

Spinoza's unorthodox metaphysics of the will¹

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1. Deducing a moral philosophy

Spinoza's claim in the *Ethics* is to have constructed a philosophical system that allows him to rigorously deduce moral doctrines from purely metaphysical foundations – ultimately from an account of God's essence – without help from irreducibly and distinctively moral premises.² This procedure results in an extremely close-knit relationship between his metaphysics and ethics. And this in turn has at least two noteworthy consequences. In the first place, the overarching moral-philosophical objectives of Spinoza's treatise dictate which metaphysical doctrines Spinoza emphasizes and develops in greater detail.³ (As he himself puts it, God's essence has an “infinity” of consequences; but Spinoza's concern is with those that bear on our mind's “blessedness [*beatitudo*]” [E2pref].) In second place, the close-knit relationship between metaphysics and morals creates a formidable pressure within Spinoza's system also in the opposite

1 I am immensely grateful to Donald Ainslie, Michael Della Rocca, Marleen Rozemond, Donald Rutherford and Clinton Tolley for comments on earlier drafts of this article.

Terminological note: for the purposes of this paper I will use interchangeably 1) “ethics” and “moral philosophy”; 2) “end”, “final cause”, “purpose”, and “teleology”. The term “phenomenon” is intended in a non-technical, generic sense.

2 Cf. Garrett, “Spinoza’s Ethical Theory,” pp. 270, 285. Cf. Hobbes's classification of ethics as the science of “Consequences from the Passions of Men” belonging to the general science of natural bodies (*Leviathan* 9). Cf. also Locke, *Essay*, 3.11.16, 4.3.18.

3 As has been noted by Garrett, “Spinoza’s Ethical Theory,” p. 268.

direction: namely, Spinoza's metaphysical commitments profoundly circumscribe his potential moral commitments. Perhaps the most obvious example of this concerns Spinoza's metaphysical commitment to necessitarianism. In ethics, this thesis rules out the possibility of a "free" – i.e. uncaused – will, championed for example by Spinoza's most influential predecessor, Descartes (cf. E3p2s). And this in turn greatly complicates the task of assigning moral responsibility, praise and blame, for actions.⁴

The problem on which this article focuses is a related one. It concerns ways in which Spinoza's metaphysical doctrines fundamentally shape his understanding of the nature of three closely related phenomena of moral agency – "will [*voluntas*]", "desire [*cupiditas*]" and "appetite [*appetitus*]" – as well as his understanding of their relation to the "good".

In the early modern period these concepts figured prominently in numerous controversies about agency, moral responsibility, freedom, and objectivity of the good.⁵ So when Spinoza places them – alongside

4 Likewise, Spinoza's doctrine of the identity of mind and body (E2p7s) precludes Spinoza from subscribing to the Platonic belief that the body is a prison for the soul, as well as to the Cartesian method of overcoming slavery to the passions by restructuring the relation of mind and body. Similarly, Spinoza's immanentist conception of the substance-mode relation, according to which all creatures are "in" God (E1p17), phrased in traditional religious language becomes the claim that all things participate in divine nature (cf. E2p49s[IVA]). Cf. Garrett, "Spinoza's Ethical Theory," p. 270-1; Della Rocca, "Spinoza's Metaphysical Psychology," p. 192; Lin, "Teleology and Human Action," p. 318.

5 This becomes especially true by the time of Kant's practical philosophy: the only unconditionally good thing is a good *will*; cf., *Groundwork* I). Consider also the following problems: if our will is exempt from causal determinations that govern the rest of nature, how can we reconcile the laws of human action with these more general laws? But if our will *is* subject to the determinism that governs natural phenomena, how do we allocate responsibility for evil, and maintain a belief in divine goodness and omnipotence? Another controversy concerns God's will: is this will moved by recognition of what is *intrinsically* good? Or is it only God's will that determines what counts as "good", as Descartes had proposed? The notion of will figures prominently in Descartes's

“passions” – at the center of his own moral theorizing, he is certainly firmly in the mainstream of the moral-philosophical tradition of his time. His conception of the nature of the “good” would likewise raise few eyebrows. For example, he grants that will and desire are directed at what is good (E3p9s); he also endorses the traditional contrast between the merely apparent goods of the ignorant “multitude” – the volatile joys of “wealth, honor, and sensual pleasure” (TdIE §3) – and genuine good. And he endorses a whole panoply of traditional names for the latter: blessedness, understanding, tranquility, virtue, salvation, right “way of living [*vivendi ratio*]”, happiness, freedom, “love of God”.⁶ Finally, as was also common at the time, Spinoza adopts a number of Stoic ethical doctrines, as well as the general Aristotelian principle that ethics as such is concerned with “virtue” and “perfection”.⁷

Yet such undeniable continuities between received moral-philosophical traditions and Spinoza's own doctrines are only part of the story. As we shall see in what follows, the initial, rather orthodox appearance of Spinoza's ethics belies a number of quite unorthodox conclusions, especially in what concerns the nature of will, appetite, desire and goodness.⁸ To be sure, recognizing Spinoza's heterodoxy requires care

moral picture more generally: it is the exercise of our will, by nature compelled toward the good, that is correct or incorrect in moral judgments; resoluteness in willing constitutes our supreme good and virtue, and is the cause of our happiness.

6 Many of these terms turn out to be co-referential.

7 For Spinoza's Stoic debt cf. especially E4app32, E5p10s, and Rutherford, “Salvation”; James, “Spinoza the Stoic”; Kristeller, “Stoic and Neoplatonic Sources”; Pereboom, “Stoic Psychotherapy”; Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method*, p. 88f.

8 To be sure, often Spinoza finds like-minded company in the equally heretical Hobbes. For example, both stress the importance in ethics of self-preservation and determinism; argue for the priority of desire to goodness, and for the need to view human beings as parts of nature (even if they disagree on the existence of the highest good, and the desirability and possibility of tranquility). Cf. Garrett, “Spinoza's Ethical Theory,” pp. 267-68. On the continuities of Spinoza's ethics

on the part of the reader. This is because Spinoza masks his disagreements with tradition by an ample use of traditional language. (As he doesn't tire of repeating, philosophy concerns itself not with words but with things [cf. e.g. E3da20expl].) So Spinoza preserves the outer shell of established moral and theological doctrines while filling it with new meanings, ones that would be valid within his own, new, metaphysical framework. In this way he carries out a systematic reinterpretation of inherited ethical concepts in accordance with what he takes to be the true description of nature as it is in itself, thereby allowing such concepts to become part of this account.⁹

One of the principal forces pushing Spinoza to part ways with received ethical tradition is precisely the metaphysical foundation on which he builds his own ethics. For an inquiry like ours – into Spinoza's conception of will, appetite and desire – there are two metaphysical commitments of particular relevance. These are Spinoza's metaphysical and explanatory *naturalism*, and his rejection of *teleology*.¹⁰ Let me quickly define these. First, by Spinoza's 'naturalism' I mean his conviction that “the laws and rules of nature, according to which all things happen...are always and everywhere the same” and so is “the way of understanding” them (E3pref/G 2:138).¹¹ Human beings are not a “dominion within a

with the ethics of Descartes and/or Hobbes cf. Donagan, *Spinoza*, p. 146ff; Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method*, p. 88ff; Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics*, pp. 185-92. Spinoza's debt to Hobbes's ethics deserves more room than I can give it here.

9 Cf. Bennett, *A Study*, p. 222; Carriero, “Perfection and Conatus in Spinoza”, 83. Cf. also Descartes AT 3.506, and Leibniz's claim to “restore” and “rehabilitate” Aristotelian notions “in a way that would render them intelligible, and separate the use one should make of them from the abuse that has been made of them” (*New System of Nature*, 139).

10 This is a controversial claim. See next section, and note 12.

11 For discussions of Spinoza's naturalism cf. Della Rocca *Spinoza*, “Spinoza's Metaphysical Psychology” (the latter argues that Spinoza *fails* to derive a naturalistic moral theory from his metaphysics [p. 218ff]); Carriero, “Spinoza on final causality”, 135; Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics*, pp. 190-93; LeBuffe, “Spinoza's Psychological Theory” p. 1; Garrett, “Representation and Consciousness”; Lin,

dominion" (E3pref/G 2:137). That is, we are neither exempt from the rules by which other beings must play, nor privy to a special set of phenomena. Secondly, a 'teleological' conception of nature is (very roughly) one on which things have the properties they do, and *ceteris paribus* develop and act in the ways they do, because of the consequences this has – consequences typically described as an attainment of an "end" or of a "good".¹²

In what follows we will chart the effect both of these metaphysical commitments have on Spinoza's conception of volition, desire and appetite. But it is especially the second of these commitments that, within a moral context, creates a singular puzzle. For us to be able to see this, I first will need to say a few more words about Spinoza's condemnation of teleology. This will be the subject of the next section.

2. Some background: Spinoza's case against teleology

The view that Spinoza undertakes (to quote Jonathan Bennett) a "drastic" and "radical attack" "against *any* kind of teleology" was the consensus among Spinoza's readers for a very long time, even though more recently several commentators have concluded that Spinoza's anti-teleological polemics target divine ends alone.¹³ Already Leibniz

"Teleology and Human Action," p. 349ff.

12 Cf. Garrett, "Teleology in Spinoza," p. 310. For other definitions cf. Bennett, *A Study*, §51.4; Curley "On Bennett's Spinoza," p. 44ff; Lin, "Teleology and Human Action," p. 327. For Spinoza's relation to Aristotelian teleology cf. Curley, "On Bennett's Spinoza," p. 45; Carriero, "Spinoza on Final Causality." (To be clear, I will not count here cases where a mental state representing an end produces an effect as 'teleological in the relevant sense.)

It's admittedly artificial for me to address the topic of final causes in isolation from any consideration of Spinoza's view of forms and species, but limited space requires this compromise. For a broader consideration of Spinoza in relation to Aristotelian philosophy, see Carriero's work.

13 *A Study*, §51.1; my ital. For similar assessments of the breadth of Spinoza's criticism of ends see also Schopenhauer, *World as Will*, 2.337; Donagan, *Spinoza*; Carriero, "Spinoza on Final Causality"; "Conatus and Perfection in Spinoza";

complained that the “Spinozist view” “dismisses the search for final causes and explains everything through brute necessity” (*New Essays* I.1, p. 73). This is how Spinoza himself describes his position:

[others have] maintained that the Gods direct all things for the use of men... This was why each of them strove with great diligence to understand and explain the final causes [*causas finales*] of all things... [T]hey sought to show that nature does nothing in vain... Not many words will be required now to show that Nature has no end set before it, and that all final causes are nothing but human fictions [*naturam finem nullum sibi praefixum habere et omnes causas finales nihil nisi humana esse figmenta*]... I have already sufficiently established it, both by the foundations and causes from which I have shown this prejudice to have had its origin, and also by... all those [propositions] by which I have shown that all things proceed by a certain eternal necessity of nature (E1app/G 2:79-80; cf. E4pref/G 2:206.)¹⁴

Della Rocca, *Spinoza*. For readings of Spinoza's criticisms as targeting divine ends only, see Curley, “On Bennett's Spinoza”; Garrett, “Teleology in Spinoza”; Lin, “Teleology and Human Action”; Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics*, p. 198f. There is no room here for a comprehensive refutation of this more modest interpretation of Spinoza's criticism but, briefly, it rests primarily on three arguments: (1) Spinoza's restriction of criticism in E1app to divine ends, (2) his ostensible endorsement there of human ends; (3) his conatus doctrine. We shall shortly see why (3) fails. Regarding (1), the first Appendix is explicitly dedicated to divine nature alone. So the absence of criticism of *finite* ends there fails to show that Spinoza's criticism isn't in fact broader. Regarding (2), Spinoza's attribution of ends to human beings is more plausibly read as describing (not endorsing) our *ordinary and false* self-understanding, one rooted in the belief that we are causally undetermined, and responsible for our misunderstanding of other things, including God (cf. Carriero, “Conatus and Perfection in Spinoza”, pp 86-7).

14 Cf. E4pref/G 2:206, and Aquinas, *SCG* 3, 25, 11. The scope of ends Spinoza dismisses here as “fictions” is controversial in line with narrower and broader reading of Spinoza criticism of ends (see note 13); see discussion in Garrett, “Teleology in Spinoza,” p. 315; Curley, “On Bennett's Spinoza,” p. 40. For

Spinoza's basic claim is that teleological concepts simply fail to mirror the nature of things as they are in themselves. In metaphysical rigour, there is nothing in nature like a final cause. The correct way to conceive of natural causality is on the model of a deduction of properties *from* an essence.¹⁵ In other words, all that 'is' simply "follows [*sequor*]" necessarily from God's essence, in the way that properties of a geometrical figure are inferable from its essence, as stated in its definition (cf. E1p16d, E1p17s/G 2:62).

Spinoza suggests that the idea of a final cause entered the repertoire of human thought only as a consequence of our ignorance of how our desires were in fact produced in us. Instead of attributing them to an infinite series of prior causes, we have come to regard it as the "first [*prima*]" cause – that is, as the spontaneous or uncaused cause that explains without itself being subject to explanation (E1p28, E4pref/G II 206-7).¹⁶ And we went on to generalize this type of explanation to all things (E1app/ G 2:78). For as long as we rely only on sensory experience, and thus on whatever impressions our finite bodies are capable of accumulating, we inevitably fall into confused empirical generalizations (E2p40s1/G 2:121). This, as Spinoza tells it, is the origin of teleology as the thesis of the universal causal and explanatory priority and self-sufficiency of ends.

In banishing teleology from his metaphysics in this way Spinoza is to be sure a thinker of his time. As is well-known, the early modern period marked a massive shift in beliefs about the nature of causality. In particular many philosophers abandoned the Aristotelian view that all

discussion of the apparent non-sequitur of deriving an absence of ends from necessity see Lin, "Teleology and Human Action in Spinoza", p. 322; Bennett, *A Study*, p. 216; Carriero, "Conatus and perfection in Spinoza", p. 85.

¹⁵ This is to understand natural causality – including all cases of what Spinoza labels "efficient" causality – as fundamentally "formal" causality. See Carraud, *Causa Sive Ratio*, p. 295ff, Viljanen, "Spinoza's Essentialist Model of Causation".

¹⁶ Cf. Curley, "On Bennett's Spinoza", p. 41; see also Carriero, "Conatus and perfection in Spinoza", p. 88.

natural phenomena are, in their God-given natures, fundamentally directed toward ends, actualizing certain predetermined potentialities. The place of teleology in natural philosophy was by and large taken over by a mechanistic explanatory paradigm. On this view of nature, every state of affairs arises lawfully from a prior one, without any purposes governing the actions and reactions of blind efficient causes.

Yet even among the moderns who championed this sort of mechanism in natural philosophy some nonetheless held onto a teleological view of *moral* phenomena, thereby preserving a sense of purposiveness in the sphere of human action.¹⁷ This bifurcated view of causality is, however, not available to Spinoza – it is closed to him by his commitment to naturalism. For one of the consequences of this naturalism is that Spinoza's prohibition on teleology has to be seen as perfectly general and uncompromising. It has to include human beings in its sweep. In other words, Spinoza's non-teleological, naturalistic metaphysics entails also a non-teleological account of human agency.

Here we come up against an example of the consequences that Spinoza's metaphysical commitments carry for his moral doctrines. For Spinoza's universal ban on teleology means that volition, desire and appetite cannot, in metaphysical rigour, be end-directed phenomena. So even if Spinoza concedes to the tradition, as we saw above, that willing and desiring are concerned with some “good”, this “good” cannot for him play the metaphysical function of an end at which the willing or desiring being might aim. Since Spinoza adopts the ancient dictum that to genuinely know some thing we must know its causes (E1a4), this means that in his eyes irreducibly final-causal explanations are inadmissible. That is, the goodness of the desired object or of the willed state of being cannot genuinely explain why a particular desire or volition occurs or has certain properties.

¹⁷ This, for example, was Descartes's position. In his view, although the causality that governs bodies is indeed mechanistic, the union of mind and body that constitutes a human being is divinely and providentially directed towards well-being as its proper end (*Med.* 6).

Spinoza's non-teleological take on phenomena of moral agency certainly goes against the grain of how of such phenomena were typically conceived, whether it be by the Stoics, medieval Aristotelians, or moderns like Descartes, Leibniz, Locke and Kant. Even putting Spinoza's unorthodoxy on this point aside, the problem is that it's simply not self-evident how such an account could be made coherent or even plausible – that is, how we are to conceive of a volition or a desire if not as end-directed. To deny their end-directedness is, it seems, to deny the phenomenology arguably universally present in willing or wanting to do something: we act *because* the object of such volitions or desires appears in some sense “good”.

But Spinoza is not denying that in the course of ordinary experience we often *take* ourselves to be acting in view of ends, and typically under the aspect of the good. His point is rather that this sort of self-understanding does not furnish an accurate metaphysical picture of the causal relations at work.¹⁸ Indeed, as we shall see again and again, for Spinoza such *prima facie* phenomenological evidence counts philosophically for very little in general. In his eyes it tends to distort rather than reveal what, in metaphysical rigour, is really going on. As we shall also see, in combination with a commitment to a rigorous derivation of moral truths from metaphysical ones, this conviction drives Spinoza to sacrifice all sorts of moral intuitions, and to conclusions that seem to run afoul of both experience and common-sense.

To return to the case at hand, what is missing from our teleological self-understanding is the recognition that our representations of ends and goods are themselves necessary effects of prior causes.¹⁹ That is, from the

18 Cf. Carriero, “Spinoza on Final Causality,” pp. 141-2, “Conatus and perfection in Spinoza”, pp. 87, 89. For the view that our self-understanding as end-directed agents is also Spinoza's considered view of the nature of human action see Curley, “On Bennett's Spinoza” p. 40-1; Garrett, “Teleology in Spinoza,” p. 313; Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics*, p. 198f; Lin, “Teleology and Human Action,” p. 318ff.

19 For this reason nature seen through the prism of teleological concepts simply appears “upside down”: “what is really a cause, [this view] considers as

perspective of the merely empirical “first kind” of knowledge, which can give rise to all sorts of errors (E2p40s2, E2p41), we may indeed characterize what appears to us as a matter of ends. But this is not how the intellect would grasp the same situation, adequately:

What is called [*dicitur*] a final cause [*causa...finalis*] is nothing but a human appetite insofar as it is considered as a principle, or primary cause [*principium seu causa primaria*], of something. For example, when we say that habitation was the final cause of this or that house, surely we understand [*intelligimus*] nothing but that a man, because he imagined the conveniences of domestic life, had an appetite to build a house. So habitation, insofar as it is considered as a final cause, is nothing more than this singular appetite. It is really an efficient cause [*revera causa est efficiens*], which is considered as a first cause, because men are commonly ignorant of the causes of their appetites. (E4pref/G 2:206-207; my ital.; cf. E4d4)

As this passage suggests, in Spinoza's view a metaphysically rigorous account of human desire for shelter would appeal not to any ends, but instead solely to the workings of “efficient” causes – efficient causes no longer subordinated to nor dependent on final causes, as they were on the Aristotelian picture.²⁰ But beyond this emancipation of efficient causes, as well as Spinoza's general commitment to the modeling of causality on a deduction of properties from essences, it's not obvious how we are to understand the nature of the “efficient” causes which, according to Spinoza, are at work in will, desire and appetite. Although the *Ethics* broaches the topic of causality already in its first line, it never offers an official definition of “cause” in general or of “efficient” cause in particular.

In the face of such an interpretative puzzle, it might be tempting to

an effect, and conversely. What is by nature prior, it makes posterior” (E1app/G 2: 80).

²⁰ Cf. Carriero, “Conatus and perfection in Spinoza”, pp. 74, 89. See also note 15.

conclude that Spinoza relies so heavily on terms traditionally used to describe the “good” (terms such as “virtue”, “salvation”, “blessedness”) because he in fact wants to reaffirm purposiveness in the sphere of human action at least, and to endorse the existence of moral ends. But if this were the case, Spinoza would be treating phenomena of moral agency as if they were subject to fundamentally different rules than other phenomena in nature, thus abandoning his stated commitment to naturalism. He would also fail to deliver on his promise of grounding his morals in his metaphysics. We could try to avoid imputing this sort of inconsistency to Spinoza by proposing that for him moral philosophy is simply not in the business of truth, that it is offered solely for the sake of therapeutic or prudential value.²¹ For example, for the sake of social harmony it might be useful, even if in metaphysical rigour false, to assert that freedom and a perfected understanding are human ends. The weakness of this proposal is that nothing indicates that Spinoza did not intend his ethics to be first and foremost a collection of universal truths, on equal footing with his metaphysics. Indeed, if we take his attempt at a derivation of ethics from metaphysics at face value, this much is dictated by his own epistemology: only adequate ideas can follow from adequate ideas (E2p40). So adequate metaphysical doctrines can imply only equally adequate ethical doctrines. The latter cannot be *merely* prudential expedients or therapeutic fictions. (This is not to deny that Spinoza is happy to give us an extra push us toward enlightenment by involving our imaginations. For instance, his catalogue of the actions of the “free man” (E4p66ff) lets us emulate such actions without genuine understanding, and so imaginatively experience ourselves as taking them for an end (cf. E5p10s).)

We must therefore look for a different solution, one that doesn't suffer from the above flaws. To state our task more precisely, in order to explain how Spinoza understands the nature of will, desire and appetite,

21 For this kind of interpretation of the status of Spinoza moral doctrines see e.g. Carriero's description of Spinoza's model of human nature as merely “a practical guide or model that we set up for ourselves” (“On the relationship between mode and substance in Spinoza's metaphysics”, 272).

and their relation to the good, we must solve the following two puzzles, and do so in a manner that respects Spinoza's commitments to naturalism, to a rigorous grounding of moral doctrines in metaphysical truths, as well as his rejection of metaphysical teleology. First, we have to explain how Spinoza reconceives the *causal nature* of will, appetite and desire, if the teleological model on which his predecessors and contemporaries rely is no longer available to him. This investigation will take up the bulk of the remainder of the paper (sections §3-6). Second, we have to explain how he reinterprets the *relation* between volitions (appetites, desires) on the one hand and the “goodness” of the desired object or willed state of being on the other, if this “goodness” can no longer be viewed as an end that produces and explains our volitions (appetites, desires). We will address this question in section §7.

But to begin tackling these two questions, and so begin fleshing out Spinoza's positive account of will, desire and appetite, we first must look at his account of “striving [*conatus*]”. This is because it is fundamentally in terms of striving that Spinoza defines all three phenomena of moral agency. For this reason, the *conatus* doctrine can be justly described – as Don Garrett once put it – as the “single most essential underpinning of Spinoza's ethics”.²²

3. The nature of “striving”

Spinoza's basic claim is that will, desire and appetite all share a metaphysical foundation: they are all at bottom a kind of “striving” (E3p9s). To be more precise, striving is what will, desire and appetite all amount to at the level of more general metaphysical description, where this means bracketing any reference to a specific “attribute” (or fundamental kind of being, such as thought or extension). Conversely, what distinguishes these three phenomena of moral agency is, primarily,

²² “Spinoza's Ethical Theory,” p. 271. For similar verdicts cf. Bennett, *A Study*, p. 215, 231; Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method*, p. 87. The *conatus* doctrine is crucial also for Spinoza's account of the passions, but this is beyond the scope of this paper. See also TTP 16.

the attribute under which striving is being considered.²³ This is analogous to how Spinoza treats discussions of God for example: by definition, God is a thing that exists under *all* attributes (E1d6). Nonetheless, it's also possible to consider him solely qua thinking, or solely qua extended (E2p1-2).²⁴ Likewise, what the moral-philosophical tradition has come to refer to as “will”, “desire” and “appetite” are in Spinoza's eyes merely attribute-specific ways of conceiving of striving.

To grasp the causal nature of these three phenomena, we must therefore first illuminate the causality proper to striving. This will be the task of the next three sections. In section §6, we will look at what is distinctive about the phenomena of moral agency that striving grounds – that is, at what sets them apart, both from one another and from striving itself.

What then does Spinoza understand by “striving”? In the *Ethics* Spinoza officially introduces this concept in Part 3, by means of the general metaphysical principle that “Each thing, as far as it is in itself, strives to persevere in its being [*Unaquaeque res quantum in se est, in suo esse perseverare conatur*]” (E3p6; transl. alt.). The underlying idea that in nature there is a universal drive to self-preservation has a long history.²⁵ But almost universally throughout this history, this principle was understood teleologically. That is, preservation was thought to constitute an end for striving things, often as part of a providential account of nature. Now, given what we know about Spinoza's metaphysical commitments, we can expect that this not how *he* understands this

23 As we shall see below, desire represents a slightly more complicated case, because it also involves consciousness. Unsurprisingly, Spinoza sometimes writes as if will, desire, appetite were simply identical (E3p35d, E3da1expl, E3p2s[ii]). Note that for him the distinction between attributes is what is left of a “real” distinction (E1p10s). See Descartes's theory of distinctions, PP 1.60.

24 In fact, this would be true of any thing in Spinoza's metaphysics (see E2p7s).

25 See e.g. Cicero *De Finibus* 3.5-6; Aquinas, SCG 19; also cf. Hobbes's “endeavor” (*De Cive* 1.7, *Leviathan* 6).

principle.²⁶ Indeed, this expectation is borne out in the very next proposition, where Spinoza identifies striving with “essence”:

The striving by which each thing [*unaquaeque res*] strives to persevere in its being [*suo esse*] is *nothing but the actual essence* of the thing [*nihil est praeter ipsius rei actualem essentiam*]. *Dem. From the given essence of each thing some things necessarily follow* [*sequuntur*]... So the power of each thing, or the striving [*potentia sive conatus*] by which it (either alone or with others) does [*agit*] anything or strives to do anything...is nothing but the given or actual essence of the thing (E3p7&d; my ital.)

If we're allowed to elaborate somewhat speculatively on Spinoza's behalf, an “essence” is just the set of properties of a thing which are jointly sufficient and severally necessary for this thing to be what it is, such that no thing can exist without having its essence, and, conversely, no *other* thing can have that essence (E2d2).²⁷ In E3p7 Spinoza's fundamental claim

26 Again, this is a controversial point. For teleological readings of Spinozistic striving see e.g. Curley, “On Bennett's Spinoza,” p. 40ff; Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method*, pp. 108-9, 164; Della Rocca, “Spinoza's Metaphysical Psychology,” p. 218; Garrett, “Teleology in Spinoza” pp. 313-14, “Spinoza's Conatus Argument”, p. 148; Lin, “Teleology in Human Action”. For non-teleological interpretations, see Bennett, *A Study*, p. 215, pp. 221-25; Carriero, “Spinoza on Final Causality”, “Conatus and Perfection in Spinoza”; Della Rocca, *Spinoza* p. 137ff; Donagan, *Spinoza*, p. 151ff. (Strictly, Bennett has one foot in each camp: he believes Spinoza *fails* to carry out his intention to offer a non-teleological theory of human motivation [pp. 231, 44].)

27 In the framework of the *Ethics*, different “things” are distinct from another only “modally”.

There is some controversy about whether Spinoza is committed to the uniqueness or universality of essences (see e.g. Della Rocca, *Representation and the Mind Body Problem in Spinoza*, p. 87). I cannot address this issue fully here, but I proceed on the assumption that Spinoza posits the existence in nature of the unique essences of really existing particulars, but also allows for rationally

is that “each thing” will necessarily produce certain effects – it will necessarily “do” something – simply by virtue of having a particular essence. And this “necessary following” of effects from an essence just *is* the striving of the thing. In other words, what defines the “efficient” causality proper to striving is the relation between a thing’s essence and the effects both produced by this essence and deducible from it, as stated in the definition of the thing. But, as we know, a causal relation in which an effect is explained by showing how it arises from something conceptually and causally prior to it, without invoking any “ends” or “goods” that brought it about and furnished its explanation, is by definition non-teleological.²⁸ In short, E3p7 confirms what Spinoza’s general rejection of metaphysical teleology would lead us to expect, namely that Spinozistic striving is not an end-directed phenomenon.

According to Spinoza then, among the various effects that a thing will necessarily produce in the course of its existence, only the effects that

constructed universal essences such as the essence of “human being”.

28 Cf. E4p25: “No one strives to preserve his being for the sake of anything else. Dem.: The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is defined by the thing’s essence alone (by 3p7). If this [essence] alone is given, then it follows necessarily that each one strives to preserve his being”; cf. also E3p9s, E4p52s. This non-teleological interpretation of Spinozistic striving is further confirmed when we return the idiom of a “conatus” to its historical context. For many modern thinkers understood the verb *conari*, its derivatives and cognates along the lines of the law of inertia in physics. Indeed Descartes uses the same key turns of phrase as Spinoza when describing “striving” in the course of mechanistic and conditional analyses in his physics, thus within a domain from which he famously banishes appeals to final causes. (Cf. e.g. “each thing, insofar as it is in itself [*quantum in se est*], always continues in the same state” [PP 2.37, cf. 1.28]. Cf. also Spinoza, PCP 2p17; Hobbes, *Elements of Philosophy* 3.15; and Newton, *Principia*, 3rd def.) For similar interpretations of the conceptual ancestry of Spinoza’s conatus see Curley, “Spinoza’s Moral Philosophy,” p. 368; *Behind the Geometrical Method*, p. 107ff; Carriero, “Spinoza on Final Causality,” p. 132f; “Conatus and Perfection in Spinoza”, pp. 69-70; Della Rocca, “Spinoza’s Metaphysical Psychology,” p. 194; Spinoza, p. 145ff; Donagan, *Spinoza*, p. 152.

are produced by its own essence will count as constituents of its “striving”. More precisely, Spinoza’s claim is that any effect will count as composing a thing’s striving *to the degree* that it has been brought about by its own essence, rather than because the thing has been affected by some other thing (E3p9). That is, for Spinoza a thing “strives” even insofar as it is not the *total*, or “adequate”, cause of a given effect, which therefore cannot be wholly explained by appealing to its essential nature alone (E3d1-2). It is to capture this particular wrinkle in his picture of striving that Spinoza specifies that each thing strives “insofar as it is in itself” (E3p6).²⁹

Spinoza also describes such cases of only partial responsibility for a particular effect as cases of striving on the basis of “inadequate” ideas (E3p9d). And his acknowledgment that things can strive without a clear and distinct understanding of what they are doing or why is particularly relevant for our purposes. This is because it begins to explain how it is possible that, as noted in the previous section, we can sometimes *misunderstand* the nature of our own desires, appetites or volitions, and so take ourselves for example to be acting on ends.

4. The grounds and scope of “striving”

As we saw in the previous section, striving for Spinoza boils down to the non-end-directed production of necessary effects by the essences of things – or, in medieval Aristotelian parlance, the production of “*propria*”. In other words, striving is nothing other than a thing’s “active”, or effect-

29 For alternative interpretations of Spinozistic “striving” (inertial; probabilistic; in terms of inherence, PSR, motive tendencies or present “states” rather than durationally unfolding eternal essences) see Bennett, *A Study* p. 222; Carriero, “Spinoza on final causality”, 133ff; “Conatus and Perfection in Spinoza”; Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method*, p. 107ff; Della Rocca, “Spinoza’s Metaphysical Psychology,” pp. 194ff; *Spinoza*, pp. 145ff; Donagan, *Spinoza*, p. 153; Garrett, “Spinoza’s conatus argument”, “Teleology in Spinoza,” pp. 313-4; Lin, “Teleology and Human Action”; Nadler, *Spinoza’s Ethics*, pp. 194ff. For a more general account of the history of this principle see Cohen, “*Quantum in se est*”. See also note 23.

generating, essence.³⁰ This explains why Spinoza can nonetheless agree with tradition at least that the conatus represents a *universal* principle (as also befits his own naturalism). This is because on his account there is striving wherever there are efficiently-causal productive essences; but all things possess essences (E2d2); and all essences are intrinsically causally productive. This last claim follows from a principle asserted already in Part 1 of the *Ethics*: “Nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow” (E1p36).³¹ Any existing, or actual, essence will thus necessarily give rise to some effects, and thus be active.³² Hence each and every existing “thing” can also be said to strive to a greater or lesser degree, reflecting the degree of its causal autonomy from its environment.

What this shows is that the conatus doctrine – the great hinge of Spinoza's moral philosophy – is a direct consequence of Spinoza's conception of the nature of essence, and more precisely of his view of essence as something that is causally intrinsically productive. In other words, in conformity with Spinoza's ambition to deduce an ethics from his metaphysics, the doctrine that founds much of Spinoza's moral philosophy turns out to be an elaboration of a perfectly general metaphysical principle asserted already in Part 1.

The question for us is then this: What pushes Spinoza toward this view of essence? Arguably it follows from a conjunction of three very basic postulates of his metaphysics and theology, namely that

30 By E5p29s, there are two other ways one can gloss “actual” in E3p7: as being in duration and as being implied by God's nature. Given E3p7d, “active” strikes me as the most appropriate gloss. Cf. Spinoza's comment that “God's power is nothing except God's active [*actuosam*] essence” (E2p3s). Spinoza also does not mention “actuality” every time he identifies striving with essence (see e.g. E4p26d), suggesting that this qualification is not meant to represent a significant restriction, as it would be at least on the durational reading of “actual” (since not all things are in duration).

31 As has been often noted, Spinoza uses “essence” and “nature” interchangeably.

32 Cf. Spinoza's claim that from the essential properties of any thing, as stated by its definition, an intellect can infer some further set of properties (E1p16d).

- (1) all things other than God are immanent modifications of God's own being (rather than, as for Descartes or Leibniz for example, substances external to their creator) (E1p18; E3p6d);
- (2) the essence of God (who has no non-essential properties) consists in causal "power [*potentia*]" (E1p34d); this is, more precisely, the power to bestow existence and activity on all things; and, finally,
- (3) all the effects God is capable of producing are necessarily produced (E1p17s/G 2:62).

In other words, Spinoza's conception of essence, and hence of striving (and thus ultimately also of the three phenomena of moral agency that striving grounds) stands and falls with his ability to justify these three basic commitments of his theology and metaphysics: substance-monism; identification of divine essence with power; necessitarianism. Together these entail that all non-divine entities are the immanent affections of a being whose essential nature is to be an absolutely infinite causal power – the necessarily realized power of producing all possible effects. And so ultimately each creature strives because at bottom each is nothing other than a determination of this power, an effect by means of which the one substance produces still further effects.³³

We can also put this by saying that all creatures strive because they are all determinate manifestations of *divine striving*, that is of the activity of the divine essence. At first blush it certainly might seem strange to think of an infinite and perfect being like God "striving". For such language may appear to imply a struggle against something. But we must take care not to be misled by the connotations of end-directedness present in the standard English translation of "conatus" as "striving". Nor by the fact that starting with E3p8, Spinoza devotes himself primarily to an analysis of *finite* striving, as it unfolds in duration. The conatus doctrine has a perfectly universal scope. As Spinoza says in E3p6, it is "each thing"

33 For other passages that ground striving of modes in divine power cf. E3p7d, E4p4d, E2p45s, E1p24c.

that strives. Moreover, all of the various components of the doctrine fit the divine case just as well: the causal 'schema' we have identified as proper to striving – namely, the relation of “necessary following” of propria from an essence – equally applies to the causality of the divine essence. For this essence too is a causal “power” from which things – indeed, an infinity of them – “follow necessarily” (E1p34, E1p16). And, as substance, God is by definition “in” himself (E1d3). So when in E1p16 Spinoza declares that “[f]rom the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many ways”, he is describing nothing other than the divine conatus. God's striving will of course differ greatly, even if only in degree, from the striving of any finite thing. Unlike our striving, divine striving will not be conceivable in relation to duration; none of it will depend on inadequate ideas; none of it will be resisted, thwarted or modified by any external causes. For, in relation to God, there are no external causes.³⁴

In seeing the striving of creatures as a manifestation of divine striving Spinoza carries on the long-standing theological tradition according to

34 The isomorphism of the general causal 'schema' of striving on the one hand, and of the causal schema of God's production of the world on the other, further confirm that striving should be construed non-teleologically.

It's controversial to include God in the scope of the conatus doctrine; the most common reading of the doctrine takes it to be applicable only to finite modes. But for this same conclusion cf. also Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p. 153. Consider also that in his writings Spinoza repeatedly talks about divine “will” (willing is one way of conceiving of striving) and that in *Metaphysical Thoughts* he writes explicitly that God “perseveres” by the “power” which “is nothing but his essence” (2.6/G 1:260). However, either (1) a teleological construal of striving (given Spinoza's universally acknowledged rejection of divine ends), or (2) restricting the sense of “actuality” in E3p7 to the durational sense (see note 30), would preclude God from being included in the scope of the conatus doctrine. As regards (1), as noted above (see note 13), I side with interpreters who hold that Spinoza rejects all metaphysical teleology, and so also doesn't permit a teleological reading of the conatus doctrine. Regarding (2), E2p45s offers evidence against a durational reading of striving.

which finite creatures, in their deficient ways, imitate God's own being and power. The key difference is that in Spinoza's substance-monistic framework, finite creatures are not just *like* their transcendent creator. They *are* manifestations of God's own essence and causal power, the finite means through which God exerts this power.³⁵

5. On the impossibility of suicide

There remains one more element of the metaphysical foundations of will, appetite and desire which thus far we have left unaddressed. This is the intrinsic connection striving has to self-preservation. For, to recall, Spinoza asserts not merely that each thing "strives", but more specifically that it "strives to persevere in its being" (E3p6). In the mouth of a Stoic or a medieval Aristotelian, this would mean that things strive because perseverance in being stands for them as an end. The question for us is this: given his rejection of metaphysical teleology, how does Spinoza reinterpret this relation between striving and perseverance?

The answer can be found in the way Spinoza argues for this relation.³⁶ The argument in question is made possible by Spinoza's underlying, more general commitment to the intelligibility of being. From this commitment it follows that truths about existence and about causal relations can be discovered through mere reflection on the eternal natures of things, as stated in their definitions.³⁷ The specific premise of Spinoza's

35 Cf. Aquinas, *SCG* 19.3; cf. Lin, "Teleology and Human Action".

36 What follows is only one of many ways Spinoza's argument about perseverance has been construed. For an alternative reading see e.g. Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, ch.4, and Carriero, "Conatus and perfection in Spinoza". For a teleological interpretation, see Garrett, "Spinoza's Ethical Theory," pp. 290, 296; Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics*, p. 198; Della Rocca, "Spinoza's Metaphysical Psychology," p. 213.

37 Cf. Bennett, *A Study*, pp. 234-5; Lin, "Teleology and Human Action," p. 345. For an in-depth study of intelligibility as Spinoza's most fundamental commitment see Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, "Rational Manifesto". On the conatus doctrine as a "specification of a principle of sufficient reason" see Carriero, "Spinoza on Final Causality," p. 132ff; Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, pp. 138-43. It's not

argument about the relation of striving to perseverance is that a thing's definition, in stating its essence, states an eternal truth about the conditions of this thing's *existence* (as well as intelligibility) (E2d2). That is, it states what is necessary and sufficient for the thing being defined to be (for finite modes this means, to 'be actualized in duration') and to be conceived. On this basis Spinoza concludes that *logically* no essence can give rise to effects that would entail its own negation, and thus the negation of the thing's existence (E3p4). For an essence that (per impossibile) contained sufficient grounds for its own negation would in Spinoza's eyes be simply contradictory. That is, it would belong not to a genuine, unified "thing" at all but to a chimera, like a 'square circle'. In short, logically a thing's essence by itself can never suffice for that thing's destruction (in contrast to the thing's total state at any given time, a state that includes properties due at least in part to external causes).

As a result, for Spinoza to say that all things "strive to persevere in being" is not to name some end that things have when striving, some future or possible state of being that they all want to reach. It is rather to name a logically necessary property common to all essential effects. Considered just in its essential nature, abstracting from external causal influences, each thing must continue to be what it essentially is, no matter what else is true of the effects that follow from its essence – no matter, that is, what other qualities its striving involves or by what specific actions it proceeds. The self-destruction of an essence is for Spinoza simply a self-evident and rudimentary conceptual impossibility, tantamount to there being, miraculously, an effect with no cause. As he writes, "Anyone who gives this a little thought will see" that if a thing "should, from the necessity of his own nature, strive not to exist...is as impossible as that

obvious what kind of logic could model causal relations in Spinozistic nature; see Garrett, "Spinoza's Necessitarianism," pp. 193f. See also Bennett's criticism of Spinoza's decision to leave temporal considerations out of definitions: since in fact "causal laws cover stretches of time", a thing could cause itself to not exist after a period of time (*A Study*, p. 235; cf. Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p. 138ff).

something should come from nothing" (E4p20s).³⁸

Occasionally in the *Ethics* Spinoza also implies that a thing's striving involves not merely such non-contradictory effects, but more specifically non-contradictory effects that *increase* this thing's causal power (E3p12, cf. E4p31d). This makes striving look less like mere maintenance of an existential status quo or like simple inertia (to which it is sometimes compared by scholars) and more like phenomena that intrinsically tend toward a maximum (for example, the sequence of natural numbers, or the acceleration of falling objects).³⁹ The fact that without any appeal to ends, striving can take on this sort of 'maximizing' profile in Spinoza's framework follows from the fact that it is something a thing does insofar as it is in itself, that is, insofar as it is an "adequate" cause. It is easiest to see the mechanism responsible for this maximization from the perspective of thought. Namely, insofar as any mind is able to act from itself, or adequately, it necessarily continues to increase in its power of producing adequate ideas. This is because the more we (genuinely) understand, the more we can understand.⁴⁰

This is what matters look like when we consider a thing in its essential nature, in abstraction from external causes. But once other entities enter the picture, destruction once again becomes a logical and so also metaphysical possibility. There is no longer any immediate logical guarantee that the conditions necessary for the actualization of this particular eternal essence will continue to be affirmed. And the more what follows from a thing's essence follows inadequately – that is, the less this essence causes and explains any given effect – the greater the likelihood

38 For similarly 'logical' readings of Spinozistic perseverance cf. Bennett, *A Study*, pp. 234-36; Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics*, p. 196. Cf. also Hobbes's description of the drive to persevere as "a certain impulsion of nature, no less than that whereby a stone moves downward" (*De Cive* 1.7).

39 For criticism of this increase claim see Della Rocca, "Spinoza's Metaphysical Psychology," p. 213. For an inertial reading, see e.g. Carriero, "Spinoza on final causality", p. 134; Garrett, "Spinoza's conatus argument", p. 145.

40 This reading was suggested to me by Don Rutherford. For an alternative proposal see Carriero, "Conatus and Perfection in Spinoza", p. 79.

that the contribution of other beings to this effect will bring about undesirable consequences, including diminution of the thing's causal power, and eventually its wholesale destruction (cf. E4p30-1). For this reason, striving has to be understood in conditional or hypothetical terms, as a claim about what a thing *would* do, were it left to its own devices, and per impossibile free from the influence of things more powerful and essentially different from it (E4a1).⁴¹

Seen in a more concrete and practical light, Spinoza's principle of universal self-preservation amounts to the claim that suicide is in metaphysical rigour impossible (E4p20s). (Indeed according to Spinoza it is impossible even to desire or will suicide, once will and desire are properly understood as manifestations of striving.) At first glance, this may appear to be simply false – indeed, an offence to everyday experience of candles burning out, metastasising cells, clinical depression. Unsurprisingly, the thesis has caused much consternation among commentators.⁴² But Spinoza's claim is simply that all cases of *ostensible* self-destruction could in principle be shown to have been brought about by causes external to and heterogeneous to the thing's own essence. In other words, in metaphysical rigour neither a suicidal person nor a burning candle constitute a unified, single thing. So once again, ordinary phenomenological evidence fails to be a reliable clue to metaphysical truths, not just about causality but equally individuation.

41 For other conditional construals of striving see Carriero, "Spinoza on Final Causality," pp. 132ff; Della Rocca "Spinoza's Metaphysical Psychology," pp. 194ff; *Spinoza*, pp. 146ff. Cf. also Descartes, PP 3.56. For criticism of such construals of power see Leibniz, Letter to de Volder (March 24/April 3, 1699), *Philosophical Essays*, 172.

42 For discussion of the doctrine see Bennett, *A Study*, pp. 234-35; Della Rocca, "Spinoza's Metaphysical Psychology," p. 200ff; *Spinoza*, p. 138ff; Donagan, *Spinoza*, p. 148ff; Garrett, "Spinoza's Conatus Argument", p. 147-9; Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics*, p. 196ff. Cf. also Hobbes, *Dialogue of the Common Laws (The English Works*, 6.88).

6. Will, appetite and desire

With now finally have in place enough of the metaphysical picture underpinning Spinoza's view of will, desire and appetite to be able to say something more specific about these particular phenomena. This will be the goal of the next two sections.

Let me start by quoting Spinoza's own account of striving's relation to will, appetite and desire:

When.. .striving is related only [*solam refertur*] to the Mind, it is called Will; but when it is related to the Mind and Body together [*simul*], it is called Appetite. This Appetite, therefore, is nothing but the very essence of man, from whose nature there necessarily follow those things that promote his preservation [*conservationi inserviunt*]. And so man is determined to do those things. Between appetite and desire there is no difference, except that desire is generally related to men insofar as they are conscious [*conscii*] of their appetite. So desire can be defined as appetite together with consciousness of the appetite. (E3p9s)

The scholium describes the phenomena in question in relation to human beings specifically. This is in line with Spinoza's stated aim of focusing, from Part 2 of the treatise onward, on what is most relevant to *our* blessedness, rather than dividing his attention among the infinite number of other things that also follow from God. Nonetheless, from what Spinoza says in the passage we can extrapolate a more general picture of the phenomena in question. For, as Spinoza notes in the course of his discussion of minds, “the things [he has] shown...are completely general and do not pertain more to man than to other Individuals, all of which, though in different degrees, are nevertheless animate.” (E2p13s/G 2:96)⁴³

43 Thus although E3p9s defines the phenomena by reference to a “mind [*mens*]”, whereas God for example has an “intellect [*intellectus*]”, I take Spinoza to have a more general definition of will, desire and appetite, according to which “will” for example is simply striving under the attribute of thought, whether it is

The basic thesis underlying E3p9s is one we've already encountered above: will, desire and appetite all constitute at bottom attribute-specific ways of conceiving of striving. What we have since learned about the nature of striving allows us to flesh out this thesis further. In particular, can infer that will, desire and appetite will all refer to ways a thing's essential nature intrinsically determines it to "do" certain things – rather than, for example, describing ways an entity might *respond* to something else that either is or appears to be good. Furthermore, Spinoza's non-teleological construal of the nature of striving implies that the causality governing will, desire and appetite will likewise not involve ends. For there seems to be no good reason to conclude that the mere act of considering a non-teleological relation in reference to a particular attribute should fundamentally alter the causal nature of this relation, especially if we recall that for Spinoza the "order and connection" of causes is the same under all the attributes (E2p7s/G 2:90).⁴⁴ In this sense, for Spinoza we are the striving of a finite mind or of an infinite intellect.

However, as a result of Spinoza's narrowing of his focus in Part 2, the formulations in E3p9s are ambiguous in at least two ways. First, Spinoza's reasons for restricting "appetite" there to striving in relation to a mind and body together are unclear. For in principle "appetite" could denote striving (1) under the attribute thought and extension specifically; or (2) under *all humanly knowable* attributes, whatever these are; or finally (3) under *all existing* attributes (although we can conceive, and thus speak, of only those two). But this ambiguity is ultimately inconsequential, since it concerns merely the rules for applying a particular term, rather than the underlying metaphysical picture. The second ambiguity concerns the kinds of things that could have an "appetite". Namely, does Spinoza wish to reserve this term for human beings alone, or does he cite the human case merely as an example, but *any* striving mind and body can be said to constitute together an "appetite"? Passages like E3p57s suggest that we resolve this second ambiguity in favour of the latter reading. But it seems to me that *any* thing that strives in thought and extension could thereby count as having an appetite.

44 The case of desire is slightly more complicated because it includes in addition to a reference to the attributes the criterion of consciousness, but Spinoza is clear that this makes no difference to the causal nature of the

indeed merely “spiritual automata” (TdIE §85): our appetites, desires and volitions are governed entirely by the logical necessity of what is implied by our essential natures.

This much the three phenomena of moral agency that we're investigating have conspicuously in common. But E3p9s also puts us in a position to work out what sets them apart. Let's take will first. According to the scholium, will is striving considered in relation to the mind alone. That is, it is striving regarded solely under the attribute of thought, or as a relation of ideas. More precisely, to will something is for the essence of a particular mind – i.e., the collection of ideas representing a particular body (E2p13) to imply another idea, representing another thing, or the striver's own modification, or, confusedly, both. Conversely, any representation can be said to have been “willed” to the degree that it has been produced (and thus can also be explained) by the thing's own essence under the attribute of thought, i.e. by the essence of this thing qua mind. It's no surprise therefore to find Spinoza insisting that, contrary to what some of his predecessors have contended, the will is not any kind of “faculty” (E2p48), separable from a purely representational understanding. In his view the causal power proper to the mental realm consists solely in the production of ideas, that is, in actions of the mind (cf. E2d3, E5pref/G 2:280). Thus, for example, the divine will – or divine striving under the attribute of thought – is simply the totality of consequences that necessarily follow from God's essence qua thinking. And this is nothing other than the eternally existent totality of all ideas, or what Spinoza also labels God's “infinite intellect” (cf. E2p49, E2p4).⁴⁵

This way of conceiving of the nature of the will has at least two noteworthy consequences. First, Spinoza's reduction of will to ideas produced by the essence of a mind implies that not only human beings but each and every thing, from God to pincushions, can be said to “will”. This is because for Spinoza mindedness is a universal, albeit scalar,

underlying striving: see E3da1expl, Ep.58, E4pref (G 2:206-7), E3p37d, E3p57d.

⁴⁵ Cf. Hobbes's view that the will is simply our last desire or aversion (*De Cive* 13.16).

phenomenon: all things have minds, even if of different degrees of complexity. This of course is a result in line with Spinoza's commitment to naturalism. Secondly, Spinoza's conception of the will also makes clear that for him there can be no such thing as "free will", if by "freedom" we were to mean the absence of determination, or the genuine possibility of acting otherwise. And so "[t]hose...who believe that they...do anything from a free decision of the mind dream with open eyes" (E3p2s/G 2:144). This doesn't mean that Spinoza has no room in his ethics for any kind of "freedom". But for him "freedom" means causal self-determination (E1d7). All told, we're quite far here from the notion of "will" entertained for example by Descartes – an absolutely free, *sui generis* faculty separable from a purely representational intellect, and reserved for only certain kinds of beings.

So much for Spinoza's notion of will. What can we say about Spinozistic appetite? In E3p9s Spinoza defines "appetite" as striving related to mind and body "together", and "therefore" "nothing but the very essence" of a thing, "determining" it to certain acts or states of being. In other words, the notion of appetite allows us to pick out what a thing does because of its essential nature under both of the humanly knowable attributes. That is to say, it lets us refer to the striving of the "thing" that is numerically one but is conceived on the one hand as thinking and on the other as extended (cf. E2p7s, E3p2s/G 2:141). Since Spinoza is committed to the numerical identity of a given mind and of the body that this mind represents, on his account no willing can occur unless there is also, simultaneously, a corresponding appetite. That is, whenever the essence of a mind gives rise to certain ideas, the essence of the body that this mind represents will also give rise to certain effects in extension – to certain movements of bodies or stoppages of such movements. Yet, despite the numerical identity of these two causal series, we must also be able to distinguish them; hence the need for the concept of "will" in addition to that of "appetite", even if referentially the two are redundant. For each attribute, qua essence of substance, must be conceivable "through itself", that is without invoking any other concept (E1p10, E1d3-4). And, no

matter how extravagant this may sound to a Spinozistically-untrained ear, given that for Spinoza *all* things are both extended and to some degree thinking, in his universe every *res* has an appetite, just as every *res* wills. In the *Ethics* Spinoza explicitly mentions the “appetites” of “insects, fish, and birds” (E3p57s), but on his account even rudimentary beings such as pebbles and light-bulbs will be appetitive creatures.⁴⁶

Finally, E3p9s allows us to say a bit more about Spinozistic “desire”. The scholium defines desire as a kind of appetite, and more precisely an appetite of which one is “conscious”. What Spinoza means by this last qualification is not immediately clear. The notion of consciousness will of course soon afterwards acquire great importance for philosophers; but it is not one Spinoza himself pays much attention to, or develops in any systematic fashion. The few remarks he does make suggest that he takes consciousness to be characterized at least by the following:

1. it is a scalar property (E5p31s, E5p39s, E5p42s);
2. it is accompanied by “knowing” (E2p23, E3p9d, E2p19, E3p30d, E2p35s);
3. a higher degree of consciousness signals “distinctness” – that is (by E2p36; E2p13s/G 2:96) “adequacy” – of the relevant ideas, which no longer represent what are in fact different entities as one entity, or solely under some common aspect (E2p40s1/G 2:120-1);
4. a higher degree of consciousness also denotes a higher degree of

46 In what sense can we think of striving as related to mind and body “together”, if (following Descartes) Spinoza views minds and bodies as having nothing in common conceptually? Spinoza cannot mean that there is a single, unified representation of such striving, on the basis of some common concept; for what happens under each attribute must be explained in terms of that attribute alone (E1p10). Presumably thus he has in mind the conjunction of two equivalent descriptions of what is numerically a single causal process, an account of striving from the perspective of thought and an account of this striving from the perspective of extension. (Recall also that God is defined as a thing under all the attributes [E1d6]. This presumably represents another instance of thinking about something under several attributes “together”.)

capacity for *autonomous* causation of a variety of effects (E5p39s, E2p13s).

This rough list of some of the properties of Spinozistic consciousness helps shed some more light on what Spinoza might have in mind when he defines “desire” as appetite of which one is “conscious”. Namely, to refer to a thing's “desires” is to refer to what this thing does because of its essential nature when (a) this nature is conceived of as participating both in extension and thought, and (b) the thing in question is able to some degree to genuinely understand what it is doing – rather than merely experiencing the bodily movements or ideas its essence necessitates through a fog of entirely confused perceptions, as is possible according to Spinoza both in willing and mere appetite.⁴⁷ By Spinoza's doctrine of common notions (E2p37-8), every mind is necessarily furnished with at least some adequate, or distinct, ideas – for example, those representing the pervasive properties of thought and extension. (Hence to some degree every thing is genuinely “active”, a self-sufficient, or “adequate”, cause [E3d1-2]). As a consequence, every mind will have some distinct knowledge of its own essential effects under the two attributes, at least insofar as these constitute particular modifications of extension and thought. Thus on Spinoza's account every being will experience desire to some degree, just as every being wills and every being experiences appetite. Of course most beings, being capable of few distinct representations, will experience only faint glimmers of desire.⁴⁸ And, to return to an earlier concern, to the extent that what we manage to distinctly represent in cases of desire are the causal relations governing our appetites, we will recognize both their inevitability and their non-

47 For Spinoza's commitment to the omniscience of each mind, see E2p12.

48 Whether modes can ever have adequate ideas is controversial; see e.g. Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p. 114. For Spinoza's notion of consciousness, see e.g. Garrett, “Representation and Consciousness”; Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, ch. 3.

Insofar as all God's ideas are distinct, he will be perfectly conscious of his entire appetite, and hence will also “desire” to the same degree as he experiences appetite.

teleological nature. But to the extent that our self-understanding as desiring agents is deficient, it is possible for us to falsely take ourselves to be acting on freely-chosen ends. But “whether a man is conscious of his appetite or not, the appetite still remains one and the same” (E3da1expl).

Given that Spinoza characterizes consciousness as a matter of what an agent represents distinctly about herself, his lack of attention to this concept – however vexing to a reader – should now appear less surprising. For, as we've seen, Spinoza systematically downplays the philosophical significance of the first-personal point of view. It should also be unsurprising that of all the morally-relevant phenomena of agency discussed by Spinoza, the one characterized by consciousness is least fundamental in the order of explanation: a category of a category of striving, which itself is determination of divine power. This sequence attests to Spinoza's belief that in order to have a true moral philosophy, one must observe the proper order of philosophizing (cf. E2p10cs/G 2:93). So one does not set out from a conception of the self, or from the point of view of self-understanding. Rather, one must begin with a universal framework, the most general point of view, and only then figure out how anything like consciousness might fit into this cosmic schema.

Let me conclude this section with three more general remarks about Spinoza's conception of will, desire and appetite.

(1) In the first place, it will be useful to bring together and systematize the various facets of Spinoza's moral-philosophical naturalism which the foregoing analysis has brought out. We can represent this naturalism as a combination of two main theses. First of all, on Spinoza's account phenomena of moral agency such as will, desire and appetite do not amount to a heterogeneous domain separate from – or even opposed to – the kingdom of nature, as some other thinkers have proposed. To give an account of the workings of these phenomena Spinoza doesn't need to introduce any *sui generis* entities. He can draw solely on perfectly general metaphysical theses about the nature of attributes, essences, causes, God, and thought. And once we grant Spinoza the claim that everything that is, is both thinking and extended, all that is needed for

appetite, will and desire to manifest themselves is an essence that is to some degree causally self-sufficient. As noted above, by virtue of Spinoza's doctrine of common notions, this is a condition met by every essence. This is not to imply that justifying the metaphysical theses on which Spinoza relies is a trivial matter, but it shows how deeply this feature of Spinoza's ethics is rooted in his most rudimentary metaphysical commitments.⁴⁹

The second aspect of Spinoza's moral-philosophical naturalism is that human beings are not the sole occupants of the moral and practical sphere, at least as far as volitions, appetites and desires are concerned. For to some degree every thing necessarily experiences such states. (We can think of this principle as the moral-philosophical twin of Spinoza's infamous panpsychism.) The doctrines Spinoza advances are perfectly general: whatever features are relevant in human beings for the applicability of a concept like "will", they are present to some degree in every being. It is true that in the *Ethics* Spinoza's utmost concern is with *our* blessedness. But in principle an analogous if simpler treatise could have been written about other kinds of beings, with their specific essences, desires and volitions – an *Ethics* of bees, for example, or an *Ethics* of spoons.

(2) The second general observation I would like to make about Spinoza's account of will, appetite and desire is this. Given that for Spinoza these three phenomena constitute one and the same causal series, his account of their nature amounts to a tacit repudiation of that tradition of moral philosophy according to which moral agents are loci of a fundamental *conflict* between desires or appetites on the one hand and will on the other. This kind of conflict presents both a descriptive problem for moral philosophers (as they try to outline the structure of the soul that would allow for such a conflict) and a prescriptive one (as they advise us on how best to subdue our appetites).⁵⁰ For Spinoza, in contrast, the will is

49 For skepticism about Spinoza's ability to justify the necessity of either modes or attributes see e.g. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, pp. 254-61, 285-9.

50 See e.g. Descartes, *Passions* §47.

not some 'higher' or more noble rational faculty through which we can (and indeed ought to) dominate our unruly, 'lower' inclinations. Instead, will, appetite, and desire all identify from the perspectives of two fundamental concepts ("thought" and "extension"), one and the same causal dimension of a thing's essential nature.

(3) Finally, it's worth noting here that E3p9s does not propose a separate label for striving considered under the attribute of extension alone. We can of course dismiss this omission as insignificant. But if we take it at face value, it suggests that striving that is not referred to the attribute of thought at all does not count as a phenomenon of moral agency, at least in the sense that it does not belong in a discussion that culminates, as E3p9s does, in an account of the good. Striving considered as a relation of bodies alone belongs instead in the so-called Physical Digression (G 2:97-102). On this reading, although striving is indeed an "essential underpinning of Spinoza's ethics", not all ways of conceiving of striving are relevant to an ethics.

This lets us, conversely, give one final refinement to our definitions of Spinozistic will, desire and appetite. Namely, these are best understood as ways a thing's essential nature *as a mind* necessarily determines it to be and act – whether it is a matter of relations of ideas exclusively, as in the case of willing, or of relations of ideas together with relations of movement and rest among bodies, as in the case of both appetite and desire.

7. The nature of the "good"

The final question confronting us – the second of the two guiding questions we identified in section §2 – is, how, according to Spinoza, we are to understand anything like a volition, desire or appetite *for the good*.⁵¹ Spinoza certainly agrees that there is some relation between desires, appetites, and volitions on the one hand, and the property of "goodness" that certain things appear to have on the other. But, given his rejection of

51 There are many aspects to Spinoza's notion of "goodness"; here I only explore its relation to striving.

metaphysical teleology, he must conceive of this relation in such a way that, in metaphysical rigour, the “good” does not become an end for the moral agents who will or desire it. The question is, how, precisely does Spinoza do this?

The answer lies in the very same scholium in which Spinoza defines volition, desire and appetite. His proposal is quite similar to Hobbes's: striving and its manifestations under the various attributes are to be regarded as causally and explanatorily *prior* to any judgments or attributions of “goodness”.⁵² Thus, “we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it” (E3p9s). That is, it is not just that our desires or appetites for a good are not responses to the *intrinsic* properties of the thing being judged good (as if goodness were – as some others have supposed – a category of being itself, something “positive in things, considered in themselves” [E4pref/G 2:208]). It is that they are not responses at all. That is, we do not desire or will some object or state of being because of a prior perception or judgment that it is good – that is, because we have first perceived or decreed its goodness or desirability. In Spinoza's view, the situation is exactly the reverse: if we judge something to be good, this is because some prior desire (will, appetite) – that is, some intrinsic effect of our essential nature – relates us to that thing, whether it be an external object or a represented state of our own being.

This is how Spinoza can preserve the relation of phenomena like volition or desire to the “good”, while not giving up on his ban on teleology, nor on his attempt to derive an ethics from his metaphysics, nor on the truth-aptness of his own ethics. For, on his account, the “good” – any “good” – is not an end that fundamentally explains a thing's actions, but rather a necessary effect of its essence. Once again, the phenomenology of ordinary experience thus proves misleading. From Spinoza's perspective the common impression that we will or want something *because* it is good, or because it appears good, is once again

⁵² Cf. *Leviathan* 6.7, *De Homine* 11.4.

only a symptom of our ignorance of our own causal nature as agents.

We can characterize this dependency of moral value judgements on striving more precisely if we recall our conclusion in the previous section, namely that for Spinoza all desires, volitions, and appetites in one way or another must involve the attribute of thought. In this light, the judgement that something is “good” can be understood to be simply one of the consequences of a striver's essential nature under the attribute of thought, i.e. part of what it is for its essence as mind to be causally active. That is, judgements attributing the property of “goodness” to an external object or to a thing's own possible state, should be seen as belonging among the ideas that are necessarily produced by the essence of a thing's mind – alongside any other ideas it may entertain about the object of its judgement (for example, that it is round, green, and edible).⁵³

E3p9s also makes clear that judgements of a thing's “goodness” are not reserved to cases of desire – that is, to instances where our representations are to some degree distinct or conscious. They equally follow from mere appetite and willing. So in Spinoza's universe all things, regardless of their degree of reality, are constantly perceiving things as “good”, without necessarily apprehending such judgements distinctly, simply by virtue of possessing necessarily active essences. And for Spinoza (unlike Hobbes) it is in principle at least fundamentally intelligible, not a brute fact, why things have the desires (volitions, appetites) they do, and hence also why they deem certain things but not others “good”. Namely, this is dictated by their essential natures, and these in turn are simply the necessary modifications of God himself.

53 Bennett's alternative proposal is that for Spinoza moral judgments are *supervenience* of representational features on the intrinsic states of essence (*A Study*, §52.3); Carriero's that for Spinoza our inertial tendencies are, when conscious, *additionally* accompanied by a “pro-attitude” or affirmation (“Spinoza on Final Causality,” pp. 138-41).

I take Spinoza to be making the weaker claim that *if* we judge something to be good, this is explicable as a manifestation of our striving, not the stronger one that everything we relate to as a consequence of our essential nature is also “good” (even if we only perceive this indistinctly).

As far as human beings specifically are concerned, Spinoza writes that “We know nothing to be certainly good...except what really leads to understanding”, “What we strive for from reason is nothing but understanding” (E4p26-27). That is to say, insofar as our desires, volitions and appetites follow from the *adequate* ideas that make up our essence as minds, what we desire and will is solely understanding. This is because greater understanding is the one thing we certainly know to increase our power to “act” as human beings (E4pref/G 2:208). And if, unlike the philosopher, we are mistaken about the true nature of our good, and instead pursue “wealth, honor, and sensual pleasure” (TdIE §3), this is because the appetites and desires responsible for such misjudgement follow at least in part from the inadequate ideas composing our essence as minds.⁵⁴

8. Conclusion: Spinoza's 'ethics'

The theses I have attributed to Spinoza here are likely, it seems, to inspire one of two diametrically opposed reactions in the reader.

In one sense it seems difficult to dispute that moral philosophy constitutes the core of Spinoza's overall philosophical project. Even the titles of his works announce that this is his pre-eminent concern.⁵⁵ And, as was noted above, in the *Ethics* Spinoza announces explicitly that his aim is to lead us, “as if by the hand”, to our mind's highest blessedness (E2pref).

⁵⁴ For Spinoza's view of species essences, see note 27.

Since for Spinoza value concepts always implicitly refer to an ideal standard (E4pref/G 2:207-8], E4p65d), more precisely striving determines first what we take to be the relevant “model [*exemplar*]” for a thing under consideration, and only by reference to this determines what we regard as “good”. Hence in E4pref Spinoza mentions that we “desire” to form a model of human nature. The model Spinoza offers us there should be understood as a hypothetical or conditional representation of our causal capacities qua human. But we can also relate to this model inadequately, and represent as an end for our actions, or something to be emulated or memorized without genuine understanding.

⁵⁵ Cf. Garrett, “Spinoza’s Ethical Theory,” p. 268.

It seems that for Spinoza philosophy as such is not a purely theoretical or disinterested search for timeless and objective truths, one that would be indifferent to the philosophizing individual. Instead, whatever leads to “understanding” is also genuinely “good” for us (E4p27, cf. E4app4, TdIE §18). So engaging in philosophy is inseparable from undergoing a spiritual and practical conversion – from attaining salvation, happiness, freedom, finding the “best” way of living, just as was the case for Socrates or the Stoics.

From this point of view, Spinoza cannot be thought of simply as a metaphysician, intent on recording the true descriptions of “essences” and “properties” of things. He is also – and in the eyes of some of his readers, first and foremost – a moral and religious philosopher.⁵⁶ From this perspective, his rejection of common sense, of moral intuitions, of the data of ordinary experience, appear simply as the inevitable costs of philosophical rigour in deducing the true conditions of our salvation.

Yet things can also look very different. One can worry that Spinoza's eccentric conclusions – such as his denial of the possibility of suicide, or of our responsiveness to the good – are evidence of a blind adherence to abstract metaphysical logic that renders his ethics incapable of explaining truly significant ordinary phenomena, and of honoring beliefs we value.⁵⁷ Indeed, it's not even clear that Spinoza's ethics amounts to a genuine “ethics”. It is certainly a rather austere, scientifically detached view of the aims, scope and methods of ethics, not ethics in the sense of a body of knowledge focused on distinctively human concerns, or on practical reasoning, or on the realm of what *ought* to be.⁵⁸ Recent readers have chastised Spinoza for his neglect not just of “contingent facts” about

56 See e.g. Alquie, *Leçons sur Spinoza*; Curley, “Spinoza's Moral Philosophy,” p. 371; Garrett, “Spinoza's Ethical Theory,” pp. 268-69.

57 See e.g. Bennett's claim that Spinoza fails to capture our ordinary notions of will and desire (*A Study*, §52.4).

58 Similarly, Spinoza's epistemology may leave us wondering whether he can account for genuine reasoning and self-consciousness. See Wilson, “Objects, Ideas, and ‘Minds’”.

“human societies” but even of the mere passage of time;⁵⁹ but already Leibniz condemned Spinoza for “allow[ing] God infinite power only, not granting him either perfection or wisdom” (*New Essays* I.1, p. 73). Indeed we could accuse Spinoza of robbing not only God but also all human beings of the chance to be genuine moral agents: he makes us inhabit a world ruled by brute necessity, and stripped of ends, free will, all responsiveness to value. I mentioned in passing Spinoza's systematic effort to redefine ethical terms; but for him this involves characterizing their definienda in purely *metaphysical* terms. Thus “virtue” comes to mean nothing more than the degree of causal power an entity has; “good” and “evil” the degree to which something facilitates or hinders the acquisition of this power; “joy” and “sadness” denote changes in the degree of one's “reality”. In this sense it is correct to say that for Spinoza's ethics is just a category of his metaphysics.⁶⁰ It is not a grounding or a derivation of ethics from metaphysics, but a reduction of the former to the latter. So it is perhaps unsurprising that over the centuries some of his readers have regarded Spinoza as the “most godless atheist the world has ever seen”, spreading opinions “infinitely prejudicial to all the societies and concerns of mankind”.⁶¹

But whatever verdict we pass on Spinoza's interpretation of moral philosophy, we have to acknowledge the basic contention behind his proposals. This is that his way of doing ethics is the only way we can rehabilitate and retain ethics as a project of *veridical* thought, and so get hold of universally valid moral truths, ones that accord with what we know about nature and God as they are in themselves.

59 Bennett, *A Study*, pp. 235, 306.

60 Cf. Garrett, “Spinoza's Ethical Theory,” p. 286.

61 Words of 18th century theologian Burmannus (in Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 419).

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