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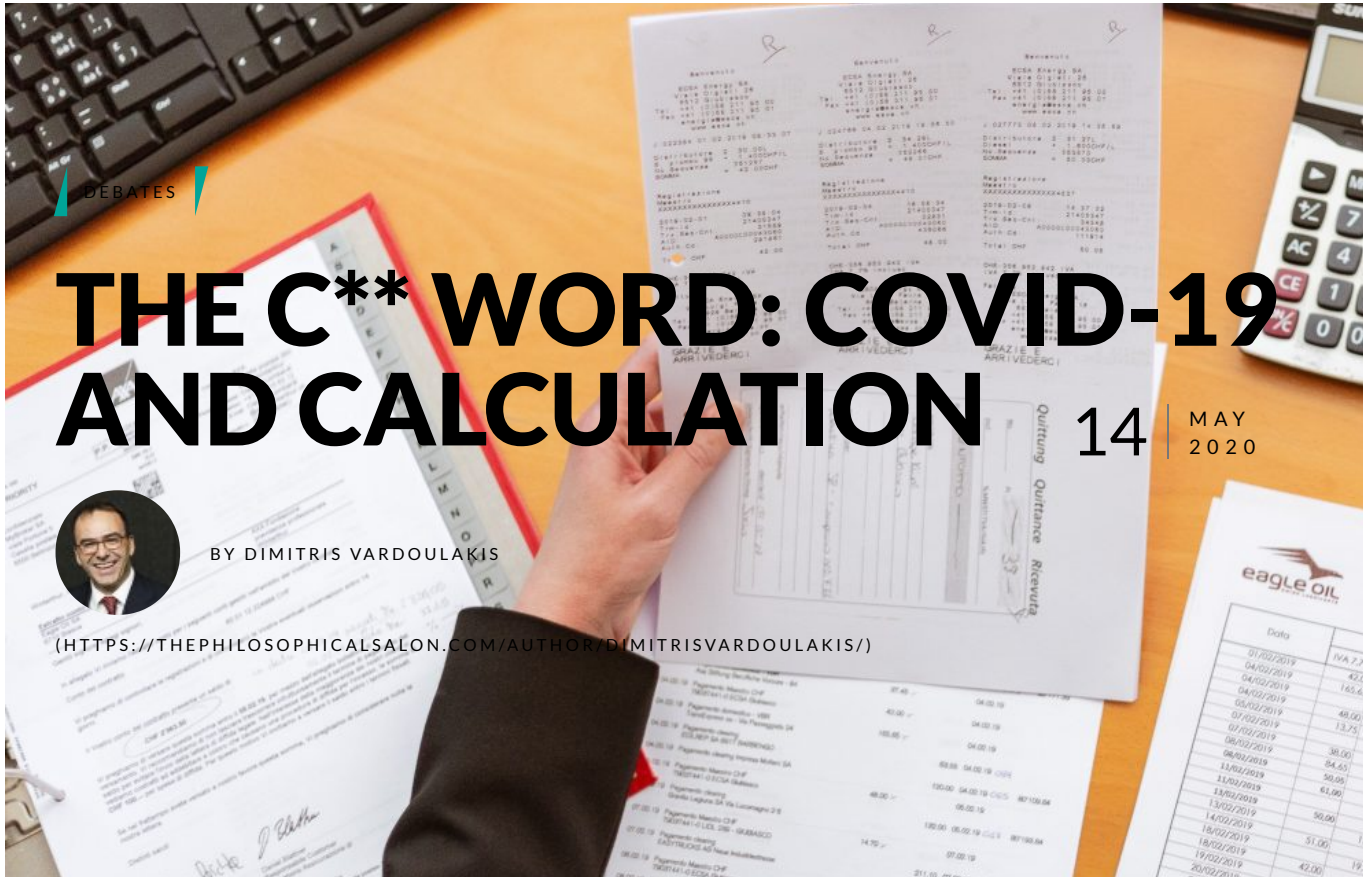
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Calculation is omnipresent in the current pandemic. And yet, Continental philosophers never talk about calculation: it seems to be the c** of philosophy. Why is that so? Has it always been like that?

Given how prevalent calculation is, it ought to have been visible to everyone.

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We calculate elements of our immediate environment: the distance that we keep from others; the amount of food that we need to stockpile; the manner in which we will need to exercise when we are in complete lockdown; whether and how we need to be tested if we exhibit flu symptoms; how to cope with the kids shut in our apartment for a prolonged period of time.

Calculations extend also beyond our immediate context. Will the lockdown last for more than a month? How many small businesses or airlines will go bankrupt? When will a suitable vaccine be available? How many ventilators are required for the hospitals of each province? What is the rate of infection? How many people will die?

These calculations are both ethical and political. They are ethical because they impact the lives of those around us, not only our family and friends but also others whom we may not know but who are contiguous to us.

The political side of calculation pertains not only to managing the present crisis, both locally and globally, but it also concerns how the crisis might be exploited to promote specific interest, as Naomi Klein notes

(https://www.democracynow.org/2020/3/19/naomi_klein_coronavirus_capitalism). This includes making a blatant attempt to consolidate personal power, as Viktor Orban did in Hungary (<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/30/hungarys-viktor-orban-wins-vote-to-rule-by-decree-155476>).

If the “Coronavirus Is Us,” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/03/opinion/the-coronavirus-is-us.html>) this is not only because the spread of the virus is accelerated by the interconnected world within which we live; more importantly, it is because we are all steeped in calculation. We are not determined by the same calculations: it is different in the US, which pretty much lacks a public health system, and China. Rather, we are determined by the fact that our actions require calculation.

Even though the specific calculations each one of us makes are different, the urge to calculate is common to all. The fact that we calculate is common, not particular calculations. The “invisible enemy” called Covid-19 makes plainly visible this shared need, which ought to be plainly visible to everyone. And yet, it is obscured. Two strategies in particular are responsible for making calculation a dirty word.

The first consists in describing the present predicament as precipitating a state of “exception.” This idea does not simply mean that the circumstances we find ourselves in are unique, which is something that no one would deny—a truism that is of limited philosophical value. Instead, the emphasis is on the way that sovereignty uses the state of exception to exercise power. This position has been put forward by Giorgio Agamben and debated vigorously (<http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>).

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Panayiotis Sotiris espoused the opposite position

(<https://lastingfuture.blogspot.com/2020/03/against-agamben-is-democratic.html>), arguing that such states of exception can in fact serve to advance a democratic way of managing the population. And yet, what both Agamben's and Sotiris' positions have in common is that they deem the fact that we calculate in such an intense and visible way to be something entirely unusual, an exceptional circumstance.

What if they are wrong? What if, instead, this urge to calculate defines us as human beings and hence it is something that we do all the time, whether we are conscious of it or not? Cicero certainly thought so when summarizing the main schools of Greek and Roman ethics in a treatise titled *On Ends*. The title is meant to convey that we all make instrumental calculations and this is a fact that ethics needs to consider. Nietzsche agreed in his *Genealogy of Morals*, where he argued that the foundation of morality is a calculus similar to that of measuring debt.

The second way to obfuscate the importance of calculation is to follow the Kantian route, according to which the human ought to be an end in itself. This means that genuinely moral action needs to be grounded in something that is independent of the circumstances, in which an instrumental calculation is made. Kant calls this the "categorical imperative."

The influence of the Kantian idea is enormous even in those thinkers who have been critical of his transcendental idealism. For instance, both Heidegger and Adorno follow the Kantian suggestion to see the negative side of the calculations of instrumental rationality. For Heidegger, this leads to the nihilism of modernity and, for Adorno, it discloses the "dialectic of Enlightenment" that has been the "siren's call" leading humanity to self-destruction.

An extension of this position is that the entire field of calculation has been abandoned to economics and to conceptions of the political subservient to economics, such as neoliberalism. To admit to the centrality of calculation nowadays is regarded as tantamount to saying that "there is no such a thing as society" (Margaret Thatcher) or to be regarded as subscribing to a stringent individualism.

The fear that instrumental rationality ineluctably leads to individuality, and hence makes the individual either immoral or a pawn in the neoliberal game, is the second major reason that prevents us from seeing that the urge to calculate determines our actions in this time of Covid-19.

Instrumental rationality does not need to be reduced to individuality. Instead, there is a long tradition that regards the calculation of utility as the foundation of ethics. For instance, according to Epicurus, one ought to love one's friends as oneself. The reason is that friends are useful and we cannot achieve our aims without the assistance of others.

“Man is god to man,” as Spinoza puts it in his *Ethics*. I intentionally refer to Spinoza. I regard him as the pre-eminent early modern philosopher who attempted to base his ethics and politics on the importance of the calculation of utility. If this is often missed by his readers, the reason is partly that the word *utilius* and its cognates in Latin tend to be translated in a variety of different ways, such as advantage, instrumentality, utility, interest and so on. This obscures the consistent technical use of the term that indicates the weight he puts on calculation for ethics and politics, as I show in my recent book, *Spinoza, the Epicurean* (<https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-spinoza-the-epicurean-hb.html>).

Besides insisting on the reciprocal nature of the calculation of utility, Spinoza further emphasizes a feature of calculation that is particularly pertinent and indispensable for grasping his conception of *utilitas*. In the *Theological Political Treatise*, he asks twice what the foundations of society and the state are, and, in both cases, he turns to calculation for the answer.

First, he points to the calculation of utility as something that takes place when people interact even before a political community with established laws is instituted. We need each other for a healthy and peaceful life. We need to share our skills and capabilities. This is not a matter of some duty or of ideal injunction. Rather, it is sheer pragmatism based on the calculation that we are better off collaborating to complement each other's skills.

Second, he expresses this pragmatic calculation as a kind of judgment to choose the best of two good options or the least damaging of two bad ones. He describes this judgment as the foundation of the agreement or pact—the social contract—that we make to be with each other.

One might object here that any calculation we make within an ethical or political register will always require an ideational surplus that regulates it. Otherwise, we will simply be faced with a finite set of possibilities. This is the specter of determinism.

Spinoza does not structure his discourse around this concern. Pragmatically, he recognizes that such determinism is a secondary issue because we customarily tend to do the worst, even though we might be able to see the best. In this sense, what is interesting for him is not so much how calculation succeeds but the ways in which it fails. Just as important as our calculations are our miscalculations. In a realistic fashion, Spinoza rejects the possibility that we can arrive at correct calculations the majority of the time. All sorts of external factors derail our calculations. We are determined by the urge to calculate combined with our propensity to make the wrong calculation.

If the impossibility of eliminating error does not complicate issues enough, there is a further paradox that marks the political, according to Spinoza. He argues that, on the one hand, democracy is nourished by allowing everyone to make their own calculations. Preventing people from making calculations, for instance by spreading misinformation so that they cannot

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base their calculations on what is true, or by stirring up strong emotions like fear and hatred (such as the rhetoric of the “invasion” of a “foreign” virus), leads to political actions that are anti-democratic or even authoritarian. On the other hand, calculation is not only carried out by a democratic community “as if by one mind,” says Spinoza. Further, there are certain instances where one can decide or calculate that the best option is to stop calculating. For instance, during the pandemic, we heed the advice of medical experts, which means that we cede some of our calculations to those with specialized knowledge, granting them the capacity to make informed calculations on our behalf.

There is thus a fine line between calculation and its absence. We cannot achieve democracy without calculating; also, democracy is unachievable without the possibility that we suspend our judgment. We need to calculate whether we ought to calculate in any given instance.

Recognizing this paradox of calculation that Spinoza describes is urgent in the times of Covid-19. Every action confronts us with the urge to calculate. These calculations can be even on issues of life and death. Coronavirus ought to make this inevitability of calculation visible. But it also makes us face the paradox whereby calculation is both our own and one that we may cede to others.

The urge to calculate, pervading our current predicament, shows the deficiency of both strategies that seek to repress calculation: the enchantment of the exceptional and an ethics requiring an ideational supplement separate from calculation. Conversely, the paradox of calculation, as expressed in Spinoza’s political thought, can account for our present situation. Maybe, then, Covid-19 shows us that we are all—whether we know it or not—thinking with Spinoza.

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