

Measuring Up (or Down?)

How the Best of Intentions Lead to
Undesirable Consequences

31st May 2012
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1 | INTRODUCTION

It is a pleasure to be a part of the academia, a job most sought after by many since time immemorial. For it is in this profession that one can find the most rewarding experiences by way of supervising young minds to seek truth and beauty in all disciplines of knowledge. And what joy it is to see that this then becomes the basis upon which useful contribution to society can be made.

I have been fortunate to be a member of the academia for about 20 years now. Along the way, I believe I have seen and gone through a myriad of experiences that have illuminated and formed my take on life to be what it is today. I always try to be as open-minded and as non-presumptuous as I can, to see both sides of the coin, so to speak. What more if the coin in question is no longer one with two sides only, but a multifaceted one, representing the very complex world that we live in. If only there are just two perspectives to a conundrum -- the job of solving it and simplifying it would have not been too difficult to accomplish. But unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, this is not to be. Our world and all the issues it contains remain highly complex, that even the most brilliant among us will never ever do a good job at specifying fully the structures that

underlie our institutions, and the actions we can take to transform the institutions to work perfectly. And even if we think we do, we will discover that our knowledge and ideas of it are inconsistent and contradictory to one another.

It is against this backdrop that I present my humble view point. When the organisers of this event insisted that I do a professorial talk, I was filled with a mortifying sense of both discomfort and fear. For, if I were to do it, there is no other subject that I would care to touch upon other than one that has brought some degree of misery to me personally, and scorn to many, including the establishments and institutions that I once had very high respect and admiration for. Indeed, this day, I will speak my mind on a matter that had once been my idea of the 'perfect way' to diagnose the world and all its complexities, a matter that had started small and well-intentioned in the minds of many, but alas, in my opinion, has taken a life of its own and has grown uncontrollably. It has now morphed into something horribly wrong. In doing so, I know I will be threading the delicate balance of sensitivities, but I feel that what I have to say deserves a chance to see the light of day, even if it is only for this one occasion alone.

2 | HOW THE SUBJECT OF MEASURING IS CLOSE TO ME

The said subject matter is that of the act of measuring. You see, I have been in the world of measuring since my PhD days more than two decades ago. I was doing a study on how manufacturing organisations in the UK *measured* their quality position. In essence, I investigated how these organisations placed themselves (or, put it another way, how they *measured* themselves) as far as *quality* was concerned. Since the year was 1990, *quality* was still relatively new and very much in fashion. Everybody wanted to be a part of it, but nobody was quite so sure how to do it.