# Sociology and Common Sense

Watts' criticisms of rational choice theory stems from his disdain of what he calls 'commonsense theory', or folk theory, or ancestor theory. It is the idea that we explain behaviour we see by rationalising it, the idea that whenever an individual or collective asks that they act because of a reason we can explain through their motivations, which are in turn a function of their belief systems, their circumstances, or their opportunities. What is even more harmful is that under the guise of rational choice theory the intentions are masked, and sociologists *believe* that they are creating useful scientific theories when it is largely rationalising behaviour they see themselves. The need to craft a narrative often overpowers careful and non-emotional analysis, and this leads to the words causality and explanation used interchangeably, when it is often if not at all times not the case in actuality. In particular rational choice theory is criticised for attempting to explain a wide variety of phenomenon using a small set of assumptions. Add the common practice of what emphatic explanations where we might just spin an explanation which "makes sense"… and we see why it can be a dangerous path to take if we intend to not stray from careful scientific research.

While starting with a criticism of rational choice theory, Watts' has also been taking apart the common sense theories we mentioned earlier - indeed, rational choice theory is just one manifestation of the way social scientists attempt to explain behaviour. This also manifests itself through methodological individualism, through pragmatism, through field theory, and so on. All of these suffer from similar problems, and one of them is a very human one; of putting ourselves in other's shoes, and expecting that we can explain behaviour that way. This is explicitly detailed out in the section of human simulation, where Watts explains how the idea of able to imagine oneself in other behaviours so as to explain them was not only allowed but possibly *encouraged*, such as in the field of history. It is impossible for one to have complete context to experience a behaviour, and our minds tend to fill in this empty context with what we have learned - often leading to improper or poor science.

Watts has multiple possible solutions which can work towards making science more rigorous to avoid such pitfalls. One of these is better experiments - by relying on more rigorous field experiments, or correctly identifying natural experiments which can be used to understand behaviour. Watts also discusses a more large data oriented approach with large datasets of non-experimental data or observational data. By gently setting aside our narratives and focusing on experiments and data we can attempt to at least reframe our questions and answers to these questions better without attempting at overarching theories which try to explain complex behaviour with a simple set of assumptions. Building more sophisticated models would mean that we increase our predictive power, and this is also an argument which Watts makes, advocating for being able to test theories by their power of prediction. While there are objections to a purely predictive approach, a more computational approach, for example, with out-of-sample testing, could drive us towards, if not more interesting, but more humble, and real science.

All of this being said, there are some benefits which could be gotten from theoretical models. An understanding of theory helps us design the experiments which Watts so emphatically advocates for, and can help push us in the right direction. I had briefly mentioned before about a more "humble" science - if we very clearly state our assumptions and expectations, and point our that it is only under these very particular

conditions, with this data set, with these set of theoretical assumptions that a model holds… it is still useful information and useful science. It will be very difficult if not impossible for us to have a complete causal model where we know every single variable or factor which contributes to a phenomenon, but we might not always *need* this. A lot of progress to the existing body of social science and indeed science in general would be made with attempting to explain behaviour with the certain caveats which might come with certain assumptions. To not take it seriously would be unnecessarily harsh, and we can help polish our scientific method by being tactful about the way we conduct research and what we claim a certain piece of science or research attempts to do.