

THINKING WITH SPINOZA ABOUT UNCERTAINTY TODAY

Preliminary Reflections on Uncertainty in Spinoza's Political and Social Thought

Alfonso R. VERGARAY

(Texas A&M International University)

Abstract: This essay examines how Baruch Spinoza's thought addresses contemporary interest in social and political uncertainty. It introduces readers to three areas in Spinoza's thought, (1) the connection between ignorance and uncertainty, (2) uncertainty as a form of governance, and it concludes examining the (3) hope driven uncertainties in a democracy. Ultimately, it hopes to show that Spinoza's insights in these areas are an indispensable starting point for reflecting on uncertainty today.

Keywords: Spinoza, uncertainty, hope, democracy, ignorance

Uncertainty and risk are at the heart of modernity.¹ It should come as no surprise then that uncertainty is widely discussed in popular and academic discourses. In the news media it is commonplace to read about the dire effects of "economic uncertainty". In academia, uncertainty is studied in disciplines that span the social sciences, humanities, and the natural sciences. Spinoza was a forerunner in these areas in so far as they all address, in one way or another, human *experiences* of uncertainty.

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¹ Zygmunt BAUMAN, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, Wiley, Cambridge 2007. Ulrich BECK, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Sage, London 1992.

1. Ignorance and Uncertainty

In one powerful interpretation of Spinoza's thought, he is a necessitarian—someone who holds the doctrine that the world cannot in any way be different than it is; nothing, in this view, is contingent. For a necessitarian, to experience the world as uncertain is to be ignorant of the orderly nature of all things. In that respect humans are bound to ignorance since they lack comprehensive knowledge of the causal links that produce events. Lacking this knowledge can make events that *are* orderly be *experienced* as chaotic and uncertain, especially when fear and anxiety drive human inquiry. Humans are peculiar natural creatures in this way. Unlike other living things, humans are not seamlessly at home in nature. Their capacity to reason does not always, or even usually, lead to rational ways of living in accordance with nature. Instead, humans tend to rely on the imagination and the senses to comprehend the inexplicable. Over time use of the imagination to gain understanding can develop into complex superstitions that provide an account of “knowledge”. Understanding this interplay between ignorance and knowledge explains why combating ignorance for Spinoza is not simply a matter of filling in the “not yet known” with knowledge.

You do not need to be a necessitarian to appreciate this perspective. For instance, the prevalence of social media and other forms of cyber communication (e.g., the use of MEMEs and trolling) have fueled a new age of misinformation, where confusion and false beliefs (i.e., ignorance) proliferate.² One method used to address misinformation is through fact-checking. Anyone paying attention to this corrective method quickly learned that combating ignorance in an age of misinformation is not merely a matter of presenting facts. Other factors, including information overload and dis/trust, play an oversized role in how individuals process “facts”. Today's technological means of communication are only the latest tools used to exploit the frailty of the human mind.³ Whether dealing with past or present challenges to human ignorance, the intractable issue that complicates the attainment of knowledge, according to Spinoza, is the experience of uncertainty.

² Caitlin O'CONNOR, James WEATHERALL, *The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2019.

³ Ann BLAIR, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2010.

The first line in the *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP) introduces readers to what I elsewhere call the problem of uncertainty.⁴

«If men could manage all their affairs by a definite plan, or if fortune were always favorable to them, no one would be in the grip of superstition». (TTP 65)

Spinoza's requirements for preventing humans from falling prey to superstition cannot be met. Human's lack control to direct their lives according to a definite plan, and good fortune cannot be relied on to consistently ward off the destabilizing blows of misfortune. Lacking certainty about the future, all humans are subject to superstitious beliefs and practices (TTP 68). The base ignorance due to a lack of comprehensive knowledge of the causal links that produce events, in other words, is creatively multiplied due to experienced uncertainty. In particular, the fluctuating emotions that are set loose due to a lack of certainty about the future underlie the process that make humans susceptible to superstition.

«Then they vacillate wretchedly between hope and fear; desiring immoderately the uncertain goods of fortune, and ready to believe anything whatever. While the mind is in doubt, it's easily driven this way or that—and all the more easily when, shaken by hope and fear, it comes to a standstill. At other times, it's over-confident, boastful and presumptuous». (TTP 65-6)

The most destructive of the passions is fear. Fear is the reason «superstition arises, lasts, and increases» and «men are tormented by superstition only so long as they are afraid» (TTP 67). The characterization of superstition as a response to fear has long been recognized, stretching back to classical writers (e.g., Plutarch), and reiterated all the way through the early-modern period, as necessary to understand the human tendency to stray from knowledge.⁵ Spinoza offers a trenchant analysis how fear-driven uncertainties keep humans in a state of ignorance on an individual and collective scale.

The study of ignorance is of special importance today when information warfare is conducted by corporations, governments, and maintains an organic presence in digital spaces online. In these conditions, it is not enough to teach epistemology. The

⁴ Alfonso VERGARAY, *Rethinking Uncertainty: Spinoza and Hume on Shaping Uncertain Secular Futures*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University 2014; ID., *Constructive Forms of Uncertainty in Spinoza's Theological Political Treatise*, Unpublished Manuscript.

⁵ Susan JAMES, *Spinoza on Superstition: Coming to Terms with Fear*, Damon, Budel 2006, p. 3.

“epistemic crisis” we are in is as much about ignorance as it is about knowledge. Agnotology, the study of culturally induced ignorance or doubt, needs to be taught to «professional-technical experts in both the private and public sectors».⁶ A starting point can be Spinoza, who was well aware that it is not only idiosyncratic personal/private experiences of uncertainty that make the quest for knowledge a challenge, there are in addition agents that attempt to manufacture uncertainty to manipulate collectives for their social, political, and/or economic interests. Conversely, uncertainty can be used to encourage the active affects, and in that way encourage knowledge over ignorance. Taken together these ways of using uncertainty amount to something like a form of governance.

2. Uncertainty as a Form of Governance

Doubt is Their Product, the title from David Michaels’ 2008 book, was a play on a quote from a tobacco executive who wrote, «Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of facts’ that exists in the minds of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy».⁷ In other words, according to this tobacco executive, the most effective means of combating the science against tobacco was through the “manufacturing of uncertainty”. As Micheals puts it, «The industry and its scientists manufactured uncertainty by questioning every study, dissecting every method, and disputing every conclusion»⁸. If you make the public doubt established scientific facts they will likely ignore the urgency of the matter (e.g., the addictive properties of tobacco). Creating that doubt, moreover, allows those using such tactics to paradoxically claim that the other side—in this case the established scientific community and public officials against tobacco—have a hidden agenda against the consumer. They might claim that since the “science” is inconclusive about the harms of tobacco, those against tobacco have ulterior motives when they claim there is

⁶ Timothy LUKE, *The New World Order of Gross Dysfunction and Guided Democracy: ‘Making America Great Again’* in “Telos”, n. 188, 2019, p. 203. Robert PROCTOR, Londa SCHIEBINGER, *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2008.

⁷ Thomas MICHAELS, *Doubt is Their Product: How Industry’s Assault on Science Threatens Your Health*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, p. X.

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 4.

scientific consensus. Similar tactics are being used by companies that actively seek to create uncertainty about well-established climate science.⁹

Like corporations, nation-states use uncertainty to manipulate the public for their own ends. Today nation-states use disinformation campaigns to sow confusion (i.e., create uncertainty) in their attempts to create «distrust, internal division and confusion on the side of the opponent, and combativeness, loyalty, and support in [their] own camp».¹⁰ A concerted use of uncertainty, however, does not always translate into self-serving manipulation. In Spinoza's terms, uncertainty has the power to facilitate a free society or lead to its enslavement. He succinctly captures this view in his final work *Political Treatise*. There he writes,

«For a free multitude is guided by hope more than by fear, whereas a multitude which has been subjugated is guided more by fear than by hope. The first want to cultivate life; the second care only to avoid death. The first are eager to live for themselves; the second are forced to belong to the victor. So we say that the second are slaves, and the first free».
(TP 530)

Fear and hope contain uncertainties. They both express inconstant emotive states (fear is an inconstant sadness, and hope is an inconstant joy) that contain doubt (IIP18S2). When doubt (uncertainty) is removed from either fear or hope (uncertain emotions), they are replaced by confidence and despair, respectively. In this way we can say that a fear or hope driven society is guided by uncertainty.

While fear can unite and restrain unwanted behaviors, and in that way is useful and even necessary, if a form of governing *only* relies on fear it stunts the possibility of human flourishing. In Spinoza's terms, fear is a passive affect that leads to sadness, and thereby brings about the dulling of the active affects required to lead a free life. «For as long as men act only from fear» Spinoza explains,

«They act very unwillingly, and don't recognize the advantage, even the necessity, of doing what they're doing. All they care about is saving their necks, and avoiding punishment». (TTP 144)

Spinoza offers an alternative when discussing Moses' ability to «encourage the soldiers [rather] than to frighten them with penalties and threats» (TTP 145). He was

⁹ James POWELL, *The Inquisition of Climate Science*, Columbia University Press, New York 2012.

¹⁰ Vincent HENDRICKS, Mads VESTERGAARD, *Reality Loss: Markets of Attention, Misinformation and Manipulation*, Springer 2018, p. 69.

able, in other words, to get his subjects to do their «duty, not so much from fear, as voluntarily» (TTP 145). Finding ways to persuade subjects to voluntarily accomplish their duties allows them to feel like they are choosing their own path, and increases the likelihood that they recognize the advantage in doing their duty. In sum, fear driven forms of governance, while at times effective, damage any prospect for human freedom when relied on exclusively.

Governing through hope, on the other hand, is more promising. Instead of sadness, joy accompanies hope, if only inconstantly. As joy is an active affect, its presence is more conducive to a free society. Still, relying on hope to govern is not sufficient, being fraught with its own difficulties. False hopes can be used to manipulate individuals with elusive promises of a better tomorrow. State run lotteries, for example, in «offering an effortless avenue to wealth» play on people's hopes and dreams.¹¹ The «vain hope» produced by the lottery is the «sole cause» of the demand¹², which in turn creates a guaranteed source of revenue for the state. As the lottery fills the coffers of the state, it simultaneously distracts lottery players from surer means to a better future. More pressingly, the uncertain nature of hope makes it unfitting for the truly free individual. In the *Ethics* Spinoza writes that «Hope and Fear cannot be good of themselves» and observes that they «show a defect of knowledge and lack of power in the Mind» (IVP47S). Consequently, fear and hope can be characterized as obstacles to our autonomy, freedom, and happiness.¹³ As Remo Bodei puts it, «Finché durano, paura e speranza dominano non solo il corpo ma l'immaginazione e la mente degli individui, gettandoli in balia dell'incertezza e rendendoli disposti alla rinuncia e alla passività».¹⁴ Given the dim view Spinoza presents of hope and fear, why does he later consider using them to govern?

For one thing the human experience of the future as uncertain is inescapable, which in turn makes fears and hopes about the future inescapable. To transcend hope and fear is to be a perfectly free individual. Since perfect freedom is out of human reach, it

¹¹ Charles CLOTFELTER, Philip COOK, *Selling Hope: State Lotteries in America*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1991, p. 117.

¹² Adam SMITH, *The Wealth of Nations*, The Modern Library, New York 2000, p. 124.

¹³ Steven NADLER, *Hope, Fear, and the Politics of Immortality*, in T. SORRELL, G. A. J. ROGERS, (eds.), *Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, New York 2005, p. 216.

¹⁴ Remo BODEI, *Geometria delle passioni: Paura, speranza, felicità: Filosofia e uso politico*, Feltrinelli, Milan 1991, p. 76.

is foolhardy to pursue a political (i.e., collective) project without using fear and hope. «The mob» Spinoza reminds, «is terrifying, if unafraid». Without the use of fear and hope there would be no possibility for political stability or a free life. That is why Spinoza, despite recognizing their debilitating effects, can claim that «Hope and Fear, bring more advantage than disadvantage» (IVP54S). There is, in other words, a salutary role for hope *and* fear to play. Like Hobbes, Spinoza notes that fear can be used to foster order and serve as a form of restraint. Unlike Hobbes, however, he argues that relying on fear to govern will ultimately prove socially destructive. Over time a fear-driven people are prone to the most damaging forms of superstition and thus they are seriously hampered from flourishing individually or collectively. A free society, on the other hand, is best supported by hope.

3. Uncertainty & Democracy

For Spinoza democracy is the freest of regimes. It relies on hope rather than fear as a source of vitality. Hope, of course, is not sufficient to understand democracy. A full account of democracy in Spinoza would need to consider devotion and loyalty to the state, law-abidingness, the place of theology in the state, and the like. Here I limit my analysis to how a democracy encourages hope filled uncertainties rather than fear driven uncertainties.¹⁵

In the final chapter of TTP Spinoza explains the limited role fear should have in a free state after explaining “the foundations of the Republic.” He writes,

«its ultimate end is not to dominate, restraining men by fear, and making them subject to another’s control, but on the contrary to free each person from fear, so that he can live securely, as far as possible, i.e., so that he retains to the utmost his natural right to exist and operate without harm to himself or anyone else». (TTP 346)

Freeing each person from fear is central to the ultimate end of the state.¹⁶ Why is that the aim? Because it helps ensure security and protects a person’s «natural right to exist and operate without harm to himself or anyone else». Fear hampers freedom. Hope, on the other hand, has the potential to support freedom. How? Well, a

¹⁵ I provide a fuller analysis in my essay *Constructive Forms of Uncertainty in Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise*.

¹⁶ As states are seldom close to their “ultimate end,” we should take Spinoza’s suggestion to free each person from fear as an ideal, rather than a practical suggestion.

democracy facilitates a hopeful posture as it approaches «most nearly the freedom nature concedes to everyone» (TTP 289). It fosters an environment where citizens hopefully look towards the future in their private and public lives. Let me explain how hope works in the public and private realm in a free state.

In public life democratic procedures allow hope to be maintained for both those who support and oppose decisions reached in common. In a democracy it is

«Agreed that the measure which had the most votes would have the force of a decree, but that meanwhile they'd retain the authority to repeal these decrees when they saw better ones». (TTP 351)

Democratic procedures do not solely reserve hope for citizens who agree with decisions reached in common, they also facilitate a hopeful posture for those that disagree with those decisions. In this way, democratic sovereignty approaches the sovereign right each individual has in a natural state. After all, it is only in a democracy where «no one so transfers his natural right to another that in the future there is no consultation with him» (TTP 289). Consequently, if a citizen believes he has a better alternative to the current laws, he can remain hopeful that the laws might change in the future. Notice how this is different from other regimes that preclude the people from rule. In those regimes, if you disagree with a certain law you can grudgingly go along with the ruling power or you might revolt against the ruling authority. There is little else you can effectively accomplish considering you hold no political power to do otherwise. Instead of hope, frustration and fear of the unknown have a greater likelihood to be the norm in non-democratic regimes. Feeling helpless with the possibilities to shape the present world, it is unsurprising that turning to otherworldly sources of hope becomes an attractive alternative in non-democratic regimes.

In private life, democratic freedoms allow citizens to look hopefully towards a future that they fashion. The hope accompanying democratic freedom, in other words, is not limited to its procedural means of instituting laws; it extends to the private sphere as well. Democracy for Spinoza, remember, is 'the most natural' in that it approximates the freedom found in the natural state. Consequently, in a democracy individuals should be «so governed that they can openly hold different and contrary opinions, and still live in harmony» (TTP 351). Formally allowing freedom of judgment without achieving harmonious living among a diversity of views and ways of life falls short of the democratic ideal. Hence, the reliance on laws to restrain behavior should be kept

to a minimum. After all, Spinoza writes, «Anyone who wants to limit everything by laws will provoke more vices than he'll correct» (TTP 348). Hence the extensive freedoms found in a democratic state generate hopes regarding private pursuits. Just as having a say in how you are ruled in public life provides citizens hope, having liberty to choose to think, speak, and behave in diverse ways facilitates hope in everyday life.

Both public and private democratic hopes reflect the type of uncertainty generated by a democratic regime. The uncertainty sustained in public life keeps citizens from feeling despair at the current order of things, and thus facilitates a respect for democratic laws and institutions. In private life the hope generated by the freedoms found in a democracy allows citizens to seek their own advantage, which Spinoza calls «the mainstay and life of all human actions» (TTP 315). That is to say, democratic freedoms appeal to individual self-interest by allowing individuals the space to flourish as they choose. That freedom, in turn, creates a salutary hope as it generates gratitude for the regime that makes those freedoms possible. That gratitude creates a loyalty to the state that is necessary for political stability. More broadly, both kinds of democratic hope (i.e., uncertainties) keep citizens' gaze oriented towards a better future. That orientation, in turn, helps temper the human inclination to follow the passions to the neglect of future goods. Instead, democratic hope creates an environment where the active affect of joy is likely to flourish, allowing the intellectual virtues to multiply, which in turn leads to the advancement of the arts and sciences (TTP 349).

Spinoza was well aware that hopes do not always prevail in a democracy. For one thing, a hope-filled society cannot be maintained in perpetuity. Democracy may facilitate a hope-filled society, but fear, its ugly partner, is never far behind. When fear overtakes a democratic society, it opens itself to the worse forms of superstition that place political stability in peril. In such a condition, moderate religious or secular beliefs can become extreme in order to deal with fearful uncertainty about the future. At that point, Spinoza's democracy could easily revert to the world of religious conflict Spinoza tried to overcome. In sum, the hope-filled uncertainties set loose in a democracy are a necessary but not a sufficient condition to facilitate a stable and free democracy.

4. Conclusion

Spinoza had a philosopher's gift for getting to the heart of the matter. To reflect on uncertainty is to reflect on the way humans experience everyday life. No life, after all, is devoid of hopes and fears. That said, contemporary experiences of uncertainty have

arguably been heightened with the breakdown of traditional/organic societies. The modern isolated individual, with an indefinite number of life choices, with little or no guidance from tradition or communities, heightens, in other words, experiences of uncertainty. Sitting at the gates of modernity Spinoza was a forerunner in his reflections on uncertainty. As shown above, he helps us think about the relationship between uncertainty and ignorance, uncertainty as a form of governance, and hope driven uncertainties in a democracy. That said, Spinoza cannot be a precise guide for thinking about uncertainty today. The social, political, economic, and technological changes that have taken place since Spinoza's time limit the immediate applicability of his thought. Spinoza's insights are, however, an indispensable starting point.

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