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SYMPOSIUM: Statistical Prediction and Decision-Making. How Scientific Techniques of Anticipation Transform Deliberation and Choice – the Medicinal Field

A patient undergoes a health check and is told about various threatening diseases she might contract in the future and about further test and monitoring options. A convicted pickpocket is kept in preventive detention because a software program has flagged him as a high risk of future offenses. A health insurance promises to lower premiums if they can monitor the customer's health behavior by an app. As these examples show, in various areas of life people are treated as risk profiles whose future can be statistically calculated. Be it in the field of crime prevention, medicine, climate protection or e-commerce: It becomes more and more natural to make decisions against the background of an anticipated future. Before the advent of prevention and insurance technologies in the 19th century, choices between statistically calculated risks would have been considered a wager or gamble, but not a reasonable decision. Today, however, risk informed decision-making is considered the most rational way to act.

Techniques of predicting the future, fundamentally transform our understanding of time and individuality. The subject of this symposium is the interrelated transformation of time, individuality, and decision-making in the horizon of anticipated futures. How does medical prediction differ from medical prognosis? What happens when the future is not anticipated based on the tangible presence, but the presence is deduced from a calculated future as in the case of a risk profile? In statistics, the basis of scientific prediction, the individual is only accessible as a risk profile derived from collectives. Thus, all techniques of statistical forecasting entail a paradox: They inevitably eclipse the individual they aim to get a hold of. How does this paradox transform the meaning of individuality? Finally, medical decision-making used to rest on the mindful judgment of the physician. In the epistemic realm of prediction, however, it is not the tangible presence (of the patient) that informs deliberation and decision-making, but calculated future scenarios. How does this transformation correlate with the increasing programming of decision-making? What happens when judgment is substituted by algorithmic rationality?

Medicine plays a key role in the scientific and technogene redefinition of subjectivity and is thus an excellent mirror for social transformations. Hence, medicine is an ideal field of study to analyze the epistemic shifts and social conflicts that emerge when judgment and decision are reshaped by predictive knowledge and programmed decision aids.

The symposium will take place from March, 5th to 7th (Thursday noon to Saturday noon) at the Institute of Advanced Study "Hanse Wissenschaftskolleg" in Delmenhorst (close to Bremen).