Critical Exchange

Spinoza: thoughts on hope in our political present

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The ambivalence of hope

In *The Works of Days*, the Greek poet Hesiod tells of two gifts from the gods bequeathed to Prometheus and humankind: the alluring and inquisitive woman, Pandora, and a sealed jar containing various evils, illnesses, and bad fortune. Contrary to all warnings, Pandora's curiosity drives her to open the jar thus releasing its contents. Struggling to reseal the jar, she manages to retain just one thing: hope (*Elpis*). There are many versions of this myth and much disagreement concerning the value of hope in human life. Is it really a gift from the gods, or is it a curse as Nietzsche suggested when he said that 'it is in truth the worst of all evils, because it protracts the torments of men' (1996, p. 45). Does the jar preserve hope for our benefit, or is it an evil from which the jar protects us? This ambivalent attitude towards hope remains a strong theme throughout Western mythology,

theology, and philosophy. Often seen by Greek philosophers as a passivity of weak and ignorant souls, then as a virtue (along with faith and charity) by some Christian thinkers, hope is configured as an ambivalent passion in early modern philosophy. For Spinoza, hope and confidence are linked but are also essentially connected to their opposites, namely, fear and despair. As Spinoza states in the *Ethics*, ‘there is neither Hope without Fear, nor Fear without Hope’ (E3DefAff XIII).¹

The future is uncertain and when we hope for the best outcome such hopeful feelings imply our confidence in gaining a good outcome. But doubt may give rise to anxiety when it appears likely that what it is that we fear will come to pass and so we fall into despair. What is clear is that the hope–fear dyad arises through our ignorance of the forces that determine our lives, and the more ignorant we are of these forces, the more we are at the mercy of hope and fear. Our power to imagine gives rise to both hoped for and feared perceptions: I imagine conversing with colleagues at an international Spinoza conference in Madrid; I imagine dying in a plane crash on my way to a conference in Madrid. The human capacity to imagine the future extends to political imaginings, too. I imagine my prime minister making sweeping changes to the management of climate change, and especially to those things that would decrease the risk of repeating the tragic loss of precious human and non-human life and property in the 2019–2020 Australian bushfires; I imagine my prime minister granting lucrative leases on coal mines and continuing to support reckless, short-term profit business practices. Exercises of the imagination are dependent on images, impressions, and memories that over time become increasingly complex and linked with each other in ways that make them significant. For example, we develop personal narratives of our life experiences as well as participate in forming and maintaining national and global narratives. According to Spinoza, all our knowledge begins in and builds upon the imagination. These imaginative stories that we construct are untrustworthy accounts of the nature of the things that we have come into contact with, and of the world in general. Our impressions and narratives involve systemic distortions and tell us more about the experiencing bodies – their specific compositions, dispositions, and desires – than about the nature of the causes of those experiences. In the *Ethics*, and elsewhere, Spinoza explains that we have a natural disposition to invert causes and effects, that is, our usual attitude is to experience an effect as if it were a cause. He refers to this as turning nature ‘upside down’ (E1Appen). This attitude lies at the centre of Spinoza’s critique of free will. Our consciousness of the ways in which external things determine us to act is, on his view, misrecognised as expressions of our own volition. The illusion of free will can be traced to our ignorance of causes. We imagine that we are independent and self-contained wholes, encountering other discrete bodies in nature. Our egocentric perspective encourages this mistake of considering ourselves as centres of action, as free and self-determined. Spinoza observes: people ‘are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined. This, then, is their idea of

freedom – that they do not know the cause of their actions’ (E2p35s). So long as we imagine ourselves as separate from nature, as privileged loci of freedom and self-determination, we lack the knowledge of our true nature and context (see Gatens, forthcoming).

These natural dispositions to experience hope and fear, and engage in imaginary thinking, leave us vulnerable to superstition, to manipulation, and to the actions of dishonourable and dishonest people and corrupt institutions. The exigencies of our social and political contexts often render us gullible – we believe the fake news, we trust the wrong people, or, to paraphrase Spinoza, we allow ourselves to be tricked into fighting for our own subjection as if it were for our salvation (TTP, Preface, p. 68). What we need are realistic political hopes that would justify a grounded confidence and cautious optimism in achieving them through our reflectively endorsed actions. What would count as realistic hope and justify confident action in our present? This is not a question to which any single person can adequately respond. What is required is collective deliberation and concerted political action. This, in turn, requires courage, honesty, vision, and trust – all of which are in short supply today in political leadership in the contemporary West. Spinoza notes that vacillation of mind (the primary source of doubt and fear) is a common experience but he notes further that to remain captive to this state of inaction can be a sign of cowardice and reveal a lack of strength of character (*fortitudo*). His analysis holds for political as well as for personal behaviour. Spinoza recognised the need for courage and honesty in government if it is to achieve its main aim: security (*securitas*). When caught between hope and fear, decisive action based in reasonable hope is far preferable to action based on fear or, worse still, an idiotic dithering when trapped between hope and fear. Powerful leaders must learn how to engage and galvanise the constructive collective affects and hopes of the people they aim to govern. The social imagination is a powerful force that may be recruited to encourage certain actions and discourage others. In the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Spinoza offers an incisive account of how Moses used narrative, song, prayer, and law to bind the Hebrews, recently freed from slavery, into a unified affective community, now motivated by shared loves, fears, and hopes materialised through sanctioned images, enforced rituals, and socially authorised attachments. But it is not only theological polities that rely on the collective imagination. All complex bodies engage in collective imaginings – democratic bodies no less than theocracies (see Gatens and Lloyd, 1999, chapters 4–6). To imagine otherwise, to think that democratic politics could be made reasonable, and based purely in rational deliberation, is to be held ‘captive to a myth’ (TP, chapter 1, p. 506). Affects are a permanent and necessary part of the human condition and because we are imitative creatures, they are also highly contagious (E3p27). Politics must acknowledge, and work with, this powerful collective political force.

The contributions comprising this Critical Exchange consider Spinoza’s theory of hope in a political context. What he has to say about hope as an affect

experienced by individuals does not automatically or neatly map onto his analysis of collective hope in politics (see Steinberg, 2018). The political is not merely the personal, writ large. From the point of view of the free man sketched in the *Ethics*, Part 4, every passion involves passivity and so detracts from freedom and reason. But there is no such thing as a perfectly rational human being – we are all, by nature, subject to (individual and collective) passions. But collective human endeavour gives rise to new powers of action and intensely *political* affects. As a recent anthology argues, Spinoza was a prescient theorist of the social and political implications of relational ontology (Armstrong et al., 2019). Insofar as, for him, everything that exists is connected to everything else, and the power of any given body is constitutively determined by the good and bad compositions it is able to form with other bodies, being itself is always political. Although other human beings are among the most dangerous things we can encounter – because they are more cunning than the other animals – Spinoza also judged that when human beings combine their powers harmoniously then *homo homini Deus est* (man is god to man, E4p35s). Each contribution here attempts to bring Spinoza's account of hope to bear critically on our political present in a way that endeavours to enhance our collective powers of action and our shared capacities for joyful fellowship. The contributors hail from the United States of America, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Germany, and each brings something of their own political context to bear on the question of hope and the political.

Justin Steinberg analyses the fear-fuelled hope that has marked President Trump's conservative politics, and contrasts this with a potentially empowering Spinozist hope that is tied to one's confidence in the state and its institutions. Aurelia Armstrong draws on Spinoza's insights to analyse the specious 'privatisation' of hope recently mobilised by right-wing media and conservative climate change denialists, and the harnessing of a shared, social, and ultimately more constructive form of hope by climate change activists. For Susan James, the disempowering affects and lack of stable consensus, recently witnessed in political debates over Brexit, can be usefully addressed through a Spinozist framework that casts hope and fear in a mutually corrective and jointly empowering role. This framework encourages a community to reflect on its shared hopes along with the potential risks that accompany them. Finally, Martin Saar reflects on the value of a (neo)Spinozist perspective that treats hope as an indicator of the transindividual social conditions that help shape political agency. Saar's analysis helps us appreciate that the cultivation of constructive forms of hope will need to critically attend to considerations of context, which can foreclose, as well as open, particular paths of intervention.

The 'affective turn' in political theory has many faces. Although Spinoza is often appropriated as a warrant for quite diverse forms of theorising affective politics, such warrants are not always sound. The contributions to this Critical Exchange follow respect the distinction between Spinoza's philosophy and contemporary attempts to re-vision his thought for the present (Saar, for example, refers to

(neo)Spinozism). It is surely the case that contemporary democratic societies have little in common with the mid-seventeenth-century Dutch Republic in which Spinoza lived, and which helped to form his views about politics. However, certain of his insights into human ways of being and ways of knowing remain key to figuring out what beings like us might do in order to better understand our present, and through such understanding act to enhance our collective power to enjoy free and reasonable lives. Steinberg remarks, below, upon the volatility of the Dutch Republic of Spinoza's time, torn as it was by wars and civil unrest. We should recall too that it was one of the sites of the bubonic plague pandemic of 1665–1666 that reportedly killed up to 100,000 people in London. Hope and fear – about plagues, wars, and natural disasters – are not new, and remain the two most powerful drivers of our political behaviour, and the constructive institutional management of these passions is essential if governments are to provide safety and security. Also essential to the effectivity of our political institutions is some understanding of the collective imagination and our enthrallment to images. The power of the social imaginary to play on our vulnerabilities, to manipulate as well as to enhance our political strengths, should not be underestimated (Saar, 2015). Despite Spinoza's commitment to the view that the true purpose of the state is to ensure our freedom and safety (*securitas*), and his assertion that democracy is the most natural state form, he nevertheless notes that 'the mob is terrifying if unafraid' (E4p54s) and asserts that no state – no matter how virtuous its rulers, or how well formed its institutions – can dispense with fear or punishment. For him, it is always a question of finding a judicious balance between these passionate states but, as some contributors note, Spinoza recommends the inducements of hope, reward, and love over the threats of fear and punishment. Rulers who can inspire trust and love in the *polis* will be stronger than those who rule by deception and fear. This is because love is a joyful passion and as such involves an increase in our power, unlike hatred (and fear) which are always sad and debilitating. Governments that encourage well-grounded hope for the future will be more loved than feared by those whom they govern, and so will constitute more joyful and more powerful political bodies.

Spinoza's robust opposition to human exceptionalism is apposite for our times. His critique of theology (James, 2012), of human narcissism in relation to our imagined privileged status in nature (Lloyd, 1994), and of our epistemic hubris, all repay study today. As part of nature, (and a very tiny part at that), our hopes and interests are easily crushed by the many non-human forces of nature (fire, pandemics, famine, tsunami, earthquake). But the power that we do possess is to endeavour to understand ourselves, our context, and the ways in which our future possibilities are determined by past and present causes. Perhaps then we may begin to intelligently address Spinoza's lament that most people 'do not know themselves' (TTP, Preface, p. 66) and nor do most governments know themselves or what their best form is. On Spinoza's account the best kind of state is

one where men pass their lives harmoniously, I mean that they pass a *human* life, one defined not merely by the circulation of the blood ... but mostly by reason, the true virtue and life of the Mind. (TP, chapter 5, p. 530, emphasis original)

To form reasonable, peaceful, and secure democratic political societies, based in a harmony of powers (E4Appen XV–XVI), is the excellence to which he bids us to aspire.

Spinoza's philosophy offers a novel vantage point from which to approach politics today. His cautious philosophy of hope can inspire a range of strategies and resources for imagining our future otherwise. To do so, we need first to understand that we are a part of nature – a status we share with all other beings – and that our well-being depends on respecting and sustaining the complex interdependencies of all human and non-human life. This Spinozistic realisation of what our genuine powers and vulnerabilities are, would compel us, through an inborn impulse to preserve ourselves (*conatus*), to select, to build, and to maintain joyful networks of active affects and to form connections between affirmative and non-reactive powers, all supported and enhanced, ideally, by reasonable collective bodies. This would amount to embodying, expressing, and nurturing that type of power that understands itself as enabled by connection and interdependence – rather than opting for a reactive and instrumentalist power that reckons its worth by what it can use, abuse, or dominate. For Spinoza, the attainment of our political aspirations does not depend on reason alone, nor on desire alone, but also on a capacity to mobilise a collectively imagined hoped-for future.

Moira Gatens.

Spinoza on security and the value of hope

America may be the land of optimism, but it peddles a rather tainted brand of hope. The 'American Dream' sags heavily atop the buckling myth of meritocracy. And if the land of the ever-expanding frontier promised an escape from suffering for some, it came only at the expense of the suffering of others, building hope on a foundation of expropriation, exploitation, and slavery. It is perhaps for this reason that Barack Obama's version of hope, converted in veritable brand thanks in part to a winsome Shepard Fairey image, seemed novel, promising a kind of national convalescence. But while his election was historic, it soon became apparent that Obama himself was an inveterate incrementalist, not a transformative politician. While this dashed the hopes of some, the vision of Obama as an iconoclast persisted in right-wing media and cyberspace, giving rise to anxiety and vitriol that generated first the Tea Party movement and then the populist wave that propelled Donald Trump into power. Trump's version of hope is a form of reactionary

nostalgia ('Make America Great Again') buoyed by fear of immigrants, Muslims, criminality, the 'deep state', the waning global significance of the U.S., and the erosion of 'American' norms and ways of life. Trumpian hope is born of, and sustained through, a thousand gnawing fears.

The psycho-social dynamics behind Trump's rise were shrewdly diagnosed 350 years ago in Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP). While Spinoza was writing in Post-Westphalian Europe, in what would come to be regarded as the Dutch Golden Age, the political situation in the young Dutch Republic was still rather volatile, as theological disputes, civil factions, controversies about confessional liberties, and ongoing wars left the country frayed. With free thought perpetually under threat, Spinoza published the TTP in 1670 in order to defend the freedom of philosophising from those who would 'suppress it as much as they can with their excessive authority and aggressiveness' (Ep 30, Vol 2). The work opens with a description of how most people 'vacillate wretchedly between hope and fear' (TTP, Preface, p. 65), proceeding to sketch how this gives rise to superstition and subservience. The account runs something like this: when people are anxious they are eager to find sources of hope or signs of something better to come, irrespective of the epistemic merits of these sources (TTP, Preface, p. 66). Consequently, fear breeds a desperate form of hope, resulting in a misplaced trust (see Gatens' introductory remark about fake news). Credulity then gives rise to stable superstition when the governors mobilise the affective power of religion for political ends (TTP, Preface, p. 68). Hope and fear function together here for, by keeping people anxious and miserable – bereft of *other* sources of hope – shrewd, deceptive political leaders can position themselves as saviours, beacons of hope in a bleak world. In addition to hope and fear, Spinoza points to hate and anger as affects that feed politicised superstition (TTP, Preface, p. 68), the suggestion being that the politically powerful are only able to evade blame for mass suffering by diverting frustration onto some perceived common enemy. In Spinoza's time, religious liberals and heretics were scapegoats; in Trump's America, the great bogeyman is the big government left, who would destroy the foundation on which American greatness precariously rests. In both cases, a politically manipulated anxiety begets credulity, antagonism, and ultimately commitment to a specious form of hope.

As the other contributors to this Critical Exchange duly observe, fear and hope bear a unique connection, for 'there is neither hope without fear, nor fear without hope' (E3DefAff XIII Exp). Beyond this point about the entanglement of these two affects, Spinoza seems to treat hope and fear alike as obstacles to freedom, claiming that 'affects of hope and fear cannot be good of themselves', and that 'the more we strive to live according to the guidance of reason, the more we strive to depend less on hope, to free ourselves from fear' (E4p47s). From all of this, we might expect that Spinoza would be critical of the role of hope in politics.

In fact, though, as I have argued at length in my recent book, *Spinoza's Political Psychology: The Taming of Fortune and Fear* (esp. chapter 4), in his political

treatises Spinoza sharply distinguishes those who are motivated by hope from those who are motivated by fear, treating the former as vastly superior to the latter. Not only does Spinoza think that hopeful citizens will preserve the institutions and laws of the state more steadfastly than fearful citizens, he also thinks that hopeful citizens are freer, less constrained, and more willing than their fearful counterparts. Unlike the desperate, fear-fuelled, Trumpian form of hope described in the preface of the TTP, the form of hope that he recommends arises from living in a well-functioning state. The Latin term that he uses to capture this notion is *securitas*, which he defines in the *Ethics* as hope ‘concerning which the cause of doubting has been removed’ (E3DefAff XIV; E3p18s2). In his political treatises, Spinoza cites security (*securitas*) as one of the chief aims of the state (TP, chapter 1, p. 506; chapter 5, p. 529; TTP, chapter 20, p. 346, chapter 11, pp. 240–241). The psychological or affective import of these claims has often been overlooked, as security is often read as something more like physical safety, despite the fact that Spinoza explicitly connects security with freedom from fear (TTP, chapter 20, p. 346, chapter 11, pp. 240–241). By understanding security as confidence in the state and its institutions – a kind of civic trust – we can better appreciate his endorsement of hopeful governance.

In what remains, I want to examine in more detail *why* this form of hope is good, situating Spinoza’s account in relation to some recent philosophical work. The question of why hope, as a mental state or attitude, is good must be distinguished from the question of why it is good to be hopeful. One reason why it is good to be hopeful is just that hope is an indicator of expected utility. Provided that one is generally capable of tracking expected utility, being generally hopeful implies being more likely to obtain the objects of one’s desires than if one is generally fearful. But this still leaves us to answer why hope as an attitude is *itself* good.

Much of the current philosophical literature focuses on the empowering function of hope. Victoria McGeer, for instance, has argued that hope enables one to acknowledge and respond to limitations on agency, fostering resilient and imaginative responses:

Hoping can empower us to acknowledge, explore, and sometimes patiently bide our limitations as agents – riding out feelings of anxiety, fear, or anticipated disappointment that might otherwise cause us to give up on our projects ... In hoping, we create a kind of affectively charged ‘scaffolding’ for ourselves, providing the motivational energy to explore how we might exercise our capacities in new and creative ways. (2008, 246; cf. 2004)

Philip Pettit makes a similar point, treating hope as a form of protection against ‘loss of self-efficacy’ and the ‘panics and depressions’ that we may experience in the face of setbacks (2004, pp. 157 and 160). And in a similar vein, Luc Bovens adds that ‘a hopeful rather than a defeatist attitude may at least be partly responsible for bringing some task to a successful end’ (1999, p. 671). On this

view, hope is valuable in part because it gives one motivational fortitude to pursue one's aims and projects in times of adversity (in this Critical Exchange, see James' remarks that deliberators and negotiators who lack hope are prone to 'settle for uninspiring resolutions'). McGeer also claims that hope can empower us to trust others and that by displaying trust in others we can empower them to exercise their own agential capacities (McGeer, 2008, p. 242). Hope thus enables one to develop and exercise one's own powers, while also empowering others.

Building on this general line of argument, Katie Stockdale has recently examined the ways in which oppression and systemic injustice diminish one's capacity to hope, restricting one's sense of what is possible and thwarting self-realisation (2019, p. 34). Stockdale draws on Cheshire Calhoun's idea of 'frames of agency' – that is, the background beliefs and attitudes that are preconditions of engaging in normative reflection and practical reasoning, which include 'confidence in one's relative security from disastrous misfortune and indecent harm' (2008, p. 198) – to show that being a member of an oppressed group can lead one to feel so powerless as to lack the requisite conditions for agency (one may think here of Fromm's conception of *Ohnmacht* discussed in Saar's contribution to this Critical Exchange). To support this, she considers the way in which depression and despair – and the correspondingly high rates of alcoholism and suicide – have ravaged indigenous communities in America (2019, pp. 34–36). Stockdale's point here is that if we accept that a certain amount of hope enables humans to cultivate and exercise their capacities as practical agents, we ought to regard it as a political imperative to establish conditions that foster this hope.

To what extent do Spinoza's views align with those sketched above? With respect to the claim that hope enables one to exercise one's agential capacities, while Spinoza does not directly articulate such a position, scattered remarks suggest that he was committed to some version of it. Consider the reasoning behind his claim in the *Ethics* that one cannot think less of oneself than is just:

For whatever man imagines he cannot do, he necessarily imagines; and he is so disposed by this imagination that he really cannot do what he imagines he cannot. For so long as he imagines that he cannot do this or that, he is not determined to do it, and consequently it is impossible for him to do it. (E3DefAff XXVIII Exp)

Spinoza is implying here that in order to be capable of doing something, one must first imagine that one can do it, which is not possible without hope. To lack hope, then, is to render oneself incapable. One might see in this account grounds for what might be called (in a nod to Bernard Williams' notion of proleptic mechanisms) 'proleptic hope': hoping even when it is not especially warranted, so as not to preclude altogether the possibility of realising these hopes.

Further evidence that he thought that hope is required for the exercise of agency may be found in the TTP: ‘we are completely ignorant of the order and connection of things itself, i.e. of how things are really ordered and connected. So for practical purposes it is better, indeed necessary, to consider things as possible’ (TTP, chapter 4, p. 126). While, regrettably, Spinoza does not elaborate on this point, one natural way of reading the claim that it is better and necessary ‘for conduct of life [*usum vitae*]’ to regard things as possible is that, from a deliberative perspective, the idea of an open future is an indispensable fiction. After all, to act as though the future is *not* open – as, for instance, by embracing a version of the ‘lazy argument’ of fatalists – would be, once again, to foreclose one’s agency or power. To hope is to imagine future states as possible (E4p12), which enables one to reason about how best to realise one’s desires.

Furthermore, Spinoza clearly embraces something like Stockdale’s view that oppression damages one’s capacity for hope, leaving one enervated and dispirited. We see this in his analysis of oppressive states, which are marked by pervasive fear bordering on despair:

A commonwealth whose subjects, terrified by fear, don’t take up arms should be said to be without war, but not at peace ... When the peace of a Commonwealth depends on its subjects’ lack of spirit – so that they’re led like sheep, and know only how to be slaves – it would be more properly called a wasteland than a Commonwealth. (TP, chapter 5, p. 530)

He advances an account of one such ‘wasteland’ in his discussion of the Ottoman empire in the subsequent chapter, which, on Spinoza’s unflattering portrayal, was able to endure only by reducing the subjects into slavish, languid subservience:

No state has stood so long without notable change as that of the Turks ... Still, if slavery, barbarism, and being without protection are to be called peace, nothing is more wretched for men than peace ... peace does not consist in the privation of war, but in a union or harmony of minds. (TP, chapter 6, p. 533)

The fact that subjects of the Ottoman empire did not rebel despite their wretched conditions can be explained by their despondency, or lack of spirit (see Armstrong’s remarks in this Critical Exchange on how this might function as a critique of Hobbes). In sum, then, Spinoza recognised that a lack of hope is incapacitating, and that it is a fundamental political concern to ensure that people feel hopeful.

Spinoza’s views on the value of hope also push beyond the prevailing contemporary discussions in an interesting way. In addition to thinking that security is good because of what it facilitates, Spinoza also thinks that to live and act from security rather than fear is itself to live more willingly and, in a sense, more authentically. We find the links between hope and willingness as well as fear

and compulsion throughout Spinoza's political writings. In the TTP, he writes that one who acts from fear is 'compelled [*coactus*] by evil' and 'acts like a slave' (TTP, chapter 4, p.135). He proceeds to contrast compelled, fearful action with willing, hopeful action:

in each state the laws must be so instituted that men are checked not so much by fear as by the hope of some good they desire very much. For in this way everyone will do his duty eagerly. (TTP, chapter 5, p. 144)

He then proceeds to praise Moses for taking 'the greatest care that the people should do their duty, not so much from fear, as voluntarily', binding the people 'with benefits', or perceived rewards – that is, by hope (TTP, chapter 5, pp. 145–46; cf. TTP, chapter 14, p. 164).

Spinoza relies on the same conceptual pairs of hope-willingness and fear-constraint in the *Political Treatise*:

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, chapter 5, p. 530)

And when discussing a model aristocracy, he writes that legislators should 'take special care that the subjects do their duty voluntarily rather than because the law compels them to' (TP, chapter 10, p. 599), treating 'hope' as a species of willing motives (TP, chapter 10, pp. 599–600; cf. TP, chapter 9, p. 594).

To engage the world securely and willingly, as opposed to fearfully and grudgingly, is to affirm one's actions more directly, which is to express one's striving more fully. This is best seen through Spinoza's analysis of action from timidity [*timor*], which is defined as that affect.

by which a man is so disposed that he does not will what he wills, and wills what he does not will ... [it] is therefore nothing but fear insofar as a man is disposed by it to avoid an evil he judges to be future by encountering a lesser evil (see P28). (E3p39s)

To act from timidity is to seek to evade some evil rather than to affirm the good in the action. We see this later in his example of a sick man who, from timidity, 'eats what he is repelled by, whereas the healthy man enjoys his food, and in this way enjoys life better than if he feared death, and directly desired to avoid it' (E4p63s2). People whose actions are motivated largely by fear are conquered by external causes. By contrast the secure person is able to affirm directly the good in their action. The difference between regarding a course of action as directly good and regarding it as a lesser evil may be merely notional, but learning to direct one's attention to the good in one's actions is important for Spinoza's cognitive therapy:

[I]n ordering our thoughts and images, we must always (by IVP63C and IIIP59) *attend to those things which are good in each thing so that in this way we are always determined to acting from an affect of joy*. For example, if someone sees that he pursues esteem too much, he should think of its correct use, the end for which it ought to be pursued, and the means by which it can be acquired, not of its misuse and emptiness, which *only someone sick of the mind* thinks of. (E5p10s, emphasis added)

Being able to affirm one's actions is a sign of strength, whereas acting aversively is a sign that one's striving has been overwhelmed or redirected by external causes.

Of course, Spinoza is not recommending altering people's sense of security by hook or by crook (e.g. by mass indoctrination). Rather, the aim is to promote security through good governance. Ultimately, he wishes to promote hope as an indicator of expected utility, an instrumentally empowering attitude, *and* as a direct expression of power.

This leaves us to ask how exactly the state can foster security. While Spinoza's own account is far too detailed to treat adequately here, I will simply note that it involves dismantling institutions that promote anxiety and prejudice, tamping down factional or tribal strife, promoting widespread participation, ensuring conditions of relative equality, and governing transparently (for my account, see *Spinoza's Political Psychology*, chapters 6–8). What are the prospects of bringing about the conditions of security in Trump's America, where inequality continues to grow, rule of law and democratic institutions are steadily eroded, and partisanship and distrust reign supreme? Admittedly, they are quite dim. But they are even dimmer if we lack hope. For that reason, perhaps we must now summon resources for proleptic hope, for only by acting hopefully in these bleak circumstances can we create conditions that might one day justify this hope.

Justin Steinberg

Spinoza's political therapy of the affects: hope

On New Year's Eve 2019 I stood on a beach on the south coast of Australia surrounded by fires with a thousand other evacuees. I would later discover that the fires that had engulfed Australia's south coast that day had destroyed the home that my partner's grandparents had built there thirty years ago, and from which my family had just escaped.

Despite the horrors of that day and of the days to come, I felt a sense of hope. Here was the kind of proof of Australia's extreme vulnerability to climate change that would surely persuade the Australian government to abandon its denialist stance and embrace stronger climate policy settings. In the weeks that followed, that hope gave way to fear and despair as the Australian government instead did

everything in its power to avoid admitting to the link between climate change and the severity of the 2019–2020 bushfire season. The fires were blamed on arsonists or on the failures of hazard reduction burning, but behind these scapegoating tactics the implicit message was clear: to take action on climate change would be to risk the loss of a way of life built on a fossil fuel economy. When faced with an event with the potential to build broader social support for meaningful action on climate change, the Australian government responded with a strategy of fear and misinformation: Australians were encouraged to fear the costs of action on the economy and their standard of living over the costs of inaction. With the enthusiastic assistance of the Murdoch press, fears about climate change were displaced and projected onto ‘greenies’ and ‘progressive elites’ who were accused by some on the far right of being part of a ‘global socialist plot’ to rob ordinary Australians of their rights and livelihoods, and the Australian nation of its sovereignty. Citizens concerned about climate change were thus positioned as economy-wrecking enemies of the Australian way of life. Instead of serving to unite Australians in common cause around a common hope for a liveable future, the bushfire crisis in Australia was cunningly exploited to entrench social divisions and foster mutual fear. In foreclosing the possibility of reasoned public debate, this strategy of fear also ensured that the power interests vested in maintaining the political and economic *status quo* would continue to be shielded from scrutiny.

Spinoza could not have foreseen the ecological crisis that we face today, but he would certainly have recognised the hopes and fears constitutive of the various personal and political responses to this crisis. Of all the passions, Spinoza regarded hope and fear as some of the most important in creating and sustaining communal identities and in shaping the character of social and political life. In sharing hopes and fears with others, we express a common outlook on the world, and because our hopes and fears motivate us to pursue the things we hope for and to evade or overcome the things we fear, shared hopes and fears also constitute collective patterns of action and response.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza presents hope and fear as two expressions of a single affective complex. Our hopes and fears track the ways in which our bodies and minds are empowered and disempowered in relation to uncertain outcomes. Spinoza defines hope (*spes*) as ‘an inconstant joy which has arisen from the image of a future or past thing whose outcome we doubt’, and fear (*metus*) as ‘an inconstant sadness, which has also arisen from the image of a doubtful thing’ (E3p18s). The inconstancy of the affects of hope and fear is a function of the fact that their objects – the idea of the outcome we hope for, or fear will come to pass – are uncertain. This element of uncertainty explains why, on Spinoza’s account, ‘there is neither hope without fear, nor fear without hope’ (E3DefAff XIII), for to be in a state of hopeful suspense and doubt about an outcome one desires is at the same time to be fearful of not attaining it. Conversely, when one fears an outcome, one at the same time hopes that it will not come to pass. Gripped by hope that the

bushfire crisis may prompt the Australian government to rethink its climate policies, I am also fearful that it may not. By the same token, what I know of the Australian government's track record on climate change may lead me to fear that the bushfire crisis will not result in the policy changes that I nevertheless can't help but hope for. The passions of hope and fear thus appear bound together in a 'wretched' vacillation.

It is because our hopes and fears enmesh us in uncertainty, doubt, and anxiety about the future that they are particularly important political tools. The desire to resolve a state of anxious uncertainty by securing the ends we hope for renders us easier to control with promises of security. The same desire for certainty makes us vulnerable to the influence of the ambitious who seek to exploit our hopes and fears by offering superstitious interpretations that serve to consolidate their influence and power over us. Managing the relationship between hope and fear is thus central to politics, and the role these affects play in any particular political community will determine its character in fundamental ways.

In reflecting on the political deployment of the affects in his political writings, Spinoza suggests that it is the ratio of hope to fear that is most important in determining the character of states. This observation entails both a descriptive and an evaluative element, as the following passage from the *Political Treatise* indicates:

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, chapter 5, p. 530)

In this passage, Spinoza suggests that in political communities in which hope prevails over fear, people are more empowered, joyful, and freer, than in communities in which fear dominates (Steinberg, 2018, chapters 4–8). These comments occur in the context of Spinoza's reflections on the arts of governance. He is recommending, *contra* Hobbes, that the wise state adopt an affective strategy of motivating obedience to its laws and institutions by fostering hope of benefits rather than fear of punishment. This strategy, he suggests, is the best way to engender loyalty to the state and thus a better means of securing political stability than a Hobbesian strategy of fear (Steinberg, 2018; Field, 2020). When the state seeks to secure participation and loyalty by appealing to our aspirations for freedom and empowerment, it binds us to itself predominantly by the joyful bond of hope for empowerment. And when, through the lens of hope, we see political society as an enabling condition of life, and an arena for the pursuit of the good, we are motivated to participate in it more actively. Because, for Spinoza, freedom and empowerment can only be realised in community as an ongoing collective project, a hopeful orientation towards community plays a vital, contributory role in the

project of freedom. In the TTP, Spinoza himself engages in a careful exercise of what we might, following Moira Gatens, describe as ‘reasonable hope’ for a ‘free republic’ when he imagines the construction of a society in which everyone would enjoy a right to participate in governance and to express their opinions without fear of intimidation.

Can we develop Spinoza’s insights about hope and fear in order to think through the politics of climate change in Australia? Can these insights help us to understand and evaluate the different affective patterns of hope and fear operative in the political project of the environmental movement on the one hand, and in the Australian government’s conservative political response to this movement on the other?

Consider, first, how we might envisage the affective economy of hope and fear operating in the politics of the environmental movement. It might seem natural to think that the environmental movement, because it tends to appeal to dreadful images of an unliveable future to motivate commitment to its cause, is itself primarily motivated by fear to avoid the evil that an unliveable future represents. However, this characterisation seems to me to be fundamentally misleading, since it suggests that this movement lacks any positive commitments. When one considers what the environmental movement is committed to, the answer must surely be that it is committed to pursuing the kind of socio-political transformation required if we are to construct more sustainable ways of life. In that sense, and using the terms that Spinoza provides, its primary orientation is towards hope for the good that a transformed society represents – a more sustainable and liveable future – and it only secondarily fears not being able to achieve this outcome. As long as those involved in this movement are able to remain hopeful of making progress in bringing about this desired future, fears about what it would mean to fail will not devolve into the despair that certainty of failure produces (E3DefAff XV), but may instead function to further energise their resolve by reminding them of the stakes of failure. In this case, we see how fear might be harnessed to support hope’s aspirations. Thus, as Susan James argues so richly below, although fears of failure always shadow hopes of success, the ratio of hope to fear, and the relationship established between them, makes all the difference to whether the affective dynamic thus established contributes generally to empowerment, or on the contrary, to disempowerment.

This affective economy, in which hope for the good is made to prevail over fear of an evil, can thus be understood, not just as a description of how the environmental movement contingently happens to be constituted, but instead as an affective relationship that can and must be cultivated. As such, it corresponds, in the socio-political sphere, to the practice of cognitive therapy that Spinoza recommends to individuals in the *Ethics* when he advises that, in order to reduce the influence of painful, disempowering affects, ‘we must always attend to those

things which are good in each thing so that in this way we are always determined to acting from an affect of joy' (E5p10s). One of the key advantages of the privileging hope over fear is the fact that hope is a species of joy, which corresponds to an increase in power, while fear is a species of sadness that signals its diminution. Thus, any social organisation or political order in which hope mostly prevails over fear will be experienced as generally more empowering than one in which the intrinsically disempowering passion of fear predominates. However, although hope is more empowering than fear, it suffers, as all passive affects do, from an instability that derives from the fact that it signals our dependence on undependable external things. It is the unstable and fluctuating nature of passive affects that explains why Spinoza attends so closely to the issue of how to design social and political institutions capable of channelling and stabilising their expression. In addition to these institutional checks, Spinoza also considers the non-institutional ways in which our affects come to acquire a relatively stable and settled cast. The key mechanism he identifies in this regard is the imitation of the affects, whereby perceived resemblances between individuals form the basis of imaginary identifications, which provide the basis for common collective affects. In other words, according to Spinoza, we come to imitate the affects of others we perceive to be like us (E3p27D). In this process of imaginative identification, each individual's affects are strengthened and reinforced through being shared with other individuals. In light of the imitation of the affects, we can see how the hope that motivates individuals as part of the environmental movement might be reinforced through being shared, and also stabilised through its directedness towards an idea of a common goal, so as to create a fairly stable affective basis for a strong form of civic engagement and activism. This relatively stable, shared, social form of hope, which expresses the desire, or striving, for a common good, serves as an example of an affective regime that agrees with 'the rules of human reason' insofar as it provides affective scaffolding for the rational endeavour privileged by Spinoza, namely, 'that all should strive together, as far as they can, to preserve their being; and that all, together, should seek the common advantage of all' (E4p18s). For Spinoza the realist, affects are the true basis for civil unity, which is why he regards politics as an art of cultivating the affective life of the body politic in ways that support the rational desire for empowerment (Steinberg, 2018, chapter 8).

Turning now to the conservative political reaction to the environmental movement, what can we say about the affective economy of hope and fear that sustains it? Does its tendency to downplay worries about the seriousness of climate change mean that it is motivated by a hopeful, if misguided and vague, optimism about the future? What, in Spinoza's terms, is the uncertain outcome that is the object of conservative politics, and about which it entertains hopes and fears? I think it is uncontentious to describe this object, or uncertain outcome, as the possibility of changes to the present. What motivates conservative politics is the desire to secure the present against change, to preserve the *status quo*, so that

business as usual – fossil fuelled consumer capitalism – can continue unabated. Because the possibility of preserving the present only becomes uncertain, and thus an object of fear, when it is threatened by something external, we can understand the conservative political response to the environmental movement to be driven by fear of the threat that this movement poses to its continued enjoyment of present goods. However, once fear ceases to be about an uncertain outcome, and is instead directed at what is imagined to be a threatening and hostile external force, it gives rise to hatred. The sad expressions of this hatred, and the conflict and division to which it gives rise, are very much in evidence in the politics of scapegoating and the ‘culture wars’ engaged in by Australia’s conservative government and its mouthpiece, the right-wing Australian media. I don’t want to linger over these issues here. Of more interest to the present topic of hope is the question of what happens to hope, and how hope is managed, within a conservative political landscape dominated by fear of change. What are the hopes that shadow fear of changes to the present, and that serve to attach us to the socio-political present more strongly? The answer to this question depends entirely on how one is situated in relation to the political present. Here I will focus only on the kind of hope that binds beneficiaries of the existing political and economic order to this order, thus serving to ensure its preservation. Another, equally important account of the affective dynamics of hope and fear could, however, be developed for those who are directly disadvantaged by this order, but who cling to it desperately nonetheless (for an example of just such a dynamic, see Justin Steinberg’s description above of the Trumpian version of hope, in which reactionary nostalgia is sustained by multiple fears).

For those who directly benefit from the existing political and economic order, investment in that order typically takes the form of privatised hopes. The privatisation of hope is the individualisation of hope and its expression in a variety of personal aspirations and expectations tied to a narrow understanding of one’s immediate utility. These are the hopes and dreams one entertains for one’s own and one’s family’s advancement and personal fulfilment, for example. By attaching us to the existing political and economic order via hope for the private advantage that it promises to secure for us, privatised hopes also serve to invest us in the preservation of that order. Moreover, because the privatisation of hope detaches personal expectations from the wider world, it serves to weaken the sense of our belonging to a collective, and thereby also weakens collective capacities to solve collective problems like climate change. Understood as an affective strategy, the privatisation of hope constitutes an effective means of undermining social solidarity and obscuring the social and political sources of problems. It thus serves as the vehicle of our attachment to conditions that we might otherwise perceive as antithetical to our more broadly conceived interests, if our capacities for understanding and acting on these interests had not been systematically undermined (for an alternative account of this affective dynamic, see Martin Saar’s analysis of

‘hope as ideology’ below). It is via the mechanism of hope’s privatisation that the conservative political agenda is advanced, and the structures of the existing political and economic order of consumer capitalism are preserved. In this disempowering relation between structure and affect, we see an example of how a particular distribution of the affects of hope and fear can lead us to support our own servitude, making us fight for slavery as if for our survival (TTP, Preface, p. 68).

To think with Spinoza about the place of hope and fear in politics is to become attentive to the determining role played by these affects in our social and political lives. Spinoza invites us to be alert to the ways in which hope and fear may be fostered and deployed, and to consider how the different relationships established between them may serve either to empower or to disempower individuals and societies. Spinoza’s political recommendations regarding how best to manage hope, in its necessary relation to fear, might be fruitfully understood as developing the elements of a political therapy of the affects. Adapting these therapeutic insights to our own context can serve, at the very least, to make us aware of the political significance of our supposedly private hopes and fears.

Aurelia Armstrong

The interdependence of hope and fear

In his most philosophically ambitious mood Spinoza is not an advocate of hope. As we develop our rational understanding, he argues, the transient satisfaction we derive from hoping gives way to the steady joy of concentrating on what we understand. ‘The more we strive to live according to the guidance of reason’, the *Ethics* explains, ‘the more we strive to depend less on hope, to free ourselves from fear, to conquer fortune as much as we can, and to direct our actions by the certain counsels of reason’ (E4p47s). A community of perfect philosophers would therefore have no use for hope. But as Moira Gatens reminds us in her introduction to this Critical Exchange, Spinoza is well aware that we are not perfect philosophers. Since losing hope is one of the most painful things that can happen to us (Crichton, 2020, p. 160), we need to ask how we ordinary human beings can live hopefully without succumbing to disappointment or despair.

For Spinoza, this is both a philosophical and, as Martin Saar points out, a political problem. As well as pointing to the remote possibility of transcending hope, philosophy indicates in both theoretical and practical terms how we can use hope to cultivate joyful and empowering ways of life. However, the difficulty of doing so is made especially complicated by the fact that hope is always accompanied by fear, and the satisfaction of hoping is always to some degree offset by anxiety. Hope, in Spinoza’s view, is tainted by sadness. If we are to live joyfully, it seems, we must therefore disjoin it from fear. In his recent book, Justin

Steinberg calls this the Inseparable Counterparts challenge, and my discussion of the problem implicitly draws on his account (Steinberg, 2018, pp. 83–94).

A number of commentators have taken up this interpretation of Spinoza's argument, and it is clear from Aurelia Armstrong's contribution that it illuminates many aspects of his thought. Nevertheless, I shall argue that the interdependence of hope and fear cannot be overcome and must instead be accommodated. By following the implications of Spinoza's claim that there is no hope without fear, and focusing on the range of ways in which these affects can interact, we can distinguish the dysfunctional relationships between them that have attracted most attention in the literature from the jointly empowering role they are also able to play. That hope and fear are interdependent, I shall suggest, is one of Spinoza's deepest and most hopeful insights, and has an immediate bearing on our own political situations.

Spinoza's discussion of this theme is rooted in his exceptionally rich analysis of the diversity of our affects. In the first place, affects vary with their objects. Hoping to have a nice dinner, for example, has a different quality from hoping one's child is still alive, or in Spinoza's more precise formulation, since the hope arising from A involves the nature of object A, while the hope arising from B involves the nature of the object B, these two affects are by nature different because they arise from different causes (E3p56 adapted). At the same time, our affects reflect our individual, embodied histories. The same piece of music may make one person joyful and another melancholy, while a thunderstorm may terrify one community and inspire hope in another. Although we classify affects into types, they are in truth unique (LeBuffe, 2009, pp. 189–190; Saar 2015, p. 120). More than this, however, many of the situations we encounter arouse contrasting affects in us, as when admiration is tinged with envy, or love vies with resentment (E3p7s). We are torn between different feelings and desires, and experience what Spinoza calls *fluctuatio animi*.

In her 1856 translation of the *Ethics*, George Eliot renders this phrase as fluctuation of mind (Eliot, 2020), where the Latin *fluctuatio* carries connotations of being swept by one affect after another as a wave (*fluctus*) is driven by the wind (E3p59s). We fluctuate, for example, when a single situation simultaneously arouses contrasting affects and moves us to opposing courses of action. We also fluctuate when one affect is partially overlaid by another, as when a generally contemptible politician does something worthy of respect, and our approval alternates with disdain. Fluctuations such as these are a manifestation of our power to be affected in many ways at once (E3p17s). An object arouses more than one affect, and neither gives way to the other. But fluctuations can also constitute new affects. Jealousy (*zelotypia*), Spinoza claims, 'is nothing but a fluctuation of mind born of love and hatred together, accompanied by the idea of one who is envied' (E3p35s). To borrow his example, a man who discovers that the woman he loves is

also seeing someone else may start to hate her without ceasing to love her (E3p35). Out of his emotional conflict jealousy is born.

Spinoza's most telling analysis of *fluctuatio* focuses, however, on the relationship between hope and fear. While these passions always occur together, they do not constitute a new affect. Nevertheless, each is implicated in the other, so that there is 'neither hope without fear nor fear without hope' (E3DefAff XIII). What ties the two together is the fact that each is a response to doubt or uncertainty. According to Spinoza's symmetrical definitions, 'hope is an inconstant joy born of the idea of a future or past thing whose outcome we to some extent doubt', while 'fear is an inconstant sadness born of the idea of a future or past thing whose outcome we to some extent doubt' (E3DefAff XII, XIII). When we confront uncertainty, fear of a disempowering state of affairs is always offset by at least a corner of hope, and hope of empowerment is always intertwined with anxiety. To put it another way, whenever we are in doubt about a potentially joyful or saddening outcome, we fluctuate between hope and fear. Indeed, as Spinoza explains, doubt and this species of fluctuation are really the same thing (E3p17s).

Because so much of our affective life revolves around our desires for uncertain ends, fluctuating hopes and fears are bound to be integral to our existence and will remain so as long as we fall short of perfect understanding. Learning to live as well as we can is therefore a matter of learning to manage the relationship between hope and fear so that it contributes as far as possible to a satisfying way of life. At this point, Spinoza suggests, everything depends on *how* our hopes and fears fluctuate, i.e. on the balance between the two affects, and on the pattern of their alternation. In general terms, we are most disempowered when the balance tips towards fear. As Spinoza remarks more than once, when governments attempt to rule by fear rather than hope, their efforts to exert control over their subjects tend to generate anxiety and resentment, and threaten the peacefulness of the state (TTP, chapter 5, p. 139 and p. 145). But this already dangerous condition can be rendered even more disempowering by the pattern of fluctuation between people's hopes and fears. At the extreme, people dominated by fear may suffer from the abrupt and irresolvable alternation of affects that Spinoza calls consternation (*consternatio*) – 'a fear which keeps a man so senseless or vacillating' that he is reduced, as Moira Gatens puts it, to feeble dithering and is unable to act (E3DefAff XLII). (Here Curley's translation of *fluctuatio* as vacillation seems wholly appropriate). However, Spinoza's most detailed examination of the disempowering effects of longer patterns of fluctuation focuses on superstition, a fragile and ultimately unsuccessful strategy for diminishing fear by tipping the balance of affect towards hope.

Superstition, as Spinoza conceives of it, is the attempt to suppress anxiety by fantasising the existence of powers capable of protecting one against the dangers one is afraid of, and ritually placating them. When supplicants try to win the favour of the gods by offering sacrifices, for instance, or when witches take themselves to be doing the devil's work in order to turn away evil, they resort to superstition to

quieten their apprehensiveness and bolster their confidence. Commenting on this strategy, Spinoza remarks that the people most thoroughly enslaved to superstition are those who invest great hope in uncertain goals and suffer a correspondingly intense fear of not attaining them. As their anxiety gains hold, they turn to superstitious practices to tip the balance of their affects towards hope, and ‘appeal to divine aid with prayers and unmanly tears’ (TTP, Preface, p. 66). By reassuring themselves that God will protect them, they suppress their doubts and restore a more positive outlook.

To the extent that superstition diminishes fear, it can be empowering, but Spinoza is adamant that the hopefulness it yields is vitiated by a longer, destructive pattern of fluctuating affect. Because the powers to which superstition appeals are the fruit of fantasy, the hope that people invest in them is likely to be disappointed, and the fear that superstition was meant to allay is liable to return (TTP, Preface, p. 68). Usually, then, superstition can only provide short-lived periods of hopefulness in an outlook inherently susceptible to anxiety and cannot definitively suppress a painful pattern of fluctuating affect (Gatens and Lloyd, 1999, pp. 30–33). This pattern also has further damaging consequences. Dispirited by relentless alternations of hope and fear, some people move in the direction of despair, tipping the balance of their affects even more sharply towards disempowerment. Others relieve the discomfort of doubt by fixing on some source of hope and rigidly suppressing the anxieties associated with it. Although both strategies block the fluctuation of hope and fear and to this extent relieve sadness, they do so at a cost. People who take these ways out disempower themselves, in one case by stifling their desire for a more joyful way of life and in the other by blunting their sensitivity to risk and doubt.

Although Spinoza’s exploration of superstition focuses on the religious culture of his time, the patterns of affect he traces have a political dimension. Martin Saar’s reminder that affects are always political is illustrated, for example, by the claim that, because superstitious people ‘are easily led, under the pretext of religion, now to worship their kings as gods, now to curse and loathe them as the common plague of humankind’, superstition ‘has been the cause of many uprisings and bloody wars’ (TTP, Preface, p. 68). Here Spinoza attributes political conflict to ‘the pretext of religion’, but he also suggests that political institutions themselves may generate superstitious fluctuations of hope and fear by advocating fantastical antidotes to political uncertainty (James, 2006). Contemporary states, for example, promise complete security whilst warning of insidious terrorist movements. Governments reassure us we can continue as we are, while our own experience tells of environmental Armageddon. Increasingly, we find ourselves vulnerable to the anxiety that arises when the balance of our fluctuating affects tips and fear dominates hope. Increasingly, we try to relieve the discomfort of fluctuating affects, whether by giving up hope or refusing to acknowledge any grounds for fear.

It is easy enough to find examples of these disempowering strategies within our own political communities, and a single parochial case will be enough to illustrate the point. During the recent British struggle over whether or not to leave the European Union, opposing sides defended their positions by offering wildly divergent interpretations of the political future Britain might hope for and the risks attendant on failing to secure it. In parts of the Brexit-friendly press, an image of an independent, homogeneous, internationally respected nation with firm control of its borders was contrasted with a dependent, even enslaved state, in which a flood of needy immigrants threatened to destroy long-established ways of life. By contrast, the anti-Brexit media dwelt on an image of an advanced, prosperous, culturally rich and politically stabilising Europe. To abandon it, they claimed, would be economically disastrous, culturally retrograde, and would put peace at risk. Bounced between these contradictory and to some extent imaginary ideals and dystopias, superstitiously fluctuating hopes and fears became the order of the day. Lack of a stable consensus stretched constitutional processes to breaking point, and both individual and collective agents suffered increasingly from *consternatio*.

As the anxiety provoked by the prolonged fluctuation of hope and fear took hold, the two disempowering responses associated with Spinoza's analysis of superstition became increasingly common. Some voices invested ever more rigidly in whatever it was they hoped for and denied associated risks. (Confronted by unfavourable predictions about the economic effects of Brexit, for example, it became enough to dismiss them as scaremongering.) Meanwhile other agents, individual and collective, descended into the spectrum of affects closest to despair. Debilitated by the disquieting sense that there was nothing worth hoping for, fear came to dominate their lives.

To protect ourselves against these disempowering responses, Spinoza urges us to make hope the dominant partner in the balance of our affects and ensure that the pattern of fluctuation between hope and fear is not itself a source of overwhelming anxiety. At one level, following this path comes naturally. As Justin Steinberg points out above, the striving that constitutes our essence is a striving for empowerment, and we are consequently more strongly inclined to empower ourselves by hoping than to disempower ourselves by dwelling on our fears. Although apprehension can get the upper hand, we are nevertheless oriented towards hopefulness and strive to live as hopefully as we can (Martin, 2014). How, though, do we maintain a hopeful balance of affects? How do we keep the anxieties that are the unavoidable counterpart of hope within bounds, and avoid the destabilising patterns of fluctuation manifested in consternation and superstition? Spinoza's most direct response is a straightforward political recommendation: it is more empowering, he says, to rule by hope rather than fear. This formulaic piece of advice may seem insufficient, but underlying it we can discern a way for hope and fear to play a jointly empowering role.

The interconnectedness of hope and fear draws attention to the complexity of our affective interpretations of the world. Through the fluctuating relationship between these affects we track both opportunity and risk, as hope delineates what we take ourselves to be able to achieve, whilst anxiety makes the limits of our power present to us. Each affect offsets the other, keeping our vulnerability as well as our possibilities in play. Without the counterweight of fear, our disposition to construe the world hopefully – to imagine things that increase our power of acting and deny the existence of things that diminish it (E3p12) – would make us more likely to overreach ourselves and ignite the saddening forms of fluctuation we have examined. As it is, our aspiration to empower ourselves comes with a potentially fruitful check; the fluctuation of hope with fear serves as a reminder of our frailty and moves us to exercise caution (Spinoza's personal motto) as we pursue our desires.

Learning to attend to the fluctuations of our hopes and fears, and cultivating the ability to use them as a means to our individual and collective empowerment, is a vital though extremely demanding process (Armstrong, 2018, pp. 42–44). In all aspects of our lives, the task of empowering ourselves partly depends on our ability to help one another keep our fears in check, and we can do this in many ways, whether by talking through the particular anxieties that individually threaten to depress us, or by devising measures to prevent panicking governments from irrevocably damaging the social fabric. At the same time, our empowerment depends on learning how to prevent our hopes from distorting our sense of what we can achieve by taking off into a realm of ungrounded optimism. A community can take steps in this direction by articulating its shared hopes along with the risks that accompany them, and expressing them in specific and realisable policies. In doing so, it constitutes the hopes and counterbalancing fears that dominate public life and shapes the fluctuations of mind that its members habitually undergo (TP, chapter 5, p. 138). By creating a compelling and hopeful political culture, it ensures that fear is guided by hope, rather than the other way around.

A sensitivity to the interdependence of hope and fear is also a condition of successful deliberation. Unless negotiators are moved by the hope of reaching a satisfying resolution, are anxious to avoid the risks at stake, and remain sensitive to both affects by feeling and responding now to one, now to the other, the lives they are discussing will be in danger of becoming mere numbers on a spreadsheet, and any solution they arrive at is likely to be a disappointment. Again, however, great skills are called for. When negotiators are too hopeful they may underestimate risk; when they are not hopeful enough they may settle for uninspiring resolutions; and when they are side-tracked by superstition or consternation they will be unable to reach stable decisions.

In its most productive form, the unavoidable fluctuation of our hopes and fears expresses itself in a nimble yet cautious openness to possibility, and in social practices that allow us to develop more empowering ways of life. As I have tried to

show, one of Spinoza's many achievements is to have drawn attention to the interdependence of hope and fear and made their relationship a topic of sustained philosophical and political reflection. Standing on his shoulders and adapting his insights to our circumstances, we too may be able to align our hopes and fears so that our sensitivity to risk supports the pursuit of our shared aspirations, and reduces our vulnerability to disempowerment or sadness.

Susan James

Power, powerlessness, and the politics of hope

Hopeless times usher in the need for hope. Among philosophers, the urge to make room for hope amidst hopelessness is increasingly felt. For quite some time, the topics of hope, progress, and utopia were not at the centre of academic debates, but recently this has fundamentally changed. The current health crisis, the ongoing 'turn to affect', and the re-evaluation of emotions in politics have contributed to this widespread tendency. To expect from Spinoza scholarship, and (neo)Spinozist authors, some elucidation of these topics is appropriate, given that many of us have promoted the relevance and timeliness of seventeenth-century philosophy for current theorising and, more broadly, for reflecting about politics, power, institutions, and social action (cf., among many, Balibar, 1998; Gatens and Lloyd, 1999; Negri, 2013).

My systematic interest in the connection between affects and politics, or, differently put, between the individual and the non-individual, predates my efforts as a Spinoza interpreter. To theoretically and diagnostically account for the interrelations of individual experience and non-individual factors, be they social, interpersonal, institutional, or material, to me seems to be the core interest of political and social theorising. To understand the emotions or affective dispositions of persons, of which hope is a prominent case, in such a way means to understand them in relation to the social world persons inhabit; a world that shapes, frames, or conditions thinking, feeling, and acting. This general interest implies that I am less concerned with the straightforwardly ethical and epistemological questions of how hope, as a hopeful affective attitude or virtue, can be retrieved or cultivated (if it is lost) or whether hope can be justified (and is not just wishful thinking). Rather, hope (or the lack thereof), in my perspective, amounts to an important indicator of social conditions and social tensions.

Before I turn to Spinoza and hope, let me illustrate this general perspective from a different angle. In the mid-1930s, Erich Fromm, then a prominent contributor to the Frankfurt school of critical theory (from which he was later expelled as a 'revisionist'), articulated the theoretical desideratum for the convergence of individual-psychic and social-material factors. In a series of important articles, Fromm argued for a methodological marriage between psychoanalysis and a

Marxism of sorts (cf. Fromm, 1932). In a fascinating article, Fromm focuses on the feeling of powerlessness or '*Ohnmacht*' (Fromm, 1937). This slightly old-fashioned word literally means 'without power'. At the same time, it refers to a mental state and a real-world state of affairs: having no power and being aware of not having it. (Interestingly, and posing some problems for translation, *Ohnmacht* can also refer to being unconscious, i.e. possessing no conscious cognitive powers.) The experience of powerlessness or *Ohnmacht*, Fromm claims, is a valuable entry point into the analysis of the social and political origins of fascism, specifically in its entanglement with the problem of illusionary hope:

A feeling of powerlessness with regard to real changes ... a 'belief in better times to come' [and] this hope for change, however it might look, was the fertile soil [*Nährboden*] for the growth of exactly those ideologies that led to the victory of the authoritarian state (Fromm, 1937, pp. 115–116, my translation).

This slight detour has led me to a point where I can explain what I would expect from a (neo)Spinozist treatment of the problem of hope that is neither purely ethical nor purely epistemological but social-theoretical or critical. Trusting that my four co-contributors will present and interpret Spinoza's 'official' and explicit treatment of hope as an affect more expertly than I ever could (as they have impressively demonstrated), I will restrict myself to some methodological remarks. The Spinozian framework, I would like to claim, is particularly well suited to capture the correlation between individual or psychic-affective experience (like the feeling of powerlessness or hope) and non-individual social factors (like social tensions and conflicts). This framework thinks through these phenomena together, as two sides of the same coin. It treats the affective, subjective realm of reactions and experiences as an indicator of a mechanism that deeply relates the self to the outside world and its objectively determining, conditioning forces. The Spinozist perspective on affect always relates affective experiences to transitions or changes in the real capacity to act or *potentia agendi* of an agent (cf. E3D3). This power-to-act is less an individual feature or possession of that agent than it is an effect within a whole transindividual network of factors – most of which are not under her control.

This interesting and non-accidental connection between a specific affect and power is illustrated in Fromm's treatment of *Ohnmacht*. This powerlessness is rather close to, but of course not identical with, hopelessness. Fromm places them alongside one another, but in a negative way, suggesting that a feeling of powerlessness or objective hopelessness may give rise to subjective (but illusory) hope. Power and (the feeling of) powerlessness therefore acquire, methodologically speaking, the character of basic, explanatory notions for other affective states (like hope). And this, I contend, is also what Spinoza is trying to achieve. Spinoza does not aim, at least not in the first instance, at a general ethical discourse about the

value or utility of this or that affect, as such. Rather, he defines affects as the affections of the body as well as the ideas of these affections augmenting or diminishing the power-to-act (cf. E3D3, E3p11s). The Spinozian framework thinks the affects of individuals and groups through the capacity or power-to-act that can or cannot be realised, that is, through socially conditioned possibilities and impossibilities to act (cf. Lordon, 2013; Andermann, forthcoming). Fromm and Spinoza both make this methodological shift: having or not having a specific affect, being hopeful or not, is discussed in terms of the social world in which this affect is produced or in which it can emerge. This perspective is fruitful for turning (personal or subjective) affective events into objects of inquiry indicating and referencing (transindividual or social) power relations and represents an important resource for contemporary political and social theorising.

Before I explicitly return to hope, let me briefly recall three well-known instances from Spinoza's works where he displays the very theoretical gesture I am trying to pin down. In these passages, specific emotional patterns or affective dispositions – fear, greed, and love – are placed firmly in a social or institutional context so that they appear as products or effects of a specific social and political arrangement. The specific affects under scrutiny then lose their brute or natural character as individual psychological features and acquire the status of *explananda* in a social-theoretical narrative: they appear as something that it makes sense to have or to express in a given society under certain institutional circumstances (cf. Saar, 2013, and forthcoming).

First, in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza famously treats fear as one of the most overtly political emotions there are, and for several reasons. It tends to be an affect that can be politically manipulated and exploited, with religion being the name for the most effective symbolic machine that feeds on human beings' existential need to make sense of the unknown and of the threats a contingent life can entail (TTP, Preface; James, 2006). Fear also tends to be the outcome of an active production of religious and moral teachings that create new objects for fearful projection. In addition, fear is a highly contagious, highly social force, and is, as Spinoza in his most Hobbesian mood seems to imply, a highly important driving factor in binding people together under state authority. This authority – the 'highest power', *summa potestas* – seductively promises to protect but more effectively threatens to strike down and sanction any trespasser of the civil order (TTP, chapter 16). There is a whole politics of fear surrounding, shaping, and inciting this seemingly all-too-human, all-too-natural emotion; there are whole institutions that build upon it and reproduce it in a vicious circle of sorts.

Second, ambition, greed, and a certain craving for recognition permeate social life to such a degree that it is hard to call them individual emotional dispositions at all. In his official theory of the affects in part 3 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza discusses these affects in isolation. However, in the more institutionally oriented sections of the *Tractatus Politicus*, they are shown to be elements of a social dynamic that

structurally conditions individual behaviour and produces certain effects that can either harm or stabilise the social order. Following Machiavelli, Spinoza recommends the construction of the political system in such a way that the individual ambition of political agents can be channelled towards the good of the whole *civitas* (cf. TP, chapter 7, p. 548; chapter 10, p. 599; Walther, 2018). An urge to excel and even dominate can find a place and serve a function within a well-designed society: the motivational energies that are created in comparing oneself to others and desiring to outdo them should be harnessed, not denied. At the heart of political processes, there is a whole economy or art of balancing the diverging and even competing ambitions of political subjects (cf. Del Lucchese, 2009, chapter 2).

Third, for Spinoza, love and affective identification or investment are major elements of community-building and community-maintaining. His (one might say) ‘passionate’ version of republicanism depicts citizens not only as rational choosers of a certain order and authority. Rather, in this picture, citizens also attach their hearts to common symbols, meanings, rituals, and narratives, which are expressive of a shared identity. Both political treatises (the TTP and the TP), the first in a more historical register, the second in a more prudential register, place an enormous weight on the power of these practices to bind individuals together and forge a collective political body. Political authorities are best advised to actively shape or even bring about these positive affects, which are the products of politics as much as they are, to a certain degree, its precondition, or, to put it more cautiously, the condition of a stable and lasting political community. There is a whole politics of love and identification needed and presupposed as the affective underside of the state, law, and institutions (cf. Gatens and Lloyd, 1999, chapter 5).

All three examples just recalled share the methodological feature I aim to highlight: Spinoza de-naturalises and de-individualises the affects in question and places them firmly in a social, even institutional context. How one feels also reflects sets of practices in place, specific institutions of power, and certain discourses in force. Concerning the examples just mentioned, it becomes clear that, for Spinoza, fear, ambition, and love are also always socially and politically produced, cultivated, modified, and harvested. It does not take much to generalise this point to other affects: in the current moment, panic, despair, and feelings of insecurity come to mind. Instead of seemingly isolated, seemingly spontaneous, seemingly individual reactions and dispositions, the Spinozist will see here an entire politics: that is, she will see strategies and utilities attached to and inherent in these affects.

A Spinozist analysis of affective dispositions cannot avoid addressing the society that makes them possible or impossible, that uses, shapes, and redirects affective energies in highly specific and functional ways. But this also means that the very *potentia agendi* of the individual undergoing or experiencing an affective state is a matter of interference with, and intervention in, the powers of other entities, be they persons, groups, or institutions. This methodological shift from a treatment of

affect as individual or purely psychological to its treatment as social and political is, by my lights, one of Spinoza's major contributions to social and political theorising (cf. Lordon, 2013, chapter 3; Saar, forthcoming). But what does it mean for the case of hope?

To reiterate, I am less concerned with analysing Spinoza's own explicit arguments about hope. Rather, my aim is to methodologically delineate what a (neo)Spinozist perspective on this phenomenon amounts to. Such a framework could, I suggest, take on the really hard political cases and make sense of situations where the value of hope is far from clear. Treating hope as a factor of power, as its tool and product, ultimately reveals it as a political entity and problem, with different valences in particular contexts, serving different purposes, strategies, and circumstances.

- (a) *Radical hopelessness* There are social or political situations where hope is not present at all, where objective hopelessness mirrors objective powerlessness (cf. Flam, 1998). Spinozists could consistently maintain that a body without much power to act or govern itself cannot accordingly form any coherent idea of a good it could reach by itself. The absence of such a positive affect or horizon is possible and should not be taken lightly. Having hope or not (for Spinoza at least) is not a matter of will, but a matter of objective conditions. This perspective might help to disarm more voluntaristic conceptions that rely on the mere will to believe 'Yes, we can', which is sometimes nothing more than a version of the 'Just do it' mentality of today's consumer culture, devoid of political analysis, or even plausibility. We should, however, treat the objective absence of hope as an extreme (yet not impossible) case of an almost complete totalitarian shut-down of the circuit of action and freedom.
- (b) *Ambivalent hope* In most other social conjunctions, some hope(s) will be produced, differing in degree for different social and political groups. Some of these groups will need such hope(s) more badly than others to keep up and to keep on struggling or resisting. It would be cynical to deny hope as a motivational factor, and no (neo)Spinozist will argue for this. But she will keep reminding herself that needing and having hope and needing and having (some) power (to do some things) will need to correlate, that hope can be a surrogate or ersatz-affect where rage or indignation, or where a sober strategic analysis of what is possible and impossible, would be more apt. I take Spinoza's explicit scepticism towards hope *qua* individual affect to express this ambivalence (cf. E3p18s2 and E3p50s), and I happily subscribe to Susan James's brilliant characterisation of this *topos* in her contribution to this Critical Exchange. Whether hope in a context of political struggle or conflict is a strengthening of, or a deflection from, political action is a strategico-political question. It will depend on the cartography or topology of powers and capacities, of alliances and hegemonies.

- (c) *Hope as ideology* There is yet another problematic case, where hope is present, almost too present, and established as a cultural norm that conceals the many forms of powerlessness that objectively exist. Just recall Fromm's harsh (and not too subtle) judgment of a vague hope for the better as an ideological fog preventing the masses from seeing their objective misery. Nobody will deny that late-capitalist society remains highly invested in existential hopes and dreams, of a better life for one's children, of romantic fulfilment, of careers and consumerist practices. Any sober social analysis, however, will show how unrealistic many of these hopes and dreams are, given the myriad of structural and systemic exclusions and disadvantages some groups face. But these hopes and dreams still fuel whole lives and help accommodate objective social realities that would not be maintained without these phantasmatic investments. Lauren Berlant has coined the phrase 'cruel optimism' for this kind of psychological entrapment, which describes 'a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility'. Berlant argues (through more or less psychoanalytic means) for the pervasive character of cruel optimism in contemporary culture (Berlant, 2010, p. 94; cf. similarly Ahmed, 2010). In his opening reference to the 'American Dream' in this Critical Exchange, Justin Steinberg strikes the same note, and it deserves underlining: hope for the better can be a major impediment to a realistic and non-illusionary assessment of social realities, and can be nothing more than an ideological imperative serving the interests of those whose lives and social status do not have to change to be acceptable.

In my view, a (neo)Spinozist perspective on hope today should be prepared to argue along lines that are adequate and responsive to these three cases. This stance would, for sure, be all *for* hope as a resource for social change, political motivation, and civic engagement, and would never deny that in order to counter and endure a grave social crisis (like a pandemic or a financial crash) hope is much in need. But it could also critically expose the many promises, functions, and seductions of hope. It could describe hope as a mind-set of political subjects, reflecting the political context in which these subjects act and understand themselves. In the ultra-realist (neo)Spinozist picture, affects as ontological features of the human should always be part of real politics. Raising, mobilising, and channelling hope will be one strategy of political projects aiming at affecting the minds and souls of citizens. Which politics? Which affects? Which hopes? These are questions that philosophy, or theoretical reflection alone, will not be able to settle. For Spinoza, a philosopher who knew the limits of philosophy, these are questions of real and imagined power, of real and imagined agency, and of who can do what, how and when – and who cannot.

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Note

- 1 All references to Spinoza’s works are to Curley’s two volume translation *Collected Works of Spinoza* and use the following abbreviations: E for the *Ethics*, Arabic numerals for its five parts, p for Proposition, s for Scholium, D for Definition, C for Corollary, Appen for Appendix, and DefAff for the Definition of the Affects that appear at the end of E3. So, E2p18s refers to *Ethics*, Part 2, Proposition 18, Scholium. The *Ethics* appears in Volume 1 (Spinoza 1985) and both the *Theologico-Political Treatise* and the *Political Treatise* appear in Volume 2 (Spinoza 2016). Abbreviations for these texts will be TTP and TP, respectively, followed by the chapter number and page number. Spinoza’s letters appear in both volumes and are abbreviated by Ep followed by the letter number and volume number.

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