

Common sense is the loosely structured group of observations and experiences that we each get from normal circumstances of our lives, and it's definitely beneficial in our daily lives.

Common sense is what keeps us from being embarrassed about going to work without our pants on and it makes us be on the right side of the escalator.

Nevertheless, sometimes common sense fails us totally as an approach for making huge decisions. This book summary is basically about us knowing how to see these failings and what to do in order to correct them.

In these chapters, you'll learn how a particular fashion company made a profit by disregarding the predictions about the future of fashion. Also, you will learn about how the fame and glory of the Mona Lisa might have nothing to do with the Mona Lisa itself.

Also, this book summary will illustrate how common sense doesn't regularly translate among cultures and the reason why the Austrians are really enthusiastic about giving out their internal organs.

Lastly, you'll also learn how we are extremely affected by the luck of the draw, and how to make a better prediction about the future as well as understand the present.

What we think to be “common sense” differs greatly across different societies.

How do you know that you shouldn't enter the subway without your pants on? Or that you shouldn't cheat someone of their money? The correct answer is common sense, which is a set of shared beliefs that we accumulate every day of our lives.

Common sense can be used to define everything like knowing the side of the escalator to stand on to treating people properly.

But, quite interesting, what some of us in the West understand common sense to do not mean the same in other cultures.

For instance, the way people play the ultimatum game is very different across different cultures.

During the ultimatum game, one player suggests that \$100 should be shared between herself and the other player, giving the second player anything from nothing to the whole \$100. The other player then makes a decision to either a) accept the offer in order for both players to get the money as suggested, or b) decline the offer, so that both players get zilch.

A lot of studies have found that in Western societies, players normally made a “common sense” evaluation of what an unbiased division should be, and suggests that they share the money 50–50 which is equal. Offers less than \$30 were often rejected.

But, when the Peru members of the Machiguenga tribe played the game, they are likely to propose to the other player just 25% of the whole amount, and nearly no proposals were rejected.

On the other hand, the Au and Gau tribes of Papua New Guinea were likely to make better offers that were more than 50-50, and still these generous proposals were rejected with the same rate as unfair offers.

This tells us that, even though we are not aware of this fact, common sense is not set in stone rather; it is a result of our certain society. This difference is important; because as we will see when we use common sense to resolve our society’s problems, we don’t usually get the outcome we wanted.

Using common sense to make a decision can lead to terrible outcomes when addressing major societal problems.

Common sense is beneficial to people for assessing the problems we face daily: it assists us in fitting in and abiding with the rules of the society. However, common sense starts failing when we are dealing with greater problems that affect the whole societies.

The judgments of decision-makers, like the politicians, social scientists, planners and so on, are regularly based on common sense, which leads to big mistakes.

One illustration of this can be seen in urban planning. While the majority of urban planners will swear that their choices are based on scientific methods, this isn't true. Rather, their decision on design is based on what they think or believe is the best way to live, meaning they use common sense.

Unfortunately, what they believe to be right is usually wrong.

For instance, the urban planners who built the Robert Taylor Homes which is one of the largest public housing projects ever built, based their design on what they believed would increase the socioeconomic status of the homes' residents.

Despite their expectations, the Robert Taylor Homes ended up being more dilapidated, poverty- and gang-ridden than the slums they changed.

However, how can we be so blind to see the failings of common sense in fixing societal problems?

Unlike our method of studying the physical world, where we make use of evidence and experimentation like the scientific method to create discoveries, instead, we approach human behavior with instinct.

Why? This is because we are deeply absorbed in a society that we assume to know the answers to its problems.

For instance, those urban planners assumed they had the answers to poverty because they have probably read about poverty in the news or saw people begging on the street on their way to work. Due to them knowing about it, they set about attempting to solve the problem without an evidence-based method in which they eventually made mistakes.

In the next chapters, we will see the wide spectrum of means in which we are fooled by our common sense.

Common sense isn't responsible for situational factors and psychological biases when explaining the behavior of people.

It is rampant among individuals to be organ donors in various countries across the world. However, the number of people who choose to donate differs across different countries. For instance, during the course of one year, 12% of Germans decided to be organ donors compared to an unbelievable 99.9% in neighboring Austria. Why is this so?

The answer is very simple: in Austria, the default choice is to be an organ donor, while in Germany it isn't so!

Truly, the impulse to make the default choice is the decision that the society considers to be normal and this is just one of the psychological factors that make it harder for us to make rational choices.

Another of such influence is priming which is when people's actions and decisions are influenced by specific stimuli. For instance, experiments conducted on priming revealed that participants who read words such as "old" and "frail" walked very slowly down the corridor after leaving the lab than those who didn't.

Furthermore, we are also influenced by anchoring, through which our ability to make correct estimates is affected by an arbitrary reference point. For instance, anytime you donate to charity you will regularly be offered a "suggested" donation amount. With such information, we often give donations that are the same or more than the suggested amount.

Biases like these significantly influence our thinking, and still, we are completely unaware of how they affect both our and everyone else's decisions. This lack of awareness allows us to use common sense in attempting to interpret people's behavior, which unavoidably allow us to make mistakes.

For instance, when we see someone donating a large amount in the charity box, we might subconsciously think that he's a generous person, when in fact he was just tricked by a little anchoring!

Common sense hinders us from understanding correctly why some things are more successful or popular than others.

The Mona Lisa is seen as one of the most significant works of art in Western culture, however, why? What makes it so special? Aren't there a lot of other paintings that are just as good as that? Try this: take a minute and write down all the reasons why the Mona Lisa is so significant. What did you come up with?

You possibly got your answers by using circular reasoning which is a rational misconception informed by our common sense. Circular reasoning is a misconception because it uses the conclusion to justify itself, rather than using evidence to make a conclusion.

Looking back to the Mona Lisa, you might have considered it as the most essential painting because of its enigmatic subject, or maybe because it was stolen once during a daring robbery. However, you are essentially saying that the Mona Lisa is famous because it has the qualities of the Mona Lisa.

Meaning, you are using the fact that the Mona Lisa is famous to justify why it is famous.

A better explanation for factors like popularity or success is that they are the outcome from a cumulative advantage.

The cumulative advantage means that once one thing maybe a book, album or any other thing becomes more popular than other things; then it will only keep becoming more popular.

The author alongside his colleagues confirmed this with a large-scale online experiment where the participants were asked to rate their enjoyment of specific songs.

The "treatment" group which is one group of the participants could see the number of times the songs had been downloaded by former participants, while the other group could not.

The results showed that social influence, the number of times a song had been downloaded greatly influence the ratings given to those songs.

As a matter of fact, the same songs were downloaded frequently by the treatment group than the control group!

Our common sense falsely proposes that products and ideas are made famous by important people.

You probably know the phrase six degrees of separation; however, you might not know where it originated from.

The phrase became very well-known after 1967 when Stanley Milgram performed a psychological experiment on 300 people. It was revealed in the study that if someone tried to send a message to a friend by handing it first to a stranger, it took an average of six connections for the message to finally arrive.

However, that was not the only thing Milgram found: almost half the messages they sent went through the hands of one of three people.

Using this information, the common-sense conclusion was that in order to function very well, networks depend on a few important people or influencers, who act as “hubs.”

For instance, in marketing, the aim is mainly to persuade a few “well connected” people to use your product, and they will eventually spread the product’s popularity throughout society.

However, a number of experiments have directly challenged this notion. These experiments have revealed that, outside the confines of a lab, real-life networks work in a different way.

The author conducted Milgram’s experiment again, however on a much larger scale; this time around the author used 60,000 people in 166 countries using emails instead of hand-held messages.

He found out that, instead of depending on “hubs” to reach the recipients, there were almost a lot of unique chains of emails as there were recipients. This illustrated that networks are much

more “egalitarian”: they don’t depend on a few important influencers; rather they treat people more or less equally.

Basically, we all play an essential role in spreading information.

Putting this in view, let’s look at the reality TV personality Kim Kardashian who was once paid \$10,000 per “tweet” just to mention products by her sponsors. Couldn’t they have acquired more “bang for their buck” by paying \$1 to 10,000 normal individuals to spread the word instead?

When we apply common sense to historical occurrences, we actually learn less than we think we will.

A lot of us have a great interest in history; we like learning about historical occurrences and we even try to figure out what occurred in the past. However, again our common sense confuses our opinion and understanding of the past.

When we consider a series of historical occurrences, common sense makes us believe that one event produced the next, even though the association might remain unconfirmed.

For instance, a lot of us believe that the surge in troop numbers in Iraq in 2007 led to the later decline in violence the next summer.

However, there’s a problem: we don’t know what would have occurred without the surge. Perhaps violence would have reduced notwithstanding!

Furthermore, a lot of other things occurred during that period like the Iraqi Army taking a more active role fighting militias; therefore, we do not know for sure if it was the surge that led to the reduction in violence or something completely different.

Additionally, common sense makes us look out for simple descriptions in history, without considering that the historical actors at that time would not have been entirely aware of these descriptions.

For instance, think of the skirmishes in the English Channel between French and English ships in 1337. They are generally considered as the initiator of the Hundred Years War.

But, during that time of the war, and even in the immediate repercussion; those soldiers and sailors couldn't have known the long-term repercussions of this battle. Hence, they would have seen these events in a very different manner than we do today.

Therefore our explanations for historical events are just stories rather than true explanations of history. Though they might be interesting to listen to and read about, they are eventually far from the lived reality of the past.

Common sense makes us try predictions that are, in fact, impossible to make.

Experts in the financial industry regularly seem very certain of their predictions for the future' like "invest in this," they tell us, "and you'll make millions!"

However, most times things don't usually go as predicted, and the people that trust the advice of experts' can lose big. Nevertheless, these "experts" keep making predictions!

Why is it that they often think that they can predict the future, and why do they mostly miss their mark?

For beginners, when we think of the future, our common sense dictates just one future will truly play out and that future can be correctly predicted.

For instance, finance experts who examine the current data will think that there is just one possible way things can take, and if they examine the evidence very well, then it will be possible for them to predict what the future holds.

However, as a result of many interdependent; the systems in our society are way too complicated to be predicted in this way. There isn't just one future, in fact, there are a lot! One little change in one area can have huge, unforeseen repercussions in other areas.

Looking back at finance, changes in the political or regulatory climate can completely destroy our predictions about the financial future.

Furthermore, it appears that common sense dictates that we should just concentrate our energy on the possible futures that truly matter.

However, we can't be sure of what will be significant before it happens since the outcome of that future can only be known after the outcomes we want to predict have happened!

This failure in our ability to make correct predictions can have serious outcomes.

For instance, before 9/11, no one even thought of the threat from terrorists armed with just box cutters, hijacking planes to crash them into the World Trade Center.

It was only after the terrible incident that we became conscious of this gap in our thinking about the future.

In the final chapters, you'll learn to make use of your knowledge of the ways common sense fails us in order to make better techniques for making predictions.

We can still make predictions with some specific methods, however, only with a degree of cautiousness.

We are now aware that there are some certain types of predictions we'd like to make; though we can't. However, this doesn't mean that we can't predict anything. For instance, poker players are very good at betting on whether they have better cards than their opponents.

Hence, how can we make predictions?

One method is to use something known as a prediction market. With a prediction market, a lot of people bet on the possibility that a certain result will happen. Afterward, their predictions are averaged-out, hence producing to us with just one outcome.

Predictions that are done using this prediction market are mostly more correct than those from an individual expert since they connect with the idea of the crowd. Crowds of people who make guesses and predictions together are wiser because there is a tendency of errors canceling out each other.

The prediction market has been proven to be more or less accurate for specific predictions like the results of elections or sporting events.

But, crowd wisdom isn't useful when it comes to huge one-time strategic choices made by governments or corporations. These incidents don't happen with enough rate for estimations using crowd wisdom or statistical models to be useful.

One method of avoiding this is to use strategic flexibility which happens by creating unique approaches optimized for individual future scenarios. Also, this assists decision-makers to be prepared for any likely negative results that might occur.

Unfortunately, there is usually a risk that none of these scenarios captured the real future.

One sad example of this happened in 1980 when a Houston-based oilfield drilling company listed three likely scenarios for different rates on the increase in their oil revenues. Unluckily for them, none of these scenarios saw the probability of their yields decreasing and they suffered terrible outcomes.

Therefore, even though our predictions enable us to make different future results, we still face problems. One alternative method is to move our focus from predicting the future based on what is happening presently as we will see in the following chapter.

Instead of trying to make predictions we should develop our understanding of the present and respond to it.

Every year in the fashion industry, a huge amount of time and energy is dedicated to making predictions of what people will be wearing the next year. However, no single person checks if any of these predictions happen! It definitely makes you think that: if you want to have and run a successful fashion company, perhaps you shouldn't focus on these predictions.

It turns out that Zara who is the Spanish clothing retailer does exactly that with their "measure-and-react strategy."

First of all, they observe what the buyers are already wearing just to get understanding and perception of what might be considered as "cool."

From their observations, they now create a small number of new styles and transport them to certain stores in which they cautiously monitor what sells and what doesn't.

Finally, they immediately respond to this by leaving the styles that don't sell and move up to the ones that do sell!

Also, the measure-and-react strategy can also be used with great success in other areas. Due to a lot of activities on the internet, this makes it a vital place to implement this strategy.

For instance, Google and Yahoo were able to make correct predictions of the number of cases of influenza by counting the number of searches for "flu" and "flu shots," and this was very close to statistics that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported.

However, this doesn't mean that we have to go back to our common sense as there are other better methods.

One way to address this is to use local knowledge of the people that are close to the changes you are trying to make. For instance, if you want to improve the assembly line at your factory, a better place to get information from is from your workers.

Their local knowledge assists you in determining the problems and their causes. Most essentially, they can provide solutions that have already been proven effective; hence giving policy and business decisions a scientific strength.

Common sense mostly disregards the influence of luck on our lives, possibly making us judge unjustly.

If a sleepy driver mistakenly runs over a child on his way home from work, common sense makes up put him to prison. However, if that child had not been out there, our reaction toward the driver wouldn't have been this harsh. Can you think of putting every sleepy driver to prison on the basis that they might kill someone?

Therefore, how do we justify this discrepancy?

This example illustrates how our common sense understanding of fairness is majorly biased by our knowledge of the result of a situation. In the above-mentioned example, these results can lead to bad luck like a child standing in the road and this might have nothing to do with our real thoughts like driving home safely.

Due to this, the way we are treated by society can be mainly depended on our "luck of the draw" either good or bad.

Random luck isn't only restricted to hypotheticals and it can affect our lives greatly.

As a matter of fact, various studies have illustrated that people who have related ranges and degrees of talent mostly end up with different levels of success five or ten years in the future due to different random occasions and "lucky breaks."

For instance, you might have gotten your perfect job by just meeting an employer at a party which is certainly a lucky break.

However, knowing that luck is really essential in our position in society means that we might need to really think of approaches to make society a fairer and just place.

Great thinkers like John Rawls the philosopher have stated that an example of a fair society is one that tries to reduce the impacts of random luck on inequality.

Although we can't get the solution to a fair society easily, we can try to avoid using common sense when discussing significant questions of fairness and justice.

We should endeavor to improve uncommon sense especially when trying to comprehend things that seem deceptively obvious.

Thanks to eras of constant research, we have been able to invent various theories in physics like gravity. But, when dealing with human behavior, our intellectual is still full of mistakes and even a few sociologists believe that grand social theories are useless for understanding complicated human relations.

How can we then develop our understanding of human behavior?

One way to do this is to totally shift from common sense reasoning. Instead, attempt to develop the uncommon sense that is embedded in scientific methods.

As a result of a lack of data, this method has been impossible for a long time. But, during recent years there has been huge increase in online activity particularly from social media like Facebook and Twitter or from search engine queries and these have led to a lot of valuable data. Due to this, we are now able to observe and measure the behavior of a group of people and the whole society in real life for the first time ever.

This data can be also useful in analyzing problems that have common sense answers, however, they are actually very complicated.

For instance, considering the music industry, we are aware of studies that people influence one another's choice in music. Though, we still are not sure how people's influence one another leads to these vast effects in the music industry, releasing hit songs.

However, now for the first time, we can now gather the data essential to tackle this question using the scientific method, instead of depending on our insufficient common sense.

Nevertheless, common sense understanding is persistent and universal; we will have to adopt not only the methods mentioned in these chapters but other methods as well, in order to overcome it.

Everything is Obvious: Once You Know the Answer by Duncan J. Watts Book Review

Common sense is mostly useful in daily lives; however, it fails us when we are faced with difficult problems with many actors and viewpoints. By understanding the consequences of common sense and using better techniques, we can enhance the way we plan for the future and understand the present.

Get your information from the right people.

If you are making huge decisions that will affect a lot of people, like public policy or business strategy, it's good to use "local knowledge" and this means getting the idea of those who are nearest to the problem at hand. Their contribution will cause innovative solutions that you had never even thought of.

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