

Essence as power, or Spinoza on heartbreak

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[forthcoming in the *Journal of the History of Philosophy*]

“we live in continuous change, and ... as we change for the better or worse, we are called happy or unhappy” (E5p39s)

One of Spinoza's basic metaphysical theses is that the “essence [essentia]” of any existing thing is “power [potentia]”. That is, a Spinozistic essence is not merely the set of properties necessary and sufficient for a thing to exist (as some scholars gloss Spinoza's definition of essence, E2def2), but also a causal power.¹ As Spinoza himself puts the claim,

the power of each thing, or the striving by which it (either alone or with others) does anything, or strives to do anything – i.e. (by [3]p6), the power, or striving, by which it strives to persevere in its being, is nothing but the given, or actual, essence of the thing itself [cujuscunque rei potentia sive conatus quo ipsa vel sola vel cum aliis quidquam agit vel agere conatur hoc est (per propositionem 6 hujus) potentia sive conatus quo in suo esse perseverare conatur, nihil est praeter ipsius rei datam sive actualem essentiam.] (E3p7d)²

1 For this point cf. Viljanen 2011:74-5. For the former gloss of Spinozistic essence, see e.g. Bennett 1984:§16.2; Crane and Sandler 2005.

I will use the following abbreviations for Spinoza's works: E = *Ethics*; KV = *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*; CM = *Appendix Containing Metaphysical Thoughts*. In citing from the *Ethics* I will use the following abbreviations: ax = axiom, def = definition, p = proposition, d = demonstration, s = scholium, c = corollary, app = appendix, pref = preface. “NS” refers to the posthumous 1677 Dutch edition of Spinoza's writings, *De Nagelate Schriften van B.D.S.*

2 Cf. E3p54d, E3p57d, E1p34, E1p11s (II/54).

Call this the identity of power and essence doctrine. The doctrine is crucial to Spinoza's broader conception of causality: it helps explain how there comes to be a world (it is necessarily produced by the divine essence [E1p16]), and it underlies the conatus doctrine, governing what "each thing" (E3p7d) in nature can and must do.³ And, as Michael Della Rocca has pointed out, a commitment to the identity of power and essence also means that Spinoza can reject both the occasionalist denial that finite things have genuine causal powers, and any mechanist claim that such powers belong to them only as extrinsic properties, not grounded in the things' natures.⁴

In short, the identity of power and essence is an important, and often acknowledged, element of Spinoza's metaphysics. Nonetheless, there have been few attempts to say how precisely Spinoza might understand this identity. A natural way to interpret it might be to take it to mean that there is only something like a conceptual distinction between

The "actual" essence of a thing is contrasted with its formal essence: the eternal and indiscernible implication of substantial essence (see E2p8c,s; KV 2.20 n. C; I/97). In the rest of the paper I will speak of essences simpliciter, treating the qualification "actual" as implicit unless otherwise noted.

3 See Della Rocca 2008b and Hübner forthcoming-a for the claim that substance's power should also be viewed as a kind of striving. For other accounts of striving see e.g. Bennett 1984; Carriero 2011; Curley 1988; Garrett 2002; Lebuffe 2014; Lin 2006; Nadler 2006; Schrijvers 1999; Viljanen 2011; Youpa 2003.

4 Della Rocca 2012.

I will not examine here in detail Spinoza's reasons for embracing the identity of power and essence. Roughly, they can be summarized as follows: (i) from the claim that God's essence suffices for the production of all things, Spinoza infers that the essence of God is identical to a causal power (E1p34d); (ii) given substance-monism, all things other than God can only be necessary modifications of God's essential nature, that is, determinations of this power (cf. E4p4d).

essences and powers.⁵ It also seems plausible that such an identity means that at least *collectively* all of a thing's essential properties are causally efficacious – that together they constitute an efficient cause – even if it's not obvious that individually each of the essentially properties must also be causally efficacious. It also seems tempting to allow that Spinozistic essences may be identical not just to a single causal power, but to whole *collections* of qualitatively distinct powers, some of which may individually be essential also to other things. This is not only arguably intuitively more plausible as an account of what it might mean as a metaphysical thesis to identify essence and power; the same conclusion is also suggested by Spinoza's account of the sage:

It is the part of a wise man [*virī sapientis*], I say, to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sports, the theater, and other things of this kind, which anyone can use without injury to another. For the human Body is composed of a great many parts of different natures, which constantly require new and varied nourishment, so that the whole Body may be equally capable of all the things which can follow from its nature, and hence, so that the Mind also may be equally capable of understanding many things. (E4p45c2s; II/244)⁶

On Spinoza's telling, the person who perfects human nature exercises in moderation not just a single power but a whole panoply of powers – the power to eat, smell, see, listen, think, etc. Given Spinoza's naturalistic inclinations – that is, given his belief that all things observe the same laws,

5 See e.g. Descartes, *Principles* 1.62. For Spinoza's use of this schema of distinctions see e.g. E1p10s.

6 The trope of the sage is arguably part of Spinoza's Stoic inheritance. On this inheritance see e.g. James 1993, Kristeller 1984, Miller 2009, Rutherford 1999, Schmitter 2014.

and differ in properties only by degree⁷ – what is true of human beings is presumably true, to some degree, also of other things: what may be essential to all of them may be sets of certain powers. But allowing for a thing's essence to be identical to such collections of powers raises of course the question of what assures the *unity* of these powers, such that together they can be identical to an essence, and be distinguished from all merely accidental powers that a thing might also have.

In short, although Spinoza's thesis of identity of power and essence is well-known, it seems to be known only in a rough outline. More work needs to be done to fill in the missing details of the account, and to explore the extent to which we are in fact entitled to attribute the above intuitions and plausible glosses to Spinoza. What is particularly regrettable is the lack of attention to how this doctrine of the identity of power and essence might bear on Spinoza's *psychological* commitments about powers.⁸ For, as is also well known, the notion of power is equally central to Spinoza's conception of an "affect [*affectus*]", or what we are more likely to call today an emotion or sentiment.⁹ More specifically, what is central for Spinoza's psychology is the idea of variations, or fluctuations, in power. This is what, in Spinoza's view, all affects fundamentally are: increases and decreases in a thing's degree of power (E3def3). But, as we shall see in more detail below, the coexistence of this conception of an affect with Spinoza's metaphysical commitment to an identity of power and essence has, *prima facie* at least, troublesome consequences. Namely, it seems to undermine (i) the consistency of Spinoza's account of essence across his

7 See E3pref (II/138); E1app (II/83); E2p13s (II/96). On Spinoza's scalar (or incremental) naturalism see Della Rocca 2008b; Garrett 2002, 2008.

8 But see footnote 48.

For the purposes of this paper I will understand by 'psychology' only that part of Spinoza's philosophical psychology that deals with affects.

9 On Spinoza's theory of emotions see e.g. Alanen 2012, Bennett 1984, Della Rocca 2008, 2008b, James 1997, Lebuffe 2009, Nadler 2006, 2011, Rutherford 1999, Shapiro 2012, Yovel 1999. For discussions of early modern theories of emotions more generally see e.g. James 1997, 1998, Pickavé and Shapiro 2012, Schmitter 2014.

metaphysics and his psychology (and hence his ability to make good on his promise to derive ethical and psychological doctrines from metaphysical ones);¹⁰ (ii) the coherence and plausibility of Spinoza's metaphysical views on individuation; and finally (iii) the coherence and plausibility of Spinoza's account of affects, especially in what concerns the pivotal notion of emotional “servitude [*servitus*]”, from which Spinoza's philosophy is meant to rescue us.¹¹

The objective of this paper is, first, to examine and resolve these apparent difficulties, and then to use this discussion to arrive at an improved understanding of Spinoza's ontology as it bears on both affects and on essences – and, in particular, an improved understanding of the sense in which Spinozistic essences are identical to powers. To anticipate, briefly, I will conclude that we cannot simply – or without further qualification – identify “power” and “essence”. I propose instead that we treat Spinozistic essences as in part intrinsically *determinable*, with affective changes in power supplying the relevant determinations. I also argue that Spinoza's claim that affects “constitute” an essence means that affects *modify* or determine this essence *as a particular desire*, appetite or volition. Finally, I propose that among a thing's essential properties, necessary and sufficient for it to be itself, is the *range* of fluctuations in power that it can undergo.

Let me say a few words about how the paper will unfold. In the next section I will start with a plausible initial account of Spinoza's ontology of affects, paying attention in particular to the way that Spinoza's claims about affects are grounded in his more general metaphysical commitments about minds, bodies, essences and causes.¹² In Section 2 I

10 See e.g. E2pref. For similar worries in relation to other Spinozistic doctrines see e.g. Rutherford 1999 and Bennett 1984 ch. 10.

11 See e.g. E5pref.

The trope of a servitude to emotions is of course well-established in the history of philosophy, and familiar in particular from Stoicism. For readings that stress Spinoza's Stoic heritage see note 6.

12 My account in this section is not intended to be exhaustive, not just as an account of Spinozistic affects, but even as an account of the ontology of affects.

will draw out the difficulties implicit in this initial account. In response to these difficulties, in Section 3 and 4 I will develop an amended account, and address potential objections to my proposal.

1. Spinoza's ontology of affects: first attempt

1.1. Spinoza's own assessment of the situation is that “no one” thus far has succeeded in “determin[ing] the nature and powers of the Affects” (E3pref; II/139). His own proposal begins with the following definition of an affect:¹³

By affect I understand affections of the Body by which the Body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, *and at the same time*, the ideas of these affections [*corporis affectiones quibus ipsius corporis agendi potentia augetur vel minuitur, juvatur vel coercetur et simul harum affectionum ideas*] (E3def3; emphasis added)

To better understand this definition, it helps to recall how Spinoza conceives of minds and bodies. What is particularly germane for our purposes are the following three claims. First, for Spinoza a “mind” is just a collection of ideas which essentially has a certain actually existing body as its intentional object (E2p11,13). Second, this mind represents, with some degree of clarity and distinctness, *all* of the affections (modifications, determinations) of its body (that is, all affections at least partially inhering in that body) (E2p12).¹⁴ Finally, pairs of minds and bodies are in some sense identical – they constitute “one and the same” entity – and exhibit one and the same causal order (E2p7s).¹⁵

In particular, I won't be able to discuss here the causality of affects, and the related distinction between active and passive affects. For discussion see e.g. Alanen 2012, Bennett 1984, James 1997, Lebuffe 2009.

13 On Spinoza's view, definitions generally articulate the essences of things (see e.g. E1p8s2 [II/50]).

14 Here I follow Garrett's 2008 gloss of E2p12 in terms of inherence (which relation I take to be minimally a relation of ontological dependence).

15 For accounts of these difficult theses see e.g. Bennett 1984, Della Rocca 2008b,

Now, Spinoza's definition states that an "affect" takes place if two conditions are met: namely, (i) if a thing's degree of causal power changes on account of some bodily modification, and (ii) if there is an idea of that affection in the mind. That is, the term "affect" picks out a certain kind of bodily affection – the kind that increases or decreases a body's causal power – *together with* an idea representing this bodily affection.¹⁶ That there will be such an idea in the mind, given the bodily affection, follows straightforwardly from Spinoza's aforementioned commitment to each mind's 'omniscience' with regard to everything that to some degree inheres in its body: a modification or affection of the body is clearly 'in' that body (if perhaps also in other bodies); so also it will be represented by an idea in the intentionally-related mind.¹⁷

The waxing and waning of bodily power brought about by the bodily affection can in turn be understood in terms of what this body can do, and, more specifically, in terms of how many different effects this body is determined to bring about at any particular time.¹⁸ Since such

Gueroult 1968, Melamed 2013, Nadler 2006, Hübner forthcoming-b.

16 Thus, similarly to Alanen 2012, I disagree with accounts that take Spinoza to reduce affects to mental representations alone (e.g. Della Rocca 2008, 2008b). Spinoza indeed seems to treat affects as if they were purely mental phenomena in E3GenDefAff (and E4p8, which appeals to E3GenDefAff). But there are at least two good reasons to be suspicious of how 'general' E3GenDefAff really is. First, it is preceded by the comment that "we shall be able to define the affects, *insofar as they are related only to the Mind*, as follows" (my emphasis). Second, E3GenDefAff identifies affects with *passive* affects alone.

For other definitions that pick out a thing under multiple attributes see e.g. E1def6, E3p9s.

See Beyssade 1999:117 for a distributive reading of the definition.

17 Like any bodily affection, the affection in question can be understood in terms of certain alterations of constituent simpler bodies (for example, as an impression of some "image" by an external body, or as a change in speed or direction). See e.g. E2ax3", E2L6 (II/100).

18 See E2p13s (II/97). Cf. also CM2.12 (I/280), which glosses "power" as being the "sufficient cause" of effects.

changes in power can fundamentally be either an increase or a decrease, Spinoza also holds that there are two basic kinds of affects: I feel “joy [*laetitia*]” when my power goes up; “sadness [*tristitia*]” when it decreases (E3p11s; II/148).¹⁹

The fact that Spinoza appears to restrict changes in power relevant to affects to what could be described as merely 'quantitative' changes seems to call for an explanation. For even if we grant Spinoza the premise that affects essentially involve changes in bodily power,²⁰ why should such changes consist solely in increases or decreases, and not for example also in changes in kind? (Why, for example, could not some “joy” involve a transition from having the power to speak to having the power to sing?) Spinoza's view is in fact less arbitrarily restrictive than it might at first appear. Given his quasi-nominalist views, opposing categories such as “quantitative” and “qualitative”, “degree” and “kind”, “power to sing” versus “power to speak” reflect only our more and less well-grounded ways of thinking about particulars in nature.²¹ And there seems to be no good reason to rule out a priori the possibility that what we might describe as a higher “degree” of a certain power – a greater intensive magnitude –

Like any bodily affection, the affection that brings about a fluctuation in power in affective experience can have been brought about either by the thing's own essence or by this essence in conjunction with external causes (cf. E2ax1[II/99]; E2p16, E3def2). In the former case, it cannot lead to a decrease in power (E3p6, E3p12).

19 Spinoza sometimes includes “desire” – the “conscious” production of essential effects in thought and extension (E3p9s) – in his list of basic affects (e.g. E3DefAff4exp; II/192). I take it that this is because joy and sadness *are* desire but qua increased or decreased (cf. E3p57d; cf. Nadler 2006:204). For other interpretations see e.g. Bennett 1984:§59-60.

20 This is not an implausible premise. Contemporary theorists of emotions generally agree that at least the simpler emotions are governed by the basic needs of organisms, such as mating, or defense against predators. On this see e.g. de Sousa 2014.

Many early moderns tied affects to self-preservation; see James 1998.

21 For a more detailed account see Hübner forthcoming-c.

could also be describable as a new “kind” of power.²²

E3def3 has a misleadingly restrictive appearance also in another way: the definition mentions explicitly only *bodily* power. Nonetheless, Spinoza's considered view cannot be that affects involve changes in a body's power *as opposed to* a mind's power, such that the mind's power – its capacity to produce a variety of effects on its own – remains unchanged in affective experiences. Such a claim would contravene Spinoza's aforementioned commitment to the sameness of the causal order that obtains among thinking things and corporeal things. This sameness demands that whenever the power of a given body changes (for example, if it now produces a greater variety of motions in neighbouring bodies), the power of the mind identical to this body must change correspondingly. Otherwise the causal orders would come apart: at a given point in time, more effects would be generated in the extended world than in the thinking world (or vice versa). Spinoza makes the point that the power to think also fluctuates in affects explicitly in another

22 This is a reason to resist Gilead's suggestion that affective change “is modal or quantitative rather than essential or qualitative” (1999:171).

E3def3 describes the fluctuating power not just as power simpliciter but as a “power of acting [*potentia agendi*]”. However, I think this too is a merely apparent restriction: “power” and “power of acting” are more and less elliptical labels for the same power. The reason is this: in Spinoza's framework all power is ultimately just substance's power of acting, i.e. its power to produce effects autonomously, whether immediately or through the mediation of modes. There is no other power over and above that: there are merely the various unequal distributions and lacks of this power, and different ways of talking about this single metaphysical reality.

That for Spinoza “power of acting” is not distinct from power simpliciter is also borne out textually: Spinoza explicitly identifies the two terms (as well as identifying them with “striving” and with the “force of existing [*vis existendi*]”): see E3GenDefAff (II/204), E3p7d, E3p28d, E3p55c[2]d (II/183), E3p54d, E4p14d.

For a different gloss of power of acting see Schrijvers 1999:73, Viljanen 2011:68-82.

definition, writing that in affects a mind is “determine[d] ... to think of this rather than that” (E3GenDefAff; II/203). In his view certain ideas (for example, the idea of God) are intrinsically richer in implications than others, and more capable of fertile “agreements” with other ideas. Affects that determine us to have these sorts of ideas increase our power to think.

Given that affective changes in power can in principle be described from the point of view of thought just as well as the point of view of extension, why then does Spinoza's opening definition focus on bodily power alone? Presumably for the same reason that we must understand bodies in order to understand our minds at all (E2p13s): our minds are in their essential nature representations of bodies.

1.2 For Spinoza then, a modified bodily state, a new degree (and perhaps also kind) of power, and a representation of all this in the mind is all there is in metaphysical rigour to our sadnesses and joys.²³

23 What we represent in affective experiences according to Spinoza is quite complex. From E3def3 we know that the idea that is part of an affect represents the power-altering bodily affection. But, according to a later definition, this idea also represents a “greater or lesser force of existing than before” proper to the body, and it “indicate[s] or express[es] a constitution of the Body ... which the Body ... has because [*ex eo quod*] its power of acting, or [*sive*] force of existing, is increased or diminished” (E3GenDefAffexp; II/203-4). Arguably then Spinoza holds (i) that the affective idea represents a bodily affection *as* increasing or diminishing bodily power (i.e it represents this affection in such a way as to thereby also represent the body as endowed with a new degree of power); and that (ii) this idea is also *conceptually related* to (it “expresses” and “indicates”) another idea, a representation of a *state or condition* that the body acquires as a result of a change in its power. Presumably (iii) there is equally no power without a corresponding bodily constitution that makes the exercise of this power possible (cf. 4p39d; II/240); and (iv) there can be different sorts of conceptual relations between the two ideas, as long as there is, to borrow from Leibniz, some “constant and regulated relation between what can be said of the one [idea] and of the other” (Letter to Arnauld, 9 October 1687). (For example, the representation of the affection and new degree of power could *imply* something about how the body's simpler constituents have been rearranged in the wake of a loss of

But not only *our* sadnesses and joys. Spinoza's account of the affects is a perfectly universal account, valid for every finite thing: in Spinoza's view not just humans or even all 'higher' animals, but also the moon, dandelions, and single-celled protozoa "feel [*sentire*]" in the affective sense.²⁴ Hence in the *Ethics* Spinoza discusses the affects of "horse[s,...i]nsects, fish, and birds" and insists that "we cannot in any way doubt that brutes feel [*bruta sentire*]" (E3p57s; II/187).²⁵

This, to say the least, is an unorthodox claim. But it fits well with Spinoza's naturalistic and scalar conception of being. In other words, we can see Spinoza's egalitarianism about affects as an expression of a more general commitment to a scalar naturalism about properties, a 'panaffectism' to match his infamous panpsychism. More precisely, the panaffectism follows quite straightforwardly from a combination of well-known Spinozistic doctrines about minds and causes: (i) his panpsychism (according to which all things are to some degree "minded"); (ii) his thesis of universal omniscience (according to which any mind to some degree perceives all affections inhering in the corresponding body); (iii) his conatus doctrine (according to which from the essence of any thing some

power).

E3GenDefAffexp ostensibly addresses passive affects alone. But it seems that the claims relevant in the present context hold equally for active affects.

24 This is despite some translators' occasional tendency to introduce explicit references to human beings into Spinoza's discussions of affects (see e.g. Curley's and Elwes' translations of E3p56d [II/185]).

Spinoza's God cannot experience affects since substance cannot experience fluctuations in power (E5p17; though see also E5p35; for one explanation of the disparity see Della Rocca 2008b).

25 Cf. E4p37s1. In the passage quoted, E3p57s, Spinoza mentions explicitly only relatively complex animals, even though as we shall see shortly his doctrinal commitments dictate a stronger thesis. I suspect that he focuses on the affects of such relatively complex animals because in the *Ethics* he is interested in things that are most *like* us: only things that are significantly *like* us can be "good" for us (E4p29).

effects necessarily follow, but these effects cannot on their own decrease this thing's degree of power); and (iv) his thesis of universal finite passivity (according to which all finite things are necessarily acted on by potentially more powerful external causes).²⁶ Since affects by definition consist of power-altering bodily affections and ideas of the changed power and bodily state, it follows from these four doctrines that all finite things can experience affects, since all finite things to some degree perceive all their bodily affections (given panpsychism and universal omniscience), and all finite things are also subject to fluctuations in power – both to the sadnesses that follow from encounters with more powerful antagonists (given universal passivity), and to the joys that necessarily accompany a thing's own striving (given the conatus doctrine).

Nonetheless, despite systematic considerations in favour of a pan-affectism, the fact that according to Spinoza dandelions and single-celled protozoa have not just minds but also feelings will to some undoubtedly seem only like a further *reductio* of his philosophy of mind. Surely it should be possible, we may object, to avoid a Cartesian reduction of animals to machines without going as far as to endow all finite things with feelings?²⁷

I will not defend Spinoza on this point. But one consideration should make his view slightly more palatable: this is that he holds not only that all things “feel”, in the affective sense, but also that they feel *differently*. The differences in question are not merely accidental or extrinsic differences, but those that pertain to things essentially. That is, in Spinoza's view one and the same affect cannot be experienced by two things with different essential natures.

Spinoza lays out the reasoning behind this conclusion in E3p57. I

26 See E2p13s, E3p4-12; E1p28, E4ax[1], E4p4,c; E4p3; E4p39d; E4p45s.

27 See e.g. Part 5 of Descartes's *Discourse on the Method*, or Malebranche's claim that “in animals there is neither intelligence nor souls as is ordinarily meant. They eat without pleasure, cry without pain, grow without knowing it; they desire nothing, fear nothing, know nothing” (*Search after Truth*, VI.2.vii).

For a classic criticism of Spinoza's philosophy of mind see Wilson 1999:126-40.

cite the passage at length because it brings us directly to the problem of identity of power and essence:

Each affect of each individual differs from the affect of another as much as the essence of the one differs from the essence of the other [*Quilibet uniuscujusque individui affectus ab affectu alterius tantum discrepat quantum essentia unius ab essentia alterius differt*].

Dem..... Desire [conscious striving] is the very nature, or essence, of each [individual] ... Therefore the Desire of each individual differs from the Desire of another as much as the nature, or [sive] essence, of the one differs from the essence of the other.

Next, Joy and Sadness are passions by which each one's power, or striving to persevere in its being, is increased or diminished... So Joy and Sadness are the Desire, or Appetite, itself insofar as it is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, by external causes. I.e. ...they are the very nature of each [individual]. And so, the Joy or Sadness of each [individual] also differs from the Joy or Sadness of another as much as the nature, or essence, of the one differs from the essence of the other...

Schol.: From this it follows that the affects of the animals which are called irrational ... differ from men's affects as much as their nature differs from human nature [*tantum differre quantum eorum natura a natura humana differt*]. Both the horse and the man are driven by a Lust to procreate; but the one is driven by an equine Lust, the other by a human Lust. So also the Lusts and Appetites of Insects, fish, and birds must vary.... there is no small difference between the gladness by which a drunk is led and the gladness a Philosopher possesses. (E3p57; transl. alt.)²⁸

Spinoza's main claim in this passage is that the affects of things

28 Cf. E4p37s1. Throughout this paper I will use the term "individual" in the generic sense of "entity" or "thing", not in the technical sense of Spinoza's physics (E2def[8]; II/99).

differ “as much” as their “essences” do. To understand this claim, we need to recall first how Spinoza thinks about the nature of essences.

It is generally agreed that he holds that all things have some essential properties, and also that particulars in nature possess unique essences (E2def2).²⁹ But, as I have argued elsewhere,³⁰ Spinoza's ontology admits not only such unique essences of particulars but also more general (less determinate) essences which characterize mind-dependent kinds. So, on this view, if the essence of any actually existing thing is identical to some causal power, it follows that there is some unique set of causal powers essential to every thing, and necessary and sufficient for it to actually exist. (Presumably knowing what these unique powers are is part of *scientia intuitiva*).³¹ But on the broader reading of Spinozistic essence that I have advocated, it also follows that finite knowers like us will take certain causal powers to be essential to the kinds into which we categorize particulars. For example, just as there is some unique set of causal powers essential to me being myself, there is also a set of powers (presumably those sketched in Spinoza's account of the sage in E4p45c2s) without which human beings cannot be and which cannot be without human beings. The same will go for goldfish, drunks, and beings in general, with the relevant causal powers specified each time at appropriate levels of generality.³²

29 See e.g. Bennett 1984:§16.2; Della Rocca 1996b:87, 2004:133; Gilead 1999:170; Koistinen 1991:13-4.

30 See Hübner forthcoming-c. For another account of Spinozistic kinds see Carriero 2011.

31 See E2p40s2 (II/122). More precisely, given Spinoza's modal views, the power identical to the essence of a unique particular will be an actual, necessitated formally-real causal process.

32 Any causal power that is less than fully determinate and unique – for example, the generic powers to “reason” or to “move” – will be for Spinoza a mind-dependent *ens rationis*. The individuation of all such powers will be mind-dependent, and subject to more and less adequate grounding in genuine similarities among formally real particulars. For more detail see Hübner forthcoming-c.

Let's now return to Spinoza's claim that the affects of things differ "as much" as the essences of things. This conclusion follows quite straightforwardly from his definition of an affect as what essentially involves changes in a thing's essential power (E3def3). That is, affects of things endowed with distinct essences will necessarily differ at least insofar as these affects will essentially involve fluctuations in distinct essential powers. Indeed, more precisely, affects will differ from thing to thing not only "as much as" the essences of these things differ but more precisely they will necessarily differ *because* the essences, or the essential powers, of these things differ. In other words, given the identity of power and essence, and given Spinoza's definition of affect as a fluctuation in this power, differences in essence will have as a necessary consequence differences in the natures of affects. So, for example, the nature of all *my* joys as a particular entity with a unique essence will necessarily differ from the nature of all of my sister's joys (and from all the joys experienced by every other particular) at least because my essential powers are unique to me and distinct from her essential powers. In second place, it means that all of my and my sister's essentially "human" joys will necessarily differ from the joys of every dragonfly and every fish at least insofar as the two groups of affects will involve fluctuations in two different kinds of essential powers.³³ It is in this sense and for this reason, I suggest, that Spinoza thinks that "brutes" must "feel" differently from us.

2. Problems with the initial account

In the preceding section I tried to illuminate some of the ways that Spinoza's thinking about the ontology of affects is rooted in his more general metaphysical commitments about minds and bodies, essences,

33 On this reading, I can thus be represented abstractly (or generally) but nonetheless adequately as experiencing certain affects qua "human", insofar as I'm genuinely similar to other particulars (for example, to my sister. But I will also experience certain affects insofar as I am a unique particular with a unique essence and unique essential causal powers. This opens up the possibility that a particular affection may increase my power qua particular, but not insofar as I'm considered abstractly qua "human".

causes, and powers. As we saw there, Spinoza's view of the mind-body relation underpins his understanding of the composition of affects; his views about the natures of minds and causes lead him to assert the universality of affects; and his conception of essence – in particular his identification of essence and power – is instrumental in establishing the necessity of essential differences in affects. At this point in our inquiry, Spinoza's metaphysics and his psychology may thus indeed appear to form a consistent whole, in line with Spinoza's ambition to derive his psychology and ethics from his metaphysics.

Unfortunately on closer scrutiny matters begin to look less rosy. The problem is this. Spinoza is explicit that the “power” that fluctuates in affects is the very same “power” that is identical to things' essences. (As he notes in E3p57d, “Joy and Sadness are passions by which each one's power, *or* [*sive*] striving to persevere in its being, is increased or diminished”).³⁴ The problem is that this seems to undermine the possibility of any kind of robust diachronic identity for finite things within Spinoza's framework. For if a thing's essence is identical to a power, and if all finite things are constantly open to changes in this same power (both because of their own striving and because of encounters with antagonistic external causes), then it is unclear that any finite thing can persist as self-same through affective experiences. This is because every affect by definition marks a new degree (and perhaps also quality) of power, and thus, it would seem, brings about a change in the essence of a thing. And so with every affect, a new and different thing – one endowed with a distinct essence – seems to come into being.³⁵

34 Cf. also E3p28d and E3p55c[2]d (II/183). Thanks to Sam Rickless for discussion of this point.

The passage extracted from E3p57d mentions only passive affects (those brought about in part by external causes) but presumably Spinoza also would want to claim that “active joy is an affect by which each one's power, *or* striving to persevere in its being, is increased.” Spinoza's focus on passive affects is to be expected: they constitute the “servitude” he wishes us to escape.

35 Leibniz raises a related worry about Spinoza's picture of the mind as an idea

Spinoza himself seems to acknowledge this consequence of his doctrines explicitly, writing that affects re-“constitute” a thing's essential “nature”:

*desire is the very essence, or nature, of each insofar as it is conceived to be determined, by whatever constitution he has, to do something (see [E3]p9s). Therefore, as each is affected by external causes with this or that species of Joy, Sadness, Love, Hate, etc. – i.e., as his nature is constituted in one way or the other, so his Desires vary [cupiditas est ipsa uniuscujusque essentia seu natura quatenus ex data quacunq̄ue ejus constitutione determinata concipitur ad aliquid agendum...; ergo prout unusquisque a causis externis hac aut illa laetitiae, tristitiae, amoris, odii etc. specie afficitur hoc est prout ejus natura hoc aut alio modo constituitur, ita ejus cupiditas alia atq̄ue alia esse] (E3p56d; II/185; emphasis added)*³⁶

Spinoza's claim in the passage is that affects “constitute” a thing's essence in various ways. The passage thus seems to confirm what is suggested by the account I have thus far attributed to Spinoza, namely that with every affect a new essence comes into being.

If this is indeed Spinoza's position, this opens him up to a number

of a changeable body: “according to Spinoza, at any given moment, a soul will be different, since, when the body changes, the idea of the body is different. Hence, we shouldn't be surprised if he takes creatures for vanishing modifications... Spinoza's soul is so transitory that it does not exist even for a moment, since the body also does not remain the same” (*Comments on Spinoza's Philosophy*, 277).

See Alanen 2012 and Schmitter 2014 for discussions of Spinoza's affects in relation to other questions of identity.

36 Again (cf. footnote 34) this passage addresses explicitly only passive affects, in line with Spinoza's focus on them. However, it seems to me that there is no reason why the claim of affective reconstitution would not hold equally for active affects: those too constitute a thing's nature. (Even passive affects are in part due to a thing's own nature [E2ax1".])

of objections. These can be divided into two groups: those that can be answered with relative ease, and those that genuinely warrant abandoning the account as it stands. I'll start with the former.

To begin with, my account – and, more specifically, the way that account characterizes the relation between a thing's essence and affective changes in its power – burdens Spinoza with a profligate and implausible ontology: where common sense and everyday phenomenology are likely to posit one entity, Spinoza sees a potentially infinite series of highly ephemeral individuals, each existing only in the timeslice between two consecutive affects.³⁷ Likewise, the account runs afoul of the common-sense conviction that finite things can, and typically do, persist through emotional upheavals and changes in power. (Heartbreak may be painful but in most cases, thankfully, it is not literally fatal.) Moreover, it's unclear that Spinoza's theory of the affects, so interpreted, is any longer recognizable as an account of “emotions”. For presumably a theory of emotions is meant to bear not on an individual's wholesale generation and corruption but rather on her states.³⁸ Spinoza elsewhere explicitly attends to the difference between these two kinds of changes,³⁹ and the fact that he

37 Appeals to common sense suffer from well-known difficulties; since, as noted, I will ultimately discount these objections, I will not try to defend any particular account of common sense here.

A concern with offering a “plausible” reading of a philosopher usually doesn't need defense; this is less so in the case of Spinoza, who is viewed as advancing “bold” and counterintuitive views. I do not wish to unduly domesticate Spinoza, nor do I take plausibility as the definitive criterion of what counts as a good interpretation of his doctrines; nonetheless I think that in the particular case on the table plausibility is a concern worth keeping an eye on, not least because as we shall see his views on affects will turn out to be more orthodox than some of his other doctrines.

38 More accurately, and depending on one's preferred ontology, on her neuro-psychological or computational states, or her physiological processes or perceptions thereof, adaptive dispositions, evaluative judgments, etc (see De Sousa, §7).

39 In CM 2.4 Spinoza distinguishes “change” (“whatever variation there can be

seems to fail to distinguish between them here threatens disaster for his whole project in the *Ethics*. This is because one of his principal objectives in that work is to free us from servitude to passive affects. But if Spinoza's metaphysics has no room for individuals who can persist through affects, then it's unclear that we can even make sense any longer of the idea of such servitude: if affects create and destroy individuals, then one and the same thing cannot be both enslaved and free. Instead, to escape affective servitude is instead to altogether cease to be.

This then is the first way one could object to the account of affects that I have offered thus far. However, as noted, this particular set of objections can be warded off with relative ease. First, as regards the alleged contrariness of Spinoza's ontology and psychology to common sense and to the data of ordinary experience, for better or worse this is typical of Spinoza's preferred methodology: in his view common sense and ordinary experience simply do not count as good reasons to tinker with the results of apriori demonstrations.⁴⁰ Likewise, even if Spinoza is radically reinterpreting emotions, their relation to individuation, and what it means to be in a condition of affective servitude, there does not seem to be anything intrinsically incoherent about the purported reinterpretations themselves. Similarly, an ontology of highly ephemeral beings is not in itself incoherent – nor is it without historical precedent.⁴¹ Indeed such an ontology would fit well with Spinoza's other doctrines. Consider for example his notorious refusal to grant finite things the status of “substances” (E2p10): one of the properties traditionally ascribed to substances was precisely persistence through change. Or recall his

in a subject while the very essence of the subject remains intact”) from “transformation” (“that change in which there is no transformation of the subject, as when we say that Peter has changed his color, or his ways”) (I/255).

For the locus classicus of the distinction see Aristotle, *Physics* I.7.

40 See E1app[I-II] (II/78-80); E4pref (II/207).

41 Moreover, recall that Spinoza identifies only actual (but not formal) essences with power. Formal essences are not subject to fluctuations in power; they are eternal and unchanging. To this extent even if the objection is correct it does not show that *sub specie aeternitatis* finite things lack a robust identity.

remarks about the amnesiac “Spanish poet”, his most sustained treatment of personal identity in the *Ethics* (E4p39s; II/240). Spinoza's conclusion there is that there is no compelling reason to believe that biological death is the only kind of death. A defender of the preliminary account could claim that according to Spinoza there is equally no compelling reason to believe that *affective* deaths are not happening around us all the time.⁴²

In short, it seems then that this first group of objections does not warrant abandoning the account I have given. Nonetheless, the claim that Spinozistic affects corrupt and generate individuals *is* genuinely problematic, albeit for a different reason than those already examined. The real problem with that claim is very basic: it is that it contradicts Spinoza's explicit textual commitment to the ability of finite things to persist through affective changes. (On this point Spinoza thus seems to align himself with ordinary understanding and philosophical tradition after all.)

The textual evidence on this point is not abundant, but there are at least two places in the *Ethics* where this commitment comes through quite clearly. In the first passage, Spinoza writes that

Men can disagree in nature insofar as they are torn by affects which are passions; and to that extent also *one and the same man is changeable and inconstant* [*unus idemque homo varius est et inconstans*] (E4p33; emphasis added).

Secondly, in the Preface to Part 4, dedicated to “Human Bondage, or the

42 For other examples of doctrines congenial to the ontology of ephemeral individuals consider (i) Spinoza's insistence on the irrelevance of duration to a thing's essential identity (E4pref; II/208); (ii) his embrace of the Principle of Plenitude, which stipulates the existence of a maximal number of beings (E1App; II/83); and (iii) his quasi-functionalist criteria of individuation, according to which it is legitimate to view as “one singular thing” any collection of individuals that produces “one” effect (E2def7). A “singular thing” so defined can presumably be extremely transient – as transient as the grounds for it being considered “one”. On Spinoza's Principle of Plenitude see Newlands 2010, on his weak criteria of individuation, Melamed 2010.

Powers of the Affects”, Spinoza notes

when I say that someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite, *I do not understand that he is changed from one essence, or form, to another* [*cum dico aliquem a minore ad majorem perfectionem transire et contra, me non intelligere quod ex una essentia seu forma in aliam mutatur*]. For example, a horse is destroyed [*destruitur*] as much if it is changed [*mutetur*] into a man as if it is changed into an insect. Rather, we conceive that *his power of acting, insofar as it is understood through his nature, is increased or diminished* [*ejus agendi potentiam quatenus haec per ipsius naturam intelligitur, augeri vel minui*]. (E4pref; II/208; emphases added)⁴³

In this second passage Spinoza seems to consider and then *reject* precisely the sort of account I have attributed to him above: he explicitly distinguishes changes in a thing's degree of power from a wholesale change of its essence (i.e., from its “destruction”). Instead, he insists that changes in power must be “understood through” a thing's essential nature. So his view seems to be that affects, as a certain type of change, are made intelligible by reference to an unchanging underlying nature (even if this nature no longer merits the label “substantial”).⁴⁴ It seems then that,

43 Since this passage mentions only what we could describe as 'species-essences' (horses, insects, human beings), one might think that Spinoza could grant here that affective changes result in different *particular* essences, though the individual remains of the same species. But this reading would still be inconsistent with passages like E4p33. Thanks to Nate Rockwood for pressing me on this point.

On the terminology of “power of acting” see footnote 22 above. Lebuffe 2009:196 also draws attention to this passage

44 Spinoza uses the “understand through” locution in this sense of referring to what makes a thing intelligible in other passages, including E3def1 (“I call [the cause] partial, *or* inadequate, if its effect cannot be understood through it alone”); E4def8 (“[virtue] is the very essence, *or* nature, of man, insofar as he has the power of bringing about certain things, which can be understood

contrary to the account of affects I have offered above, for Spinoza affective changes in power are not only consistent with a thing retaining its essential nature (and so consistent with its ability to persist as essentially self-same through various affects); such affective changes in power also *require* for their intelligibility the existence of such a nature. And, as is well known, for Spinoza intelligibility of all that is is a non-negotiable requirement (E1ax2, E1p11altd1).⁴⁵

Such passages as the two cited above suggest then not only that Spinoza's theory of affects does not in fact generate the problems identified by the first group of objections (the problems of a profligate ontology, an inconsistent notion of servitude, and so on); more importantly, such passages suggest that, contrary to the account I have given, but also contrary I believe to the standard reading of Spinoza, we cannot simply identify Spinozistic "power" and "essence", without further qualifications. This is in the sense that not every change in one amounts to a change in the other: a thing's power can change while its essence or nature can – and, for the sake of intelligibility, must – stay the same.⁴⁶

The account of Spinozistic affects that I proposed in Section 1 thus cannot be correct; in particular, it cannot be correct in the way it characterizes the relation between a thing's essence and affective changes in its essential powers. What we need is an account that can explain how affective changes in such powers can be consistent with an unchanging

through the laws of his nature alone"). See also E4p4, E4p35d, 4p64d, and E4App2.

45 On Spinoza's commitment to the Principle of Sufficient Reason see especially Della Rocca 2008, 2008b.

46 It's possible to draw a different conclusion from E4pref: because changes in power require for their intelligibility an unchanging substratum, but Spinoza does not provide such a substratum (since he deprives finite things of substantiality), it follows that the changes in power, and with them affects, are unintelligible. Given that by the PSR all that is is intelligible, both the changes and the affects are in metaphysical rigour illusory. For a similar argument from a different starting point see Della Rocca 2008.

essential identity of the thing, despite Spinoza's commitment to the identity of these powers to a thing's essence. To put the problem slightly differently, we need a better way of articulating the conditions of the identity of a thing's essential powers, such that the sorts of changes that these powers undergo in the course of affective experiences do not cause the powers in question to cease being the powers that they are.⁴⁷

The job of the next two sections of the paper will be to offer such an account.⁴⁸

3. The amended account: essences as “constituted”

To see where my initial account went wrong let's return to E3p56d, the passage which earlier I took to corroborate that account and the unorthodox picture of individuation through affects that it implied. Clearly, if the account is incorrect, the appearance of textual corroboration must likewise be illusory. The question then is, is E3p56d amenable to a different interpretation?

⁴⁷ Manning's pessimistic conclusion is that Spinoza does not offer such conditions of identity of powers: “the notion of the individual essence of a body conceived as a power to maintain itself is of dubious intelligibility. Spinoza clearly believes that an individual's power to persevere can increase or diminish. But if this power is to constitute the thing's essence and identity, such changes in degree cannot alter the identity of the power. But what then constitutes the individuality and identity of a power? In this light, the account of individuation by essence seems unexplanatory: either it amounts to an elaborate name for the problem of the individuation of bodies it is supposed to solve, or it simply displaces the same sort of problem from bodies to powers” (2012: 5.3).

⁴⁸ In a somewhat different context, Donagan proposes what could serve as a solution to a problem at hand: he argues that we must distinguish higher- and lower-order powers within Spinozistic striving, where only the latter are subject to fluctuation, and only the former are identical to a thing's essence (1988:192-3). The problem with this proposal is that it doesn't have textual support, either for the distinction between the two orders of powers, nor for relating identity conditions and power fluctuations to distinct orders.

The crucial part of that passage – the part that I took to corroborate my initial account – is Spinoza's assertion that “as each [individual] is affected ... with this or that species of Joy, Sadness, Love, Hate, etc. – i.e., as his nature is constituted in one way or the other, so his Desires vary”, where “desire is the very essence, *or* nature, of each [thing]” (E3p56d). The claim that different affects “constitute” a thing's essence in different ways corroborates my initial account on the assumption that for x to “constitute” y is for x to make y be, bring it into being, to form or compose it either wholly or essentially. And this, to be sure, is a natural gloss of that term. It is also a gloss that fits well with how Spinoza uses *constituere* in other contexts. Consider, for example, his remark that

The being of substance does not pertain to the essence of man, *or* substance does not constitute the form of man. [...T]he essence of man is constituted [*constituit*] by certain modifications of God's attributes (E2p10&c).⁴⁹

Nonetheless, in another passage Spinoza himself offers a rather different gloss of the term. He writes,

Desire is man's very *essence*, insofar as it is conceived to be determined, from any given affection of it, to do something.

Expl. ...For by an affection of the human essence we understand any constitution of that essence [*per affectionem humanae essentiae quamcunque ejusdem essentiae constitutionem intelligimus*], whether it is innate [NS: or has come from outside]... . Here, therefore, by the

⁴⁹ For other passages that suit this initial gloss of “constitute” see e.g. “although two attributes may be conceived to be really distinct...we still cannot infer from that that they constitute two beings, *or* two different substances]” (E1p10s; II/52). There is a lot controversy about the nature of the substance-attribute relation, but it seems at least plausible to think that for an attribute to “constitute” the essence of substance (E1def4) means that an attribute brings, or is perceived as bringing, (a) substantial essence into being.

See also E2p11 and Descartes *Pr* 1.53, 63.

word Desire I understand any of a man's strivings, impulses, appetites, and volitions, which vary [*varii*] as the man's constitution varies, and which are not infrequently so opposed [*oppositi*] to one another that the man is pulled in different directions and knows not where to turn. (E3DefAff; II/190; emphasis added)⁵⁰

Here the suggestion is that a “constitution” of an essence is to be understood as an “affection” of that essence. On this understanding of *constituere*, for an affect to “constitute” an essence would be for it to merely *determine or modify* this essence – not, as on my initial account, to bring it into being as a whole.

Prima facie this second interpretation of *constituere* does not seem to suit all the passages in which that term appears. (To give just one example, it is difficult to construe “constitution” as “modification” in E2p10&c, where Spinoza asserts that human essence is “constituted” by certain modifications of the attributes, and not by substance. For it makes little sense for Spinoza to suddenly oppose in Part 2 the thesis that “human essence is *modified* by substance” – which, as we know from Part 1, cannot be “in” anything else [E1def3], in favour of the tautological claim that “human essence is *modified* by certain modifications”. In contrast, it would make sense for Spinoza to intend here “constitute” in the first sense of “bringing into being” wholly or essentially. On that reading of the passage, Spinoza would opposing there the widely-held view that human beings are substances, in favour of the thesis that we consist merely in modifications of substances.)⁵¹

It seems, in short, that we have in front of us at least one passage – E3DefAfflexpl – where Spinoza identifies “constitution” with “affection”

50 E3p5d rules out that an essence could *by itself* give rise to “opposed” (and not merely different) affections.

51 Likewise, it seems implausible that the point of E1p10s would be that “really distinct” attributes needn't “modify” different entities, since this would amount to conflating attributes and modes, contrary to well-known, if not well understood, Spinoza's identification of attributes with substance (see e.g. E1p4d).

or “modification”, and at least one passage – E2p10&c – that seems to require us to gloss “constitution” as “bringing into being” wholly or essentially. Are we dealing here simply with a case of equivocation, or with a failure to use a term systematically? This of course is a possibility. But another reading seems to be both more philosophically interesting and more charitable to Spinoza. On that reading, which I wish to endorse, we would gloss “constituting” as bringing into being (forming, composing, etc), but with the caveat that this relation is subject to degrees, analogously to the Spinozistic relation of causation. That is, just as according to Spinoza x can cause y to be, or to have a certain property, to different degrees, such that x can be either an adequate (complete) or an inadequate (partial) cause of y 's existing or having this or that property (E3def1), I suggest that in Spinoza's view things can also be “constituted” – brought into being – to different degrees. Namely, x can “constitute” y in the sense that x makes y up exhaustively (in this sense Spinoza can claim in E2p10&c that certain modifications of attributes, and not anything substantial, “constitute” human essence), but x can also merely partially contribute to bringing y into being, by making it be in a certain way, or with respect to certain properties. And this analogy between the nature of causal relations and constitution relations is no accident. For presumably constitution as a certain kind of bringing into being is just a certain kind of causal relation.

If we accept this amended gloss of “constitution”, we no longer have to read E3p56d as corroborating the discredited initial account, with its individuation through affects and an extravagant ontology of ephemeral beings. For on the modified construal of “constitution”, when Spinoza says that affects “constitute” a thing's essence this does not mean (as on the initial account) that with each affect a new entity, with a distinct essence, is generated. Rather it means that a thing's essence is modified in a certain way. On this account, a finite thing can thus persist as essentially the same thing through different affects, and Spinoza is cleared of all the difficulties imputed to him thus far, even those (such as ontological profligacy) that in the end were deemed relatively trivial.

I suggest then that what we should say is that according to Spinoza, an affect “constitutes” a thing's essence in the sense that an affect modifies or determines this essence. More precisely, to borrow from E3p56, an affect modifies or determines this essence *as a particular desire* or appetite – for a certain object or state of being, or as a particular volition – to do this or that.⁵² Conversely, particular desires, appetites and volitions are all particular modifications of a thing's essence and, what amounts to the same, particular modifications of a thing's essential power. For example, under the attribute of thought, to say that an affect modifies a thing's essential power in a certain way means, as we have already seen, that a mind is “determine[d] ... to think of this rather than that” (E3GenDefAff; II/203) – to produce an idea of this or that object, or of this or that state of being. That a mind is determined in an affect of think a specific idea (perhaps of God, or of the “beauty of green plants”) is, as we have also seen, also a determination of this mind to a certain degree of mental power (the power to produce a greater or lesser variety of more or less fecund ideas). It is also, for Spinoza, a determination of this mind as a particular volition (to become more God-like, for example).⁵³

4. The amended account: essences as determinable

The 'amended' account I wish to endorse in this paper requires that we treat Spinozistic essences as at least in part intrinsically *determinable* (that is, intrinsically subject to modifications or affections), with affects, as a

52 For Spinoza all these terms – “desire”, “appetite”, “volition” – are attribute-sensitive ways of referring to a thing's essential power (E3p9s). “Volition” names this power in relation to the mind alone, whereas both “desire” and “appetite” refer to the power of mind and body considered together. For more detailed accounts see e.g. Bennett 1984, Lebuffe 2009, Hübner forthcoming-a.

53 We are now in a position to refine the explanation given in Section 1 of what grounds essential differences in affects: such differences are grounded in the fact that particular things (and kinds of things) differ in terms of how their essences can be determined. In other words, human-affects and goldfish-affects necessarily differ according to Spinoza at least because their essential powers are determinable in different ways.

certain type of causal event (the sort that results in a change in a thing's essential powers) supplying the relevant determinations. To return to the question we posed above – How can a thing's essence be identical, as Spinoza claims, to a changing “power”? – we can now respond that Spinoza takes an essence to be the sort of thing that by its very nature is capable of undergoing modifications. In other words, for Spinoza the identity of power and essence means that an essence can be variously determined as particular “strivings, impulses, appetites, and volitions”.

That Spinoza might regard essences as subject to determination or modification in this way hasn't often been noted, to my knowledge at least. Bennett is an exception here: he acknowledges in passing that Spinoza indeed speaks of “states” of an “essence”, but goes on to dismiss this as a merely “odd” way of referring to the states of an individual.⁵⁴ I think this dismissal is a misjudgement on Bennett's part. For unless we accept that Spinoza very much intends to treat essences as subject to modification we will fail to understand the basic causal mechanism of Spinozistic affects, as well as the nature of the identity of power and essence.

Nonetheless, it's worth pausing over the question of why one might be inclined to dismiss the idea that Spinozistic essences are variously determinable. There are it seems to me at least two possible motivations. Considering them here will allow me to flesh out my account further.

First of all, one may object to my talk of Spinozistic essences as “determinable” on the grounds that within Spinoza's necessitarian framework such unrealized potentialities cannot be, and a fortiori cannot be ontologically fundamental in the way that I seem to be suggesting.⁵⁵ But this is a superficial – merely terminological – misunderstanding. To clarify, my talk of determinability is not meant to suggest that Spinoza

54 1984:222.

55 See E1p17s[I] (II/62), E1p31s.

There is also a debate among contemporary metaphysicians whether determinables can play the role of ontologically fundamental (or at least relatively fundamental) entities. For a defense see e.g. Wilson 2012.

allows for mere potentialities, or that he treats them as ontologically fundamental. To put things more precisely, on the reading I'm proposing, the essence of a finite thing is identical not to a mere potentiality for determination but to the entirety – the whole series, so to speak – of the ways in which this essence will be necessarily determined over the duration of the thing's existence.⁵⁶ The talk of essences as *determinable* is meant to be a shorthand for this more precise claim.⁵⁷

The second reason why one might want to reject the idea of modifiable essences is because one might think that modifications or determinations should be attributed only to *things*, not however to their essences, at least in Spinoza's framework but perhaps more generally. On this objection, essences are simply the wrong kind of thing to be modified. So if Spinoza talks about the affections of an essence, as he does in E3DefAffl, this is only because (once again)⁵⁸ he fails to properly distinguish between things and their essences, and hence attributes to the essences of things what is in fact attributable only to the things themselves.

This second objection as it stands is also defeasible I think. Rather than charging Spinoza with a failure to mark a rudimentary distinction, it seems more charitable to take him at his word and conclude that he holds a very broad conception of the possible scope of relations of determination or modification, and takes such relations to apply to things and their essences alike. That he does so is arguably confirmed by the way he characterizes the essence of substance: this essence too is subject to modification, indeed to all possible modifications (E1p16).⁵⁹

56 Presumably the eternal “formal” essence of a thing will then be either the totality of this series of determinations of essence or the rule for that series. Read in this way, Spinozistic essences seem to anticipate Leibnizian monads, whose states unfold according to an eternal rule.

Cf. also Schrijvers 1999:69.

57 Compare Spinoza's talk of “potential intellect” in E1p31s.

58 For this charge in a different context see Della Rocca 1996:214, 259 n 24.

59 Likewise, the idea of a modifiable essence is arguably implicit also in Spinoza's talk of “modifications of God's attributes” (E2p10c); as we know

But one can sharpen this objection as follows. Even if Spinoza is committed to this broader conception of determination, all the worse for him, because the very idea of a modified essence is inconsistent with his other doctrines. In particular, allowing for the essences of things to be modified in various ways undermines (goes the objection) his own definition of essence. For, as we have seen, E2def2 implies that a Spinozistic essence is, minimally, the set of of properties necessary and sufficient for a thing to actually exist. That is, it is minimally the properties a thing *must* have to actually exist as the thing that it is. But this conception of essence seems to be inconsistent with the idea of essences being modifiable or determinable in various ways. For, if the essence of x can undergo different and passing modifications, in what sense does it consist in the *necessary* conditions of being x ? If the essences of things can be differently determined, modified or “constituted”, this seems to imply that the essential properties of a thing can undergo change without, paradoxically, any change in the essential natures of those things. So the necessary conditions for being x are after all *not* genuinely necessary for being x , since they can, it seems, be acquired and lost.

This version of the second objection restates the problem at the heart of this paper – the problem of reconciling Spinoza's metaphysical theses about essences (such as those expressed in E2def2) with his psychological commitment to the variability of essences. If, as the objector insists, we must reject the notion of a determinable essence as inconsistent with E2def2, not only can we not accept my 'amended' account, we are also confronted with the very real possibility that Spinoza's conception of

from E1def4, an attribute “constitutes” (brings into being) substantial essence.

It's not clear if we should say that the essence of *substance* is also *intrinsically* determinable. On the one hand this would fit well with Spinoza's naturalism (since it would make the essence of substance and the essence of modes alike in this respect). It would also help answer the Hegelian worry about why, according to Spinoza, there must be a world of modes in addition to substance (see e.g. Hegel 1995, 3.256–61). On the other hand, it's not clear that this answer would satisfy Hegel, since it seems to appeal to a brute fact about essences (that they are intrinsically determinable).

essence is simply inconsistent across his psychology and his metaphysics.

Fortunately, I think that this version of the objection too is surmountable. To see how this may be the case, recall the following passage from the early *Short Treatise*, in which Spinoza outlines the conditions of *physical* diachronic identity:

if ... a body has and preserves its proportion - say of 1 to 3 - the soul and the body will be like ours now are; they will, of course, be constantly *subject to change, but not to such a great change that it goes beyond the limits of from 1 to 3* ... But if other bodies act on ours with such force that the proportion of motion [to rest] cannot remain 1 to 3, that is death, and a destruction of the soul (KV2pref[12-14]; I/52; emphasis added)

To be sure, the question raised in the above passage (of the conditions of physical identity over time) is not interchangeable with, or reducible to, the question we are concerned with (that of the determinability of essences). For one, our question is posed at a more fundamental ontological level, that of essences generally, considered highly abstractly, for irrespectively of attribute.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, I think that we can use the above passage to reconstruct how Spinoza might think about the determinability of essences, in a way that would make that commitment consistent with his other claims about essences.

What interests me about the above passage in particular is the idea that there are *limits* to the changes that a body can undergo that are consistent with this body remaining one and the same (that is, retaining its

⁶⁰ Another potential difference between the two questions is that it's not clear that the physical changes discussed by Spinoza in the Physical Digression for example can also be described as new determinations or "constitutions" of a body's essence. That is, it's not clear that a change that does not alter a body's essence (for example, a change in the direction of motion of constituent bodies) counts as an affection (determination, constitution) of that essence, as opposed to a merely accidental change in the body of the individual endowed with that essence.

essential “*ratio*” of motion to rest),⁶¹ and the implicit suggestion in the passage that it is the *essence* of this body that determines these limits. I want to suggest that we apply this idea of an essentially predetermined range of permissible changes to the problem of determination of essences in affective experience. More specifically, I want to propose that we grant that according to Spinoza the essence of a thing is in part intrinsically determinable, but with the caveat that it is determinable in such a manner as to be subject to a specific qualitative and quantitative range of determinations. On this reading, to be a particular thing – or a certain kind of thing – is *inter alia* to be intrinsically determinable in specific ways and within specific limits, beyond which a thing ceases to be. So yes, essential powers (to reason, to move, to swim, and so on) are, according to Spinoza, subject to affective fluctuations, but proper to every essence is also an enduring and unchanging range of possible – viable – fluctuations. This range of possible fluctuations proper to an essence is, I suggest, one sense in which changes in a thing's power must be “understood”, as Spinoza writes, “through [its] nature” (E4pref).

How does this picture address the worry with which we started, the worry about the consistency of my characterization of Spinozistic essences as subject to various and passing determinations with Spinoza's own definition of essence in terms of necessary and sufficient properties? My suggestion is that the limits to possible determinations are among the properties necessary and sufficient for a thing to be what it is. That is, what does *not* change about a thing's essential identity, what is necessary and sufficient for it to be itself, is, among other things, precisely this range of fluctuations in its essential powers that a thing can undergo without ceasing to be.

In short, on the plausible assumption that we can allow that a thing's essence may be identical to a multiplicity of different powers, rather than to a single power, it seems that we should say the following

61 On how Spinoza might understand this *ratio*, including how literally we should take his use of numbers to describe it in *KV*, see e.g. Barbone 2002; Bennett 1984; Garrett 1994; Gueroult 1974; Manning 2012; Matheron 1969.

on Spinoza's behalf: the essence of a thing is not identical to power simpliciter (as his thesis is usually put). Rather, the essence of a thing is identical to a certain set of powers, each of which has a certain qualitative or quantitative range of permissible exercise. Furthermore the powers themselves bear to one another certain relations which themselves are also subject to ranges of permissible variation.⁶² So for example, applied to a goldfish, it would not be just the power to swim, or even to swim at a particular range of speeds, that would constitute her essence, but rather the relation of her various essential powers with their particular ranges: a power to swim at certain speeds, a power to detect certain intensities of light, to digest and excrete certain kinds of microscopic nutrients, etc. It is this mutual relation of particular powers – more precisely, a viable (or, in Spinoza's terminology, “moderate”) state of that relation of all the powers – that, I suggest, constitutes the unity of a thing's essence in Spinoza's metaphysics.

Presumably we can decide case by case whether a given change in a thing's collection of powers still permits us to count this thing as essentially the same. In some cases perhaps there will be no obvious answer, as suggested by Spinoza's rather tentative remarks a propos the amnesiac Spanish poet.⁶³ Some affective experiences may indeed exceed what a thing can bear, given what it essentially is. This would be heartbreak understood quite literally.⁶⁴

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62 Thanks to Don Rutherford for discussion of this point.

63 Cf. Garrett 1994:91-3.

64 Thanks to John Carriero, Don Rutherford, Sam Rickless, Marleen Rozemond, Clinton Tolley, Stephen Zylstra, the participants of the UC San Diego's History of Philosophy Roundtable, and the audience at the UCLA Conference in Early Modern Philosophy for invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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