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Towards a Spinozist Conception of Hope

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The philosophy of hope is an extensive philosophical body represented by ancient thinkers such as Hesiod to more modern thinkers like Terry Eagleton. A drastic shift in how philosophers came to evaluate hope arose during the early Enlightenment, in which there was a discernible move from the Christian and broadly providential understanding of hope towards a more critical evaluation of the nature and value of hope. However, one of the early Enlightenment's preeminent figures, Baruch de Spinoza, is seldom linked to this development. Spinoza's brief mention of hope in *Ethics* resulted in the lack of historical attention regarding the Spinozist understanding of hope. Furthermore, due to his conceptualisation of hope as a passion, Spinoza has been primarily represented as providing a pessimistic account of hope. In the paper it will be shown that Spinoza's conception of hope is more nuanced and extensive, and thus deserves greater attention since it relates to his discussions on freedom, reason and the *conatus*. The argument of the paper develops the findings of Simon Wortham who, in *Hope: The Politics of Optimism,* presents a dualistic interpretation of Spinoza's understanding of hope. The aim of the present paper is to better evaluate Spinoza's attitude and argue that he advocates for a mid-point between pessimism and optimism by virtue of his pragmatic attitude towards hope.

Within the confines of the paper Spinoza's understanding of hope as a passion and its relation to concepts such as the affects, reason, the *conatus* and freedom will be explicated. It will be argued that Spinoza presents a dualistic conception of hope, wherein hope is, on the one hand, critiqued insofar as it runs counter to reason, and on the other hand, is seen as valuable insofar as it is derived from joy. It will be argued that this dualistic approach leads to the development of two differing conceptions of hope, namely 'epistemic hope' and 'regulative hope.'

1. Spinoza on the Affects, the *Conatus* and the Passions

If one is to arrive at Spinoza's understanding of the passions, it is imperative that his notions of the affects are clearly explicated. In part III of *Ethics,* Spinoza describes the affects as states that influence the body's ability to act either through an increase or a decrease in action (*Ethics III*, D3). The affects as first described in *Ethics* seem to be dissimilar from states of mind inasmuch as they are directly related to the body's ability to act. For Spinoza, something that influences the body necessarily influences the mind, as mind and body for him are one and the same (*Ethics III*, P2S). This leads Spinoza to state that the affects of the body are the same as those of the mind.

When an affect is seen to increase the body's activity, it is called an action; when it is seen to diminish the body's ability to act, it is referred to as a passion. Spinoza relates the understanding of the affects to the epistemic distinction between adequate and inadequate ideas (*Ethics III*, P1). An idea is considered adequate when the causes of the said idea are clearly understood and are seen to emerge from the individual's nature. Therefore, adequate ideas are self-generating and allow for causality to be understood. In other words, adequate ideas relate to epistemic clarity because the agent is able to understand how certain ideas emerge from within the said agent. Inadequate ideas, in contrast, represent something incomplete because they relate to a variety of external forces that confuse the subject, leaving them unable to understand the causal connection (Nadler 2020). Inadequate ideas lack epistemic clarity because a variety of forces outside the individual impinge and cloud their understanding of the generation of ideas. Spinoza goes on to state that all passions derive from inadequate ideas. Therefore, passions leave the subject passive because they are

unable to act properly (i.e., in accordance with reason), due to a lack of sufficient understanding of causes of their ideas and thus, as stated by Spinoza, lead to a deficit of knowledge and a lack of power (*Ethics IV*, P47D).

Spinoza's understanding of the affects relates directly to an individual's ability to act. The notion of the *conatus* describes the striving and self-preservation of a given organism (Hampshire 2005, xxvii). Stuart Hampshire in *Spinoza and Spinozism* claims that for Spinoza the *conatus* or the striving for self-preservation *i*s the very essence of an individual (Hampshire 2005, xxx). According to Hampshire, Spinoza sees the *conatus* as linked to the desire for "greater power and freedom" (Hampshire 2005, xxvii). In part IV of *Ethics,* Spinoza states that virtue is defined by striving to preserve one's being and asserts that happiness can be found in such a striving (*Ethics IV*, P18S). Spinoza justifies this claim by stating that to be virtuous is to act in accordance with the laws of nature and thus he suggests that striving and actively preserving one's being is the virtuous essence of humankind (*Ethics IV*, P22).

Owing to Spinoza's understanding of the *conatus,* it is clear that his attitude towards the affects *i*s dependent on the extent to which they allow for action and the aiding of the *conatus*. Spinoza treats the passions with disdain given that they restrain action and therefore contradict the need for action implicit in the *conatus*.

For Spinoza, there are two primary passions from which all other are subsequently derived: joy and sadness. Spinoza views joy as that passion that allows the mind to reach greater perfection; conversely, sadness is that which leads the mind to lesser perfection (*Ethics III*, P11S). From this definition of joy and sadness, it is not clear why joy should be considered a passion since, if it allows for the mind to attain greater perfection, it is involved in the search for adequate ideas and thus aids the *conatus*. A further complication arises in *Ethics IV*, wherein Spinoza explicitly states that joy cannot be a passion, since we experience joy through the presence of adequate ideas (*Ethics IV*, P63D). However, from reading the text it is clear that joy is not a passion provided it does not become excessive, and that both joy and desire allow for action (*Ethics IV*, P59). Although joy can aid the striving implicit in the *conatus*, it can also lead to a variety of other troublesome passions such as hope and pride. Therefore, joy in itself is an action, but its derivatives are passions. Spinoza's treatment of sadness, on the other hand, is more definite; sadness and all the passions that derive from it impede action.

Spinoza's description of the primary passions and their derivatives illustrates his attitude towards the passions as confused ideas that, in the words of Lilli Alanen, are viewed as "obstacles to true knowledge" (Alanen 2018, 315). The passions, as based on inadequate ideas, do not prompt comprehension and reasonable outlooks, but instead lead to confusion. For Spinoza, inadequate ideas do not allow for action inasmuch as the subject is unaware of the true causes as long as they are guided by the passions. For Spinoza, an understanding of the true causes is the prerequisite for action. Therefore, the passions go against the very essence of human nature, namely the *conatus*.

Spinoza further evaluates the passions by way of illustrating their relation to freedom. According to Spinoza, people believe themselves to be free because they are conscious of their desires and passions. In other words, people see themselves as free because they know what they want (*Ethics III*, P2S2). However, freedom according to Spinoza can only arise once an individual is aware of the causes of their actions and lives in accordance with reason (i.e., true knowledge and adequate ideas). Although an individual may be aware of their desires as they are driven by passions, they do not understand the reason or cause for their desires, and therefore cannot be considered truly free. Spinoza contrasts the passions with the search for freedom, thus indicating that someone who is driven by passions is incapable of attaining true freedom. Rather, freedom can only be achieved by living under the "guidance of reason" (*Ethics IV*, P37S), which relates to being aware of the causes behind one's actions.

Although Spinoza seems to critique the passions because they impede freedom, he does not believe that the passions can be totally overcome. Spinoza believes that humans are always liable to be influenced by external forces that manifest themselves as passions (*Ethics V*, Preface). For Spinoza, the way in which to attain freedom is through the moderation of the passions. An individual must attempt to minimise the delirious influence of the passions by striving to be aware of the true causes of their actions, and thereby living according to the dictate of reason.

2. Hope as a Passion

A detailed understanding of the affects, *conatus*, as well as Spinoza's attitude *vis a vis* the passions, enable one to address Spinoza's attitude towards hope, which in Part III and IV of *Ethics,* Spinoza explicitly states is a passion derived from joy. The following paragraphs present the definition and discussion on hope as presented in Part III and IV of *Ethics*. It will be argued that there are two diverging accounts of hope hinted at in *Ethics*. The first will be referred to as 'epistemic hope,' inasmuch as it expresses hopes' delirious effects with regards to the attainment of reason and knowledge. The second will be referred to as 'regulative hope,' which relates to hope's connection to joy and its role in political discourse. This distinction between epistemic and regulative hope illustrates Spinoza's dualistic conceptualisation of hope as well as his latent pragmatic attitude towards hope.

Any discussion of hope in Spinoza's work must yield to the definition of hope provided in *Ethics III*, in which Spinoza describes it as "an inconstant joy which has arisen from the image of a future or past thing whose outcome we doubt" (*Ethics III*, P18S2). For Spinoza, hope is inseparable from fear, which is the "inconstant sadness, which has arisen from a doubtful thing" (*Ethics III*, P18S2). Therefore, where hope exists, fear will necessarily be present. As stated by Spinoza, "there is no hope without fear and no fear without hope" (*Ethics IV*, P50S). This coupling of hope and fear can be referred to as the hope-fear dyad. The following paragraphs will problematize this dyad and state that hope, because it arises from joy, is fundamentally different from fear; and that although hope might always be accompanied by fear, there are cases in which hope is more prominent than fear.

Spinoza's discussion of hope and fear allows one to better assess how the two passions function. One can assume that what is said of fear extends to hope on the basis of the hope-fear dyad (*Ethics III*, P50S). In *Ethics* IV, Spinoza clearly indicates that hope and fear are primarily negative in character as they are not valuable or "good" by themselves and are seen as obstacles to living according to reason (*Ethics IV*, P47).

In line with their definitions, hope and fear are both related to the imagining of a doubtful thing. Imagination is contrary to reason because it is influenced by a variety of external factors and uncertainties as opposed to true knowledge. When we are affected by hope and fear, we do not seek out the true causes because we are distracted by a doubtful eventuality. Imagination is not a benevolent force unrelated to our ability to act, but rather something that directly influences the *conatus*. According to Spinoza, inasmuch as an individual is "affected by the image of a thing," they will incorporate this imagined thing into the present, thus influencing the activity or striving of said individual (*Ethics III*, P18D). Hope and fear are passions that affect our present and that influence our ability to act, and like all passions they are liable to render the individual passive rather than active.

Spinoza strongly asserts that being guided by fear does not allow one to act in accordance with reason. Rather, to live in accordance with reason requires one to jettison all fear and imagination and embrace adequate ideas (*Ethics IV*, P63). To embrace fear and hope is to be superstitious because hope and fear impede virtuous living in accordance with reason. Spinoza goes on to illustrate to what extent they limit the possibility of human freedom.

Spinoza makes the link between reason and freedom explicit in *Ethics* IV when he states that "a free man is one who lives according to reason alone" (*Ethics IV*, P67D). For Spinoza, freedom is defined as the embodiment of reason, adequate ideas and thus the moderation of the passions. Hope and fear more specifically leave the individual liable to manipulation by others and lead to the said individual passively awaiting that which causes either inconstant joy (hope) or inconstant sadness (fear). Hope and fear are not mere epistemological obstacles towards an ideal form of knowledge, but rather obstacles to the *conatus* as well as human freedom.

However, the aforementioned critique of hope might not be as definite as it initially seems. Spinoza attacks hope by virtue of its coupling with fear. The most vehement denunciations of the passions take place in *Ethics* IV, in which the passions are seen as that which "torments" and places humans in bondage (*Ethics IV*, P15). Fear is mentioned frequently, whereas in the strongest statements against the passions, hope is not mentioned. The fact that Spinoza refers to hope and fear as one and the same leads one to discount such a discrepancy. However, as stated by Justin Steinberg, the strict hope-fear dyad must be reconsidered (Steinberg 2021, 207). Furthermore, Wortham has indicated that hope receives a radically different treatment in *TTP*. All reassessment of Spinoza's attitude towards hope needs to relate to its definition, namely that it is an "inconstant joy." Hope's nature as a derivative of joy points to it being less harmful than fear, which is a derivative of sadness.

3. Spinoza's Conception of Regulative Hope

The above paragraphs have illustrated that hope, insofar as it is conceived as a passion receives a negative appraisal by Spinoza in *Ethics*. However, authors such as Moira Gatens, Justin Steinberg and Simon Wortham have pointed out that Spinoza comes to provide a different evaluation of hope in *TTP* and *TP*, in which the pessimistic account of hope presented in *Ethics* gives way to a more optimistic one.

This section will illustrate that hope as a derivative of joy comes to be viewed as a passion that allows for motivation and social cohesion, whereas fear is seen as something overtly negative. In line with the argument presented by Susan James in *The Interdependence of Hope and Fear*, this section argues that Spinoza diverges from the hope-fear dyad and comes to privilege hope over fear, although he does not extinguish the dyad as such (James 2021, 217). It will be claimed that although hope is seen as more beneficial than fear, it is still conceived as a passion that can lead to superstition and inadequate ideas. It is argued that Spinoza provides an account of regulative hope, a form of hope, the value of which lies in its ability to regulate and aid individuals and society. The novel concept of regulative hope exemplifies Spinoza's dualistic conception of hope, an understanding that ranges from more pessimistic interpretations of hope to more optimistic interpretations which constitute Spinoza's pragmatic approach to hope.

In *TTP*, Spinoza indicates that hope and fear both play a significant role in the make-up and functioning of the state. This is because the real world is not the ideal society where people could cease to "fluctuate wretchedly between hope and fear" (*TTP*, 3) Rather, in the real world, fear and hope are present in the minds of the common people. Both hope and fear impel people to keep promises and maintain stability. For Spinoza, no individual will keep a promise unless they "hope for a greater good or fear a greater evil" (*TTP*, 199). Due to the *conatus*, we are innately driven by a desire to preserve our own being. This form of self-interest means that we will keep a promise or undertake a given act provided we hope that it benefits us, or if we fear that to not do so will be to our detriment. Hope and fear therefore emerge as practical tools to ensure a form of obedience. However, Spinoza claims that although fear is an effective tool in terms of encouraging social cohesion, it cannot be the basis for a long-lasting state (*TTP*, 200). Fear, according to Spinoza, does not lend itself to stability. Rather, when a leader's hold on the people is predicated on fear

alone, the state cannot exist for long (*TTP*, 199). Spinoza in Chapter 20 of *TTP* states that one of the central principles of the state is to not control citizens by use of fear (*TTP*, 251).

Spinoza's rejection of fear as a constitutive part of political life marks the beginning of his differentiation between hope and fear. Such a differentiation emerges in the hope-fear dyad's genealogy. Although both are passions, the fact that hope is a derivative of joy means that it is imbued with more value than fear, the latter being a derivative of sadness. For Spinoza, nothing good can come from sadness, whereas joy can lead to action and aid the *conatus*. Spinoza comes to view the derivatives of joy as passions and not actions. However, the fact that hope is a derivative of joy (action) means that it is more liable to lead to action than fear, which is derived solely from sadness.

Prior to investigating the specific views on hope as espoused in *TTP* and *TP*, it is imperative that the hope-fear dyad is better understood. More specifically, one must ask the question whether hope can be decoupled from fear. A reading of *Ethics* could lead to such a question being answered in the negative on the basis that whenever one hopes one is necessarily affected by a degree of fear and vice versa, because, as stated in *Ethics*, hope and fear are inseparable. However, the seeming disparity between Spinoza's valuation of hope and fear in his political and theological works has led to a variety of assertions regarding this supposedly inseparable dyad.

Susan James has argued that hope and fear are indeed inseparable (James 2021, 217). According to James, one must rather see the dyad in terms of degrees and not separation. For it is impossible that in the act of hoping for something, we are not afflicted by the fear or anxiety that such a thing might not occur. According to James, when Spinoza refers to fear in the negative sense and hope in the positive sense, he does not jettison the dyad, but rather refers to a psychological state where hopefulness is more pronounced than fear. Although hope and fear are always intertwined, individuals and societies can be affected more by hope than by fear (James 2021, 221).

Spinoza aims, in *TTP* and *TP,* to envisage a society in which people are compelled more by hope than by fear. He privileges hope inasmuch as he states that citizens should be driven by hope of rewards rather than fear of punishment (Gatens 2021, 204). Furthermore, Spinoza states in *TTP* that the laws of the state should ensure that "people are restrained less by fear than hope of something good" (*TTP*, 73). For Spinoza, such laws that accommodate the hopes of citizens, lead them to do their duty willingly. Thus, by implication, laws premised on the perpetuation of fear diminish the citizens' ability to carry out their duty willingly, because to act under fear alone is merely to avoid punishment or harm (*TTP*, 74).

Spinoza's assertions presented above support the claim that hope can allow for increased activity of the citizens. Hope compels people to act, whereas fear incapacitates them. Spinoza agrees that fear can be useful in order to free people from the state of nature. However, fear cannot become the *modus operandi* of the state. Rather, hope and faith in political institutions ensure the long-term existence of a state. In short, hope leads to an active and duty driven citizenship. This duty driven citizen will be willing to keep their promises and will remain obedient to the ruling institutions. As stated by Wortham, hope in this sense can be seen as the "glue" that keeps society together (Wortham 2020, 32). Steinberg echoes such a claim by asserting that hope is a "species of willing motives," and thus linked to the increase in activity and willingness on the part of citizens (Steinberg 2018, 82).

In *TP,* Spinoza goes further by asserting that a hopeful community is freer than a fearful one, stating that a "free community is led more by hope than by fear" (*TP*, V/VI). For Steinberg, Spinoza's notion of *securitas* can be defined as the feeling of safety and confidence and lack of fear, not only in a physical sense but also a psychological sense. For Steinberg, *securitas* leads to an empowered and liberated citizenry, and allows for freedom within society (Steinberg 2018, 81). The notions of hope and freedom are partially

incommensurable on the basis that the former is a passion, and the latter requires reason devoid of passions. However, Spinoza suggests in *TP* that although hope is a passion and thus anathema to reason, a hopeful citizenry is *freer* than a fearful one. This is premised on the fact that hope being a derivative of joy allows for an increase of activity and "making use of life" (*TP*, V/VI). Fear, however, being a derivative of sadness, is solely related to avoiding punishment or death (*TP*, V/VI).

The above indicates a more optimistic treatment of hope. However, the hope-fear dyad remains in Spinoza's discussion of hope in *TTP* and *TP*, as well as hope's nature as a passion. The citizenry that is hopeful is not to be seen as an ideal. Rather, they are liable to become superstitious and be misled. Although hope can lead to an increase in action and willingness to contribute to society, Spinoza (as stated in *Ethics*) would rather people be motivated and driven by true reason than hope for a reward. Therefore, this reading of *TTP* and *TP* must be offset with the understanding that hope, as a passion, is contrary to Spinoza's ideal world in which people live in accordance with reason.

Spinoza's political works are concerned less with ideals than with the reality of the world. On the basis that humans will always be afflicted by passions, Spinoza seems to realise that the ideal psychological make-up as presented in *Ethics* is untenable in the real world. Rather, we will always be afflicted by both hope and fear to some degree, and thus be liable to manipulation and superstition. However, because hope is less harmful than fear, Spinoza advocates for a degree of hope in any political society, inasmuch as it can allow for stability and cohesion. Hope in this sense is therefore regulative. Its regulative nature is premised on the fact that its existence can allow for beneficial effects such as cohesion. In other words, hope can regulate and stabilise society. This conception of hope as a regulative concept fits in with Spinoza's overall theory of the moderation of the passions. For hope, in this regulative sense, is viewed as partly beneficial, but not as something to be embraced wholeheartedly. Individuals and societies must, in line with Gatens, adopt a "reasonable hope": a form of hope that precludes the more illusionary qualities of the passions, and focuses on the concrete socio-political sphere and allows for stability and cohesion (Gatens 2021, 204). "Reasonable" hope phrases the need to moderate the superstitious and ignorant aspects of hope, but admits that hope is regulative and allows for stability. Gatens' conception of reasonable hope allows for one to conceive of hope as a functional and beneficial force, provided it is moderated and made devoid of its illusionary qualities. The present paper, however, uses the novel concept of regulative hope because the use of the word 'reason' in Gatens' formulation contradicts the definition of the passions, which are innately distinct from reason. Therefore, 'regulative' hope can be said to be a more applicable concept, since it does not presuppose that hope can be reasonable, but rather that it can be beneficial for a given society due to the fact that it regulates and stabilises society. Spinoza's understanding of regulative hope indicates a pragmatic attitude towards hope. Although hope is fundamentally negative in character, Spinoza can be said to be a pragmatist insofar as he allows for it to proliferate in society on the basis that it can lead to stability.

In conclusion, it can be said that Spinoza holds a dualistic conception of hope which leads to a pragmatic attitude towards it. In line with Wortham, for Spinoza, "hope is both false and true" (Wortham 2020, 33). In other words, Spinoza conceives of hope both in a negative and a positive sense. This dualistic approach illustrated above points to Spinoza's attitude towards hope being more complex than the simple rejection of hope on the basis of it being a passion. Rather, it can be said that, within Spinoza's conception of hope, there is a dualism which includes an epistemic hope that receives negative appraisal because it is contrary to true reason, and a pragmatic regulative hope, which can allow for stability and cohesion.

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