

Living in the Light of our Knowledge: Spinoza on Fortitude

Many of the things that go wrong in our lives are not a surprise. We may know, for example, that we are prone to ignore the warning signs of illness, and wearily reproach ourselves when we do it again. We may know that more immigrants will drown in their desperate attempts to escape poverty and persecution, and yet feel outrage when it happens. The problem in cases like these is not lack of knowledge. The events that arouse our indignation and distress are often thoroughly predictable. So why do we allow them to occur? In this paper I explore an answer offered by Spinoza. The virtue we lack, he argues, is *fortitude* - the power to act on our knowledge or put it to work. I examine Spinoza's analysis of this virtue and some of the traditions on which his account draws. I argue that he bequeaths us a pertinent though neglected set of questions (particularly relevant in an era of fake news) about the project of living in the light of our knowledge.