

Revealed Preference and Model Theory

In this book, we have studied the concept of empirical content in disparate environments. To conclude our study, we wish to suggest that there is a unifying theme behind these exercises. The idea of the empirical content of a theory as *the set of all falsifiable predictions of the theory* is generally applicable, and subject to formal study.

A theory can make predictions which are non-falsifiable. A case in point is the theory of representation by a utility function. Recall Theorem 1.1. The theorem implies that if a preference relation \succeq over \mathbf{R}_+^n possesses a utility representation, then there is a countable set $Z \subseteq \mathbf{R}_+^n$ such that for all $x, y \in X$ for which $x \succ y$, there exists $z \in Z$ for which $x \succeq z \succeq y$. This implication of the theory of utility is not falsifiable. To demonstrate that the theory has been falsified, one would need to establish the non-existence of such a set Z . Doing so involves checking, one-by-one, every possible countable subset Z of \mathbf{R}_+^n , a task which can never be completed.

A first and basic issue in understanding empirical content has to do with universal vs. existential axiomatizations. The idea was already introduced in Chapters 9 and 12, where we saw the removal of existential quantifiers as a source of testable implications. The issue of universal and existential axioms goes back to Popper (1959), who thought that a theory with a *universal* description is falsifiable, while an *existential* theory is not.

Popper offers the example of the theory that claims “all swans are white.” This theory is universal, in the sense that it states a property of all swans, or “universally quantifies over swans.” It is easy to see that, in principle, such a theory can be falsified by finding a single swan that is not white. Contrast with Popper’s example of an *existential* theory: that “there exists a black swan.” The existential theory cannot be falsified. Falsifying the theory would involve collecting all possible swans and verifying that each one is not black. We could only do this if we could somehow be sure to have exhaustively checked all the swans in the universe.

Universality is clearly important for falsifiability, but there is a second component that is particularly relevant for the subject of this book. Popper’s

idea captures the notion of empirical content and falsifiability very well in many environments. However, economic theories and data are often burdened by *partial observability*. Implicit in Popper's examples is the idea that when we observe a swan, we observe its color. And indeed, in the swans example, this is entirely natural. With economic choice data, on the other hand, it is perfectly reasonable to observe objects but not all their properties. It is common, for example, to observe a pair of alternatives and not be able to observe which of the pair an individual chooses, or would choose. Think of choice from a budget B . When $x \in B$ is chosen this reveals something about the pairs (x, y) for $y \in B$, but nothing about the pairs (z, y) for $z \neq x$. This issue has been important in many of the results we have established. It lies behind the non-testability of concave utility in Afriat's Theorem, for example.¹

Thus, in contrast to the theories that Popper had in mind, economic theories have the feature that we may be able to observe objects without observing the properties these objects enjoy. The phenomenon of partial observability will be very important for our discussion.

The considerations of universality and partial observability will be reflected in the kinds of axioms that capture the empirical content of a theory. Recall GARP, which states that the revealed preference pair $\langle \succeq^R, \succ^R \rangle$ is acyclic. Acyclicity of a revealed preference pair is a universal theory, but it is more. Using the universal quantifier \forall and the negation symbol \neg , we can write acyclicity succinctly as for all n ,

$$\forall x_1 \dots \forall x_n \neg \left(\bigwedge_{i=1}^{n-1} (x_i \succeq^R x_{i+1}) \wedge (x_n \succ^R x_1) \right). \quad (13.1)$$

The structure of Equation (13.1) explains its falsifiability: it begins with universal quantification, followed by a negation, followed by a conjunction \wedge (meaning “and”), followed by basic properties about observables. Specifically, such “basic” properties amount to *observable* relations among observables. This mathematical equation is therefore a Universal Negation of Conjunction of Atomic Formulas: it is an *UNCAF* formula. Negating atomic formulas means that one rules out that a particular (observable) relation holds among observable entities or quantities.

Contrast GARP with the hypothesis that \succeq^R is a preference relation (a weak order) and \succ^R is its strict part. This hypothesis has a universal axiomatization, but *not* of the UNCAF form. We shall see that this distinction matters. The hypothesis that \succeq^R is a weak order and \succ^R is its strict part has the following axiomatization:

- I) $\forall x \forall y (x \succeq^R y) \vee (y \succeq^R x)$
- II) $\forall x \forall y \forall z (x \succeq^R y) \wedge (y \succeq^R z) \rightarrow (x \succeq^R z)$
- III) $\forall x \forall y (x \succ^R y) \leftrightarrow (x \succeq^R y) \wedge \neg(y \succeq^R x)$.

¹ If one could observe comparisons between all pairs of alternatives, then concavity would clearly be testable.

Some claims made by this theory are falsifiable. For example if we observe that $x \succ^R y$, $y \succ^R z$, and $z \succ^R x$ (a violation of transitivity), then obviously we have falsified the theory. But not *all* claims made by the theory are falsifiable. A pair x, y could be observed without observing any relation between them for example: this is common in the consumption datasets analyzed in Chapters 3–5. Therefore, in the presence of partial observability, completeness cannot be falsified.² Interestingly, GARP is usually understood as forming the empirical content of axioms (I), (II), and (III). We demonstrate below the formal sense in which this is true.

13.1 A MODEL FOR OBSERVABLES, DATA, AND THEORIES

There are three important concepts we need to explain. The first is the primitive of the model: the things we can observe are the primitive, and these things will be specified through a *language*. The second is what we mean by a dataset: datasets are finite and consist of partial observations. The third is our notion of a theory: a theory is a formal way of hypothesizing that certain relationships hold between objects of interest.

A first-order *language* \mathcal{L} is given by a finite set of *relation symbols* and, for each relation symbol R , a positive integer n_R , the *arity of R* .

Let \mathcal{L} be a language. An \mathcal{L} -dataset \mathcal{D} is given by:

- I) A finite non-empty set D (the *domain* of \mathcal{D}).
- II) An n -ary relation $R^{\mathcal{D}}$ over D for every n -ary relation symbol R of \mathcal{L} .

Each element $(x_1^*, \dots, x_{n_R}^*) \in R^{\mathcal{D}}$ is intended to represent the *observation* that (x_1^*, \dots, x_n^*) stand in relation R . The notion of a dataset is intended to capture the idea that there can only be a finite number of observations.

As an example, consider the language \mathcal{L} that has two binary relation symbols, \succeq and \succ . We mean the former to signify revealed weak preference observations, and the latter to signify revealed strict preference observations. Consider a dataset \mathcal{D}^1 , with domain $D^1 = \{a, b, c\}$, and where we observe that a is revealed weakly preferred to b , and b to c , but we do not observe any strict comparisons. In symbols, $\mathcal{D}^1 = (D^1, \succeq^{\mathcal{D}^1}, \succ^{\mathcal{D}^1})$; $\succeq^{\mathcal{D}^1}$ is the relation given by $a \succeq^{\mathcal{D}^1} b$ and $b \succeq^{\mathcal{D}^1} c$, while $\succ^{\mathcal{D}^1}$ is empty. The example illustrates partial observability: We might theorize that $a \succeq^{\mathcal{D}^1} b$ implies either $b \succeq^{\mathcal{D}^1} a$ or $a \succ^{\mathcal{D}^1} b$, but often data will not contain this kind of information. In fact partial observability is very prominent in economics, for example in the consumption datasets used by the papers described in Chapter 5.

² In an environment of full observability (meaning, not partial) and strong rationalization, Eliaz and Ok (2006) investigate choice functions based on maximization of a relation that retains transitivity, but which need not be complete. In such a context, they show that completeness adds real content. They also show how indifference can often be distinguished from incompleteness in such an environment.

We will now define a notion of theory. We are interested in investigating a notion of empirical content, so from this perspective, we imagine that all of the relevant aspects of a theory can be captured by describing the relations among potential observables that we hypothesize hold. To this end, define an \mathcal{L} -structure \mathcal{M} to consist of the following objects:

- I) A nonempty set M (the *domain* of \mathcal{M}).
- II) An n -ary relation $R^{\mathcal{M}}$ over M for every n -ary relation symbol R of \mathcal{L} .

A structure forms a hypothesis about the relations which we might expect to observe, but we never expect to see the entire structure. Rather, we imagine that a dataset is consistent with a structure when all of the observations are members of the structure.

With this in mind, we say that an \mathcal{L} -structure \mathcal{M} *rationalizes* an \mathcal{L} -dataset \mathcal{D} if the following conditions are satisfied:

- I) $D \subseteq M$, where D and M are the domains of \mathcal{D} and \mathcal{M} .
- II) $R^{\mathcal{D}} \subseteq R^{\mathcal{M}}$.

The definition of rationalization requires that $R^{\mathcal{D}} \subseteq R^{\mathcal{M}}$ rather than that $R^{\mathcal{D}}$ is the restriction of $R^{\mathcal{M}}$ to D . The idea is again simply that we do not imagine that all existing relations are necessarily observed. This is the nature of partial observability: observing only a weak preference for coffee over tea does not refute the possibility that coffee is strictly preferred to tea.

We say that two structures are *isomorphic* if we can relabel the objects across the two structures so that all relations are maintained. Let \mathcal{M} and \mathcal{N} be \mathcal{L} -structures with domains M and N respectively. Formally, an *isomorphism* from \mathcal{M} to \mathcal{N} is a bijective map $\eta : M \rightarrow N$ that preserves the interpretations of all symbols of \mathcal{L} : $(a_1, \dots, a_{n_R}) \in R^{\mathcal{M}}$ iff $(\eta(a_1), \dots, \eta(a_{n_R})) \in R^{\mathcal{N}}$ for every relation symbol R of \mathcal{L} and $a_1, \dots, a_{n_R} \in M$.

Informally, two structures are isomorphic if there is no way to use our language to distinguish between them.

Finally, we define a theory to be a class of structures. Formally, an \mathcal{L} -*theory* T is a class of structures that is closed under isomorphism. A dataset \mathcal{D} is *T-rationalizable* if there is a structure in T that rationalizes \mathcal{D} . Otherwise, \mathcal{D} *falsifies* T .

As an example, consider again the language with two binary symbols, \succeq and \succ . We have the theory T_{wo} consisting of the class of triples (M, \succeq^M, \succ^M) such that \succeq^M is a preference relation on M (a weak order), and \succ^M is the strict preference derived from \succeq^M . The theory T_{wo} can be thought of as the theory of rational choice. Note that T_{wo} rationalizes the dataset \mathcal{D}^1 described above: \mathcal{D}^1 has observed objects $D^1 = \{a, b, c\}$, where a is revealed weakly preferred to b , and b to c . The data \mathcal{D}^1 is T_{wo} -rationalizable because it can be rationalized, for example, by the set M of all letters in the English alphabet, with \succeq^M being the lexicographic order on M . Of course, there are many other structures in T_{wo} that could rationalize \mathcal{D}^1 .

We emphasized that \mathcal{D}^1 is silent on some aspects of the relationship between a , b , and c ; these aspects are not observed, but we do not view this partial observability as a conflict with T_{wo} . Some “theoretically true” relations are simply not observed in the dataset. The structure of all the letters in the English alphabet is a possible rationalization of \mathcal{D}^1 in T_{wo} . In this structure a is strictly preferred to c , a property that has not been observed in \mathcal{D}^1 .

In contrast with data \mathcal{D}^1 , consider the dataset \mathcal{D}^2 ; where $D^2 = \{a, b, c\}$ (the same as D^1), but where we observe no weak comparisons, and instead observe that

$$a \succ^{\mathcal{D}^2} b \succ^{\mathcal{D}^2} c \succ^{\mathcal{D}^2} a.$$

No structure in T_{wo} could rationalize \mathcal{D}^2 because the “theoretical” strict preference \succ^M in such a structure would need to exhibit the cyclic comparisons $a \succ^M b \succ^M c \succ^M a$. This is impossible for a weak order.

Another example of a theory is the theory of utility maximization, denoted T_u , which is the set of triples (M, \succeq^M, \succ^M) in T_{wo} such that there is $u : M \rightarrow \mathbf{R}$ with $x \succeq^M y$ iff $u(x) \geq u(y)$. Note that

$$T_u \subsetneq T_{wo}.$$

The theory of utility maximization is more stringent than T_{wo} . But T_u can also rationalize \mathcal{D}^1 (but not \mathcal{D}^2). In fact, it is easy to see that any dataset that is T_{wo} -rationalizable is also T_u -rationalizable, even though utility maximization is more stringent than rational choice. Put differently, one can weaken T_u to T_{wo} without observable consequences. When that happens we shall say that the two theories have the same empirical content.

13.1.1 Empirical content

We want the empirical content of a theory to capture all of the observable consequences of that theory, but no other consequences. To this end, we want to weaken the theory as much as possible without changing the observable consequences of the theory, removing all non-observable consequences. For example, we can obtain a new theory by adding structures to T_u (thus weakening T_u) without changing the datasets that falsify the new theory. The empirical content of T_u is the most one can weaken T_u in this fashion.

Hence we define the *empirical content* of a theory T , denoted $ec(T)$, to be the class of all structures \mathcal{M} that do not rationalize any dataset that falsifies T . The main result of this chapter is that the empirical content of a theory is captured by the UNCAF axioms that are true in that theory.

Given a language \mathcal{L} , we can write formulas using the symbols in \mathcal{L} . In addition to the relation symbols specified by \mathcal{L} , we shall use standard logical symbols: the *quantifiers* “exists” (\exists) and “for all” (\forall); “not” (\neg); the *logical connectives* “and” (\wedge) and “or” (\vee); a countable set of *variable symbols* x, y, z, u, v, w, \dots ; parentheses “(” and “)” ; and equality and inequality symbols “=” and “ \neq ”.

Strings of symbols are put together to form *axioms*. Rules for the formation of axioms can be found, for example, in Marker (2002).

We are primarily concerned with a special class of axioms, the UNCAF axioms. These are defined as follows. First we must define the notion of an *atomic formula*.

An *atomic formula* φ of a language \mathcal{L} consists of either

- I) $t_1 = t_2$ or $t_1 \neq t_2$, where t_1, t_2 are variable symbols or
- II) $R(t_1, \dots, t_{n_R})$ where R is a relation symbol of \mathcal{L} and t_1, \dots, t_{n_R} are variable symbols.

Atomic formulas are closely related to the notion of observation discussed above. Let us consider again the language with two binary relation symbols, \succeq and \succ . In this example, all atomic formulas use at most two variable symbols. For example, the string $x \succeq y$ is an atomic formula, as is $x \succ y$. These strings are unquantified and as such do not yet form axioms. But one can imagine that an observation might consist of some pair a and b for which a is observed to stand in relation \succeq to b .

We will form axioms out of the atomic formulas. The axioms are intended to be statements precluding the existence of certain finite collections of observations from holding. To this end, let \mathcal{L} be a language. A *universal negation of a conjunction of atomic formulas (UNCAF)* axiom is a string of the form

$$\forall v_1 \forall v_2 \dots \forall v_n \neg (\varphi_1 \wedge \varphi_2 \dots \wedge \varphi_m)$$

where $\varphi_1, \varphi_2, \dots, \varphi_m$ are atomic formulas with variables from v_1, \dots, v_n .

As an example, consider again the language that has two binary relation symbols, \succeq and \succ . An example of an UNCAF axiom in this language is:

$$\forall x \forall y \neg (x \succeq y \wedge y \succ x);$$

which we might call the weak axiom of revealed preference (WARP). Similarly, GARP can be seen to be an UNCAF axiom. In a different language, congruence (recall Chapter 2) is UNCAF.

Let Γ be a set of UNCAF axioms of \mathcal{L} . Let $\mathcal{T}(\Gamma)$ consist of the structures for which all axioms in Γ are true; thus, $\mathcal{T}(\Gamma)$ is a theory. If $T = \mathcal{T}(\Gamma)$ for some set Γ of axioms, we say that Γ is an UNCAF *axiomatization* of T .

Given a theory T , let $\text{uncaf}(T)$ be the set of UNCAF axioms that are true in all members of T . The following result establishes that the empirical content of a theory always has an UNCAF axiomatization. This is true whether or not the theory itself does. Moreover, one such UNCAF axiomatization consists of the UNCAF axioms true for every structure in the theory.

Theorem 13.1 *For every theory T , $\text{ec}(T)$ is the theory axiomatized by the UNCAF axioms that are true in T : $\text{ec}(T) = \mathcal{T}(\text{uncaf}(T))$.*

Thus, in the presence of partial observability, UNCAF axioms, not universal ones, properly describe the empirical content of the model. In the context of

the examples we have been using, Theorem 13.1 presents the formal sense in which GARP is the empirical content of completeness and transitivity.

Theories that coincide with their empirical content are in some sense special. They cannot be weakened in any way without adding falsifying datasets. We shall see in 13.2 an example of a theory with $T = \text{ec}(T)$.

13.1.2 Relative theories

In economics, a researcher often wants to take certain hypotheses as being given. For example, economic theorists often view continuity axioms as a technical assumption. By itself, continuity has no empirical content. Hence, they are not interested in testing for this property, though it is often useful for providing a representation. Even though continuity by itself usually has no empirical content, the axiom may have empirical content when imposed with other axioms. So what we really care about are the empirical implications of a preference in the presence of the hypothesized continuity.

Moreover, there are often obvious constraints imposed on us by the structure of the model. We can imagine an individual with preferences over bundles of coffee and tea. Bundles of coffee and tea are elements in a linear space. It would not be interesting to “test” the axioms for a vector space. One can then talk about the empirical content of the economically meaningful theory, relative to the theory of linear spaces.

Consider two theories, T and T' , where $T \subseteq T'$. We can define the *empirical content of T relative to T'* , written $\text{ec}_{T'}(T)$, as the class of all structures $\mathcal{M} \in T'$ that do not rationalize any dataset that falsifies T , i.e.,

$$\text{ec}_{T'}(T) = \text{ec}(T) \cap T'. \quad (13.2)$$

The following is an immediate consequence of Theorem 13.1.

Corollary 13.2 *For any theories T and T' such that $T \subseteq T'$, $\text{ec}_{T'}(T) = \mathcal{T}(\text{uncaf}(T)) \cap T'$.*

We say that a collection of UNCAF axioms Λ is an UNCAF axiomatization of T relative to T' if $T = \mathcal{T}(\Lambda) \cap T'$. Corollary 13.2 implies that the empirical content of T relative to T' admits an UNCAF axiomatization relative to T' .

13.2 APPLICATION: STATUS QUO PREFERENCES

As mentioned above, theories that satisfy $T = \text{ec}(T)$ are particularly interesting. As an application, we discuss a recent theory of choice in the presence of *status quo* due to Masatlioglu and Ok. There is a sense in which their theory makes no non-falsifiable claims.

Let \mathcal{L} be a language including the binary relation \in and the ternary relations c, \tilde{c} . The latter two are meant to express “chosen” and “not chosen.” We define the theory of choice with *status quo* T_{csq} to be the class of structures $(M, \in^{\mathcal{M}},$

$c^{\mathcal{M}}, \tilde{c}^{\mathcal{M}})$ whereby there is some set X , a collection $\Sigma \subseteq 2^X \setminus \{\emptyset\} \times X$ satisfying $(E, b) \in \Sigma$ implies $b \in E$, and a nonempty valued function $c^* : \Sigma \rightarrow 2^M \setminus \{\emptyset\}$ for which $c^*(E, b) \subseteq E$ for all $(E, b) \in \Sigma$ for which the following are satisfied:

- I) $M = X \cup \Sigma$
- II) $\in^{\mathcal{M}}$ is the usual set theoretic relation
- III) $c^{\mathcal{M}}(a, b, E)$ if and only if $a \in c^*(E, b)$
- IV) $\tilde{c}^{\mathcal{M}}(a, b, E)$ if and only if $a \notin c^*(E, b)$;

as well as all structures isomorphic to these. The idea here is that each budget set E possesses a *status quo* b . We observe the choices made (and not made) from budget sets.

The theory of *status quo* rationalizable choice is the subtheory $T_{sq} \subseteq T_{csq}$ whereby there exists a function $Q : X \rightarrow 2^X \setminus \{\emptyset\}$ such that for all $x \in X$, $x \in Q(x)$, and a complete and transitive binary relation \succeq for which the corresponding function c^* can be expressed as $c^*(E, b) = \arg \max_{\succeq} Q(b) \cap E$. The idea is that the *status quo* alternative determines a “reference set” from which the agent will choose.³

Theorem 13.3 $ec_{T_{csq}}(T_{sq}) = T_{csq}$.

Proof. We provide an explicit syntactic characterization. The formula

$$(x \in E) \wedge (y \in E) \wedge c(x, d, E)$$

is abbreviated $x \succeq (E)_d y$, and the formula

$$(x \in E) \wedge (y \in E) \wedge c(x, d, E) \wedge \tilde{c}(y, d, E)$$

is abbreviated $x \succ (E)_d y$. Note that each of these formulas is a conjunction of atomic formulas.

Similarly, we define, for a structure $(M, \in^{\mathcal{M}}, c^{\mathcal{M}}, \tilde{c}^{\mathcal{M}}) \in T_{csq}$, the ternary relations $x \succeq_d^{\mathcal{M}} y$ to mean that there is E for which $x, y \in E$ and $x \in c^*(d, E)$, and $x \succ_d^{\mathcal{M}} y$ means there is E for which $x, y \in E$ and $x \in c^*(d, E)$ and $y \notin c^*(d, E)$ (here, we suppress the dependence of the relation on E as it is not needed).

Now, a *cycle* for a structure $\mathcal{M} \in T_{csq}$ is a collection $x_1, \dots, x_n, y_1, \dots, y_n$, and z_1, \dots, z_n all in M such that $x_{i+1} \neq y_i$ and $x_i \succeq_{z_i}^{\mathcal{M}} x_{i+1}$ with at least one strict part, and for each z_i , $x_{i+1} \succeq_{z_i}^{\mathcal{M}} y_i$ or $x_{i+1} = z_i$.

Note that the collection of axioms which rule out all cycles is UNCAF, as each formula $x \succeq (E)_d y$ is a conjunction of atomic formulas, as is the formula $x \succ (E)_d y$. In other words, the UNCAF list of axioms given by

$$\forall x_1 \dots \forall z_n \forall E_1 \dots \forall E_n \forall F_1 \dots \forall F_n \neg \left(\bigwedge_{i=1}^n (x_i R_i(E_i)_{z_i} x_{i+1}) \wedge (Q_i(x_{i+1}, y_i, z_i, F_i)) \right),$$

³ Masatlioglu and Ok (2014) also allow there to be no *status quo*, which they represent with a *status quo* “alternative” of \diamond . We could accommodate this easily by introducing a constant symbol for \diamond , and none of the results would change. However, the analysis would become notationally much more burdensome.

where each R_i is either \succ or \succeq and at least one is \succ , and each $Q_i(x_{i+1}, y_i, z_i, F_i)$ is either the expression $x_{i+1} \succeq (F_i)_{z_i} y_i$ or the expression $x_{i+1} = z_i$, is the appropriate collection of sentences.

Finally, given $\mathcal{M} \in T_{csg}$, we have its associated ternary relations $\succeq^{\mathcal{M}}$ and $\succ^{\mathcal{M}}$. We claim that $\mathcal{M} \in T_{sq}$ if and only if it has no cycles.

To this end, suppose that $\mathcal{M} \in T_{sq}$. Then \mathcal{M} is isomorphic to a triple (X, Σ, c^*) . There is a binary relation R and a function Q as stated in the definition. Suppose for a contradiction that there is a cycle. Each $x_{i+1} \in Q(z_i)$, since $x_{i+1} \succeq_{z_i}^{\mathcal{M}} y_i$ (implying it is chosen at some point when z_i is the *status quo*) or $x_{i+1} = z_i$, which again implies that $x_{i+1} \in Q(z_i)$. Therefore, $x_i \succeq_{z_i}^{\mathcal{M}} x_{i+1}$ implies $x_i R x_{i+1}$ and $x_i \succ_{z_i}^{\mathcal{M}} x_{i+1}$ implies $x_i R x_{i+1}$ but not $x_{i+1} R x_i$, contradicting transitivity.

Conversely, suppose $\mathcal{M} \in T_{csg}$ and that there are no cycles. Without loss of generality, we may assume that \mathcal{M} is specified by a triple (X, Σ, c^*) . We define $Q(d) = \{y : \exists E \in \Sigma \text{ such that } y \in c^*(d, E)\}$. Define $\succeq_d = \{(x, y) \in \succeq_d : y \in Q(d)\}$ and $\succ_d = \{(x, y) \in \succ_d : y \in Q(d)\}$. Finally, define $\succeq = \bigcup_{d \in X} \succeq_d$ and $\succ = \bigcup_{d \in X} \succ_d$. Then because there are no cycles, there exist no x_1, \dots, x_n for which $x_1 \succeq \dots \succeq x_n$, where at least one \succeq is \succ . By Theorem 1.5, there is a complete and transitive R for which $x \succeq y$ implies $x R y$ and $x \succ y$ implies $x R y$. The pair Q, R then *status quo* rationalizes c^* .

13.3 CHOICE THEORY AND EMPIRICAL CONTENT

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, theories that coincide with their empirical content are in some sense special. We shall here consider the structure of such theories relative to a theory of choice.

The theory of rationalizable choice functions enjoys a very interesting property. Recall Chapter 2 and, in particular, Theorem 2.6. The theorem characterizes the empirical content of a preference relation by the congruence axiom. Congruence is a collection of first-order axioms precluding the existence of certain types of revealed preference cycles. Importantly, congruence can be described in a very parsimonious language: the language is able to express the relations \in, \notin , as well as the properties of being chosen or not. This means that the data the economist must possess in order to falsify the model are quite simple.

In this section, we demonstrate a very simple result claiming that most choice theories do not share this property. As motivation, consider the following simple example.

Example 13.4 An economist asks whether a given individual maximizes a preference relation (a weak order). She observes three budget sets, A , B , and D , and three potential choices, x , y , and z . She sees that each of x and y are feasible in A , y and z are feasible in B , and x and z are feasible in D . She also sees that x is chosen from A , y is chosen from B , and z is chosen from D , while x

is never chosen from D . These data clearly refute the hypothesis of preference maximization.

To establish this refutation, the economist did not see every feasible option from each of the three budget sets or any “global set” on which the choice function might potentially be defined, nor did she need to see what the individual would choose from an unrelated budget E .

Consider two languages. The first, $\mathcal{L} = \{\in, \notin, c, \tilde{c}\}$, includes four binary predicates. The predicates \in and \notin are to be understood in their usual way, while $c(a, B)$ means a is chosen from B , and $\tilde{c}(a, B)$ means a is not chosen from B . The second language is more expressive: $\mathcal{L}' = \{\in, \notin, c, \tilde{c}, \subseteq, \not\subseteq\}$. The binary relations \subseteq and $\not\subseteq$ are given their usual interpretation.

A choice function consists of a triple (X, Σ, c) , where X is a set, $\Sigma \subseteq 2^X \setminus \{\emptyset\}$, and $c : \Sigma \rightarrow 2^X \setminus \{\emptyset\}$, so that for all $E \in \Sigma$, $c(E) \subseteq E$. Each choice function is naturally identified with a structure in either language.

In either language, \mathcal{L} or \mathcal{L}' , a choice theory T is a class of choice functions and all structures isomorphic to an element of this class. The choice theory which consists of all choice functions is written T_{choice} in language \mathcal{L} and T'_{choice} in language \mathcal{L}' , respectively.

Say that the \mathcal{L} -theory T is *rich* if for all (X, Σ, c) in T , there is $z \notin X$ and a choice function $(X \cup \{z\}, \Sigma', c') \in T$, where $\Sigma' = \{E \cap X : E \in \Sigma\}$ and for all $E \in \Sigma'$, $c'(E) = c(E \cap X)$. Intuitively, a rich choice theory is one with the property that, for any of its structures, we can add an alternative that is never chosen to the domain. Say that a choice theory satisfies condition α if all choice functions in the theory satisfy condition α .

When a theory satisfies $ec(T) \cap T_{choice} = T$, then we say that it makes no non-falsifiable claims relative to the theory of choice. We are now in a position to show that, under some conditions, the property of not making non-falsifiable claims can imply WARP.

Theorem 13.5 Suppose that T is rich, satisfies condition α , and that $ec(T) \cap T_{choice} = T$. Then every $(X, \Sigma, c) \in T$ satisfies WARP. Further, the class of choice functions satisfying WARP is the maximal T which is rich, satisfies condition α , and $ec(T) \cap T_{choice} = T$.

Proof. Suppose by way of contradiction that $(X, \Sigma, c) \in T$ violates WARP. Thus, there are $x, y \in X$ and $E, F \in \Sigma$ for which $x, y \in E \cap F$, $x \in c(E)$, $y \in c(F)$, and $x \notin c(F)$. Appeal to richness and consider $z \notin X$. Let Σ^* consist of all budgets of Σ , with the exception that z has been added to E . The choice function c^* then coincides with c , and $c^*(E \cup \{z\}) = c(E)$.

Now consider the following choice function: $X' = \{x, y, z\}$, $\Sigma' = \{E' = \{x, y, z\}, F' = \{x, y\}\}$, and $c'(\{x, y, z\}) = c(E) \cap \{x, y, z\}$, $c'(\{x, y\}) = \{y\}$. This choice function is clearly not a member of T as it violates condition α : $x \in c'(\{x, y, z\})$, but $x \notin c'(\{x, y\})$. However, every dataset consistent with (X', Σ', c') can be rationalized by $(X \cup \{z\}, \Sigma^*, c^*)$. This is a contradiction.

Clearly, the class of choice functions satisfying WARP has the desired property (WARP is an UNCAF axiom, so the result follows from Corollary 13.2).

A special example of choice theories are choice theories rationalizable by some binary relation. Let \mathcal{R} be a class of complete binary relations. We define the theory of \mathcal{R} -rationalizable choice, $T_{\mathcal{R}}$, to be the class of choice functions (X, Σ, c) for which there exists $R \in \mathcal{R}$ such that for all $E \in \Sigma$, $c(E) = \{x \in E : x R y \text{ for all } y \in E\}$.

Let the relation \succeq^* on $\mathbf{Z}_+ \cup \{\omega\}$ be defined so that for all $n, m \in \mathbf{Z}_+$, we have $n \succeq^* m$ if and only if $n \geq m$, and otherwise, $\omega \sim^* n$ for all $n \in \mathbf{Z}_+$.

A simple corollary follows.

Corollary 13.6 *For the following \mathcal{R} , $ec(T_{\mathcal{R}}) \cap T_{choice} \neq T_{\mathcal{R}}$:*

- \mathcal{R} is the set of all complete binary relations.
- \mathcal{R} is the set of all quasitransitive and complete binary relations.
- \mathcal{R} is the set of all complete binary relations for which there exists a pair of linear orders \succeq_1 and \succeq_2 for which $\succ = \succ_1 \cap \succ_2$. These are the set of 2-Pareto rationalizable choice functions.

Proposition 13.7 *If $\succeq^* \in \mathcal{R}$, then $ec(T_{\mathcal{R}}) \cap T'_{choice} \neq ec(T_{\mathcal{R}})$.*

Proof. Let $X = \mathbf{Z}_+ \cup \{\omega\}$ and let us consider the collection Σ which includes all binary subsets, as well as the set X itself. The choice function is specified by $c(X) = \{\omega\}$, $c(\{i, \omega\}) = \{i, \omega\}$ for all $i \in \mathbf{Z}_+$, and finally, $c(\{i, j\}) = \{j\}$ when $j > i$. Then $(X, \Sigma, c) \in T_{\mathcal{R}}$, and has the feature that ω is uniquely chosen from X , but it beats no $i \in \mathbf{Z}_+$.

Consider the following choice function: (X', Σ', c') , where $X' = \{1, 2, \omega\}$, $\Sigma' = \{\{1, 2\}, \{2, \omega\}, \{1, 2, \omega\}\}$, and $c'(\{1, 2\}) = \{2\}$, $c'(\{2, \omega\}) = \{2, \omega\}$, and $c'(\{1, 2, \omega\}) = \{\omega\}$. Clearly $(X', \Sigma', c') \notin T_{\mathcal{R}}$ as if it were, any R which rationalizes c' must have that $2 R 1$ and $2 R \omega$, which would imply that $2 \in c'(\{1, 2, \omega\})$, a contradiction.

However any dataset contained in (X', Σ', c') can be rationalized by (X, Σ, c) , a contradiction.

Proposition 13.7 demonstrates that none of the choice theories mentioned in Corollary 13.6 are equivalent to their empirical content, even when we can express set containment.

13.4 CHAPTER REFERENCES

Theorem 13.1 and Corollary 13.2 are due to Chambers, Echenique, and Shmaya (2014). This result is related to a theorem of Tarski (1954), which characterizes those theories that are universally axiomatizable. Tarski's result relies on the axiom of choice, while Theorem 13.1 does not. The working paper version of Chambers, Echenique, and Shmaya (2014) has results for languages

with constants and function symbols. A collection of papers apply Tarski's result to the issue of falsifiability; see Simon and Groen (1973); Simon (1979, 1983); Rynasiewicz (1983); Simon (1985); Shen and Simon (1993).

Popper (1959) is a seminal reference in the philosophy of science, viewing falsifiable theories as those that admit universal axiomatizations. Much early literature in philosophy of science was concerned with whether the restrictions on observable relations imposed by axioms involving unobservable relations could be expressed in terms of observable relations alone. Craig (1956) provides a seminal result in this direction.

Adams, Fagot, and Robinson (1970) seem to be the first social scientists to discuss empirical content in a formal sense (see also Pfanzagl, Baumann, and Huber, 1971, and Adams, 1992). This work defines two theories to be empirically equivalent if the set of all axioms (of a certain type) consistent with one theory is equivalent to the set of all axioms consistent with the other. These works do not provide a general characterization of the axiomatic structure of empirical content, but rather focus on characterizing the empirical content of specific theories. Finally, there is an approach in philosophy of science called *structuralism*, which also comes close to the approach we have taken here. These works also adopt a model-theoretic perspective to investigating theories. Sneed (1971) is a classic reference as applied to physics. Stegmüller, Balzer, and Spohn (1982) present a collection applications of these ideas to economics.

Schipper (2009) has a notion of theory that is similar to ours.

The theory discussed in Section 13.2 is due to Masatlioglu and Ok (2014). The analysis of this section appeared in a working version of Chambers, Echenique, and Shmaya (2014).

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