

Spinoza on conatus, inertia and the impossibility of self-destruction

“... he does not will what he wills, and wills what he does not will ... “(E3p39s)

1. Introduction.

Today, suicide is a significant social issue. In a country such as Great Britain more than 6000 people a year commit suicide. And recently we have been confronted with the terrible consequences of suicide bombers in Paris, Brussels and several other places.

Suicide or self-destruction means in ordinary language “the act of killing oneself deliberately” (intentionally or on purpose). Indeed, that’s what we read in the *Oxford dictionary* and the *Oxford dictionary of philosophy*¹, which seems to be confirmed by the etymology² of the term “suicide”, a term introduced around mid-17th century deduced from the modern Latin *suicidium*, ‘act of suicide’.

Traditionally, suicide was regarded as immoral, irreligious and illegal in Western culture. However, during the 17th century this Christian view started to change as a consequence of the rise of modern science³. Generally speaking, Spinoza does not write much on death. His name does even not occur in the *Oxford Philosophy of Death*, although he had had very particular ideas on the nature of death. However, he even had much more particular ideas on suicide. Moreover, he states in the fourth proposition of the third part of his masterpiece, the *Ethics*, that self-destruction is simply impossible: *Nulla res, nisi à causâ externâ, potest destrui.*⁴

From this bold statement, which is presented by Spinoza as a self-evident proposition, arises several question such as: What does Spinoza actually mean by this sentence? If suicide for Spinoza is impossible how then does he explain what is normally called “suicide”? How did he come to his views? Was he influenced by other philosophers or did he rather react against traditional views? Was he inspired by the new science of his times? Did he have a physical or mechanical analogy, a paradigmatic example or a model in mind? Does he consider the supposed act of suicide as morally wrong? How does he distinguish himself from other philosophers belonging to other traditions?

Questions of this kind have already been discussed in the existing publications on the impossibility of suicide in Spinoza. However, the aim of this paper is to develop some new ideas on this interesting topic based on an analysis of what the Dutch philosopher writes in one of his early works, the *Cogitata metaphysica* (1663). My central claim is that Spinoza applied the analogy of the

¹ Blackburn, Simon, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, Oxford, OUP, 2008, 354. Further in my text, I will refer to this definition as the ‘Oxford definition of suicide’.

² Mid-17th century: from modern Latin *suicidium* ‘act of suicide’, *suicida* ‘person who commits suicide’, from Latin *sui* ‘of oneself’ and *caedere* ‘kill’.

³ Critchley, 2015, 21.

⁴Translations used: *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, edited and translated by E. Curley (Princeton 1988: Princeton University Press); *Spinoza. Complete Works* translated by S. Shirley (Ed. M.L. Morgan. Indianapolis 2002: Hackett)

body in motion in his views on the existence of beings in general. I will show that this analogy helps not only to resolve Spinoza's intriguing statement that self-destruction is impossible. This paper also shows the relevance and importance of the passion of "*timor*" for the understanding of Spinoza's views on what we normally call suicide.

2. The threefold problematic character of self-destruction in Spinoza

Firstly, self-destruction is by definition a destruction! But destruction of what? What is the self that is destroyed in self-destruction? Obviously, here arises already a first problem for the Oxford definition of suicide because the self is according to Spinoza not a closed self. On the contrary, it is characterized by openness towards the world. Indeed, according to the 4th postulate on the human body in the *Physical Interlude*, the human body—which is ontologically the same thing as the mind and a model for all bodies⁵—must necessarily be renewed continuously by a great number external bodies, which affect that body in many ways, in order to be preserved:

IV. The human body, to be preserved, requires a great many other, by which it is, as it were, continuously regenerated.

So, strictly speaking, the self in self-destruction is - in that sense - only partially my own because it is also shared by others.

Secondly, one cannot kill himself deliberately, according to Spinoza, for the simple reason that man does not have a free will. At least not a free will in the ordinary sense of this word, as he states in proposition 48 of the third part of the *Ethics*. It is for Spinoza an illusion to think that you take decisions deliberately. According to the Dutch philosopher, an idea (e.g. the idea to destroy myself) is always necessarily caused by another idea, which is caused by another idea, *ad infinitum* creating an infinite causal chain of ideas.

Thirdly and even more importantly, no thing can - according to Spinoza - destroy itself because a thing in general and a human being in particular is always determined to act by external causes. Moreover, the desire to exist is the essence of a human being⁶. As a consequence, in the light of Spinoza's ontology, it is simply impossible, even absurd that a man should be capable of destroying himself.

In sum, what we normally call "self-destruction" seems to be for several reasons problematic in the light of Spinoza's philosophy. Moreover, the fact that there are rumors, taken seriously by academics such as Piet Steenbakkers⁷, that Spinoza actually committed suicide at the end of his life makes this question even more complicated. Indeed, how can we explain that a philosopher, who argues that

⁵ E2p13s

⁶ E3p9s

⁷ Steenbakkers, 2010 & 2013.

suicide is impossible, has committed suicide? And, how can this be explained in the light of his own philosophy?

In this essay, I will first try to find out how Spinoza came to his particular views on this topical item starting with an analysis of his views on death and life. I will argue that it is not Spinoza's views on death but rather his views on life that put us on the right track. Secondly, I will suggest that Spinoza applied the mechanical⁸ analogy of the body in motion in to his conception of the essence of a thing. This analogy allows us not only to resolve his ideas on the impossibility of self-destruction. It shows also that this hypothesis is in resonance with all the other propositions of the third part of the *Ethics* treating the *conatus*. Thirdly, I will analyze the different cases of supposed suicide that Spinoza distinguishes and give a new interpretation of the second case wherein Spinoza gives the example of Seneca to illustrate his views. And fourthly, we will try to develop a spinozistic ethics and politics of suicide.

3. **Spinoza on death and life.**

3.1 Spinoza on death

According to Plato, to die is to get rid of your body in which your soul is imprisoned. For Spinoza, by contrast, body and mind are one and the same thing conceived from two different attributes. The Dutch philosopher defines⁹ a body in his *Physical Interlude* of his *Ethics* as a mutual relation of a physical nature, the *ratio* of motion and rest of the body:

When a number of bodies, whether of the same or of different size, are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon one another, or if they so move, whether with the same degree or different degrees of speed, that they communicate their notions to each other in a certain fixed manner, we shall say that those bodies are united with one another and that they all together compose one body or Individual, which is distinguished from the others by this union of bodies.

This *ratio* of the whole of parts gives a thing its singularity and its identity over time. Nearly anything may happen: parts can be substituted, parts can change their direction or their velocity, the number of parts can alter, ... Nevertheless, the body maintains its identity as long as the parts respect the same mutual relation which governs the whole. This concept of an individual was a general concept applicable to all bodies in the universe which opened the door for a universal concept of destruction and self-destruction of the body.

The destruction of the self entails - according to Spinoza - that the *ratio* is destroyed, but destruction has a particular meaning here. The Dutch philosopher defines destruction in his *Letter 36* (Voorburg, mid June 1666) to Hudde "To destroy a thing is to resolve it into such parts that none of them express

⁸ The term "mechanical" refers here to the new theory of motion of which the theory of instruments and machines was only a part.

⁹ Definition of a body of the *Physical Interlude* of E2.

the nature of the whole” [*rem destruere est illam in ejusmodi partes resolvere, ut nulla earum omnium naturam totius exprimat*]. We find this definition of destruction also in the scholium of E4p39.

However, it is essential to notice that destruction is for Spinoza not a complete annihilation of an existing thing. Like Yitzhak Y. Melamed¹⁰ puts it: “Annihilation is just as impossible as creation *ex nihilo* for Spinoza”. What we call death is for Spinoza just a transformation, the start of a new individual with (a) new ratio(s) of motion and rest of bodies. After the destruction of a body, its parts become part of (a) new whole(s) respecting (a) new mutual relation(s). Spinoza’s view on death is thus not one of pure indifference as it is in the Stoic and Epicurean traditions¹¹. The idea is thus not - as Lucretius puts it in *Rerum natura* [*On the Nature of Things*] - “when death is, I am not and when I am, death is not.”

However, the Dutch philosophers writes rather seldom about death. Contrary to the very influential Platonic tradition, Spinoza did not regard death as an object of philosophical reflection. For Plato’s master Socrates (who would later commit suicide) to philosophize is to learn how to die as he argues in the *Phaedo*¹². Spinoza, by contrast, states in E4p67 that: “A free man thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a meditation of life, not of death. In conclusion, Spinoza’s ideas on death don’t help us any further in our elucidation of his views on the impossibility of self-destruction.

3.2 Spinoza on life

The solution of the paradox of the impossibility of suicide is not to be found in his ideas on death but rather in his ideas on life. One of the leading Spinoza scholars of the 20th century, Stuart Hampshire, argued in last interview just before he died: “That Spinoza was right. In the end it is all biology”¹³. Hampshire came to this conclusion based on the fact that Spinoza’s philosophy fits amazingly well with the findings of evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and molecular biology. However, as Michel Foucault¹⁴ puts it, 17th century philosophers didn’t have any sharp, adequate definition for “life”. Moreover, the notion of life was hardly used in studying nature¹⁵. Some of the early modern philosophers, such as Descartes, had a very narrow idea of what things are alive and other philosophers by contrast a very broad one.

Spinoza realized this already in his time. Indeed, in one of early writings already, the *Cogitata metaphysica* (which he had written before his *Principia philosophiae cartesianae*), he summarizes that there are two possible meanings of life and that he prefers to apply the definition with a broad scope because as he puts it: “the word 'life' is commonly used in a more widely sense,”. (CM II/6).

¹⁰ Melamed, Y.Y. and Oded Schechter, Spinoza on Death, ‘Our Present Life’ & the Imagination (06.24.15), 6.

¹¹ Cf. Jaquet, 2003.

¹² Cf. *Phaedo* 81a.

¹³ Cf. NY Review of Books, Oct. 2005.

¹⁴ The Chomsky – Foucault debate on human nature. London/NY, The New Press, 2006, 6.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*

But then, what precisely is the meaning of ‘life’ according to Spinoza? Can we possibly find a definition in order to resolve his views on self-destruction?

The Dutch philosopher gives in the 6th chapter of the second part of the *Metaphysical Thoughts* his own definition of life. But first, he rejects categorically the peripatetic concept(s) of life based on heat as the principle of life. Since the early Greek medical and philosophical writers, innate heat was considered to be essential in the animal system. As Mendelsohn writes: “It was responsible for the generative and growth functions; it played a major role in effecting digestion; it was necessary for movement, sensation, and thought. The maintenance of innate heat coincided with life, the destruction of innate heat to death.”¹⁶.

And secondly, he rejects the soul as a principle of distinction of bodies. This soul functioned in the tradition, that started with Aristotle, not only as a principle to distinguish the humans, animals and plants but also to distinguish the living from the non-living¹⁷. Spinoza, by contrast, wrote later write in the scholium of E3p13¹⁸ of his posthumously published *Ethics* (1677) that all extended things have an idea in God and are consequently all “animate though according to certain degrees” [*omnia quamvis diversis gradibus, animata tamen sunt*]. One of the possible meanings of this phrase is that each extended thing is alive since the presence an idea of an existing thing (or a soul) was in 17th century regarded as a criterion for being alive. As the Nobel laureate Erwin Schrödinger would write it 300 years later in *What Is Life?* (1967), physicists had excluded the phenomenon of life from physics by excluding the mind from matter¹⁹. Spinoza by contrast introduced “the bold thought of universal animation” and highlighted that not only the body but also the mind is part of nature.

Although, in Spinoza’s modern thinking there is no question that this soul should create a hierarchy, a *scala naturae*, among the living things, with the humans on top, just under the angels and God. On the contrary, Spinoza writes in the E2p13s that all bodies have an idea in God and that the human body functions as a model for all bodies. Consequently, the human body lost its primacy among the bodies. With “according to different degrees” Spinoza rather refers here to a gradation in complexity since he treats in his *Physical Interlude* the bodies according increasing complexity.

Further, Spinoza is quite clear in *CM*: “... we shall not spend much effort in refuting these views. For as regards the three souls that they attribute to plants, animals, and men, we have already sufficiently demonstrated that these are nothing but fictions, having shown that in matter there is nothing but

¹⁶ Cf. Mendelsohn, 1964, 8.

¹⁷ Jaquet, 2004, 130.

¹⁸ In this paper I will use the following abbreviations to refer to Spinoza’s work: PPC=Principles of Cartesian Philosophy (*Principia Philosophiae Cartesianae*), CM = *Metaphysical Thoughts (Cogitata Metaphysica)*, E= *Ethics (Ethica)*, Ep=Letters (*Epistolae*), KV=Short Treatise (*Korte Verhandeling*), TIE=Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect (*Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*), TP=Political Treatise (*Tractatus Politicus*), TTP=Theological-Political Treatise (*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*).

¹⁹ Schrödinger, [1967] 1996, 94

mechanical structures and their operations.” So, Spinoza wants to replace the peripatetic definitions of life based on three souls. by one universal strictly mechanical definition in terms of motion and rest of material objects.

Interestingly, after rejecting the Aristotelian concept and principle of distinction of life, Spinoza gives, in the chapter VI of the second part of the *CM*, his own “philosophical” definition [*quid philosophicè eâ denotetur*] of ‘life’: “by life we for our part understand the force through which things persevere in their own being.” [*Quare nos per vitam intelligimus vim, per quam res in suo esse perseverant*].

CM II / 6: Spinoza’s definition of life:

By life they understand 'the persistence of the nutritive soul with heat' (see Aristotle *De Respiratione*, I, 8).

[...] by life we for our part understand the force through which things persevere in their own being.

After this definition, Spinoza highlights that there is a difference between the force through which things persevere in their being and the thing itself. In other words: there is difference between ‘being life’ and ‘having life’. Spinoza argues that things are alive or have life but we cannot say that they are life since there is generally speaking a difference between on the one hand the essence (or power) of God or the “force to which things persevere in their being” and on the other hand the particular essence of each singular thing. For God, there is no difference between the force (or power) and his essence so that we can say that God is life²⁰.

GOD = The essence = The force = Being life = The power to persevere in His being

Modus = an essence = a force = having life = a force to persevere in its being

Our next question is how we should conceive this “force by which a thing perseveres in its own being” which Spinoza identifies with “having LIFE”? Is there an example, a model or analogy to clarify this? Was Spinoza inspired by something? Where does this idea comes from? Was Spinoza inspired here once again by the physics of his times which he knew well?

3.3 The very simple example of the body in motion: motion and *conatus*.

And yes there is indeed, since Spinoza, had already given us what he calls “a very simple example” to explain this in chapter 6 of part I of the *CM* in order to explain his views on the force of a thing to persevere in its own being:

That this may be clearly understood, we shall take an example of a very simple kind. Motion has force to persevere in its own state. This force is surely nothing else than motion itself, the fact that the nature of motion is such as it is. **For if! say** that in this body A there is nothing else than a certain quantity of motion, from this it clearly follows that, as long as I am attending to the body A, I must always say that the body is moving. For if I were to say that it is losing its force of motion, I am

²⁰ Cf. Zac, 1963, 104-121.

necessarily ascribing to it something else beyond what we supposed in the hypothesis, something that is causing it to lose its nature. Now if this reasoning seems rather obscure, then let us grant that this conatus to motion is something other than the very laws and nature of motion. Because, then, you suppose this conatus to be a metaphysical good, this conatus will also necessarily have a conatus to persevere in its own being, and this again another conatus, and so ad infinitum. I cannot imagine anything more absurd than this. Now the reason why they make a distinction between the conatus of a thing and the thing itself is that they feel in themselves a wanting to preserve themselves, and they imagine a similar wanting in each individual thing.

In the paragraph that precedes the passage above, Spinoza had highlighted that there is no real distinction between a thing and its tendency to persevere in its being. Interestingly, he even introduces here for the very first time (because he had written his appendix before his *PPC*) his fundamental, metaphysical notion of “conatus”. [*Res, et conatus, quo res in statu suo perseverare conantur, quomodo distinguantur*]:

They [the Peripatetics] distinguish between the thing itself and the striving that is in each thing to preserve its being, although they do not know what they understand by striving. For though the thing and its striving to preserve its being are distinguished by reason, or rather verbally (which deceives these people very greatly), they are not in any way really distinct.

However, at a first literally reading there seems to be a contradiction with what the definition we have just discussed from *CM2*. Indeed, as we have shown, in this part of his *CM* Spinoza writes that “the force through which things persevere in their own being is different from the thing itself”. Now, by contrast, the Dutch philosopher writes that there is no real but only by reason a distinction between a thing and its striving to persevere in its existence. However, in the first case, “the force” should be understood as the essence of God or Nature which expresses itself in a determinate way in finite *modi*. In the second case, by contrast, Spinoza emphasizes that the force should be understood as the *conatus* (essence) or “force” by which a finite, singular thing perseveres in its own being. In other words: here he means here by force the finite expression of the essence of God.

Interestingly, Spinoza illustrates his conception of the essence of thing with what he calls the very simple example of the body in motion. A being preserves in its being, he explains, just as a body in motion perseveres in its motion. And there is no difference between the essence of a being and its tendency to persevere in its being just as there is no difference between the motion of a body and its tendency or force [*vis*] to persevere in that motion. In the modern conception (which Spinoza knew well since he taught several students often physics in the early 60 ties in Rijnsburg), you don’t need no external force to maintain a motion. The motion of a body was for Spinoza not just displacement of a body as in Descartes’ physics. On the contrary, motion was for Spinoza an expression or modus of the attribute extension and Spinoza defines in *PPC* II/22 force as a quantity of motion. The motion of a body has its own force since you have to apply external forces in order to stop or counterbalance the motion.

It is important to notice also that the motion (in this modern sense) is a blind motion. There is no goal directedness just as there is no (divine) finalism in God or nature for Spinoza, as he explains in the appendix of the first part of the *Ethics*. The key idea of modern physics – the principle of inertia - gives Spinoza thus a paradigm for the understanding of the existence of a thing.

The example of the body in motion (with the principle of inertia) that Spinoza gives in his *CM* I/6 is not just an example of minor importance that Spinoza had given exceptionally in one of his early writings and that disappeared later on into the background. On the contrary, Spinoza gives much later, more precisely in his letter 58 (1674) to Schüller, written a few months before the end of his short life, once again “a very simple example” as he puts it [*Quod ut clarè intelligatur, rem simplicissimam concipiamus*] of a stone in motion in order to explain once again his radical determinism: “every single thing is necessarily determined by an external cause to exist and to act in a fixed and determinate way.”. And he highlights that “what here applies to the stone must be understood of every individual thing, however complex its structure and various its functions.”:

However, let us move down to created things, which are all determined by external causes to exist and to act in a fixed and determinate way. To understand this clearly, let us take a very simple example. A stone receives from the impulsion of an external cause a fixed quantity of motion whereby it will necessarily continue to move when the impulsion of the external cause has ceased. The stone's continuance in motion is constrained, not because it is necessary, but because it must be defined by the impulsion received from the external cause. What here applies to the stone must be understood of every individual thing, however complex its structure and various its functions. For every single thing is necessarily determined by an external cause to exist and to act in a fixed and determinate way.

4 **The impossibility of Self-destruction (the analogy of the body in motion)**

My claim is that Spinoza's application of the analogy of motion (with the principle of inertia) can teach us how to understand Spinoza's views on self-destruction. Wallace Matson argued already that Spinoza conceived his doctrine of death “to be a special application of the law of inertia, which is proved a priori (II Lemma III C) by applying the principle of sufficient reason in negative form”²¹. However, Matson does nowhere mention the passages of the *Cogitata metaphysica* which are central to my argument.

Spinoza states in a very explicit way in one of propositions of E3 which treat the *conatus*, more precisely as the first in the series, proposition 4, that self-destruction is impossible: “No thing can be destroyed except by an external cause”. Amazingly, as J. Bennett has remarked, “this is the only proposition in the *Ethics* that is demonstrated without help from previously declared doctrines”²². As a consequence, the question arises where Spinoza got this remarkable idea? In the proof of this

²¹ Matson, 1977, 406.

²² Bennett, 1984, 234.

proposition, Spinoza begins by saying that this demonstration does not need any proof since it is self-evident:

This proposition is self-evident, for the definition of anything affirms, and does not negate, the thing's essence: that is, it posits, and does not annul, the thing's essence. So as long as we are attending only to the thing itself, and not to external causes, we can find nothing in it which can destroy it.

Nonetheless, Spinoza gives – as Don Garrett puts it - “a three-step argument”²³:

1. The definition of a thing affirms, and does not deny, the thing's essence, or it posits the thing's essence, and does not take it away.
2. While we attend only to the thing itself, and not to external causes, we shall not be able to find anything in it which can destroy it. (from 1)
3. 3p4 – Nothing can be destroyed except through an external cause. (from 2)

As Garrett rightly remarks, the proof of this proposition does not cite any previous definitions, axioms, or propositions of the *Ethics* but appeals instead to the nature of “the definition of a thing”. However, in his analysis Don Garrett does not make any link with what Spinoza had written in the appendix of his *Renati Des Cartes Principia Philosophiae* published already in 1663. Nor has any other Spinoza scholar such as S. Nadler, E. Curley, J. Bennett, Barbone & Rice, ... do who likewise make no mention of this appendix of the *PPC* in their publications on Spinoza's particular views on self-destruction.

Moreover, the *Cogitata metaphysica* is hardly mentioned by them in this context although the similarity with what he had written at the moment he had introduced his notion of *conatus* by means of the mechanical analogy of the body in motion in his early work is striking what the structure as well as what the content of the argumentation is concerned. I will give four examples to illustrate this.

First of all, both passages treat the striving to preserve (the essence or the *conatus*) of an existing, finite thing:

CM I/6: For though the thing and its striving to preserve its being are distinguished by reason, or rather verbally which deceives these people very greatly), they are not in any way really distinct. [...] To make this clear, let us take an example of a very simple thing.

E2p4: [...] definition of anything affirms, and does not negate, the thing's essence [...]

Second, in both cases the central idea is presented as self-evident. In the CM I/6, the example of the body in motion is presented as a very simple example that speaks for itself so to speak and E3p4 is even in a much more explicit way presented as self-evident:

CM I/6: To make this clear, let us take an example of a very simple thing.

E2p4: This proposition is self-evident [...]

²³ Garrett, 2002, 128-129.

Third, in both cases it is about the thing conceived in itself:

CM I/6: “... it follows clearly from this that, so long as I attend to A, I must always say that it is moving.”

E2p4: “While we attend only to the thing itself, and not to external causes ...”

Fourth, in both cases there is a reference to a definition and the conclusion follows from that definition:

E3p4: “for the definition of anything affirms, and does not negate, the thing's essence: that is ... “

CM I/6: “For if I say that in this body, A, there is nothing but a certain quantity of motion²⁴, it follows clearly from this that ...”

In *CM I/6* this reference to a definition is less explicit. However, Spinoza refers here to his definition of quantity of motion or force [*Nota, nos hîc per vim in corporibus motis, intelligere quantitatem motûs*] that he had given in the second part of his *PPC*:

Note that here, by force in moving bodies, we understand a quantity of motion, which must be greater, in bodies equal size, as the speed of motion is greater, insofar as the equal bodies are, by that speed, separated more, in the same time, from bodies immediately touching them, than they would be if they were moving more slowly. Therefore (by D8) they also have more motion. But in bodies at rest we understand by force of resisting a quantity of rest. [...] (*NB in demonstration of PPC II/22*)

Moreover, we find the four points of similarity mentioned above also in Spinoza's letter to Schüller. Just as he had done in *CM I/6*, he explains his concept of determinism by means of the simple example of the body in motion, or more precisely by means of a stone in motion. His argument is very similar. In the passage above he also mentions the quantity of motion (or force of motion) which he had defined in his *PPC*. So his argument follows from a definition. Secondly, the condition of the motion is that there no other external forces than the one which caused the motion of the stone. In other words: the stone is conceived in itself. Thirdly, Spinoza concludes, on the basis of the two preceding premises that “it will necessarily continue to move when the impulsion of the external cause has ceased.”. As consequence, the possibility that the motion should stop by itself is excluded. Moreover, just as in the *CM* he applies the analogy to the existence of all things: “What here applies to the stone must be understood of every individual thing, however complex its structure and various its functions.”.

Jonathan Bennett asks in his *A study of Spinoza's Ethics* (1984) the crucial question, “Why can a thing not be destroyed?” just after having quoted E3p4. His answer is that “a thing capable of

unaided of self-destruction would have a nature which both entailed or included a certain essence and was also inconsistent with it; such a nature would be self-contradictory, and therefore could not be had of anything; so nothing can be capable of destroying itself without outside help”²⁵.

However, Bennett’s explanation of the grounding of E3p4 is fallacious. First of all, this is not the explanation Spinoza gives in the demonstration of E3p4. But, there is another reason why Spinoza would accept this explanation. In his explanation, Bennett argues on the basis of the premise that there cannot be two ideas of a contrary nature in the same mind. However, that’s precisely what Spinoza states in the next proposition E3p5 which - as Spinoza mentions clearly [*per Prop praeced.*] - follows from E3p4. So, E3p4 does not follow from the idea stated in E3p5, as Bennett suggests. On the contrary, E3p5 follows from E3p4 as the order of the propositions on *conatus* suggests.

Hence, we need another explanation for the grounding of E3p4. The analogy of the body might be a good candidate, for the reasons already given. Additionally, it is important to notice that all the other propositions treating the *conatus* are in resonance with this analogy. E3p5 states literally that “Things are of a contrary nature, that is, cannot be in the same subject, insofar as one destroy the other.” In the analogy of the motion of a body, this can correspond with a body that cannot persevere at the same time motions in two opposed directions. The 6th proposition states that “Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being.” As we have already explained that is what Spinoza had illustrated with his example of the body in motion in *CM*. A thing perseveres in its being just as a motion perseveres in its motion. The 7th proposition states that “The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence or the *conatus* of the thing.”. As we have shown the essence of a thing is its striving just as the essence of a motion is its striving (or force) is to persevere in its motion. Moreover, as we have seen, Spinoza had introduced the term “*conatus*” at the moment he gave his explanation in the *CM*. And finally proposition 8, states that: “The striving by which each thing striving persevere in its being involves no finite time, but an indefinite time. “This is also coherent with the fact that a body in motion in absence external bodies (other bodies) does not alter its *modus*. There is no change, no time and no duration involved. A body in motion (considered in itself) will necessarily remain in motion (or at rest) if there is no external cause that affects this body. In that sense, the motion is perpetual motion.

Moreover, the example of the motion is also consistent with Spinoza’s anti-finalism as it is explained in the appendix of E1 because motion is – as he presents it – in the *CM* blind motion. There is no goal-directness, there is no end, no natural end or state of rest which puts an end at the motion.

²⁵ Bennett, J., 1984, 234.

5 Three different cases of suicide

At the moment, very exceptionally, Spinoza speaks of suicide, he distinguishes in E4p20s three possible categories from among the numerous cases of supposed suicide:

Therefore, nobody, unless he is overcome by external causes contrary to his own nature, neglects to seek his own advantage, that is, to preserve his own being. Nobody, I repeat, refuses food or kills himself from the necessity of his own nature, but from the constraint of external causes. This can take place in many ways. A man kills himself when he is compelled by another who twists the hand in which he happens to hold a sword and makes him turn the blade against his heart; or when, in obedience to a tyrant's command, he, like Seneca, is compelled to open his veins, that is, he chooses a lesser evil to avoid a greater. Or it may come about when unobservable external causes condition a man's imagination and affect his body in such a way that the latter assumes a different nature contrary to the previously existing one, a nature whereof there can be no idea in mind (Pr.10, III). But that a man from the necessity of his own nature should endeavor to cease to exist or to be changed into another form, is as impossible as that something should come from nothing, as anyone can see with a little thought.

The first category is, what we would call, self-homicide by accident or misadventure. Spinoza illustrates this case with the following example: "A man kills himself when he is compelled by another who twists the hand in which he happens to hold a sword and makes him turn the blade against his heart." Obviously, the killing of oneself is here not on purpose, not deliberate. Consequently, according to our Oxford definition of the introduction this is thus no suicide. However, someone kills here nevertheless literally himself, he is indeed the immediate (direct) cause, he literally puts his own sword into his own body, which subsequently kills him. Nonetheless, this is homicide because – as Spinoza states clearly – the act is "compelled by another".

The second category is explained by Spinoza in only one sentence but illustrated by the well-known example of the suicide of Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c.4 BC – AD 65). Seneca the Younger was a Roman stoic philosopher. He had been the tutor of the young Nero and was later - when Nero was Roman emperor - accused by him of conspiracy against him. Subsequently, in 65, Nero ordered Seneca to kill himself. The historian Tacitus (ca. 56-117) wrote about this supposed suicide in his *Annales XV*. Spinoza came to know of the work of Tacitus and Seneca when he was in the Latin school of the Flemish ex-Jesuit Franciscus van den Enden. However, he had Tacitus' *Opera* in his personal library²⁶. As a consequence, he must have had the following passage in mind at the moment that he mentioned the example of Seneca' suicide when he illustrated the second category:

63. Having spoken these and like words, meant, so to say, for all, he embraced his wife; then softening awhile from the stern resolution of the hour, he begged and implored her to spare herself the burden of perpetual sorrow, and, in the contemplation of a life virtuously spent, to endure a husband's loss with honourable consolations. She declared, in answer, that she too had decided to die, and claimed for herself the blow of the executioner. There upon Seneca, not to thwart her noble ambition,

²⁶ Spinoza had the following edition in his possession: Tacitus, *Opera*, Antwerpiae, J.J. Moretum, 1607. Cf.: Catalogus van de bibliotheek der vereniging Het Spinozahuis, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1965, 30-31.

from an affection too which would not leave behind him for insult one whom he dearly loved, replied: "I have shown you ways of smoothing life; you prefer the glory of dying. I will not grudge you such a noble example. Let the fortitude of so courageous an end be alike in both of us, but let there be more in your decease to win fame." Then by one and the same stroke they sundered with a dagger the arteries of their arms. Seneca, as his aged frame, attenuated by frugal diet, allowed the blood to escape but slowly, severed also the veins of his legs and knees. Worn out by cruel anguish, afraid too that his sufferings might break his wife's spirit, and that, as he looked on her tortures, he might himself sink into irresolution, he persuaded her to retire into another chamber. Even at the last moment his eloquence failed him not; he summoned his secretaries, and dictated much to them which, as it has been published for all readers in his own words, I forbear to paraphrase.

64. Nero meanwhile, having no personal hatred against Paulina and not wishing to heighten the odium of his cruelty, forbade her death. At the soldiers' prompting, her slaves and freedmen bound up her arms, and stanchd the bleeding, whether with her knowledge is doubtful. For as the vulgar are ever ready to think the worst, there were persons who believed that, as long as she dreaded Nero's relentlessness, she sought the glory of sharing her husband's death, but that after a time, when a more soothing prospect presented itself, she yielded to the charms of life. To this she added a few subsequent years, with a most praise worthy remembrance of her husband, and with a countenance and frame white to a degree of pallor which denoted a loss of much vital energy. Seneca meantime, as the tedious process of death still lingered on, begged Statius Annaeus, whom he had long esteemed for his faithful friendship and medical skill, to produce a poison with which he had some time before provided himself, same drug which extinguished the life of those who were condemned by a public sentence of the people of Athens. It was brought to him and he drank it in vain, chilled as he was throughout his limbs, and his frame closed against the efficacy of the poison. At last he entered a pool of heated water, from which he sprinkled the nearest of his slaves, adding the exclamation, "I offer this liquid as a libation to Jupiter the Deliverer." He was then carried into a bath, with the steam of which he was suffocated, and he was burnt without any of the usual funeral rites. So he had directed in a codicil of his will, when even in the height of his wealth and power he was thinking of his life's close.²⁷

Barbone and Rice argue in their comments on Bennett's interpretation that Seneca was indeed condemned to death by Nero but decided nonetheless rationally how to die. As a stoic, he desired to die honorably to avoid a "*a disgraceful and excruciating death*":

Inevitable circumstances well beyond his control predetermined his destruction; conditions external to him necessitated his annihilation. What remained for Seneca was rationally to decide how to die, and as a Stoic he would certainly prefer not to become the passive victim of a disgraceful and excruciating death, but instead to die honorably, suffering the least amount of pain. Although the immediate cause of Seneca's death was a loss of blood, the formal cause was Nero who commanded his soldiers to kill Seneca.²⁸

Obviously, this interpretation of Spinoza's case is incorrect! Spinoza writes literally about Seneca that "he desires to avoid a greater evil by submitting to a lesser "and that is precisely the definition of the passion "Timor" that the Dutch Philosopher had given in definition 39 of the preceding part of the

²⁷ Tacitus (Author), Moses Hadas (Editor), Alfred Church (Translator), William Brodribb (Translator), Shelby Foote (Introduction), *The Annals & The Histories*, Modern Library, Revised ed. Edition, NY, Random House Inc., 2003.

²⁸ Barbone & Rice, 233.

Ethics: Timor [“Timidity”] is “a desire to avoid a greater evil, which we fear, by a lesser one” [39. *Timor est Cupiditas majus, quod metuimus, malum minore vitandi. Vide Schol. Prop. 39 hujus.*] Consequently, Seneca did not choose rationally how to die as Barbone & Rice suggests. The stoic was governed by his passions, more precisely by timidity. As a consequence, he did not act based on his own nature or rationally. He did not have adequate ideas concerning his acts. On the contrary, passions and inadequate ideas go together and from inadequate ideas follow necessarily inadequate ideas. Being overwhelmed by timidity, Seneca was not the complete or adequate cause of his acts, he was only partially the cause. In his acts there was of course also the command of Nero. This interpretation seems to be confirmed by Tacitus’ romanticized description of the facts. According to the report of the historian, Seneca’s suicide did not really occur in a rational way. On the contrary, after he had cut his veins Seneca did not die and his wife did not get permission to kill herself. He then asked for poison but that didn’t work either. Only after a third attempt, and with assistance of other people, he was suffocated by the steam of a bath.

Why did Spinoza choose Seneca as example? He could have chosen other examples such as the supposed suicide of Socrates. Or did he choose Seneca arbitrary? Obviously the answer is: no! He knew very well what he was doing and - as I mentioned already - he knew the stoics very well from his Latin school under the direction of Franciscus van den Enden²⁹. In his view, stoics think that they have their passions completely under control as he writes in the preface of E5: “the Stoics thought that they depend entirely on our will, and that we can command them absolutely. But experience cries out against this, and forced them, in spite of their principles, to confess...”³⁰ Consequently, if Spinoza could show that passions lead in the second category a stoic to “self-destruction”, this would be definitely true for other people. What was true here for a stoic was definitely true for ordinary man because after all, stoics had their passion under control. Or at least, they thought they had.

Interestingly, in his definition 39 of *Timor* he refers to E3p39s [*Vide Schol. Prop. 39 hujus*] wherein he highlights that timidity is an affect “by which a man is so disposed that he does not will what he wills, and wills what he does not will”. And this sentence summarizes perfectly well Spinoza’s view on supposed suicide. Indeed, someone who commits suicide does - according to Spinoza - not what he wills. Indeed, basically a man wants to persevere in his existence. That’s what he wills basically. After all, that is his essence or his *conatus*. However, people who want or desire to commit suicide want exactly the opposite. Apparently, they don’t will what they will (to persevere their existence). On the contrary, they will what they don’t will (they want stop their existence) as Spinoza puts it. As a consequence, it is for Spinoza an illusion to think that someone wants to kill himself.

²⁹ Cf. Klever, Wim, *Spinoza Classicus*, Budel, Damon, 17-30.

³⁰ Preface of E1.

The third and final category of suicide which Spinoza distinguishes in E4p20s seems to be much more close to what we normally understand today under “suicide”. Spinoza might have thought here of suicidal behavior in cases such as depressions, burn out, ... where you cannot indicate a single well definable specific, distinguishable cause. Spinoza explains that the body is affected in this category by many hidden, unnoticed external causes (other bodies) which transform the body into another body or in other words: a body with another ratio of motion and rest. Body A (the object of idea A or mind A) becomes for instance body B which does not match Idea A. As a result, this new body does not correspond anymore with the idea of the former body (its mind). The effect is an impossible situation of the presence of two contradictory minds that results in an act of “suicide”. It is important to notice that this case is as all the other cases - according to Spinoza – no self-destruction. Not only because the cause which lead to this situation is external. One might argue also that the mind does not kill itself (or the body of which it is the idea). In other words, there is in this view no self-destruction. On the contrary, the mind kills the newly formed body which was the effect of affections by external causes.

6. Is suicide morally wrong according Spinoza?

The topical ethical question whether suicide is morally bad or wrong is a question which lacks sense in the light of Spinoza’s philosophy. First of all, because – as Gilles Deleuze has argued – there exist no Morality with the capital ‘m’ according to Spinoza, there is only ethics³¹: “Le Bien, comme le Mal, n’a pas de sens. Ce sont des êtres de raison, ou d’imagination, ...” There is no absolute good or absolute evil, there is only right and wrong, Deleuze argues. Traditional religions or conventions don’t have to prescribe what is good or what is evil. As the Dutch philosopher writes repeatedly in all of his works³² and his correspondence: good and bad are relative qualities. They are even relative in double sense: relative towards each other and relative towards an existing *modus*. Good is what makes the essence or *conatus* of a thing stronger and bad is what makes it weaker. Secondly, it makes no sense to consider the possibility of an ethics of self-destruction or suicide for the simple reason that - as we have shown - self-destruction is impossible. This seems to make the question of the ethics of suicide here completely redundant.

However, it makes sense to ask whether, what is normally called “suicide”, is ethically wrong according to Spinoza. Traditionally, suicide was (and still is in several countries) considered to be illegal, immoral and irreligious in Western culture. During antiquity, Plato considered suicide to be disgraceful as well, although he permitted notable exceptions such as suicide by judicial order, as was the case for his master, Socrates. The stoics, by contrast, believed that suicide could be an honorable

³¹ Deleuze, G., *Spinoza Philosophie pratique*. Paris, Les éditions de minuit, [1967] 2002, 74 -77.

³² See for instance the appendix of E1.

act of farewell from a state of unbearable pain, whether physical or psychological³³. During the 17th century the views on suicide started to change drastically. In western Europe, the number of suicides increased significantly³⁴ and simultaneously the number of homicides diminished. This evolution challenged philosophers as Spinoza to develop their own views on the morality of the act of killing oneself.

Obviously, for Spinoza, what is commonly called ‘suicide’ is ethically wrong. In all the cases of supposed suicide that he distinguishes the cause is an external cause that weakens our power of acting which is consequently wrong. Indeed, ultimately ‘self-killing’ is destroying the ratio of motion and rest of your body and Spinoza states in E4p39 very clearly that: “Those things are good which bring about the preservation of the proportion of motion and rest the human Body’s parts have to one another; on the other hand, those things are evil which bring it about that the parts of the human Body have a different proportion of motion and rest to one another.”

7. A spinozistic preventive cure for suicidal behavior

Could we possibly find elements of treatment based on Spinoza’s philosophy for people with suicidal behavior? People who kill themselves are according to Spinoza “weak-minded and completely conquered by external causes contrary to their nature. [*Tertiò denique sequitur, eos, qui se interficiunt, animo esse impotentes, eosque à causis externis, suae naturae repugnantibus, prorsùs vinci*]. They might lack power as a result of negative emotions. Spinoza might have thought of affections such as: conflicts, negative thoughts, negative experiences, inner conflicts, etc. However, the only way to strengthen such people is by new affections. But, what kind affections could be candidates for this role? In the scholium of E4p18, the Dutch philosopher shows “what reason prescribes to us, and which affects agree with the rules of human reason”.

Spinoza explains us in the same scholium how to prevent suicidal problems. “To man, [...], there is nothing more useful than man”, he writes. However, this other man or wife should “agree entirely with our nature”. The Dutch philosopher argues that these two individuals should join to one another to compose as it were “one Mind and one Body”. “Two individuals of entirely the same nature joined to one another, compose an individual twice as powerful as each one, Spinoza argues. And subsequently, this composed individual can joint with another individual in order to compose which is even stronger, ... etc. Obviously, the message that Spinoza wants to give here is that as part of a social group of people (with a similar nature) people are much stronger and much more apt to tackle

³³ Cf. Critchley, 20. For a comparison of the Stoic position with Spinoza’s on the moral aspect of suicide see the article of J. Miller, 2005.

³⁴ Cf. For the reasons why this changed, see: Barabagli, 2015, 118-121.

all sorts of external causes which might otherwise weaken their power and could lead ultimately to suicidal behavior.

The problem of suicide has not only a social but also a political dimension in Spinoza. Karl Marx (1818-1883) would much later argue that suicide has “simply to be viewed as a symptom of the deficient organization of our society”³⁵. And Emile Durkheim³⁶ (1858-1917) wrote that “our social organization, then, must have changed profoundly in the course of this century, to have been able to cause a growth in the suicide rate.” As we have seen, according to Spinoza, people should unite with other people with whom they agree to avoid suicidal behavior. But when do people agree? According to E4p35, they agree necessarily in nature insofar “they live according to the guidance of reason”. Paradoxically, they agree the most in nature, according to Spinoza, when each of one seeks his own advantage. (E4p35c2). In other words, when each of them seeks to persevere his own conatus. And this can be realized the best in a community and even better in a political state (E4p37c2) “where he lives according to a common decision” (E4p73). Consequently, the increasing number of suicides (which are always related to environmental causes) is related to the community and the political organization of that community. A possible solution might thus be found in another political organization.

8. The rumor that Spinoza committed suicide

It is not clear how Spinoza came to his end. In most biographies you can read that he died on 21 February 1677 at an age of 44 from a long disease which was most likely a result of his work as a lens grinder³⁷. However, there is no objective report of the end of his life. In Spinoza’s first biography³⁸ (1705), Johannes Köhler (Colerus) explains that the Dutch philosopher died an unexpected death in the presence of a physician with the initials L.M., probably referring here to Spinoza’s good friend Lodewijck Meijer. However, this physician could also have been G.H. Schüller. In another early biography, “*La Vie et l’esprit de Monsieur Benoit de Spinosa*” (c.1719), J. M. Lucas (1646-1697) writes about Spinoza’s death in way which resembles too much Aristotle’s death to be true. Moreover, P. Steenbakkers is convinced that most of the content of this biography has been fantasized³⁹.

³⁵ Cf. Marx, K. (Edited by E.A. Plaut and K. Anderson), *Marx on suicide*. Evanston/Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1999, 13.

³⁶ Cf. Durkheim, E., *Le suicide: étude de sociologie*, Paris, puf, 1897.

³⁷ Cf. Nadler, Spinoza. A Life, 2003.

³⁸ Colerus, *Levensbeschryving*. In: Freudentahl, *Lebensgeschichte in Quelleschriften, Urkunden und nichtamtlichen Nachrichten*, Leipzig, Van Veit, 1899, 94-98.

³⁹ Steenbakkers, 2010,

There remains a kind of mystery Spinoza's death. His death seems to be as intriguing as his views on death. Interestingly, a few years ago, Jeroen van de Ven⁴⁰, discovered a new, handwritten anonymous document with some information of Spinoza's death, written only a year or two after Spinoza's death. In this text of 28 pages, written in Latin with some words in Dutch. In this text the author mentions Spinoza's name eleven times. Around 1 September 1679, he has writes the following of Spinoza's death:

spinosa appropinquante morte jussit medicamenta et reliqua vitae necessaria juxta lectum poni et secedere medicum occludique fores ac clavis firmari jussit, triduum adhuc vixit ibi, ut testatur medicus suus familiaris qui in tabulato supra caput ejus excubabat: et sic mortuus est dubium an penituerit.

Colerus' biography is a very important biography because the Lutheran pastor got his information concerning Spinoza's death directly from Spinoza's landlords, the van der Spijcks, who were afterwards Colerus' landlords. However, Colerus wrote his biography twenty years after Spinoza's death. The document with the passage above, by contrast, has been written only two years after his death and could therefore be a more trustworthy source.

In both documents, it is mentioned that there was a physician. However, in Colerus' version the death was sudden, unexpected and unassisted. In the passage above Spinoza's death is presented rather as an act of self-killing which took place over a period of three days. Or more precisely an act of assisted self-killing because there was a physician who assisted him. Of course, it is far too speculative to interpret Spinoza's death based on this document although its report of Spinoza's death is not incoherent with what Pierre Bayle writes in *Pensées diverses sur la comète* (1680) about Spinoza's death.

However, if the suicide version is true, this would entail that Spinoza just as many other people was at the end of his life was overwhelmed by passions, and to use his own words, "he desired to avoid a greater evil by submitting to a lesser" or he was overwhelmed by many hidden, unnoticed external causes. In this scenario, Spinoza was obviously not "an empire within an empire".

⁴⁰ Steenbakkens, P., Touber, J. and van de Ven, J., 2011.

9. Conclusion:

Spinoza states in proposition E3p4 that self-destruction is impossible. This bold statement is not only remarkable because of the counterintuitive idea which it expresses. This proposition is also the only proposition of the *Ethics* which Spinoza gives without further reference to other axioms, propositions or definitions. Moreover, as Matson⁴¹ remarks, almost every subsequent proposition in the entire *Ethics* is grounded somehow in the this eight-words-long statement.

In this essay, I have suggested that the mechanical analogy of the body of motion - which Spinoza applied several times in an explicit way - has shaped Spinoza's thinking about the essence of a being. As he points out in his *Cogitata metaphysica*, there is no real difference between the striving of a thing in order to persevere in its being just as there is no real difference between the motion of a body and its force to persevere in its motion. Spinoza was inspired here by the modern physics that he knew very well since he taught physics in the early 60ties which ultimately lead to the publication of the only work he published under his name during his life time.

According to this analogy, a being - conceived in itself - cannot destroy itself since a motion of a body – conceived in itself – cannot stop itself according to Spinoza's physics. As I have tried to show, this analogy does not only allow us to resolve Spinoza's ideas on the impossibility of self-destruction. It is also in resonance with all the other propositions of E3 treating the *conatus*. Moreover, the analogy is also consistent with Spinoza anti-finalism since motion in the modern sense is always non-goal directed or blind motion.

Wat is normally called "suicide" is according to Spinoza always caused by external causes. That is crystal clear. However, the Dutch philosopher distinguishes three categories of supposed "suicide". In this paper, I have presented a new interpretation based on Spinoza's definition of *timor* for the second category illustrated by Spinoza with the example of Seneca.

Asking whether suicide is ethically bad is in the light of Spinoza philosophy a bad question since self-destruction is impossible. However, what we normally call "suicide" is according to Spinoza obviously per definition bad because this kind of acts weakens our *conatus* and leads even ultimately to destruction of our *ratio* of motion and rest.

⁴¹ Matson, 408.

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