Big Data: Appearance and Disappearance

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Abstract : The mainstay of Big Data is prediction in that it allows practitioners, researchers, and policy analysts to predict trends based upon the analysis of large and varied sources of data. These can range from changing social and political opinions, patterns in crimes, and consumer behaviour. Big Data has therefore shifted the criterion of success in science from causal explanations to predictive modelling and simulation. The 19th-century science sought to capture phenomena and seek to show the appearance of it through causal mechanisms while 20th-century science attempted to save the appearance and relinquish causal explanations. Now 21st-century science in the form of Big Data is concerned with the prediction of appearances and nothing more. However, this pulls social science back in the direction of a more rule- or law-governed reality model of science and away from a consideration of the internal nature of rules in relation to various practices. In effect Big Data offers us no more than a world of surface appearance and in doing so it makes disappear any context-specific conceptual sensitivity.