

# HOW CAN THREAT ASSESSMENTS BECOME SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES?

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## ABSTRACT

In this essay, the writer examines how threat assessments can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Firstly, he explains the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy which results from actors believing and expecting a purported eventual state of affairs and then unwittingly rendering it true via their corresponding attempts to manipulate its emergence. Next, he analyses how states make threat assessments in the context of an anarchic system. Through the examples of the Cuban missile crisis, Al Qaeda in Iraq and bioterrorism, he illustrates the role of perception and misperception in transforming threat assessments into self-fulfilling prophecies. He then discusses the nuclear domino theory and its association with Taiwan to exemplify how a vicious, self-fulfillment spiral can be negated. Finally, the writer concludes that when caught in a self-fulfilling prophecy, it will be best to reflect on the prophesied outcome and alter one's behaviour in response, so as to break out of the self-fulfillment cycle.

Keywords: *Capabilities, Prophecy, System, Threats, Paradox*

## INTRODUCTION

Since the discovery of Iran's nuclear facility at Natanz a decade ago, Israel has been engaged in cloak and dagger operations, actively seeking to derail Iran's nuclear ambition. However, the Islamic Republic has managed to remain defiant despite the onslaught of implicit threats, muscle flexing, convoluted diplomacy and intelligence intrigues. This notwithstanding, Israel has consistently warned that a nuclear-armed Iran would not be tolerated, and that direct military intervention would be an eventuality if Iran does not change course. Yet, taken to its logical conclusion, if Israel opts for pre-emption and prevention, the attack would probably harden Iran's resolve to secure nuclear capabilities, if only to retaliate at Israel for the humiliation. In other words, Israel would have initiated a self-fulfilling prophecy, trading the mere possibility of an attack for its certainty.<sup>1</sup> Is this the fate awaiting the Israelis? Can the cycle of self-fulfilment be broken?

This essay examines how threat assessments can become self-fulfilling prophecies. First it will review the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy, also variously

known as the 'Oedipus effect', 'boot-strapped induction' or the 'Barnesian performativity'.<sup>2</sup> Next, it analyses how states make threat assessments in the context of an anarchic system. Through the examples of the Cuban missile crisis, Al Qaeda in Iraq and bioterrorism, it will illustrate the role of perception and misperception in transforming threat assessments into self-fulfilling prophecies. He then discusses the nuclear domino theory and its association with Taiwan to exemplify how a vicious, self-fulfilment spiral can be negated. The writer then concludes that since the process of threat assessment is inherently imperfect, states should practice self-reflexivity if they wish to avoid the tragedy of King Laius of Thebes and Macbeth, who in their efforts to forestall an undesirable outcome, consequently perpetrated a course of events that ironically realised that very outcome.

## CONCEPT OF SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

A self-fulfilling prophecy, as defined by sociologist Robert Merton, is 'a false definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the originally false conception come true.'<sup>3</sup> In coining the



*The Peloponnesian War alliances at 431 BC.  
Orange; Athenian Empire and Allies  
Green: Spartan Confederacy*

term, Robert Merton drew inspiration from fellow sociologist W. I. Thomas, who observed that ‘If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.’<sup>4</sup> David Houghton suggested that it is not necessary for the espoused outcome or idea to be patently false from the outset, to qualify as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Ambiguity regarding its actualisation is a sufficient criterion.<sup>5</sup> Michael Biggs added that the concept implied that ‘the actors within the process—or at least some of them—fail to understand how their own beliefs have helped to construct that reality.’<sup>6</sup> In essence, a self-fulfilling prophecy results from actors believing and expecting a purported eventual state of affairs and then unwittingly rendering it true via their corresponding attempts to manipulate its emergence.

Self-fulfilling prophecies involve institutional facts, which become true only when they are widely believed, rather than brute facts, which remain true

regardless of the degree of acceptance. For example, the prevailing notion that ‘democracies do not fight each other’ is an institutional fact that would be invalidated should two or more cases of war break out between established democracies. In contrast, the existence of electricity is a brute fact, and no amount of disbelief would ever make one immune to the effects of being struck by lightning.<sup>7</sup>

For a proposal to seize the imagination and become self-fulfilling, it must possess what Malcolm terms the ‘stickiness factor’ and the ‘power of context’.<sup>8</sup> This means that the proposal must be memorable and communicated when the timing and climate is apt, so that the audience is receptive. If the idea fails to take root or elicit a response, the mechanism promoting self-fulfillment breaks down, since behaviour that would lead to the predicted outcome evolving into the empirical truth is not set in motion.

Arguably, the Peloponnesian War is an example of a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which a prevalent belief in the inevitability of conflict between the belligerents contributed to its commencement. As Thucydides explained in the Melian Dialogue, the fierce rivalry between Athens and Sparta led to the anticipation that they would eventually come to blows.<sup>9</sup> Thus, each made military preparations accordingly to defend themselves. However, this was misread in turn by the other as signs of mobilisation for hostilities, propagating further mistrust. Anticipation then became reality when the situation degenerated into hegemonic warfare, thus consummating the opposing Greeks’ worst fears.

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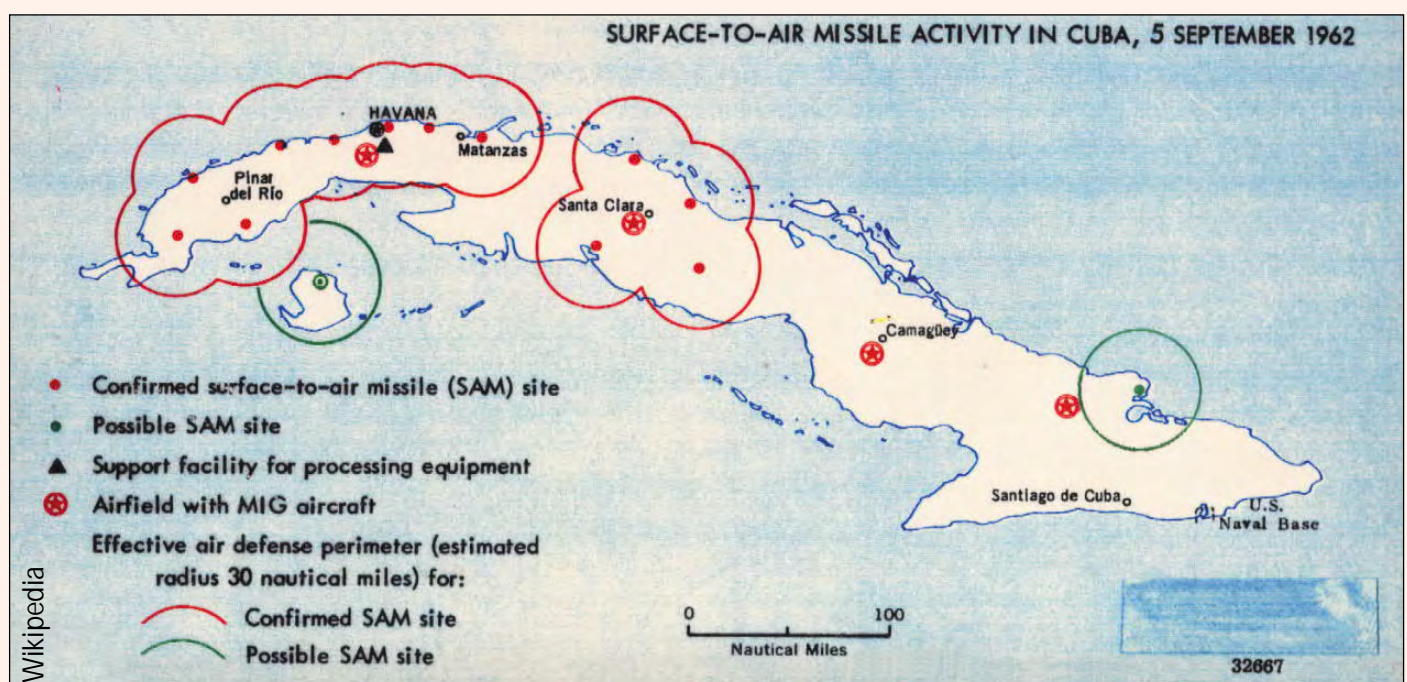
## THREAT ASSESSMENT, SECURITY PARADOX AND THE PROBLEM OF MISPERCEPTION

From the realist's perspective, power is the currency of international politics and states have little choice but to pursue its accumulation in order to obtain security. According to John Mearsheimer, in this system of anarchy where there is no overarching arbiter to maintain order, states vie for power with hegemony as their final goal.<sup>10</sup> This is because only by becoming the hegemon can survival be considerably guaranteed. The quest for power is thus a self-help, zero-sum game in which one state's gain is another state's loss. In order to maximise their relative power, states are inclined to think offensively. Even states 'which seek only to be secure ... [are forced to] act aggressively towards each other.'<sup>11</sup> This implies that there is an inherent uncertainty and fear surrounding the intent of states. In such an environment, each state 'interprets its own measures as defensive and measures of others as potentially threatening', thereby creating the perception that a pre-emptive (or offensive) attack is a safer, more preferable course of action than (defensive) co-operation.<sup>12</sup>

In general, there are two kinds of threats—conditional and situational.<sup>13</sup> Conditional threats—are issued to signal commitment and resolve, for instance,

to deter a would-be challenger. For conditional threats, what matters is not the amount of punishment it can muster but its perception by the other actor. On the other hand, situational threats are those that are intrinsic to the environment. However, they are comparatively harder to identify and pin down, as states may view and consider the same environment differently.

When confronted with matters affecting security (e.g. military developments and political postures), states have to meticulously interpret and assess the putative adversary's motives, intentions and capabilities, and then rationally calibrate an appropriate response.<sup>14</sup> If the threat assessment is inaccurate and an overly muscular reaction is instigated, the scenario risks devolving into a security paradox, defined as 'a situation in which where two or more actors, seeking only to improve their own security, provoke through their words or actions an increase in mutual tension, resulting in less security all round'.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, if the response is overly tame, it could be construed as a sign of weak resolve, which carries the risk of inviting adventurism from the putative adversary. The security paradox becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when a state fails to appropriately define its security situation within the anarchic system. Though a state's behaviour is internally deemed to be rational from the state's perspective, it can be perceived externally by another state as provocative and threatening. This then prompts



Map created by American intelligence showing Surface-to-Air Missile activity in Cuba, 5<sup>th</sup> September, 1962.

the affected state to build up its arms to counter-balance the foreboding menace, thus causing the very threat that the original state was seeking to deter.

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Fear underlies the dynamics of the security paradox. Robert Jervis adds that even if another state 'is benign today, it can turn malign in the future.'<sup>16</sup> This conundrum leads many states to assume the worst and build up military might for defence in a competitive manner. Consequently, threat assessments tend to be extremely conservative since states 'must assume the worst because the worst is possible'.<sup>17</sup> Two factors constrain states from reliably assessing potential threats to their well-being: the ambiguous symbolism of weapons and the 'other mind' problem.<sup>18</sup> The former refers to the predicament of differentiating between offensive and defensive weapons. For example, how should a shield be categorised if it is used offensively as a blunt attacking instrument, despite its intended function of absorbing the opponent's assault? Is it a false dichotomy to begin with? As for the latter, it is the difficulty of approximating the putative adversary's psychological and cultural filters, and cost-benefit calculus. Compounding this is the quandary that states are customarily coy about their ends, ways and means and would withhold information for flexibility and surprise. On matters of strategic importance, they may even engage in deliberate deception. Hence, while it is

achievable to attain a modest level of empathy, to fully experience and understand the motives, intentions, hopes, fears, emotions and feelings as the 'other mind' would is typically beyond reach, even with a formidable intelligence apparatus. In fact, most political leaders are deficient in their capacity to empathise and display no sensitivity to their putative adversary's sense of vulnerability, whilst they dwell on and become preoccupied with their own perception of threat.<sup>19</sup>

Due to the inalienable condition of 'unresolvable uncertainty,' threat assessments are commonly plagued by misperception, which 'involves a discrepancy between the psychological environment of the decision makers and the operational environment of the real world'.<sup>20</sup> Decisions and actions may be determined by the former, but their effects and consequences (e.g. defeat in war and foreign occupation) are constrained by the latter. Of particular concern is the misperception of the putative adversary's capabilities or intentions, since these predominately and directly contribute to the processes leading to war.<sup>21</sup>

## THREAT ASSESSMENT AND SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES

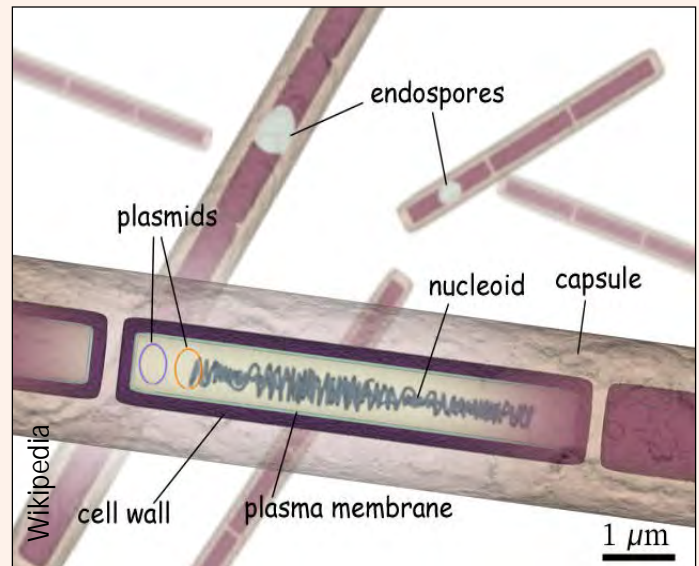
In *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Robert Jervis repeatedly emphasises the role of the self-fulfilling prophecy as a cognitive pathology.<sup>22</sup> The 1962 Cuban missile crisis is a notable observation of this phenomenon. According to Richard Lebow and Janice Stein, the crisis began as a result of mutual misperception. Soviet officials testified that the American strategic buildup, missile deployment in Turkey and assertions of strategic superiority exacerbated their insecurity.<sup>23</sup> President Kennedy considered all these actions as prudent, defensive measures against Soviet threats, especially in Berlin. Instead of restraining Khrushchev, they convinced him of the need to do more to protect the Soviet Union and Cuba from American military and political challenges. Through their avowedly defensive actions, the leaders of both superpowers made their fears of an acute confrontation self-fulfilling.<sup>24</sup>

During the crisis, there was widespread agreement amongst United States (US) President John Kennedy's advisors that the Soviet Union had placed the

medium range SS-4 and intermediate range R-14 missiles in Cuba as part of an offensive strategy. No consideration was given to the alternative hypothesis that the Soviet Union did so out of weakness. At that point in time, the Soviet Union was keenly aware that its Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) were inferior in terms of quantity and range to that of the US. Moreover, the Soviet Union knew that the US had already found out about this strategic vulnerability since the US Deputy Secretary of Defense, Roswell Gilpatric, had directly referenced the weakness of the Soviet ICBM system when he spoke publicly about US strategic superiority a few months prior. Yet, despite entering the crisis from a position of strength, the US exaggerated misperception of the Soviet threat persisted. Thus, the US myopically saw itself as the primary determinant of Soviet action, which meant excluding any other plausible interpretation of Soviet intentions.<sup>25</sup>

In comparison, Mikhail Gorbachev, the leader of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) after 1985, was able to wind down the Cold War because he understood how threatened the West felt by the USSR's aggressiveness. He sought to alleviate those fears by offering to withdraw hostile military deployments and review antagonistic foreign policy positions.<sup>26</sup> In this case, Mikhail Gorbachev exhibited the rare ability to empathise with and appreciate the dilemma experienced by his putative adversaries. He comprehended how mutual mistrust and suspicion could result from security paradox dynamics and embarked on dampening them through no-strings-attached trust-building initiatives.

Another illustration of the self-confirming belief is the decision by the US to invade Iraq in the aftermath of 9/11, on the misperception that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had a secret nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programme, enjoyed an intimate relationship with Al Qaeda, and that the two were conspiring to attack the US, possibly with weapons of mass destruction. As history has revealed, 'it was false that there was Al Qaeda in Iraq before the invasion, but then it became true after the invasion.'<sup>27</sup> The dismantling of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime left a power vacuum that subsequently birthed a spontaneous nation-wide insurgency against the US-led coalition occupying Iraq.



Photomicrograph of *Bacillus anthracis*

Capitalising on the internal chaos, Abu Musab al Zarqawi, leader of the Jordanian militant group Al Tawhid wa al Jihad, started perpetrating anti-coalition and Sunni-Shia violence in Iraq. After pledging his allegiance to Osama bin Ladin in 2004, al Zarqawi renamed his group to Al Qaeda in Iraq, which later earned a gruesome reputation for savage beheadings and other atrocities.<sup>28</sup> Despite the brutal death of al Zarqawi in 2006 in a US air strike, Al Qaeda in Iraq survived and grew from strength and strength, eventually morphing into the notorious Islamic State (IS) in 2014, the only Islamist terrorist group to achieve proto-state status (including the minting of its own currency) via the military conquest of urban population centres. Thus, it may be said that the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 created the pre-conditions for the rise of al Qaeda in Iraq and IS.

In 2008, the Partnership for a Secure America assessed that 'a nuclear, chemical or biological weapon in the hands of terrorists was the single greatest threat' to the US.<sup>29</sup> Disputing this, Milton Leitenberg countered that 'terrorist groups with an international presence and international political objectives ... have little or no scientific competence, little or no knowledge of microbiology, and no known access to pathogen strains or laboratory facilities' to engender the development of biological weapons.<sup>30</sup> He suggested that bioterrorism was at best an over-imaginative assessment and at worst a self-fulfilling prophecy. Indeed, a 1999 message from Ayman al Zawahiri—who was to succeed bin Laden in 2011 (following his death) as the leader of Al Qaeda—

had admitted that ‘we only became aware of them [biological weapons] when the enemy drew our attention to them by repeatedly expressing concerns that they can be produced simply with easily available materials.’<sup>31</sup> This was a clear indication that for Al Qaeda, the idea for utilising biological weapons was seeded and imported from the analytical minds of counter-terrorism experts, rather than organically conceived. Currently, most non-state terrorist groups lack the sophistication and technical know-how to culture biological weapons. While the possibility of a mass-casualty biological attack cannot be ruled out, it is likely to be remote. After all, besides an inept and ultimately thwarted attempt by Al Qaeda to obtain *Bacillus Anthracis* in 2001, there has been no other known efforts till date by terrorist groups pertaining to the planning and conduct of bioterrorism.<sup>32</sup> Should such an attack come to pass, it would be difficult to absolve from blame the unrelenting stream of forewarnings on the viability, potency and desirability of infectious biological agents as attack vectors capable of creating mass panic and terror.

### NEGATING SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES

Richard Betts once boldly claimed that ‘intelligence failures are inevitable.’<sup>33</sup> Do self-fulfilling prophecies suffer the same fate? Is the chain of events impossible to disrupt once it has been precipitated? If not, how can the situation be arrested or reversed? The answer lies in self-reflexivity. Human beings are capable of reflecting on an observed finding and altering their behaviour in response to it. In other words, knowing about the circumstances in which a socially undesirable outcome occurs can lead to changes in behaviour that make the original prophecy self-negating. This ability to be self-reflexive makes human behaviour somewhat unpredictable, akin to a moving target.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, self-fulfilling prophecies are inherently fragile and can be turned into self-negating prophecies accordingly. The nuclear domino theory, which asserts that ‘proliferation breeds proliferation’ is a case in point.<sup>35</sup>

In October 1964, China attained prominence as the world’s fifth nuclear power when it successfully conducted a nuclear detonation at Lop Nur. This feat was a situational surprise, since analysts had doubted

China’s capability to develop a nuclear weapon on its own, following the withdrawal of Soviet technical assistance in 1959 due to the Sino-Soviet split. Immediately, the nuclear test sparked off US concerns that anxious states like Australia, India, Japan and South Korea would soon pursue their own nuclear capability to allay their sense of vulnerability, leading to widespread cascading nuclear proliferation.<sup>36</sup>

Presently, less than ten states are known to possess nuclear weapons, a fact that seemingly throws the validity of the nuclear domino theory into question. However, the comparatively small number of nuclear weapon states (US President John Kennedy pessimistically warned in 1963 that there could be 15 to 25) is actually testament to the laborious behind-the-scenes manoeuvring to persuade as well as deny states from embarking on their own nuclear weapons programmes.<sup>37</sup>

### The power of self-fulfilling prophecies lies in expectancy.

For Taiwan, the Chinese nuclear test critically triggered its insecurity—in terms of defence against a nuclear attack as well as prestige. As Derek Mitchell puts it, a nuclear-armed China directly challenged Taiwan’s status as ‘the keepers of China’s historical great-power status’.<sup>38</sup> As such, Taiwan felt compelled to secretly acquire nuclear weapons to counteract China, despite being a 1968 signatory of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. In 1973, based on credible intelligence, the US pressured Germany not to sell reprocessing equipment (needed to recover plutonium from the spent fuel rods of light water nuclear power reactors) to Taiwan, warning the latter that ‘we would be forced to react’ if it did not curtail its unsanctioned nuclear weapons programme.<sup>39</sup> In 1976, the US detected that Taiwan was again attempting to obtain reprocessing technology via Belgium. This time, Taiwanese Premier Jiang Jing Guo had to contain the fallout by personally giving assurance that Taiwan would not ‘manufacture nuclear weapons’.<sup>40</sup> Yet, this was nothing more than lip service. It was only in 1977, when US President Jimmy Carter threatened to deny military and economic assistance as well as cut off diplomatic relations that Taiwan decided

to concede and suspend its ambition of becoming a nuclear weapon state. Even so, sustained US pressure was required up till 1987 to still-birth intermittent, opportunistic attempts at reviving lingering interest on the subject.<sup>41</sup>

As demonstrated, the underlying concerns and assumptions of the nuclear domino theory are not in doubt. Today, a nuclear-armed Iran may induce Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey to similarly develop nuclear capabilities, much like how the emergence of a nuclear-armed China spurred Taiwan's dalliance with nuclear weapons. In fact, the ubiquity of nuclear powers would probably be a foregone conclusion if the 'reactive proliferation behaviour in the form of nuclear exploration and pursuit' predicted by the nuclear domino theory is left unattended and unaddressed.<sup>42</sup> Instead, the theory's predictions did not bear out because of the efficacy of the active measures leveraged on aspiring nuclear weapon states—international pressure, security guarantees, technology denial, military intervention, etc—and not because they were manifestly wrong. As Nicholas Miller contends, 'the belief in the nuclear domino theory has been instrumental in inspiring the policies needed to transform the theory into a largely self-defeating prophecy.'<sup>43</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In an anarchic system, states vie for power to obtain security. This harsh competitive environment dictates that fear and uncertainty are the two constants

confronting states when they interact with each other. As such, the process of threat assessment is inherently imperfect, in view of the ambiguous symbolism of weapons and the 'other mind' problem. The issue of objectivity is further coloured by the tendency of states to interpret one's own measures as defensive and the measures of others as threatening. Often, this leads to misperception in terms of capabilities and intentions, and can result in the creation of self-fulfilling prophecies, in which efforts designed to forestall an undesirable outcome end up triggering a course of events that ironically bear that very outcome into fruition.

A self-fulfilling prophecy results from actors believing and expecting a purported eventual state of affairs and then unwittingly rendering it true via their corresponding attempts to manipulate its emergence. The power of self-fulfilling prophecies lies in expectancy. Hence, when reluctant to accept an ominous eventuality, one can deliberately react in a manner that causes the undesirable prediction to be falsified. This process is known as self-reflexivity. Self-fulfilling prophecies are not inevitable and can be made self-negating; this also means that they are also inherently fragile. When caught in a self-fulfilling prophecy, the gambit to avoid the tragedy of King Laius of Thebes and Macbeth is to reflect on the prophesied outcome and alter one's behaviour in response, so as to break out of the self-fulfillment cycle.

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