

# Uncertainty (part 1)

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**T**he Dutch COVID press conference was wonderful this week. The Prime Minister and new Health Minister openly expressed their uncertainty about lifting the lockdown. They emphasized that, though the lockdown has had many undesirable consequences in society, it remains uncertain what the virus will do now that we downscale the measures. It has surprised us so many times.

Nobody knows. And those who can't do criticize. Even who can do, the Government/WHO, has made numerous predictions that did not come true. And of course there were always people who called in advance on aspects that later turned out to be more accurate. If there is a lot of shouting, there's always someone right in retrospect. But this too is an illusion of control, a false sense of security.

We live our lives in fundamental uncertainty, even though many things are going as we hope, fear, or expect. The more uncertainty, the more we cling to uncertainty reduction, such as predictive technologies (data science, AI) and futurologists, who promise a technological heaven on earth, even though we now really know that every new technology brings about a world of new uncertainties (or downright problems). Though born out of doubt, good science always raises more questions.

If there's one psychological quantity that we like to deny or even eliminate, while at the same time tacitly playing a major role in virtually all of our individual (and even collective human) actions, it's uncertainty. Doubt lies at the root of Western thought, in the scientific method. René Descartes argued that all knowledge is questionable: I cannot rely on my senses (I may dream and think I perceive reality), nor on my knowledge. However, I can trust that I doubt: I think, therefore I am.

## Just like Descartes

When you're uncertain – do I contribute enough, may I even be there – it's sometimes tempting to look at what you do know for sure, just like Descartes did. Surprisingly, our certainty is uncertainty; we can be sure that (almost) nothing is as it seems. But pretending we know for sure is big business. Take, for example, satisfaction surveys that companies 'buy' to show how satisfied customers are with their products, or how satisfied employees are with the company. It simply says that Marketing & Communication departments or agencies have actively succeeded in getting customers or employees to fill in smartly prepared lists at the right times. How satisfied are you with healthcare, for example, if you have just been told that you are terminal? How inappropriate it is to pester people over and over with satisfaction questions, begging for positive reviews. It's inappropriate unless you're really uncertain about your added value, and if you really want to improve. Do you like my lectures? Maybe you don't understand much of it now, but the penny will fall in 1 year, or in 5 years.

Labels, rules & regulations, fact checkers or myth busters, none of these are a way out. The power of vulnerability, uncertainty is a powerful weapon. Conversely, companies are suspicious from the outset, if they widely display their satisfaction with their products or employership, if they know everything for sure. They are of course also uncertain and try to counter that with certainty. I've been paying attention to it recently, and increasingly avoid companies that advertise their customer satisfaction scores or good employer-employee labels.

They are like futurologists who pretend to know for sure which way the future will go, thus deceiving not only themselves but also their customers. Complacency with one's own certainties invariably betrays that there is no room for uncertainties, and that for individual exceptions you can count on nothing but the "standard procedure". Attention and individual customization cannot be bought off with quality marks. Certainties concern everything in general and often nothing or no one in particular. Certainty is not for sale, except the certainty that we have to manage with ... uncertainty.