**Opacity and trust in institutions**

*Trust, respect, recognition panel, PERITIA, Dublin, 24/3/23*

This talk is based on work with Havi Carel, University of Bristol (cf. Carel and Kidd 2022).

We describe a phenomenon we call **institutional opacity** and give four reasons it is a problem for trust in institutions.

**Institutional opacity.**

Institutional opacity is a general tendency of large, specialised, internally complex institutions to increasingly become resistant to epistemic assessment and understanding.

Comments:

1. Institutions can be **more or less opaque** in ways that can change over time.
2. Institutions can be **locally** or **globally** opaque.
3. Institutions may be **differentially opaque** to agents, users, and third parties.
4. Some degree of opacity is **unavoidable**: some key features of institutions:

* large, hierarchical, and compartmentalised.
* distinctive norms, routines, and stipulated styles of interpersonal interaction.
* periodic restructurings, redefinition of roles and responsibilities.
* terminologies, acronyms, abbreviations, informal idiolects.

Such features make it difficult to ‘see’ and understand the institution’s arrangements and operations, which in turn makes it increasingly difficult to engage in critical assessment. What is opaque, depending on context, could include:

* specific decisions and actions.
* whole chains of decision-making – ‘all along the line’ or at specific key stages.
* patterns of investment and prioritisation (and disinvestment and deprioritization).

**The costs of institutional opacity.**

Institutional opacity characterises situations where the institution—or aspects thereof—has become increasingly resistant to epistemic assessment and understanding.

Note the obvious solution – more transparency! – is also problematic (Nguyen 2022).

**Problems of opacity (1): epistemic agency.**

1. Institutional opacity imposes **high epistemic demands** on agents and users (one will need new or enhanced kinds of confidence, understanding, investigative abilities, and communicative competences).
2. Institutional opacityimpedes**individualepistemic agency** by obscuring the relevant standards, conditions, decision-making procedures, and styles of comportment that enable one to perform as a confident, credible epistemic agent.

Such effects will be disproportionately affect certain – usually marginalised – social groups.

**Problems of opacity (2): estrangement and cynicism.**

In some cases, opacity is interpreted, rightly or not, as a product of deliberate **opacification**:

1. Institutional opacity can encourage a sense of **estrangement**: the institution starts to seem strange, its decisions obscure, its reasoning impenetrable, and slowly becomes a source of confusion and frustration. This can lead to **distrust** – I cannot reliably tell *what* the institution’s *actual* commitments are (cf. Hawley 2014).
2. Institutional opacity can feed a kind of **cynicism**, the convictions that the *professed* motivations, reasoning, values of an institution are, or are likely to be, (i) **different** and (ii) epistemically and/or morally **lesser** than the *actual* ones (Kidd 2023).

If this is right, institutional opacity is one important obstacle to sustaining institutional trust.

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