liked this book (on account of my confirmation bias):

1. Watts thinks Malcolm Gladwell is an idiot
2. His criticism of Nassim Taleb's "Black Swan" events
3. Great summaries of various behavioral economics/policy/psychology/sociological experiments
4. Further proof that Nozick was wrong and Rawls/Sandel are right (obviously)

Michael says

If you are only a reader of fiction, you probably will not like this book. If however you have some interest in the psychology of human behavior, this may appeal to you. It is well suited for those of us who have some background training and or experience in clinical trials, study groups, and statistics. The text is a bit dry, but not so much so that it is difficult to read. The author does a reasonably good job in explaining how and why people decide to do what they do and form the opinions they have.

I hope you'll forgive me if I make a summation of the book with a personal reference. In the past, I raised cattle. If I wanted to move the herd, I did not try to move all the cows at the same time because they would just scatter and I would be left saying words I normally kept out of my everyday vocabulary. I found that if I selected a single animal and calmly moved it, the rest would easily follow. The message of this book is that humans are easily manipulated, like cattle. For verification of this theory, just tune in to CNN, Fox News, or MSNBC.....mgc

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Al Bità says

This book starts off reasonably well: the first half is devoted to giving us many examples of the failure or inadequacy of 'common sense' to explain or predict the world we live in. The most interesting underlying concept, for me, is that in this world, ALL knowledge is generated and developed for the purposes of prediction: we collect data, develop hypotheses to back up certain patterns we perceive or deduce from that data, and then use these patterns (usually in the form of mathematical formulae) to predict what the future will bring, thus allowing us to devote our resources to benefit most from our predictions. The fact that in reality such predictions often can and do go disastrously wrong; and then when we re-examine the actual results, we then fool ourselves into believing that of course, what resulted was 'common sense'. Watts points out that with such hindsight our vision is always 20/20, but that is an illusion, and if we take it seriously, a delusion as well.

It is in the second half of the book, when our sociologist author starts talking about thinking differently, that the work becomes more an apologia for sociology, but using modern technological capabilities to enable us to predict the present. It is perhaps an attribute to the cleverness of the writing that we could easily actually

accept that phrase: predicting the present. What he really seems to be arguing about is that, through the use of such technologies as the Internet, Twitter, Facebook, Google, Yahoo! etc. we can cheaply and very quickly establish vastly huge 'data' bases on the preferences of the individual subscribers at any one time, and from which data applied probability theory will 'predict' how these preferences will result in specific purchases 'now'. Note there is nothing 'predictive' about this: it is merely extensive data collection at an incredibly fast rate; the normal distribution curve based on this data will then take the normal standard deviation as being the area which will provide the greatest 'dividends' to any company willing and able to provide the desired products quickly and immediately to satisfy those preferences. This will thus no doubt give the illusion that the result has been 'predicted', but in fact it hasn't been. Since this is exactly the same process as the very techniques used in the first part of the book, which the author argues is basically useless, one can hardly trust, in my opinion, in any long-term benefits of this new strategy. It is the speed of the technology that creates the illusion that one is identifying the most profitable products, and as long as we can quickly respond to these ephemera quickly enough, all will be well in market-town. This, too, is 'common sense'.

Our author wants this 'speed-up' ability to be perpetually and continually used by sociologists as a kind of groundwork for the development of a 'science' for the future, and that all corporations worth their salt should make extensive use of this as the necessary basis to establish sociology as a justifiable and real science. He is wrong. It seems to me that instead he is putting his trust in instant immediate response on all levels which, in reality, will be forever 'instantly' changing practically day by day, and which will become increasingly more ephemeral and illusory as a result. What he is proposing is scientism, not science; and serious social dangers lie therein.

What I think the book was saying in the beginning is that all predictions as to how or why people act on the information available to them are inherently fallible; the conclusion would be that we should stop doing it, since it is all pretty much a waste of time and money. The same conclusion should be applied to the author's proposed 'solution' — so for me this book ends up by cutting the ground from under its own feet.

Kevin says

Consider the last national election, your employer's last annual report, or your favorite sports team's last away-game victory. What made the particular outcome happen? Looking backward, conclusions seem foregone; we construct retrospective explanations that justify how what happened had to happen, because, well, it did. But Duncan J. Wells explains that what seems inevitable once it's already happened, is actually deeply contingent and controversial. Exactly why is both bizarre and revealing.

Trained as an engineer but functioning as a sociologist, Wells has conducted intensive research for America's largest corporations, including Yahoo and Microsoft. In that capacity, backed with massive corporate capital and utilizing technocratic research techniques that didn't exist fifteen years ago, he's investigated questions about how humans make decisions. Not only has this included individual decisions, but how uncountable group decisions form a consensus. That is, he's investigate how individuals make a society.

Watts' answers prove many and various, and deserve careful reading. Their common thread, however, devolves to common sense. A system useful for negotiating everyday interactions, common sense proves more fraught when confronted with the hidden inner dynamics of large groups. Human interactions prove founded on myriad rules, mostly unspoken--as anybody who has ever traveled abroad and unknowingly transgressed serious taboos already knows. These rules are not only unquestioned, but largely

unacknowledged.

In this, Watts relies heavily on research avenues first utilized by Stanley Milgram. Though mostly famous for his "Obedience to Authority" experiments, Milgram also pioneered research, like the famous Six Degrees experiment, demonstrating how intensively connected society is. We cannot explain who influences us, and by whom we're influenced, because we cannot comprehend our cultural links. Watts actually replicates some Milgram experiments digitally, proving reality is more linked than Milgram could've realized.

Society proves difficult to explain. In one experiment, Watts, using double-blind research methods and sophisticated online social networks, manages to recreate the digital music marketplace. By segmenting populations into mutually unaware groups, he manages to simulate several different marketplaces, resulting in completely different bestseller lists. This proves that just because certain circumstances occurred doesn't mean they had to occur; reality is deeply provisional. We cannot prove or understand why what happened, happened.

This goes double for situations which, unlike music markets, cannot be segmented and rerun analytically. We cannot, for example, have multiple trial Presidential elections or overseas wars. Explanations for outcomes therefore lack scientific rigor. When Nate Silver gives probabilities for certain electoral outcomes, his numerical assignments mean something very different from Vegas betting pools. The differences are opaque to people who can't access Silver's original math. Therefore we construct explanations retrospectively.

This comes across in popular self-help books which examine successful people to unlock their secrets. Authors believe we'll replicate somebody else's miracle if we simply find whichever magic choice or simple connection made their success possible. However, Watts asserts, we cannot see every influence that steered so-and-so to seemingly inevitable success. Essentially we assume somebody had to succeed because they did succeed; Watts calls this creeping determinism.

(Watts specifically name-checks Malcolm Gladwell for this tendency, though in fairness, Gladwell did write "Outliers," which examines successful individuals' cultural contexts, to counter this very tendency.)

Essentially, according to Watts, we don't explain the past, we describe it. Therefore, attempts to construct actually useful predictions prove frustrating. And because most professional soothsayers' predictions go largely unexamined, we must step over corpses of numberless stupid secular prophecies to reach contemporary reality. Certainly, many people my age lament their missing flying car. But most high-profile attempts to apply past observations to future choices remain equally fruitless, and we often don't realize it's happened.

Can we then even make meaningful predictions? Watts says yes, though exactly how defies brief restatement. We must eschew many common prejudices, like expecting meaningful predictions to be particularly precise. We must also limit our horizons: decades-long predictions prove as useless as long-term weather forecasts. And our reliance on either credentialed experts or gifted rookies limits our options. Processes for making actually useful predictions are surprisingly simple, yet because of learned biases, applying them is shockingly difficult.

Watts' explanation of human reasoning, and its limits, sheds powerful light on how important decisions fail. Watts explicitly describes several implications for business, government, entertainment, and other fields, while constructive readers can imagine other fields which suffer exactly the field blindness Watts describes. If you've ever wondered how politicians, CEOs, and media pundits can be so spectacularly wrong, this

book's explanations will chill your blood. As science for the masses, Watts is a master.

Malin Friess says

Duncan Watts argues that our common sense is not as good as we think it should be. When we trust our common sense we often make bad predictions.

His support:

We are duped into believing the Mona Lisa is such an extraordinary painting or Shakespeare such amazing writing. The Mona Lisa is small and average work for Da Vinci. We study these works as masterpieces and eventually it becomes self fullfilling.

Our common sense is a poor predictor as it should have been obvious that Facebook and Yahoo and Google would be screaming success..but we didnt't but into these companies when they were in their infancies.

People predicted that No Child Left Behind would incentivise teachers to teach better, principals to fire bad teachers, and then we would see test scores improve among students. Instead we saw teachers cheat (giving the kids the answers and altering their answer sheets) to improve scores artificially and gain for themselves a nice bonus.

Watts writes in the same genre as Malcolm Gladwell (stories that try to pull together and support a sociological theory). I wasn't as engaged and did not feel that stories of Jobs, The Surge in Iraq, or the Mona Lisa really did prove that common sense is poor.

2 stars...

Sergei_kalinin says

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