

A Portrait of Plausibility

The future is a problem, or rather, *some* problems are futurity, the possibility of surprise, novelty, new meaning.

But what are *plausible* futures? Plausibility is an evaluative category that is first and foremost cognitive in nature, a quality of relations between ideas, not relations between things. When we try to answer a question put to us about some state of affairs which may once have been, may exist now, or may exist in the future, having provided an answer, we can ask: “did that seem plausible?”. Whether the response does or not seem so depends on how it connects together commonly available facts or opinions. As such, judgments about plausibility typically concern inferences between propositions concerning particular states of affairs, and are instances of “backward inferencing”. It is harder to judge plausibility when dealing with forward inferencing, which moves from facts to generalities, a form of reasoning exemplified by assertions about the future - “there are no future facts” (Brumbaugh 1966)649. Such patterns of reasoning tend to “quickly [fall] below some threshold of plausibility” (Collins and Michalski) (Collins and Michalski)8.

If the plausibility of backward inferencing, based on facts (or opinions) that are common property, is generally stronger, then this implies that the problems and questions to which more plausible answers may be given are of a particular kind. Etymologically, plausibility derives from the Latin *plausibilis* (meaning deserving of applause). What receives some degree of communal affirmation is plausible – but does this mean that plausibility is reserved only for future visions which chime with the lowest common denominator of *sensus communis*, “conventional wisdom”? (Amara 1991)648. Gilles Deleuze points out that

It is interrogation which, within the framework of a community, dismembers problems and questions, and reconstitutes them in accordance with the propositions of the common empirical consciousness – in other words, according to the probable truths of a simple doxa. (Deleuze 1994)157

Given that the future is a problem (one which embodies uncertainty, unpredictability and novelty) which cannot be satisfactorily or responsibly dismembered in this way, is there anything that can make a future plausible other how far our imagination of it coheres with the settled expectations of comfortable prejudices?

For a future to be plausible, it has to become knowable. Somehow, warrants which distinguish propositions about the future which have epistemic weight from ones which do not have to be established. This is not the same as saying that plausible futures are limited to those which gel with our preconceptions of what is possible. Consider Spinoza’s letter to his friend Peter Balling, regarding the groans which Balling “heard” in the night, presaging (as it turned out) the death of his son, who had appeared healthy. Spinoza writes that the imagination may follow on the heels of the “disposition”. However:

This being so, I say that no effects of imagination springing from physical causes can ever be omens of future events; inasmuch as their causes do not involve any future events. But the effects of imagination, or images originating in the mental disposition, may be omens of some future event; inasmuch as the mind may have a confused presentiment of the future. It may, therefore, imagine a future event as forcibly and vividly, as though it were present; for instance a father (to take an example resembling your own) loves his child so much, that he and the beloved child are, as it were, one and the same. (Spinoza 1884)

Spinoza goes on:



Again, as the soul of the father participates ideally in the consequences of his child's essence, he may (as I have said) sometimes imagine some of the said consequences as vividly as if they were present with him, provided that the following conditions are fulfilled:—I. If the occurrence in his son's career be remarkable. II. If it be capable of being readily imagined. III. If the time of its happening be not too remote. IV. If his body be sound, in respect not only of health but of freedom from every care or business which could outwardly trouble the senses.

To understand this, we need to go beyond the cognitive dimension of plausibility.¹ Futures are actively anticipated, and on this basis, they take on a specific weight of insistence (the future *insists* in the present, just as the past *persists*), prefiguring them as determinately knowable, actionable, and ethically significant. It is on the basis of active anticipation – which I identify with what Spinoza cryptically refers to when he states that the hallucinating father “participates ideally in the consequences of his child's essence” – that futures can become plausible at all. Anticipation – active future-orientation – is rooted in biological phenomena, and perhaps extends into the inorganic world too (according to figures like Prigogine and Stengers). At the social level, the organization of anticipation takes on different dimensions. Encompassing the formation of social imaginaries of the future (Marcus 1995; Taylor 2001), there are horizons of expectation [*Erwartungshorizonte*] (Koselleck 2002)111.

As Niklas Luhmann (1976) notes, “[...] the essential characteristic of a horizon is that we can never touch it, never get at it, never surpass it, but that in spite of that, it contributes to the definition of the situation”. Against these socially and historically variant horizons, futures become knowable, actionable and objects of ethical evaluation ways which exhibit regular, secure expectations. But we can also orient ourselves to the future in ways which produce meaning from improvisation, and which move personal relationships and political communities away from settled, sedentary rhythms of the reproduction of the everyday towards different horizons.

How do we produce futures as plausible in these two cases?

And how far does a distinction between these two ways of producing futures have to do with (in Spinoza's language) how we “participate in the essence of others” differently in each case?

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¹ See the discussion of Spinoza's letter and the logic of “participation” by the blogger Kvond Kvond (2009). Omens of the Future. [Frames/Sing](http://kvond.wordpress.com/2009/10/30/omens-of-the-future-intellection-and-imagination/). Kvond. <http://kvond.wordpress.com/2009/10/30/omens-of-the-future-intellection-and-imagination/>.