



Why common sense doesn't always make sense



In my heart of hearts I am an academic. I am curious, I want to understand the world and learn new things every day. Yet the more I learn, the more I understand that I will never know even a fraction of it all.

My late grandfather, Kai Setälä, was a professor of medicine. His science was always more natural than mine. Mine was always more social than his. He was a scientist, I am a political scientist.

I remember the talks we used to have about the methodology of science. His theories had to be clear, precise and

quantified. My social science was always a bit more flimsy. He had clear answers; I was trying to find clarity with my questions.

Against this background I enjoyed reading Duncan J. Watts' book *Everything Is Obvious *Once You Know the Answer: How Common Sense Fails Us*. He argues that "the outcomes we observe in life – explanations that seem obvious once we know the answer – are less useful than they seem."

Watts, a principal researcher at Microsoft, makes the simple observation that we should not try to apply the same rules to social and natural sciences. Rocket science is difficult, but we are actually better at planning the flight path of a rocket than we are at managing the economy.

Arguing against common sense is not easy, because in our day-to-day lives it is indeed a good thing. The problem arises, Watts

argues, when we start trying to apply common sense to more complex issues.

The application of common sense to business, markets, politics or international relations rarely works. This is relevant because a lot of big decisions are made on the basis of assumed common sense.

POLITICIANS THINK THEY KNOW how to deal with poverty – and prepare policies accordingly. Advertising agencies base their marketing plans on assumptions about what the consumer wants.

Some things seem obvious in hindsight. Watts is correct in arguing that "the paradox of common sense...is that even as it helps to make sense of the

world, it can actively undermine our ability to understand it."

This is the problem. We look at something retrospectively and believe that we have an answer for the future, that we know how it is all going to work the next time around. This is where I think we go wrong. The world is complex. Every problem is different, thus solutions must vary.

I think my grandfather and Watts are right. In our daily lives it is absolutely fine to try to find common sense answers to simple questions. But when it comes to more complex questions, common sense is often an impediment to a solution.

Questioning your own beliefs is not easy, but it is a good start to finding an answer. The worst type of politician is the one who thinks that he knows it all. And then when something goes wrong he says that it came as no surprise. Well, Watts' book surprised me – it made sense. ●

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