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## The Physicists

Gerold Permoser



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We were reading way too little in high school. As a result, I sometimes find myself reading books that others read, discussed, and understood at the age of 16 at school. Recently I was reading Friedrich Dürrenmatt's "The Physicists", one of the best-known plays of German literature. Written in the shadow of a mushroom cloud, it deals with the responsibility of science. Can science be good or bad per se? Can the human race handle scientific discoveries? Are scientists responsible for the consequences of their actions? Big issues that keep coming up today as well, if we think about big data.

Big Data contains a lot of good. Just think of early detection of cancer. Algorithms are able to calculate the probability of a person suffering from cancer from his online search queries. If someone googles certain symptoms such as pain or fatigue, the algorithm's alarm bells are ringing. Isn't that a great technology that is capable of providing someone with the chance of a therapy due to early warning at a stage where the chances of a complete recovery are significant?

Big Data gives rise to a lot of controversy. Just think of social scoring, for example. Your friends, your media consumption, your daily habits, your sports activities, your opinions, everything you do is recorded, evaluated, and ultimately channelled into a rating. – A number that expresses your value and your opportunities as human being. This is a world that Marc Elsberg described in his dystopian thriller "Zero – They Know Everything You Do" a few years ago. In 2014, the Chinese State Council decided to introduce such a system by 2020. The Social Score will then be crucial for access to credit, university admission, jobs in the public sector, or the chance to travel abroad.

In the annex to his book, Dürrenmatt summed up his drama theory in "21 Points to the Physicists". They are:

1. I don't start out with a thesis but with a story.
2. If you start out with a story you must think it through to its conclusion.
3. A story has been thought out to its conclusion when it has taken its worst possible turn.
4. The worst possible turn is not foreseeable. It occurs by accident.
5. The art of the playwright consists in employing, to the most effective degree possible, accident within the action.
6. The carriers of dramatic action are human beings.
7. Accident in dramatic action consists in when and where who happens to meet whom.
8. The more human beings proceed by plan the more effectively they may be hit by accident.
9. Human beings proceeding by plan wish to reach a specific goal. They are most severely hit by accident when through it they reach the opposite of their goal: the very thing they feared, they sought to avoid (i.e. Oedipus).
0. Such a story, though it is grotesque, is not absurd (contrary to meaning).
  1. It is paradoxical.
  2. Playwrights, no less than logicians, are unable to avoid the paradoxical.
  3. Physicists, no less than logicians, are unable to avoid the paradoxical.
  4. A drama about physicists must be paradoxical.
  5. It cannot have as its goal the content of physics, but its effect.
  6. The content of physics is the concern of physicists, its effect the concern of all men.
  7. What concerns everyone can only be resolved by everyone.
  8. Each attempt of an individual to resolve for himself what is the concern of everyone is doomed to fail.
  9. Within the paradoxical appears reality.
  0. He who confronts the paradoxical exposes himself to reality.
  1. Drama can dupe the spectator into exposing himself to reality but cannot compel him to withstand it or even to master it.

I do not have an answer to the question of whether Big Data is good or bad, but I do know that it is reality and that we have to face this reality.

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