

The Concept of the Learned Multitude¹

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Some form of the concept of the “multitude” seems to be employed even by the most democratic of philosophers. For example, John Stuart Mill who is often regarded as the prime defender of the equality and liberty of the individual, assumes that the average person is hardly capable of rising above mediocrity. He asserts,

No government by a democracy or a numerous aristocracy... ever did or could rise above mediocrity except in so far as the sovereign Many have let themselves be guided (which in their best times they have always done) by the counsels and influence of a more highly gifted and instructed one or few. The initiation of all wise or noble things comes and must come from individuals.... The honor and glory of the average man is that he is capable of following that initiative.²

The most egalitarian of philosophers tend to employ the concept either explicitly or implicitly in a sense which assumes a significant difference between the learned and the multitude. This distinction is not the focus of this article, however, except insofar as it helps to define another one, a distinction within the circle of the few, of the learned.

The intellectual community has been divided by deep divisions of metaphysical and religious commitment throughout its history. Such commitment is often held to be beyond intellectual challenge. Rival assumptions are regarded as irrational and those holding them as fundamentally ignorant. Another kind of notion of the multitude then emerges, one which classifies even the learned opponents as radically irrational in some relevant respects even though they excel in intellectual competence.

When deep metaphysical or religious differences divide the learned, both sides of the metaphysical chasm tend to regard each other as a “learned multitude,” irrational in the most crucial areas of their consciousness. As a classical example of the way this concept is employed I discuss Baruch Spinoza’s views on the matter and compare him with some of his opponents. In the end I take a more recent example, Thomas Kuhn, who regards the whole of the scientific community in terms traditionally ascribed to the learned multitude. This comparison produces interesting educational implications.

SPINOZA’S CONCEPT OF THE LEARNED MULTITUDE

By his concept of the “multitude” Spinoza defines a category of people who are not controlled by reason and are therefore incapable of impartial judgment. They react emotionally to images raised by rhetorical expression because they are controlled by imagination. Imagination is for Spinoza the lowest kind of knowledge, characterized by unorganized mental images. On this level we acquire knowledge “from individual objects presented to us through the senses in a fragmentary and confused manner without any intellectual order” or “from symbols. For example, from having heard or read certain words we call things to mind and we form certain ideas of them similar to those through which we imagine things.”³ Together the

knowledge acquired from casual experience and from reminiscence and imagination are denoted by Spinoza as knowledge of the first kind, or opinion or imagination.

Knowledge of the second kind, or reason, differs radically from that of the first kind, since it consists of the application of general patterns to individual cases, thus yielding adequate insight. It is acquired “from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things.” The highest form of knowledge, the third kind, is called *scientia intuitiva*: “This kind of knowledge proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things.”⁴

Spinoza assumes that only a few individuals are controlled purely by reason and are not, therefore, included in the multitude. By “multitude” (*vulgus*) Spinoza means people who acquire their beliefs by the power of the imagination. Rational argumentation has no effect on them insofar as they are controlled by imagination. They are dominated by external influences, because they are rationally passive.⁵

Those who are rationally passive are controlled by passions. Since their emotions function according to natural laws, they cannot help reacting in certain ways to external influences.⁶ One such emotional law is that they cannot help hating a person who offends their prejudices.⁷ This means that if knowledge opposed to their prejudices is presented to them openly, they cannot help hating both that knowledge and the one who presents it.

Spinoza does not include in the multitude only the uneducated and the rationally passive, but he also includes a considerable number of the cultured and intellectually active members of the scientific and philosophical communities. They are well educated and may exhibit considerable intellectual ability. Their entire lives may be devoted to scholarship, but their religious views are controlled by imagination. They do not submit their basic beliefs to rational deliberation but cling to them in a prejudiced manner. In that respect they live in a rationally passive state. In those dimensions of their consciousness they are not guided by rational reasons but by their passions.

Spinoza assumes that the scientific and intellectual communities include a considerable number of people who are guided by imagination in central areas of their consciousness, and are thereby imprisoned by prejudices. In certain respects they are similar to the common people, the multitude in the ordinary sense of the word. If they are openly confronted with knowledge opposed to their prejudices, they necessarily resort to morally undesirable behaviour because their passions are aroused.⁸

Spinoza regards intellectuals and scientists committed to traditional religion as the basic type of such a civilized multitude. Historically Spinoza’s specific focus was on Christian scholars who exercised considerable social and political influence in the Netherlands of his time and who also occupied important positions in the scientific community.⁹ It was not unusual for many natural scientists to use theological vocabulary in defining their basic ontology. A considerable number of the pioneers of the scientific revolution were religious people.¹⁰ Furthermore,

theologians themselves received an education which gave them the necessary prerequisites for understanding Spinoza's kind of metaphysics, ethics and political theory.

While assuming the supposed rational passivity of the Christian scholars, who were rationally active in the technical-functional sense, Spinoza means something specific by rational passivity. Christian thinkers were rationally active in the sense that they pondered theoretical questions on the basis of their faith, but from Spinoza's point of view they were rationally passive since they did not question the essence of their faith. In these areas they were under the power of imagination and could not be influenced by rational arguments.

Spinoza asserts that the interaction between rationally free men and the learned multitude is complicated by the prejudiced nature of the latter's way of perceiving things. Therefore it is impossible to communicate openly about controversial issues. One of Spinoza's basic principles is that the multitude should be addressed in a way which does not offend them. It is rational, he writes, "to speak according to the power of understanding of ordinary people. For we can gain a considerable advantage, if we yield as much to their understanding as we can. In this way, they will give a favorable hearing to the truth."¹¹ Spinoza suggests that the enlightened members of the scientific community should adapt their communication to the understanding of the learned multitude and communicate only by symbols that arouse positive emotions in them in order not to raise their hostility.

In general, Spinoza accepts the principle that the scientist-philosopher has to satisfy the requirements of clarity, transparency and certainty in her research and to communicate her findings clearly and perspicuously to her scientific colleagues. But insofar as the philosopher has to deal with controversial issues for which members of the scientific community have strong emotional commitment, she has to present her views carefully in order not to become an object for the hatred of the learned multitude. If knowledge is presented openly to those committed to prejudices, it necessarily produces morally undesirable consequences like hostility. If knowledge is, however, presented to each audience according to the level of its understanding, the result is external conformity to morally desirable behaviour like tolerance, benevolence and justice.

Spinoza regards this approach as justified on the basis of the powers of comprehension of the multitude and of the possible ways of influencing them based on a rational analysis of the laws governing their emotions. Spinoza devotes a considerable part of his *Ethics* to this analysis (especially of the third and fourth books).

Since it is not advisable to present the multitude with anything but a meaning adopted to its understanding because of the fundamentally passive nature of its consciousness, the crucial concern is to choose a level of meaning which is constructive, not disruptive. The open presentation of knowledge will necessarily result in its public distortion according to the laws governing emotions. Wrong associations are produced in the multitude's prejudiced, emotionally loaded way of perceiving things. Their motivational reluctance to subject their conceptions to

rational deliberation makes them immune to rational arguments. This may have socially disruptive consequences.¹²

Since it may be impossible to liberate the learned multitude from their prejudices through strictly rational methods, one has to direct their attention to their morally constructive elements. As a result these prejudices are modified and redirected so that they do not present a threat to orderly procedures within the scientific community.

REASON AND IMAGINATION

Spinoza's account of the learned multitude is founded on his theory of religious imagination. Those who hold inadequate ideas about nature are controlled by imagination.¹³ Spinoza argues that religion does not provide us with true knowledge.¹⁴ Rather religion is only a series of powerful images which make a strong impact on imagination and produce strong convictions. It makes no knowledge claims which need to be subjected to serious rational scrutiny.

Spinoza differentiates between those who can attain to certain knowledge by rational thought from those who are only capable of simple faith.¹⁵ By "simple faith" he means a certainty based on vivid imagination and the occurrence of signs, as opposed to the certainty based on rational apprehension. He suggests that certain intellectuals adopt religious convictions "by simple faith" as if they were intellectually like the common people.

The Spinozistic dichotomy of imagination and rational thought has been challenged, however. Various thinkers have suggested that faith can be a source of knowledge since it is a form of rational apprehension rather than an exercise in imagination. The representatives of such views often develop their own alternative notions of a learned multitude by which they characterize their opponents as blind and unenlightened.

Jonathan Edwards, for example, questions the two faculties of imagination and the natural light of reason as exclusive alternatives. Since he regards spiritual experience as a form of rational apprehension, he defines the learned multitude as those who are incapable of understanding spiritual issues in spite of their intellectual acumen.

Edwards argues that neither imagination nor rational thought as such is capable of providing us with knowledge about ultimate questions. What is needed in addition to these two basic faculties is what he calls "a spiritual sense, a principle of new kind of perception."¹⁶ Edwards agrees with Spinoza in regarding imaginary ideas as the lowest sort, incapable of providing any genuine knowledge.¹⁷

While Spinoza regards the natural light of reason as the source of truth and understanding, Edwards assumes that human reason needs enlightening by a spiritual sense.¹⁸ This new spiritual sense does not exclude human reason, but it enhances its powers of comprehension, if it is genuine. Without such a spiritual comprehension human reason is not able to reach true conclusions about the origin and nature of the universe and the meaning of human existence.

Related, Blaise Pascal criticizes those who do not understand the inherent limitations of their intelligence nor acknowledge the need for divine revelation.¹⁹

These people assume that they are able to discover the nature of ultimate reality through their unaided intelligence. As a consequence, they are unable to use their intelligence and learning properly in central areas of their existence.

Spinoza's theory of the learned multitude has, therefore, an interesting analogy in Edwards' and Pascal's conceptions. While Spinoza regards those adhering to revealed religion as prejudiced, Edwards and Pascal see prejudice in the attitude which rejects divine revelation and assumes that unaided intelligence is sufficient for determining the ultimate nature of reality. Both of these rival conceptions characterize the supporters of the opposite view as rationally passive with regard to the ultimate questions of human existence. Both sides of the epistemological chasm see each other as self-deceivers.²⁰

This creates a polar antithesis between the rival positions. Since both sides of the opposition regard each other as fundamentally misguided, any compromise seems unreachable. It ought to be possible, however, to increase self-critical awareness of the structure of such ultimate commitment and its position in the overall belief system. This is a challenge to religious education. Such an education ought to avoid stereotypical characterization of the representatives of opposite views. Instead, it should sharpen the learner's capacity for self-critical awareness of her fundamental starting point.

Moreover, the necessity for faith in ultimate commitment may not be an indication of intellectual naiveté. It may result from a consciousness of the limitations of theoretical thought. The assumption that rational thought can produce indisputable proofs about ultimate questions can be challenged. This means that even the learned cannot base their views merely on reason. A finite being who is consistently intelligent recognizes her limitations. Without such a recognition she becomes uncritical even if she is intelligent and learned in the formal sense. Lack of self-critical awareness of one's limitations leads to the tendency to believe one knows things one does not know. It is one of the challenges of education to promote a self-critical awareness of the structure of one's belief system, and to abstain from a dogmatic over-simplification of rival views.

KUHN AND THE LEARNED MULTITUDE

European intellectual climate has been characterized by irreconcilable oppositions between viewpoints which challenge each other's basic presuppositions. Often no real discussion seems possible between rival viewpoints. The different sides of the epistemological chasm see each other as self-deceivers.

It may be instructive to focus on another account of this state of affairs. I will introduce the concept of the learned multitude implicit in the theory of Thomas Kuhn. This position is so familiar and so much discussed that it is sufficient to refer to it briefly.

Kuhn employs a notion of the learned multitude to characterize members of the scientific community in general. His position is a logical conclusion from the criticisms which various absolutistic positions direct at each other. The assumption that many of the members of the scientific community are controlled by faith in central areas of their consciousness is consistent with the Kuhnian picture of the

normal scientist and the sociological and social-psychological situation in which she operates.²¹ There are areas in the consciousness of the practitioner of normal science which function without ultimate rational control. The practitioner of normal science holds on to certain paradigmatic conceptions for social-psychological and world-view reasons and often opposes new conceptions in an emotional and prejudiced manner. Her behaviour manifests attitudes which contradict the virtue of rational openness. Writes Kuhn,

The transfer of allegiance from paradigm to paradigm is a conversion experience that cannot be forced. Lifelong resistance, particularly from those whose productive careers have committed them to an older tradition of normal science, is...an index to the nature of scientific research itself...Inevitably, at times of revolution, that assurance seems stubborn and pigheaded as indeed it sometimes becomes.²²

The one who adopts the new paradigm in the early stages of its development cannot do so strictly on rational grounds. Kuhn continues,

The man who embraces a new paradigm at an early stage must often do so in defiance of the evidence provided by problem-solving. He must, that is, have faith that the new paradigm will succeed with the many large problems that confront it, knowing only that the older paradigm has failed with a few. A decision of that kind can only be made on faith.²³

Since the supporters of the old paradigm control scientific institutions, their negative attitude towards new theories may mean withholding financial and other resources from their further development. Attempts to present the new views openly may result in prejudiced reactions from the old scientific establishment. Kuhn refers to the inevitability of misunderstanding in the process of paradigm shift:

Since new paradigms are born from old ones, they ordinarily incorporate much of the vocabulary and apparatus, both conceptual and manipulative, that the traditional paradigm had previously employed. But they seldom employ these borrowed elements in quite the traditional way. Within the new paradigm, old terms, concepts, and experiments fall into new relationships one with the other. The inevitable result is what we must call, though the term is not quite right, a misunderstanding between the competing schools.²⁴

The communication between the rival scientific schools is hampered by their different conceptual systems as determined by their incompatible metaphysical assumptions.

The problem with the Kuhnian account is that it tends to lead to relativism since it regards ultimate presuppositions as beyond rational evaluation. It is, however, possible to advance towards the truth even within the constraints of incommensurability and meaning variance, if their problems are recognized.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The concept of the learned multitude reflects the perplexity which finite thinkers experience when confronting an opposite absolute conception or an opposing truth claim made by an intelligent mind. Those who do not share the foundations of one's perspective are often regarded as unenlightened. They do not see reality in its true light, but fundamentally misunderstand it.

The irreconcilability of opposing viewpoints and the need to characterize the opposite view as irrational shows a lack of awareness about the limits of theoretical justification, about the fact that ultimate metaphysical presuppositions exceed the boundaries of theoretical justification. Ultimate perspectives cannot be proved

conclusively, because they function as the foundation for theoretical justification. Insofar as the concepts used in a theory are dependent on metaphysical presuppositions, it may be difficult to express their meaning in terms of rival philosophical perspectives. This is the element of truth in the theory of incommensurability of rival theoretical viewpoints.

This does not imply that the teaching of ultimate metaphysical issues should be excluded from education, however, since it may be possible to know something without being able to prove the truth of one's knowledge claim conclusively. An example is our knowledge of the existence of things external to our mind or of other people.²⁵ It would seem strange to claim that we do not know that external things or other people exist. At the same time it seems clear that we cannot prove our knowledge claim conclusively.

The fact that no conclusive proof is forthcoming either way due to the inherent limitations of theoretical justification does not, therefore, imply that nothing definite about ultimate questions could be included in educationally acceptable teaching. It simply indicates a limitation of theoretical thought. The relevant knowledge may be accessible, even though it cannot be conclusively justified. Søren Kierkegaard's suggestion of the necessity of a leap of faith over the abyss confronting a finite being may be understood in this way.²⁶ It is a leap from the point of view of theoretical justification. It need not be a leap from the point of view of pretheoretical knowledge. Even though such a leap often is irrational, there is no easy way to determine that it is. It may be rational, if it expresses one's considered intuitions about the ultimate nature of reality in the light of available evidence.

The fact that religious and metaphysical disputes have persisted throughout human history does not prove that there is no truth, or that we can never discover it. The persistence of disputes, however, shows an irreducible pluralism of views with regard to ultimate issues. Because intelligent people disagree with each other on what they regard as good grounds, no definite solution is in sight. This does not necessarily imply, however, that no solution exists, or that no progress may be achieved through rational discussion. We may progress so gradually as to be unable to predict in which direction the final result will be discovered.

To attach the label of irrationality to all positions that cannot be proved conclusively radically restricts the options made available through education. The discovery of truth is better promoted by a pluralistic situation in which rival standpoints may freely compete with each through their educational and cultural expressions. Since the representatives of various metaphysical views may know the relevant arguments of opposing views while holding different metaphysical standpoints, it is possible to teach various alternative views so that arguments and counter-arguments are fairly represented. This means that any such positions may be taught in a way that satisfies the demands of rational openness and critical thinking.

The crucial issue is the method of teaching and the way students are treated. Does the teaching provide the student with intellectual tools for independently assessing the arguments presented by the teacher and for arriving at a different conviction? Does the teaching develop the capacity for independent criticism and

appraisal? Or is the aim to close the student's mind to counter-arguments? If teaching develops the student's intellectual capacity to independently question and criticize the relevant arguments, it is educationally acceptable, even though its contents may be contested.

Questions about the origin, ultimate nature and order of the universe are central to human knowledge in general and to theoretical knowledge in particular, although they can not be given a final theoretical determination. They function as basic assumptions in all human inquiry and in all attempts to achieve knowledge. Since they cannot be avoided, it is better to make these assumptions explicit rather than to leave them in their implicit form. Even though it is not easy to test them, it is still possible to assess their explanatory power in understanding human experience.

My conclusion is that metaphysical and religious education can legitimately express definite commitment even though it cannot produce uncontested proofs for such convictions. Even though in practice this implies that children may be confronted with contradictory knowledge claims in different contexts, that is not necessarily worse than if they were not taught anything relating to ultimate questions. In any case it is crucial that students are taught these beliefs against the background of discussions in which rival views compete with each other. If teaching completely bypasses religious and world view issues it thereby hides the world view connections of knowledge. Such teaching does not develop the central dimensions of the students' personalities and fails to develop their capacity to understand their ultimate commitment. To characterize the intelligent representatives of rival viewpoints simply as a learned multitude deprives their views of the right to proper consideration.

1. I am thankful to Karl Schuhmann, Piet Steenbakkens, Thomas Flint, and Frederick Crosson for criticisms on an earlier version of this essay.

2. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. John Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 269; compare, Frederick Crosson, "Mill's Dilemma," *Interpretation* 9, vol. 16, no. 2 (1988-1999): 241-42.

3. E IIP40S2; translation by Samuel S. Shirley, in *Benedict de Spinoza: Ethics and Selected Letters* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), 104.

In my references to the works of Spinoza I use the following abbreviations:

E *Ethics*

PR prefatio

P propositio

C corollarium

D demonstratio

S scholium

A appendix

TdIE *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*

TP *Tractatus Politicus*

TTP *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*

G Gebhardt's *Spinoza Opera*

For example, E IIP40S2 refers to the second book of *Ethics*, proposition 40, scholium 2. I use the translation by Edwin Curley, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol I (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), unless otherwise indicated. TTP, G III 12 refers to *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, the third part of Gebhard's edition, page 12. I use the translation by Samuel Shirley in Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (Gebhardt edition, 1925) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989). The first page reference is to this edition.

4. E IIP40S2, translation by Samuel S. Shirley in Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics and Selected Letters*, 104.

5. E IIP1, 3, VP3, IVP2-6.

6. TP ch.1, G III 287-89; E IVP4C.

7. E IIP22, 24-5.

8. Compare, see for example, E IIP19-27.

9. Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics, The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 136-37.

10. Compare, Brad. S. Gregory, "Introduction," in Spinoza: *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Leiden: E.J. Brill), 10.

11. TdE, 12, G II 9.

12. TTP, 252; G III 203.

13. TTP, 73; G III 30.

14. TTP, 86; G III 42.

15. TTP, 59; G III 15.

16. Jonathan Edwards, *The Collected Works of Jonathan Edwards I*, ed. Edward Hickman (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1984), 269.

17. *Ibid.*, 267.

18. *Ibid.*, 266.

19. Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), 145.

20. *Ibid.*, 167.

21. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, 2d enlarged ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

22. *Ibid.*, 151-52.

23. *Ibid.*, 158.

24. *Ibid.*, 149.

25. See Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967).

26. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David B. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 90-7.