

# An excerpt from Beyond the Neglectful State

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It is often taken for granted that what one is attempting to explain or predict is unaffected by our attempts to do so: predicting a solar eclipse does not affect its timing. However, in systems in which the behaviour of human beings plays a part, ‘public definitions of a situation (prophecies or predictions) become an integral part of the situation and thus affect subsequent developments’. (Merton, 1948) Merton underlines this point via a parable about a bank which is in good financial health, but becomes insolvent as a result of a rumour. The rumour causes more and more of its customers to want to withdraw their money; queues get steadily longer, and the bank does not have enough cash at hand to fulfil all these requests. There is a run on the bank, and it collapses. The bank *becomes* insolvent, in a self-fulfilling prophecy: an initially false view of a situation becomes true because people act as if it is. I describe this feature of complex systems as their *performativity*.

Performativity is a well-known phenomenon in economics, leading to a whole literature on the extent to which economic models and predictions influence markets—pithily summed up by the economist Charles Goodhart, who was then an advisor to the Bank of England, in what has come to be known as Goodhart’s law: ‘Any observed statistical regularity will tend to collapse once pressure is placed upon it for control purposes.’ In short, how the human beings who partially compose a system interpret elements of the system, and how easy or difficult the expectations of others make it for them to get what they want, will alter the behaviour of that system.<sup>1</sup>

Performativity can work both for good and ill. If you assume that someone is hostile to you, and then act on that basis, and they then respond to your apparent distrust, and you

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<sup>1</sup>The changing role of volatility (where volatility measures the extent of price changes within a market) provides a vivid example. Back in the 1950s, some traders and economists thought it would be useful to start measuring the volatility of financial markets, and such measures gradually gained acceptance. By 1993, the Chicago Board Options Exchange’s Volatility Index (VIX) was launched, which allowed traders to make bets on future volatility. By 2018 betting on volatility had become so popular that it had started to destabilise markets around the world, leading to massive losses. Measuring, and betting on volatility had greatly increased volatility. See Wigglesworth (APRIL 12, 2018, 2018-04) for more on this.

then take their response as evidence of their hostility, then things can easily escalate into a full-blown enmity in which it is *true* that the other person is hostile to you, even though this is true only because of your initial false assumption. Start with the assumption that the other is trustworthy and likeable and act on this basis, then the cascade of behaviour may go the other way; the other returns the openness and compliments, which are interpreted as signs of friendliness and as the cause for further friendly moves.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, we are not spectators or detached scientific investigators of social reality, but the actors who are creating the show.

William James gives a seminal analysis of the ethical implications of performativity in his 1897 essay, ‘The Will to Believe’. James argues that while we usually start from the thought that we should only believe something if it is true, there is a vast and vital class of cases where whether something is (or will be) true depends on whether we (and others) are willing to act on the basis that it is. We see this in cases such as friendship, but also in the construction of social reality more generally.

Few things are as important for day-to-day life as money, but yet money is clearly and deeply socially constructed. The earliest widely used currencies were commodity currencies, which were taken to be valuable because of the materials (and the quantity) of materials from which they were composed—as when the worth of a gold coins derives from the fact that it is certain weight of gold. Later, representative currencies were introduced: coins and banknotes were taken to represent, and be exchangeable on demand for, a certain value of commodities. The twentieth century saw the rise of fiat currencies, where the value of the money comes neither from the materials from which it is made, nor from the fact that there is a legal right to exchange it for commodities, but has value as a medium of exchange because a government stands behind it.

The shift to fiat (and the twenty-first century rise of cryptocurrencies) has made clear that money need not have any physical form at all. What makes something money at all, and what other goods it can be exchanged for, depends on the willingness of others to treat it as money, and alters according to the dynamics of social systems. This much becomes painfully obvious in circumstances such as the hyperinflation in Germany in 1992–3, or Zimbabwe in 2008–9; but even in more ordinary circumstances the exchange rates of fiat currencies are continually altering on the basis of bets on the confidence of different economies.<sup>3</sup>

This are just one example of the myriad ways in which social construction and performativity make a difference to our lives. The fundamental challenge for positions that aim to treat truths as something wholly separate from us, and which need to be somehow applied in order to decide what to do, is thus that the social reality to which we would be attempting to ‘apply’ these truths is not fixed separate from what we do, but is partly constituted by it. Vaccination policy, public trust in use of healthcare data, and social equality each show this

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<sup>2</sup>Easwaran relates the following parable: ‘We have a story in India about two men, one high-minded and generous, the other very selfish, who were sent to foreign lands and asked to tell what kind of people they found there. The first reported that he found people basically good at heart, not very different from those at home. The second man felt envious hearing this, for in the place he visited everyone was selfish, scheming and cruel. Both, of course, were describing the same land.’ (1986, p. 66)

<sup>3</sup>For a history of money, see Weatherford (1997).

dynamic clearly.

High rates of childhood vaccination are vital in order to prevent outbreaks of measles and other contagious diseases. In the case of measles, a vaccination rate of upwards of 90% (and preferably 95%) is required to prevent outbreaks. Where the vaccination rate begins to fall significantly below this, governments have a choice about whether to make vaccination mandatory, and if so what penalties to apply to vaccine hesitancy or refusal. Whether making vaccination mandatory is a good solution to this problem, and whether it would even increase vaccination rates, depends to a significant degree on how citizens interpret the policy. Mandating vaccination might increase both vaccination rates and public confidence in vaccination, if citizens are moved by the dangers that would come from the loss of herd immunity, and feel that it is reasonable to require everyone to play their part in protecting the common good. Conversely, making mandatory a vaccination policy that was previously supported on voluntary basis may act to reduce public confidence in it, and if the coercion is perceived to be heavy-handed or unmerited, may increase vaccine refusals.

What counts as a violation of privacy is partly constituted by social norms and expectations. Obligations of privacy and confidentiality are ethically interesting in that while they are clearly of the first importance within healthcare, it is also the case that they are highly malleable (norms about privacy and confidentiality can differ greatly between contexts, and between states), and that what individuals choose or consent to makes a significant (but not total) difference to the obligations that others face. Reasonable expectations create a set of normative defaults, which then need to be overridden if the default is not going to happen. Such expectations play a *constitutive* rather than an *instrumental* role in creating obligations: it is not that clinicians merely should have regard to the fact that patients are likely to be surprised or angry if their data is used in certain ways, but also that these expectations play an important role in making it the case that there are certain obligations in the first place. (Taylor and Wilson, 2019; Rumbold and Wilson, 2019; Nissenbaum, 2009)

Being treated by others as an equal is a vital pre-requisite for self-respect and self-esteem. Yet the conditions under which it is reasonable to think of oneself as an equal to others, or to feel slighted by not being treated as an equal are largely or completely socially constructed. Constructs such as 'race', social class, and caste can make profound differences to the life chances of those who find themselves labelled as part of a less favoured group, despite the fact that these delineations amount to nothing over and above a collective willingness to judge and to enforce judgements on this basis. Power is crucial to these dynamics. Filling out what it is to treat individuals as equals within a modern healthcare system, thus requires engaging in the kinds of detailed contextual understanding of the kinds of ways that equality can be undermined and what to do about it (for example, properly understanding mental health stigma, and how to counteract it), which must start from and work within the social construction of reality.

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