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# Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, and Common Knowledge

*Michael Suk-Young Chwe*

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**Michael Suk-Young Chwe : Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, and Common Knowledge** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, and Common Knowledge:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. great overview but needs more substanceBy lou whoWhat purpose do rituals serve? How can people coordinate behavior when many solutions exist? Michael Chwe's book hopes to answer these questions from the perspective of knowledge. He contends that community rituals and education are a

means to form common knowledge and initiate individuals into the group. Most interactions are not zero-sum games of conflict: instead, individuals must understand how to coordinate behavior when there are many potential ideal equilibria. Hence, believing that information is the same across individuals can help when attempting to choose amongst multiple equilibria. Chwe offers insight into how these rituals can help separate equilibria, however he falls a bit shy of the mark when he attempts to address counter points to his arguments. Despite this shortcoming, his book offers an interesting overview of the significance of common knowledge and rituals that is short, accessible, and easy to read. Chwe shows that rational behavior motivates individuals to seek common knowledge if they hope to interact in any form of group environment (in which coordination/cooperation is needed). Often in these interactions, individual behavior is conditioned not upon an individual's knowledge, but what that individual perceives others to know. Rituals are one means of generating common knowledge and the specific behavior within the rituals is designed to lay a basic foundation for future interactions. Alternatives to these rituals are costly in that they would require explicit communication on the individual level, or small-group level, but again not everyone could be certain of the knowledge others possess. Chwe uses examples to explain how agents are able to coordinate, showing that many cultural practices are about reinforcing what they already know. Chwe's focus is upon coordination problems in which each person's desire to participate is contingent upon the behavior of others (only wants to participate when others do). He argues that others focus upon different equilibria while the means of coordinating behavior can shed the most light on human behavior. The common solution to coordination problems is some form of ritual, rally or ceremony in which common knowledge necessary for the coordination is generated. Cultural practices coordinate behavior among citizens and create a display in which all are aware that everyone else is participating (and thus legitimizing) the authority. Here, the significance is public attitude and display, not private emotions or ideas of participants: each individual agent could have private thoughts about the illegitimacy of the regime, but unless s/he knows others' thoughts, s/he is likely to continue participating as a loyal constituent (or may try to rebel and create a new group of common knowledge). The framework Chwe creates allows the reader to gain a new understanding of many common features of society quite easily while developing an appreciation for the significance of culture. The first portion of the book reads as though he is setting up a big reveal--an explanation for why society is as it is--but this is not quite borne out in the second half. Once he transitions to information networks and information, it seems as though he either loses steam or expertise. Chwe theorizes that strong-link networks allow individuals to create common knowledge through the redundancy in connections in a way that weak-link networks cannot, despite their increased ability to spread information rapidly. However, it seems more a notion than a claim. As he addresses alternate explanations of rituals, he again offers observations and explanations that counter existing understandings, but he lacks the thorough analysis he employed in the first portion of the book. Chwe could strengthen his position by developing his arguments against those who claim common knowledge is not possible and by recognizing the limitations of common knowledge (and whether the existence of common knowledge can drive the population to less-than desirable outcomes). With respect to limitations of common knowledge, he does mention that there are limitations of what individuals can know or how 'meta' brains can go, but this needs to be more fully developed. A nice extension would include examples of how much individuals really are aware of common knowledge, or some analysis of an important ritual and what it conveys. He uses an example regarding how children do seem to be aware of some forms of common knowledge, but it is a bit thin. He could really expand here (and perhaps has in subsequent works) with an integration of his explanation of meaning and common knowledge in the following section. Publicity and common knowledge generation, he explains, must be considered in understanding cultural practices but content and publicity are never completely separable (and in fact, may interact). This may be partially true because content and publicity both have an implied audience. If he included a discussion on symbols and their tie to rituals (for example, rings with marriage, or the message conveyed by visible and hidden tattoos), he would have provided more ground for himself. Individuals often choose to access common knowledge banks when they engage in symbolic behavior, which would indicate that there is an awareness of common knowledge that is called upon when interacting with others. Such ideas would bolster his claims and add additional depth to his arguments.

6 of 9 people found the following review helpful. fascinating but a little disappointing  
By Henry A. Kim  
All of Mike Chwe's papers are on line--including all those included in this book. That's really the only reason that this gets four, rather than five stars.  
The book (and Chwe's work in general) breaks fascinating ground where economics, with its hyper-rationalistic bias, has often refused to tread: the realm of culture, customs, and norms. He argues, convincingly, that these seemingly irrational behaviors often have very rational foundations, specifically due to problems posed by scarce information and inference. This isn't necessarily shocking to various subtopics in economics--Condorcet Jury Theorem comes to mind as a classic example, as are recent advances in behavioral finance--but Chwe's approach takes it to far more commonplace varieties of social interactions than, for example, the economics of financial market bubbles and manias.

6 of 11 people found the following review helpful. A theoretical book with popular appeal.  
By A Customer  
I find this book to be simply compelling. Easy to read and approachable, yet the logic and theories behind the premise are rock solid. What boggles the mind is how incredibly pervasive the concepts are in today's information society. I can see that this book will soon be required reading for advertisement executives, psychologists, sociologists, business school students. This is a powerful look at ourselves and what drives

our behavior on a daily basis. Outstanding.

Why do Internet, financial service, and beer commercials dominate Super Bowl advertising? How do political ceremonies establish authority? Why does repetition characterize anthems and ritual speech? Why were circular forms favored for public festivals during the French Revolution? This book answers these questions using a single concept: common knowledge. Game theory shows that in order to coordinate its actions, a group of people must form "common knowledge." Each person wants to participate only if others also participate. Members must have knowledge of each other, knowledge of that knowledge, knowledge of the knowledge of that knowledge, and so on. Michael Chwe applies this insight, with striking erudition, to analyze a range of rituals across history and cultures. He shows that public ceremonies are powerful not simply because they transmit meaning from a central source to each audience member but because they let audience members know what other members know. For instance, people watching the Super Bowl know that many others are seeing precisely what they see and that those people know in turn that many others are also watching. This creates common knowledge, and advertisers selling products that depend on consensus are willing to pay large sums to gain access to it. Remarkably, a great variety of rituals and ceremonies, such as formal inaugurations, work in much the same way. By using a rational-choice argument to explain diverse cultural practices, Chwe argues for a close reciprocal relationship between the perspectives of rationality and culture. He illustrates how game theory can be applied to an unexpectedly broad spectrum of problems, while showing in an admirably clear way what game theory might hold for scholars in the social sciences and humanities who are not yet acquainted with it.

"Communal activities, with lots of emotional and symbolic content . . . serve a rational purpose, argues Michael Suk-Young Chwe. . . . [His] work, like his own academic career, bridges several social sciences."--Virginia Postrel, *New York Times* "A welcome addition. . . . Rational Ritual . . . can be understood and enjoyed by almost anyone interested in human interaction."--Vincent P. Crawford, *Journal of Economic Literature* From the Inside Flap "This is a very compelling and original work. It is the best conceptual book I have read in economics in several years. It will have an immediate and enthusiastic readership in the social sciences and will make Chwe's name as an important thinker."--Tyler Cowen, George Mason University "Rational Ritual is engaging, well organized, and well written. It brings together the tools of game theory and the issues posed within a wide variety of areas of contemporary social theory to address an important problem. Students and scholars in diverse academic disciplines--including political science, sociology, anthropology, and some areas of cultural studies--will find the book both relevant and accessible."--David Ruccio, University of Notre Dame From the Back Cover "This is a very compelling and original work. It is the best conceptual book I have read in economics in several years. It will have an immediate and enthusiastic readership in the social sciences and will make Chwe's name as an important thinker."--Tyler Cowen, George Mason University "Rational Ritual is engaging, well organized, and well written. It brings together the tools of game theory and the issues posed within a wide variety of areas of contemporary social theory to address an important problem. Students and scholars in diverse academic disciplines--including political science, sociology, anthropology, and some areas of cultural studies--will find the book both relevant and accessible."--David Ruccio, University of Notre Dame