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On Certainty – The Comparison between Spinoza and Zhuangzi's Monism

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Abstract: In this paper, the concept of monism is compared between Spinoza and Zhuangzi. Although both ultimately aim at liberation from the autocracy of theology or morality, their ontological starting points differ significantly. Spinoza's monism is rooted in a rational and deterministic substance, emphasizing certainty and logical necessity, whereas Zhuangzi's monism arises from an indeterminate Dao, characterized by fluidity and uncertainty. These ontological differences—marked by opposing properties yet situated within the same metaphysical dimension—give rise to fundamentally distinct epistemological frameworks. As a further development, this paper reinterprets Spinoza's classification of knowledge by introducing new dimensions grounded in the contrast between certainty and uncertainty. This revised framework is then applied to a deeper investigation into the nature of certainty itself, shedding light on how different metaphysical assumptions shape modes of knowing and the limits of human understanding.

Keywords: monism; freedom; substance; certainty; knowledge

1. Introduction

Is it feasible to compare different philosophers from reformation Netherlands and ancient China? Such cross-cultural comparisons often fall short due to differences in social and cultural contexts. However, situation becomes different if the background is similar, and the core of their philosophic system is also similar.

An examination of their historical contexts reveals that both philosophers challenged the dominant societal norms of their time. Spinoza (1632-1677) was expelled by his church and the mainstream Europe society for his identity, and Zhuangzi (369B.C-286B.C) was a small local official who did not enter the aristocratic class, and resist the prevalent theory of confucian morals. Both advocated living in accordance with natural principles as a way to resist imposed standards and societal restrictions. While Spinoza lives in the era of flourishing trade and of the disintegration of feudalism, Zhuangzi also lived in the era when China's feudalism collapsed and several new strength began to flourish. By the breaking of the traditional, stable and feudal social order, people began to move and fight, and reflect on the validity of government and tried to establish new theory to find a cure to the world. What Spinoza advocated laid the philosophical foundation for international trade and commerce, while what Zhuangzi promoted inspired intellectual challenges to established political and moral systems in Chinese history.

Thus, their monism can be compared, even if the background is not sufficient, the similarity of their theory is still conspicuous. Moreover, it would be reductive to evaluate

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philosophical thought solely through a political lens, as their pursuit of eternal truths transcends utilitarian concerns and deserves a more nuanced interpretation.

2. Description of Two Monistic Systems

2.1. Spinoza's System

Whatever is, is in Deity, and without Deity nothing can be, or be conceived [1].

As the core concept of Spinoza's system, substance is also designated as Deity, is unique and infinite, and the foundation of his monism. This unique substance possesses infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essentiality. Among these are the Cartesian concepts of mind and extension. These are not independent substances but attributes of the one substance, meaning they cannot be separated from it, as an absolutely infinite substance is by definition indivisible.

Here we encounter the problem of division. Spinoza argues that if the former, namely, if the substance is divided into several infinite substances, we should have several substances of the same nature, which (by Prop. V namely, there cannot exist in the universe two or more substances having the same nature or attribute.) is absurd [1]. This argument becomes unclear when it suggests that if substances differ only by their attributes, there cannot be more than one substance with the same attribute—because if the attributes are truly different, they cannot, by definition, be identical.

It will be illustrated better this way, that if the substance is divided, for example, by the space, into a Western substance and a Eastern substance, then, it will produce two substance which have different finite parts of this infinite attribute. If it is finite, it will be conceived through anything else [1]. For by substance, I mean that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself, a finite thing separated from the substance cannot be considered a true substance, because it does not exist independently; rather, it is formed and understood only through the substance that contains it.

For Spinoza, partial can be conceived by the overall, instead of vice versa, and the overall is the cause of partial (The knowledge of an effect depends on and involves the knowledge of a cause) [1]. In this way, it becomes clear that the whole cannot be conceived through a part. For instance, the property of a particular apple—say, its sourness—cannot be generalized to all apples, since others may be sweet. However, if all kinds of apple grows on the tree, then that special kind of apple definitely grows on the tree.

Thus, the thing that includes everything cannot be conceived by its broader overall, for its overall is itself, so it can only be conceived by itself, which correspond to the definition of substance. And the substance that include everything but only is included by itself is infinite.

Therefore, substance cannot be divided into other substances. It may appear to be divided into attributes, but these do not correspond to the definition of substance, as they are not self-caused and are included within something greater. Thus, the self-caused thing can only be the largest and infinite overall.

The difference between Spinoza's concept of self-causation and Aristotle's concept of the first cause is also the point on which Hegel focused his criticism, 'The philosophy which adopts the standpoint of substance and stops there is the system of Spinoza. I also indicated there the defect of that system alike as to form and to matter' [2]. While in the system of Aristotle, first cause is the most original thing that exist, the self-caused substance seems not involve the process of time, history. Hegel argues that the system of Spinoza is lack of movement, especially the dialectical movement of notion.

Spinoza actually had illustrated the dimension of time, 'Existence of this kind is conceived as an eternal truth, like the essence of a thing, and, therefore, cannot be explained by means of continuance or time, though continuance may be conceived without a beginning or end'. The concept of eternal substance is beyond the description of time, his con-

cept of eternal is different from the endless continuance of time. For if something is continuing with time, then, it doesn't include time, then, it will be not totally infinite, then it will be no longer substance.

To explain his argument, one may make a metaphor, that substance is static like a history book. The events flow with time, but the book itself which includes all time and all events, is static, eternal and beyond the description of time.

Certainly, the dialectical development of human cognition is an insightful system of Hegel, however, to elevate human rationality above nature, above substance, maybe a conceit of human reason. According to Spinoza, 'The mind is a fixed and definite mode of thought, therefore it cannot be the free cause of its actions; in other words, it cannot have an absolute faculty of positive or negative volition; but (by I. xxviii.) it must be determined by a cause, which has also been determined by another cause, and this last by another' [1]. The mind is a mode of thought which is an attribute of substance, it is restricted only by substance, namely, by nature, 'the rights of an individual extend to the utmost limits of his power as it has been conditioned' [1]. From this view, Hegel's attempt to elevate reason above nature may be interpreted as shifting the function of reason—from a tool for understanding nature and attaining freedom, as seen in Spinoza's system, to a principle that could potentially constrain individual autonomy under a collective or universal rational order.

2.2. Zhuangzi's System

Dissolving the myriad distinctions, letting things return to stillness, who is it that initiates all this movement?

While Spinoza uses rigorous and explicit language, modeled after Euclid, to explain his monism, Zhuangzi—a philosopher in ancient China—employs allegory and parable to express his philosophical vision. However, he also dedicated to solve the problem of the true ruler of world. After raising the question, 'Who is it, the ultimate cause of movement and existence?', he followed his thinking:

"If not for him, I would not exist; if not for me, the world would be unknowable." This more closely reflects the meaning in the original Chinese, though many English translations fail to fully capture Zhuangzi's intended nuance. Zhuangzi thinks of the relationship between Deity and an individual, it turns out that Deity is the reason of existence of individual, and individual is vital to recognize the world. Then, is it possible for the individual to know him?

"It exists, but it cannot be comprehended." Zhuangzi concludes that the ultimate principle exists, yet cannot be grasped by rational thought. If we explain it by Spinoza's theory, Zhuangzi argues that, if there is any description of him, there will be limitation of him, then, he is limited and no longer omnipotent. While he is infinite, he cannot be limited.

For Spinoza, the mind can acquire the second kind of knowledge by reasoning, and acquire the third kind of knowledge to gain blessedness by intuition of the essence of things like circle. In the theory of Zhuangzi, Deity can only be intuited for its existence, and 'There is nothing like the proper light (of the mind)' [3]. Here, light is a metaphor of wisdom.

While the two philosophers both acknowledge the unique Deity, the implication of Deity is slightly different between them. For Spinoza, Deity is substance, and is nature itself. While for Zhuangzi, nature, 'notes of Earth', is a thing, but Deity, 'notes of Heaven', is another thing above it and controls it.

This is the fundamental difference between them. Spinoza's Deity is infinite in scope, encompassing all of reality as a singular, boundless substance. Zhuangzi, by contrast, conceives of the Dao as elusive and almost imperceptible—closer to the infinitesimal than the infinite. Both infinity and infinitesimal is not possible to be limited by any specific property, but infinity is the extreme of existence, and the infinitesimal is the extreme of nihil.

Zhuangzi suggests that what we might call “non-being” or “nothingness” lies at the root of natural order and logic. He calls this principle the Dao.

Both Spinoza and Zhuangzi oppose a specific deity. Difference is, Spinoza integrates it into nature, while Zhuangzi minimize its sphere and eventually reaches nihil.

Zhuangzi distrusts the reliability and fixity of language, noting that in his time, people often used language to serve their own interests or deceive others. He said, ‘He wrote, “Under heaven there is nothing greater than the tip of an autumn down, and Mount Tai is small.” In other words: “Why should I accept your standards of what is great or good?”, and to show his anger and resistance to those people, and to undermine their language, and their ethics basic on language. While Spinoza chose to beat those people who enslave citizens by their sophistry by sharper language and plain deduction.

To intuit Deity, Zhuangzi advises people to integrate in nature without reasoning but with feeling, ‘Heaven, Earth, and I were produced together, and all things and I are one’ [3]. And to practise, he advice people to acquire an unconscious intuition of skills and the rule of nature, like the skilled cook who dissected a cow without tearing his knife, ‘Excellent! I have heard the words of my cook, and learned from them the nourishment of (our) life.’. To follow the rule, one can prevent the world to harm himself, and pursue blessedness, at this point, the two philosophers are consistent.

Furthermore, Zhuangzi even states that “The Dao is in the excrement and urine” 444, emphasizing that the natural order (Dao) applies equally to all things, regardless of how humble or repulsive they may seem, and even an odious thing has its right to be there, for natural rule let it be, and even a lowly human has its right not be killed arbitrarily. He can be killed in a war, or in a court, but neither of them is justice, for the natural rule doesn’t say it’s justice or evil, just let him alive or die. Zhuangzi uses a provocative contrast: “One steals a hook and is executed; another steals a state and becomes its ruler.” He challenges conventional moral judgment by illustrating that power, not intrinsic goodness or evil, often determines societal labels—whereas in nature, such distinctions are nonexistent. Only the Dao governs all without judgment, like the famous motto, ‘He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.’

3. Similarities and Differences

3.1. Similarities

From this comparison, one can conclude that their ultimate aim is similar: to follow natural laws in order to gain freedom. However, their methods are different. Spinoza uses conscious reason to understand nature, while Zhuangzi jumps from empirical experience directly to intuition, omitting reason altogether (Table 1).

Table 1. Similarities between Spinoza and Zhuangzi’s monism.

	Spinoza	Zhuangzi
	Deity is unique	
ontology	Deity is self-caused	Deity controls everything on earth
ethic	Recognize and follow the natural rule to gain blessedness	Use the natural rule to protect oneself
end	gain freedom	

3.2. Differences

This difference is derived from their differences in ontology. The Deity of Spinoza is certain and clear, and includes every true thing in the world, while even the rule or Tao is also certain in Zhuangzi’s system, Deity behind it is obscure and nihil for him. Spinoza’s Deity include natural rules, while Zhuangzi’s Deity is included in natural rules. This difference makes Spinoza use reason to understand his knowable Deity, while it leads

Zhuangzi to approach his agnostic Deity—which resembles Kunt’s thing-in-itself—through non-conscious experience. Thus, while Spinoza recommend people to know the natural rule consciously and to follow it to correct our prejudice, Zhuangzi recommend us to follow the natural rule unconsciously like the cook who dissected a cow, or similarly, the skilled musician who plays an instrument unconsciously to produce perfect music (Table 2).

Table 2. Differences between Spinoza and Zhuangzi’s monism.

	Spinoza	Zhuangzi
ontology	Deity is infinity Deity is nature	Deity is infinitesimal Deity controls nature by rules(Tao)
epistemology	Deity is knowable Recognize the natural rule by	Deity is unknowable Recognize the natural rule by intuition and
ethic	both intuition and conscious reason	unconscious feeling summarized from empirical experience

4. On the Boundaries of Knowledge

4.1. Boundaries of Present Theory

Since the main difference between Spinoza and Zhuangzi lies in their views on agnosticism, we need to analyze this issue more deeply.

First, there is certainly not a kind of absolute agnosticism. Many philosophers have set boundaries for human knowledge. Kunt believed that the noumenal realm lies beyond human comprehension, while Wittgenstein held that what lies outside the bounds of language cannot be meaningfully discussed. It can be shown as Figure 1.

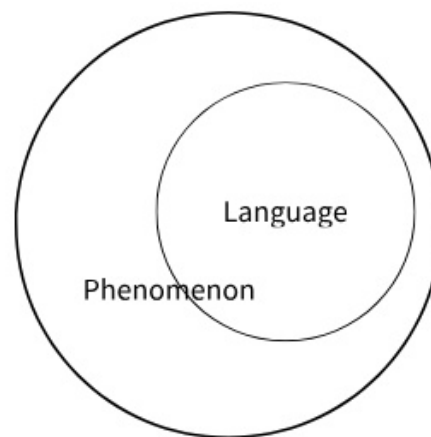


Figure 1. Schematic diagram of previous boundaries of knowledge.

For Spinoza, the realm beyond phenomena is also knowable; for Zhuangzi, it can only be intuited; and for Kunt, it can only be indirectly implied through aesthetic judgment.

To further analyze this issue, we should distinguish between different kinds of knowledge.

- 1) Can only be intuited, but cannot be described
- 2) Can be intuited for its correctness, and can be described for further deduction, but cannot be deduced from other knowledge by reasoning
- 3) Can be deduced from other knowledge

Obviously, the second and third kinds of knowledge can also be intuited. Moreover, any conclusion that has been deduced must be describable, since it is expressed through specific terms. Thus, it can be shown by Table 3.

Table 3. Categories of Knowledge.

	Can be describe	Can't be describe
Can be deduced	3rd	Not exist
Can't be deduced	2nd	1st

For Spinoza, the knowledge from reason belongs to the 3rd, and the intuited knowledge belongs to the 2nd, like the axiom of Ethic, it can be the basic of further deduction but it cannot be deduced by other axioms but only can be intuited for its correctness.

For Zhuangzi, the Tao, namely the natural rule belongs to the 2nd for it cannot be deduced by other things, and Deity belongs to 1st for it cannot even be described.

They both do not set boundaries for knowledge, just the categories is different. Overall, Zhuangzi is closer to the indescribable, unconsciousness and agnostic. While the modern science has always confirmed its power to make things certain and clear, the modern physics seems to incline its balance to agnostic and uncertainty again. When Newtonian mechanics comes into contact with its uncertain boundaries, it becomes increasingly important to bring Spinoza's system into dialogue with that of Zhuangzi. Certainty becomes the crucial question of the boundary of knowledge.

4.2. The Essence of Knowledge

Before penetrating into the boundary of knowledge, it's vital to clarify the concept of knowledge. We've already discussed the definition of Spinoza's three kinds of knowledge, while it's inspiring, it is "not as simple as Kunt's definition, 'Knowledge consists in the agreement of the representation with its object' [4].

However, Kunt's definition is also not entirely satisfying. He confines himself to the phenomenal world, refuses to admit that we can approach some essence of the world through phenomena, and disparages reason by limiting it to the realm of phenomena. Because phenomenon is what information people receive and know. If we define knowledge by phenomenon, that is to say, knowledge is something people know, or be able to know. But what is knowing? It becomes rather sophisticated in Kunt's theory.

The information theory affords an inspiring definition. According to information theory, information is the resolution of uncertainty [5], which means, the more certain we can predict for an event to happen, like probability of 70%, the more knowledge we will have. It should be mentioned that, when the probability approach 50%, it shows the most uncertainty. For either affirmative or negative prediction is a kind of certainty. 0% of affirmative is equal to 100% of negative. If we can predict that the outcome is 100% negative, then we also have certain knowledge of it.

Thus, information is the certainty in the relationships between events, which differs from phenomena because it refers to things that actually happen, although these are observed through phenomena. Thus, we can define knowledge like this:

Knowledge is the information we have acquired (and to acquire is to describe or feel the certainty of relationship, description belongs to 2nd and 3rd knowledge, and feeling belongs to 1st knowledge in Table 3).

While there is also some information that we haven't found out, like the ancient people don't know the gravity, we don't deny the probability of their existence. Thus, information refers to the relationships that really exist, and knowledge refers to the relationships human has discovered.

By this definition we encounter the question of certainty.

If knowledge is the information we have acquired, and information is the certainty of relationship between events, then, if some event is totally uncertain, that is, it has no relationship with any other events, then, there will be no certain relationship between other events and this event, which means, the certainty of relationship between anything and this event is 50% and totally uncertain. That means, there is no information about this event. And knowledge is the information we have acquired, so we will never have the

choice to know this event, that is, to acquire the information about it, because there is no information about it at all.

Thus, the real boundary of knowledge, namely, the boundary between knowable and unknowable, between reason and agnostic, is uncertainty. Any event, even with 51% of certainty, is knowable, while if its probability accurately reach 50%, it falls into the unknown.

4.2.1. Certainty Described by Entropy Theory

$$S = k \ln \Omega \quad [6]$$

The larger Ω is, the more diverse the microscopic states of the system are, which manifests as a higher degree of disorder. Therefore, entropy S is a quantitative measure of the degree of disorder of the system.

However, the definition of entropy, the disorder of the system, still needs further explanation. Ω , namely the number of microstates, describes the number of possible microstates that the system can occupy. K , namely Boltzmann's constant, relates to the thermal motion of particles. Thus, if we ignore the factor of movement, the entropy is decided by Ω . If the Ω is larger, the probability different micro-state to appear is higher, conversely, if Ω get lower, the system probably presents few micro-state, that is to say, the possibility of system is restricted, and the certainty increase.

In another word, entropy indicate the uncertainty of a system. If we draw a line, and spot points are distributed on it, if the spot gathers around, it is easy to speculate their position, and if they are distributed evenly with a certain distance, it is also quite certain. However, if they are in random distribution, when we go through the line, it will be rather difficult to make it certain to predict where is the next point. This can be defined as the entropy of space.

From this view, the structure of modern society has much more entropy of space, but its resistance to disaster has been improved, which means it gained a higher stability along time, namely, a lower entropy of time. Human has won the certainty of time by the uncertainty and complexity of space. So has the creature.

4.2.2. The Boundary of Certainty

On the journey of obtaining certainty, humans have achieved much. Unfortunately, they have ultimately reached a boundary—one that seems to define the limits of knowledge itself. Quantum physics has discovered such events whose probability is exactly 50%, implying a wall of total uncertainty.

The experiment by Alain Aspect, the winner of the 2022 Nobel Prize in Physics, shows that the correlation of entangled photons violates Bell's inequality, ruling out the possibility of local hidden variable theory and confirming the non locality and inherent uncertainty of quantum mechanics [7].

That is to say, the state of quantum is total uncertain before someone observe it, which means the information about it in the time before observation is totally uncertain.

It doesn't exist, and it does exist, just by the probability of 50%. This gap of uncertainty has settled a boundary of human knowledge, because for the total uncertain event, information is none, and knowledge cannot be acquired.

And after observation, it turns out to the 2nd knowledge in Table 3, which means it cannot be deduced, and can only be described and admitted.

Someone describe it as the dice Deity throws. For Spinoza, I believe it can be better described as the uncertainty wall Deity set for human. And for Zhuangzi, it may be the will of his uncertain and unknowable Deity. Whatsoever people call it, it is a limitation of certainty, information and knowledge.

And that maybe the crucial point of human history to turn into uncertainty and agnostic theory, which illustrate the spiritual connection with the uncertainty by uncon-

sciousness. Through further explore, maybe human can come across this wall of uncertainty, and find out who and what is behind, who set this boundary for us, or it's simply the end and limitation of the world.

4.2.3. Re-Examination of Spinoza and Zhuangzi's Theory from Certainty

There is only one way to reconcile the certain and complete concept of substance of Spinoza and the uncertain and empty concept of Deity of Zhuangzi, and it's pretty tricky. The converse always has something common, but the only problem is people hasn't realized it.

If we clarify the concept with more specific terms, the two systems can be consistent in one. Only difference is, Spinoza's substance including all things is Deity itself, and Zhuangzi's concept is more accurately to be called divinity. When it comes to Deity, it is infinite, but when it comes to divinity, it will be rather small a sphere, because divinity is the property of Deity, and the more an overall includes, the less common property can be found among those it includes, so it will be rather small a sphere of property when it comes to the whole world, even reaching nihil and infinitesimal. The larger a noun is, the smaller and blurrier its corresponding adjectives will be.

Thus, Deity becomes the set of all certainty, and divinity becomes their common property which contains nothing but certainty. This is where the theory of Spinoza conflicts with the theory of Zhuangzi and quantum physics.

Spinoza judge that the substance is totally certain, while quantum physic encounters definitely uncertain, which cannot be explained by Spinoza's theory, even by any theory figured out by human reason, because the sphere of reason, which is equal to the sphere of 3rd knowledge, is included in the sphere of knowledge, which is further included in the sphere of certainty, which contains every piece of knowledge both we have acquired or not acquired. Thus, if the uncertainty is out of certainty, it will be out of human reason, shown in Figure 2. Compared to Figure 1, it doesn't still restrict knowledge in the category of phenomenon, but includes all relationships in which even the slightest certainty exist. While Spinoza's Deity contains all the things inside the outside circle, Zhuangzi's divinity may exist outside it, where we cannot know.

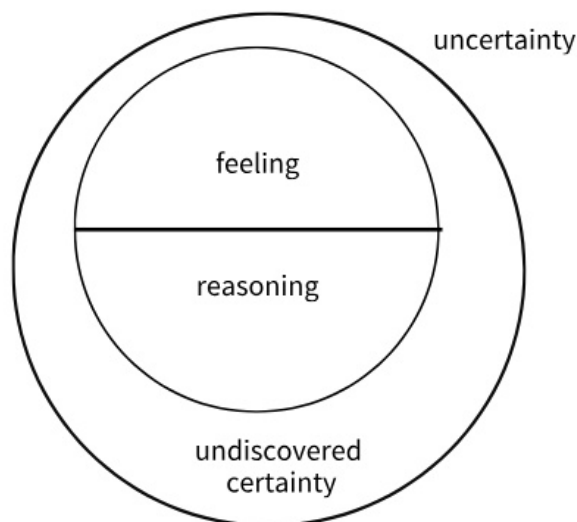


Figure 2. Schematic diagram of boundaries of knowledge divided by certainty.

The only remaining method to approach the uncertainty maybe the method of Zhuangzi and Kunt, aesthetic feeling regarding the nature. While intuition is a tool to perceive certainties that have yet to be discovered, it can also be a tool to feel uncertainty, which can go through all the three major parts of Figure 2.

Like the uncertain quantum constitute the certain world, it's possible that the unknowable and uncertain divinity constitutes the essence of the certain substance.

5. conclusion

1. Spinoza and Zhuangzi's monism has the same end but different origin.
2. The basic difference between them is whether the self-caused is infinity or infinitesimal, that is certain or uncertain.
3. This difference results in their difference in epistemology, which shows the same boundary of knowledge with different means to reach.
4. Modern physics shows the boundary between nihil and the 3rd knowledge (in Table. 3) probably exist, and it may be more important to explore the 2nd knowledge to reach the origin of certainty from uncertainty.

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