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The Presentation of Hidden Selves

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in voce **a.Goffman**

Abstract

Goffman's dramaturgy as inference over hidden social state: performances, fronts, and the POMDP structure of everyday encounters.

Introduction

Erving Goffman described social life as a stage on which selves are **performed** and **managed**. This essay reframes that vocabulary in the language of **partial observability**: interactants observe cues and infer intentions, competence, and moral character that remain latent—hidden state in a social POMDP.

Front stage, back stage, and belief

Front region performances correspond to observable emissions; **back region** preparations correspond to latent dynamics. Trust, embarrassment, and “face work” are **belief updates** when the hidden process leaks into view. Goffman’s micro-sociology is therefore continuous with Bayesian theories of mind—though affect and dignity add normative weight pure likelihoods omit.

Applications

Online identity multiplies fronts; latency and editability change what “sincerity” can mean. Institutional roles—clinician, teacher, officer—bundle expectations that constrain how much latent strain may surface. For AI evaluation, the lesson is sharp: benchmarks that score static worlds miss the **interactional** heart of intelligence.

History and method

Goffman’s ethnographic imagination drew on mid-century fieldwork; updating his framework requires attention to digital ethnography, platform governance, and cross-cultural variation in face norms—topics the essay sketches without pretending closure.

Conclusion

Hidden selves are not bugs in social life; they are structural features of coordination. Good maps of interaction must model what actors cannot—and should not—fully disclose in real time.

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