

Spinoza's Metaphysics of Desire: The Demonstration of IIP6

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Abstract: In IIP6, Spinoza claims that all things strive to persevere in their being. The importance of this claim for Spinoza's philosophy cannot be overestimated. It is central to his metaphysics, psychology, ethics, and political philosophy. Yet, most recent commentators have viewed the demonstration of IIP6 with skepticism. These commentators usually interpret the demonstration as an argument from the impossibility of self-destruction. I argue that, although the demonstration does indeed contain such an argument, there is a second and more persuasive argument in the demonstration that proceeds from the premise that singular things express divine power. I start with an interpretation of Spinoza's notion of "expression" and show how it relates to his conception of efficient causality. In particular, I argue that the idea that effects express the natures of their efficient causes can be better understood if we take into account certain assumptions about efficient causality widely held in the seventeenth century. On the basis of this interpretation of expression, I show that Spinoza's conatus doctrine is a natural consequence of his main premise: that finite things express divine power.

Each natural thing, Spinoza tells us in IIP6 of his *Ethics*, is animated by a striving (*conatus*) for self-preservation.¹ This claim has significant ramifications for a wide variety of topics in Spinoza's philosophy. For example, Spinoza appeals to his *conatus* doctrine in his explanation of basic metaphysical categories such as causality and essence, in his account of psychological phenomena such as will and desire, in his discussion of ethical topics such as virtue, and in his treatment of political concepts

¹ "Unaquaeque res, quantum in se est, in suo esse perseverare conatur." All citations from Spinoza are from Gebhardt 1925. Most English translations are from Curley 1985 with occasional modifications. References to the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, Descartes' "Principles of Philosophy", *Cogitata Metaphysica*, and the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being* are abbreviated TdIE, DPP, CM, and KV respectively. Translations from the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP hereafter) and the *Tractatus Politicus* (TP hereafter) are my own. In citations from the *Ethics*, I use the following abbreviations: roman numerals refer to parts; 'P' means 'proposition'; 'C' means 'corollary'; 'S' means 'scholium'; 'D' means 'demonstration' e.g. 'IVP37S' means *Ethics*, part IV, proposition 37, scholium.

such as natural right. In this way, the *conatus* doctrine serves to link together Spinoza's metaphysics, cognitive and moral psychology, ethics, and political theory, thus forming the backbone of his system. Clearly then the importance of this claim for Spinoza's system cannot be overestimated. But is Spinoza entitled to it?

Many recent commentators doubt the validity of Spinoza's demonstration of the *conatus* doctrine.² One influential critic even goes so far as to describe the argument in favor of the *conatus* as "glaringly fallacious"³. It is often supposed that the weakness of the demonstration of IIP6 stems from Spinoza's failed attempt to deduce the *conatus* simply from the assumption that nothing destroys itself. As we shall see, such an attempt *is* fallacious. I believe, however, that, in the demonstration of IIP6, Spinoza offers not one but two arguments in favor of the *conatus*; the argument from the impossibility of self-destruction is supplemented by an additional argument from the expressive relationship between modes and God. I shall argue that this second argument is much stronger and ultimately more important for Spinoza.

Why then have recent commentators neglected this second argument? Several related factors have contributed to this omission. First, since the demonstration itself is extremely terse, stating its premises and conclusion without explanation, it is less than clear what role the premises concerning expression of divine power are intended to play.

What is more, the very notion of expression might seem enigmatic and vague. This results, in part, from the fact that the notion of expression employed by Spinoza relies on a conception of efficient causality which, although pervasive in the seventeenth century, is alien to our contemporary notions. Spinoza's seventeenth century readers, however, would immediately recognize the argument from expression as a variant of a class of traditional arguments concerning how the desire for self-preservation of creatures derives from their causal relationship to God. In short, the demonstration itself is little more than a sketch that gestures toward a more complete argument which Spinoza expects his readers to discern from his cursory exposition. We have lost touch with older notions of causality and the metaphysics of creation, and thus cannot easily oblige Spinoza.

My task here is to provide some of the missing context that renders the demonstration of IIP6 intelligible. Once this is accomplished, we shall see that Spinoza's argument for the *conatus* doctrine is stronger than usually supposed.

² Cf. Bennett 1984, 242; Della Rocca 1996; Garber 1994; Matson 1969; and Curley 1988, 107–115. More recently Don Garrett (2002) has offered a favorable assessment of the argument for IIP6.

³ Bennett 1984, 242.

1. *The Meaning of IIP6*

Before we attempt to interpret and evaluate Spinoza's demonstration of IIP6, we should specify exactly what he sets out to prove. As I understand it, IIP6 claims that all existing finite things possess these three characteristics: (1) they act, (2) their actions maintain their existence, and (3) they do everything they can in order to achieve this goal. I must now offer evidence in support of this interpretation.

To begin with, we know that the claim is meant to apply exclusively to actually existing finite things – as opposed to possible things, or infinite things – because, in the demonstration, Spinoza makes it clear that it pertains to what he calls “singular things” (*res singulares*). Earlier, he defines singular things as having “finite and determinate existence”⁴. We also know that the claim pertains to *all* such things, as indicated by “*unaquaeque res*”. Hence IIP6 gives us a universal statement regarding the behavior of finite things that actually exist.

All finite and actually existing things, IIP6 tells us, strive to persevere in being, i.e., try to stay in existence. This “striving” should be understood as action. According to Spinoza, to act (*agere*) is to produce an effect of which the thing acting is the adequate cause, i.e., a cause through which the effect can be understood without reference to anything else.⁵ In other words, action is adequate causation. Spinoza identifies a thing's *conatus* with its causal powers.⁶ So in order to show that “striving” refers to a kind of action, we need to establish that striving is a kind of causal activity independent of external causes. That Spinoza intends the *conatus* doctrine to describe what singular things do insofar as they act, i.e., are independent of external causes, can be seen from his use of the phrase *quantum in se est*. Literally this means: insofar as it is in itself. Della Rocca has noted that the phrase “*quantum in se est*” has the following technical meaning in Descartes' philosophy: *x*, insofar as it is in itself, does *F* if and only if *x*'s state is such that it will do *F* unless prevented by external causes.⁷ Spinoza seems to have taken over this Cartesian meaning. First of all, he accurately captures the Cartesian meaning of “*quantum in se est*” in his geometric exposition of Descartes' *Principles*.⁸ Moreover, the Cartesian meaning accords well with how Spinoza uses the expression “*in se est*” in his definition of substance. As Curley has pointed out, a substance is *in se* because it is independent of external causes.⁹ So to the extent that they too are independent of

⁴ IID7.

⁵ IID1, IID2.

⁶ IIP7D, IVP4D.

⁷ Della Rocca 1995, 196f.

⁸ DPP IIP14, G I/201.

⁹ Curley 1969, chap. 1. Garrett (2002, 134–141) offers a convincing interpretation in terms of Spinoza's metaphysics of inherence, which is intimately connected to conception and causation. Singular things, insofar as they are in themselves, are like substances, bearing, to that extent, the same conceptual and causal relationship to them selves as substances do.

external causes, singular things too can be described as “in themselves”. Action, in Spinoza’s technical sense, also requires independence from external causes. So by qualifying IIP6 with “*quantum in se est*” Spinoza can be seen as saying that the striving described in that proposition should be understood as a properly Spinozistic action. Striving for self-preservation is what singular things do insofar as their behavior is not determined by external causes, i.e., in virtue of their own intrinsic causal power.¹⁰

Lastly, Spinoza does not merely wish to affirm that all things only perform actions which aim at self-preservation; rather he makes the stronger claim that each singular thing *does everything it can* to maintain its existence. The difference between these two versions of the claim can be easily discerned by comparing the following two propositions:

- (1) If x does φ , then φ helps x .
- (2) x does φ (insofar as x can), if and only if φ helps x .

The first proposition corresponds to the claim that things only perform actions that help preserve their existence. The second proposition adds to this the further claim that things do everything in their power to maintain their existence.¹¹ One important difference between these two formulations is that while the second allows us to make inferences from an agent’s advantage to the agent’s behavior, the first does not. At most we can make negative inferences (x does nothing that doesn’t help x), or inferences from behavior to advantage. We cannot make positive inferences because we do not know whether the agent will do anything at all. The uses to which Spinoza puts IIP6 in the demonstration of subsequent propositions show that he understands the *conatus* doctrine as licensing positive inferences about an individual’s behavior on the basis of what actions will help preserve its being. For example, he says that we strive to promote those things which help us persevere in being and to avert

¹⁰ This talk of striving or aiming at goals might seem to indicate intelligent or intentional action, but such psychological notions would appear to conflict with the universal scope of the proposition. Spinoza holds that thought and extension are two separate attributes that have nothing in common. Bodies, i.e. modes of extension, we may presume, are singular things. So does the claim that every singular thing *strives* violate the separateness of attributes by ascribing a psychological predicate (viz., striving) to bodies? No, because, for Spinoza, striving is not a psychological predicate. We can see this from the fact that in his earliest writings, Spinoza, following Descartes, attributes striving to motion without the slightest indication that motion is a mental, in addition to being a physical, phenomenon (DPP, II, P17, and CM I, chap. 6 [G I/248]). Moreover, in IIP9S, Spinoza says that striving when related to the mind alone is called “will”, and related to the mind and body together is called “appetite”. The unspoken implication is that striving can be ascribed to the body alone. Thus it would be incorrect that the term “striving” carries with it the connotation of intentional action or some other psychological notion.

¹¹ Cf. Bennett 1984, 244f.

or destroy those things that hurt us.¹² If Spinoza meant (1), he would only be entitled to say that if we strive to destroy something, then it must be something that hurts us. Instead, he says we strive to destroy whatever hurts us, which follows from (2) but not (1).¹³

2. Summary of the Demonstration of IIP6

The demonstration of IIP6 is often seen as consisting of two stages; the first treats the relationship between the modes and God, and the second deals with the impossibility of self-destruction:

First Stage:

- (1) Singular things are modes which express God's attributes in a certain and determinate way (by IP25C).
- (2) Singular things express the power by which God is and acts (by IP34).

Second Stage:

- (3) No thing has anything in it that can destroy it (by IIP4).
- (4) Two things such that one can destroy the other cannot be in the same subject (by IIP5).

Conclusion:

- (5) Each thing, insofar as it is in itself, strives to persevere in its being, q.e.d.

3. The Deduction of the conatus from IIP4 and IIP5 Alone

Many commentators hold that Spinoza attempts to derive IIP6 from the second stage alone, i.e., from the impossibility of self-destruction. Adherents of such an interpretation recognize that the actual demonstration is not, in fact, limited to those two propositions, but they typically justify truncating the demonstration in such a manner by arguing that the initial stage of the demonstration merely "sets the Spinozistic scene" and that only the second stage does real justificatory work.¹⁴

¹² See for example, IIP12, 13, 19, 25, 26, 28, 29, 33. It is evident that these propositions are supported by the second formulation of the conatus doctrine but not the first.

¹³ It might be objected that only in IIP7D, in which Spinoza shows that the conatus is the essence of each thing and consequently the only power by which anything does anything, does Spinoza conclude that x does G *only if* G helps x . But, for example, Spinoza thinks that he can prove IIP12, in which Spinoza clearly depends on the biconditional formulation, by III6 and without reference to IIP7D, so he must think that III6 already implies the biconditional formulation.

¹⁴ Bennett, Della Rocca, and Garber all construe the demonstration of IIP6 along these lines. Bennett writes that: "The demonstration first sets the Spinozistic

The second stage begins by citing IIP4 which reads:

P4: *No thing can be destroyed except through an external cause.*

Dem.: This proposition is evident through itself. For the definition of anything affirms, and does not deny, the thing's essence, or posits the thing's essence, and does not take it away. So while we attend only to the thing itself, and not to external causes, we shall not be able to find anything in it which can destroy it, q.e.d.

At first glance, this proposition may seem anything but "evident through itself". Why should we think that the essence of a thing contains nothing that can destroy it? One might object, for example, that the proposition "All human beings are mortal" indicates something about the essence of human beings. Anything that is a human being is *necessarily* also mortal. Being mortal is a necessary characteristic of human beings and thus an *essential* characteristic. Since an essential characteristic of human beings would be that they all eventually die, we could not grant that any definition affirms and does not deny the existence of the thing in question. At least one aspect of the definition of a human being would, to some extent, deny its existence, to wit, mortality.

scene, and then proceeds to the real argument [...] The mention of P4 is otiose. *The real argument uses only P5*" (Bennett 1984, 242, my emphasis). Della Rocca writes: "*I have treated 3p4 (on some reading) as more or less directly entailing 3p6 and Spinoza, in effect, treats 3p4 in this way too. For although he cites 3p5 in his proof of 3p6, 3p5 is proved with the help only of 3p4. Thus, formally speaking, 3p5 is a superfluous middle man here. Exactly why Spinoza includes 3p5 is an intriguing matter, but I do not have space to take this up here*" (Della Rocca 1995, 206, my emphasis). Garber is more judicious in his assessment, but he nevertheless places the greater part of the burden of proof on the shoulders of P4 and P5. He writes: "[...] individual things express God's power in certain and determinate ways. True enough. The world is made up of things that, in a sense, participate in the power and activity of God. But this, by itself, does not establish the theorem, the conatus that each thing has to persevere in its existence. *The real work of the demonstration is in what follows, I think. There Spinoza appeals to propositions 4 and 5*" (Garber 1994, 60, my emphasis). It is interesting to note that while all three of these commentators agree that both the justification depends mainly on the second stage of the demonstration and that the deduction is invalid, they do not agree on which parts of the second stage are important. Bennett thinks that the real work is done by P5 alone and that P4 is "otiose". Meanwhile, Della Rocca holds that P4 does all the work and that P5 is an inconsequential "middle man". And Garber thinks that both P4 and P5 are important. None of these commentators seems to feel the need to explain why they effectively ignore half of the propositions invoked by Spinoza in his demonstration, viz., IP25C and IP34). While both Curley and Matheron both hold that the propositional material from part I invoked by Spinoza have some justificatory role to play in the demonstration of IIP6, neither of them have described the full significance of that part of the argument (Curley 1988 and Matheron 1969, 11).

Spinoza would not be moved by this line of thought. He would not be convinced that simply because that all men are mortal is *necessarily* true, it is thereby an *essential* property of human beings.¹⁵ Contemporary philosophers often think of essential and necessary features as one and the same thing, but Spinoza did not.¹⁶ What then does Spinoza mean by “essence”?

Spinoza defines essence in IID2 as “that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken away; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing”. That is, the essence provides the necessary and sufficient conditions for the existence of a particular thing. So far as we disregard the influence of external causes, the only causal factor in determining the state of a given thing is its own nature or essence. Since the essence is simply the necessary and sufficient conditions for a thing's existence, the satisfaction of these conditions could never imply the nonexistence of the thing.

The next proposition invoked by Spinoza is P5: “Things are of a contrary nature, that is, cannot be in the same subject, insofar as one can destroy the other.” The demonstration of this proposition elaborates the thought expressed by P4. It reads:

For if they [things which can destroy one another] could agree with one another, or be in the same subject at once, then there could be something in the same subject which could destroy it, which (by P4) is absurd. Therefore, things and so on, q.e.d.

This proposition means that insofar as one thing can destroy another, the things are of a contrary nature, i.e. cannot be in the same subject. That is, “cannot be in the same subject” explicates “of a contrary nature” – things of a contrary nature *ipso facto* cannot be in the same subject (and conversely). What needs to be *proved* is that things capable of destroying one another fall under this notion of contrariety. Spinoza attempts to do this by citing P4. But P4 only says that nothing can contain anything which can destroy it. Why can't something contain elements that can destroy each other so long as they do not destroy the thing which comprises them?¹⁷

¹⁵ Cf. Garrett 1991 and Carrierro 1991.

¹⁶ Among contemporary philosophers, Kit Fine rejects the idea of essences as being the set of properties that a thing has necessarily in favor of a more traditional notion, similar in some respects to Spinoza's, of essence as what is described by a real definition. He points out that while it is necessarily the case that the Sears Tower is not the Empire State Building, the property of not being the Empire State Building is not part of the essence of the Sears Tower (Fine 1994).

¹⁷ Garrett suggests that the solution to this difficulty can be found in Spinoza's metaphysics of inherence. According to this interpretation, Spinoza thinks that if *x* inheres in *y*, then *x* is conceived through *y*. He also thinks that if *y* is conceived through *x*, then *x* causes *y*. Since things are conceived through their essences, things are also caused by their essences. Moreover, if *y* inheres in *x*, then *y* is caused by *x*'s essence. So if *y* and *z* are in *x*, then they are caused by *x*'s essence. But since *y* is caused by *x*'s essence, destroying *y* involves destroying *x*'s essence.

Leaving aside this difficulty, let us suppose that Spinoza establishes in IIP4 and 5 that destruction requires an external cause, and that no individual comprises elements such that one can destroy another. From this Spinoza appears to infer that if something performs an action, then that action does not result in the destruction of that thing. At this point, Spinoza seems to make the stretch to the conclusion that all things actively strive for self-preservation. Such a derivation of the *conatus* is vulnerable to many criticisms. One such objection focuses on the gap between the non-self-destructive character of action, which follows from IIP4 and 5, and the self-preservative character of action asserted by IIP6.

Let us consider this criticism as articulated by Leibniz.¹⁸ It is one thing, the objection goes, to deny that anything in the definition or essence of a thing could lead toward its opposite, and quite another to claim that everything actively *resists* external forces. The first claim means only that left on its own, anything will persist in the same state. Of course, in Spinoza's world, nothing is ever left on its own.¹⁹ Each thing finds itself caught in a web of causal interaction which helps determine it to exist and to produce effects. Only in the artificial air of abstraction can anything exist unmolested by external forces. So long as we leave a thing inside the hermetically sealed jar of *quantum in se est*, we may grant that it will not self-destruct. But why must we assume that once we break the seal and the external world comes rushing in, our previously isolated object will offer any *resistance* to this onslaught of outside forces? Why should it not crumble into dust the very moment it comes in contact with the external environment? In the face of this objection we must admit that resistance cannot be legitimately inferred from the impossibility of self-destruction.

3.1 Further Difficulties for the *conatus* Doctrine

The failure to demonstrate that each thing must exhibit some positive force or activity is in itself fatal for any attempt to deduce the *conatus* from propositions 4 and 5, but it is worth noting that further difficulties arise even if we grant that everything is, at least in some measure, active.²⁰ As noted earlier, activity alone does not amount to *conatus*; rather it must have at least two additional features. First, the activity performed by each thing must aim at self-preservation. Second, the power of action of each thing must be sufficient for its exercise in appropriate circumstances.

With regard to the first feature, it certainly follows from propositions 4 and 5 that nothing, *quantum in se est*, performs self-destructive actions, but we cannot infer from this alone that all its actions will aim at self-preservation. It would be com-

So then something, *z*, could destroy a thing, *x*, in which it inhered. And that would violate P4 (cf. Garrett 2002, 142f.).

¹⁸ Leibniz, *Letter to de Volder* (March/April 1699).

¹⁹ IVP4.

²⁰ Matheron (1969, 11) claims that the demonstration can be salvaged by introducing this additional premise: that all things are active.

pletely consistent with propositions 4 and 5 if all the actions performed by something were neutral with respect to promoting or hindering existence.

With respect to the second feature, although something may be capable of a repertoire of self-preservative actions, we cannot infer that one or another of those actions will be performed on the basis of propositions 4 and 5. They are fully compatible with something failing to perform a self-preserving action despite being capable of it, so long as it did nothing to hurt itself. Even if propositions 4 and 5 entailed:

If x does φ , then φ will help x .

It certainly does not follow that:

x does φ if and only if φ will help x .

We can conclude that those critics who charge that IIP6 cannot be legitimately derived from IIP4 and IIP5 alone are absolutely correct.

4. *The Argument from Expression: The conatus and the Power of God*

I would now like to discuss the first, and all too often neglected, stage of the demonstration. The demonstration of IIP6 begins with the claim that singular things *express* God's attributes in a "certain and determinate way". The notion of "expression" thus presents us with the first interpretative puzzle for this text. What does "expression" mean for Spinoza? This question has no easy answer because Spinoza never defines the term explicitly²¹, but an examination of the various contexts in which Spinoza uses the word sheds some light on its meaning.²² The first occurrence of this word in the *Ethics* is at ID6, where he defines God as a "substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, each one of which *expresses* an eternal and infinite essence" (my emphasis). More concisely, God's attributes express his essence. Spinoza sometimes describes this expressive relationship between the attributes and God in terms of *manifestation*; attributes manifest or show (*ostendunt*) God's essence.²³ Indeed, when Spinoza defines the term "attribute" in ID4, he says that an attribute is what an intellect *perceives* as constituting the es-

²¹ Some frequent meanings of the verb are: (1) to press out or extract, (2) to elicit or extort, (3) to stamp (e.g. a design on a surface), (4) represent or depict, (5) to model on a pattern, (6) to translate into another language, (7) make manifest, exhibit, evince, make known or set forth.

²² The following discussion is indebted to Deleuze 1990, 13–16.

²³ TdIE, § 76, note z.

sence of a substance. In other words, an attribute is the way in which the essence of God is made manifest to the understanding. In the *Ethics*, this showing or manifesting relationship is often indicated by the verb “*explicare*” which can mean both to display and to make clear and intelligible.²⁴

Not only is God’s essence expressed by his attributes, but, as we have already seen in the demonstration of IIP6, the modes express it as well. Importantly, the fact that modes express God’s nature follows from the fact that they cannot be conceived without it. When Spinoza first mentions the expressive relationship between the modes in God in the corollary of IP25 he cites, in support of it, IP15, which says that nothing can be conceived without God. Again in the TTP, Spinoza writes: “Since without God nothing can exist or be conceived, it is evident that all natural phenomena involve and express the concept of God as far as their essence and perfection extend, so that we have greater and more perfect knowledge of God in proportion to our knowledge of natural phenomena.”²⁵

In Spinoza’s system, conception is intimately connected to causation. For example, Spinoza argues, in IP25, that God is the efficient cause of both the existence and essence of all things in the following manner:

- (1) Effects can only be conceived through their causes (by IA4).
- (2) If the essences of things were not caused by God then they could be conceived without God.
- (3) Nothing can be conceived without God.
- (4) The essences of things are caused by God. (by 2, 3 and *modus tollens*)

It seems that, for Spinoza, conception implies causation.²⁶ We have already noted that conception implies expression. In what follows, I hope to show that expression and causation are both implied by conception because causation implies expression. That is, efficient cau-

²⁴ “IP20D: God (by P19) and all of his attributes are eternal, that is (by D8), each of his attributes express existence. Therefore, the same attributes of God which (by D4) explain [*explicant*] God’s eternal essence at the same time express his eternal essence.” Spinoza appears to be saying that an attribute “*explicat*” God’s essence as a consequence of the fact that it “*exprimit*” his essence.

²⁵ TTP IV.

²⁶ Garrett (2002, 136) argues for the Conception Implies Causation Doctrine.

sation results in a kind of manifestation or exemplification of the cause by the effect.

Why would Spinoza think that effects manifest the nature of their causes? The answer lies in the conception of efficient causality current in the seventeenth century. In general, the seventeenth century view of efficient causality differs greatly from our contemporary understanding. Today, we likely see efficient causality in terms of counterfactual dependence, nomological subsumption, probability raising, or some such. In contrast, the seventeenth century, even in its progressive anti-Aristotelian factions, draws upon a very different metaphysical tradition, one which begins with the Neoplatonists.

According to the Neoplatonists, efficient causality occurs through a process that they called 'emanation' in which the effect receives its qualities or properties from its cause. The effect is said to 'participate' in the cause insofar as it partakes of the qualities or properties transferred to it in the act of causation. This idea exerted its influence on the Latin West through a number of channels. First, Neoplatonism was a direct influence on many of the writers who set the agenda for subsequent generations of Christian philosophers. Both the philosophy of Augustine and Boethius, for example, bear the evident mark of Neoplatonic influence, and both understand God's causal relationship to his creation in terms of the Neoplatonic concept of 'participation'. The being of creatures is explained by the participation in or imitation of the first Being. Second, a generation after the death of the great Neoplatonist Proclus, a Christianized version of his *Elements of Theology*, produced by an unknown author, managed to pass as the work of an early convert of St. Paul.²⁷ On the basis of its spurious provenance, *On the Divine Names* of Pseudo-Dionysius eventually acquired an intellectual authority second only to that of Augustine, and thereby widely disseminated the Neoplatonic conception of causality throughout Christendom.²⁸ Third, sometime during the early Middle Ages, an Arabic paraphrase of *The Elements of Theology* known as the *Liber de causis* somehow found its way into the corpus of Aristotle.²⁹ Conse-

²⁷ See Dodds' excellent introduction to the *Elements of Theology* for a useful account of the reception of Neoplatonism (Dodds 1963).

²⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius 1980.

²⁹ Anonymous 1966. There was also an alternative and equally prevalent conception of efficient causality which was genuinely Aristotelian, viz., that efficient causality took place when something potential became actual by means of a cause which was actual with respect to that which was potential in the effect. In

quently, many of the main themes of Neoplatonic metaphysics, particularly its conception of efficient causality, gained currency among Aristotelians. Eventually, the idea that an effect receives its qualities from its cause, or, in the language of the *Liber de causis*, a cause gives (*dat*) something of itself to or impresses (*imprimit*) itself upon its effect, became the standard view of efficient causation in the Latin West.

This conception of efficient causality is pervasive in the seventeenth century. For example, it remains a well-established tenet of scholastic Aristotelianism, as this passage from one of the century's most prominent scholastic philosophers, Suarez, attests:

[...] a principal cause must be either more noble than, or at least no less noble than, the effect. For since no one gives what he does not have, how can an imperfect form have within itself or communicate to its suppositum a principal power for effecting a more perfect form, a form which it is unable to contain either formally or eminently?³⁰

And despite Descartes' desire to institute a radical break with the philosophic tradition, it also lies at the root of Cartesian metaphysics as the causal axiom employed in his proof of the existence of God in the third Meditation plainly illustrates:

Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause. For where, I ask, could the effect get its reality from, if not from the cause? And how could the cause give it to the effect unless it possessed it?³¹

The Neoplatonic overtones of this claim, although perhaps obscure to contemporary readers, was not lost on Descartes' seventeenth century audience.³²

I propose that this conception of efficient causality stands behind Spinoza's conception of expression. Recall that in IP25 and IP25C, Spinoza claims both that God is the efficient cause of the modes and that the modes express God's nature because modes cannot be conceived without God. We can gain some understanding of the nature of these claims by noting that an important consequence of the expressive rela-

general, this Aristotelian notion was accepted in the domain of physics while the Neoplatonic conception held sway in the fields of theology and metaphysics.

³⁰ Suarez 1965, *Disputation* 18, §2.

³¹ Third *Meditation*, AT VII/40–1, CSM, 28.

³² Caterus, for example, evokes Dionysius in his exposition of Descartes' proof of the existence of God from the idea of an infinite being in the *First Set of Objections*. AT VII/92.

tionship deduced by Spinoza is that modes are causally active because they express divine power.³³ That is, they have some quality, viz. causal power, in virtue of expressing divine power. Why should singular things have causal power because they express God's nature? One possible explanation is that Spinoza thinks of efficient causation as a kind of expression in a way similar to the emanation or impression of qualities according to the Neoplatonic theory.³⁴ Causes give something of themselves to their effects. God's power, as the cause of the modes, impresses itself upon the modes – it gives power to the modes. Does Spinoza really hold such a view of efficient causality? Some evidence that he did can be found in his uncritical treatment of Descartes' causal axiom in his geometrical exposition of the *Principles of Philosophy*.³⁵ I shall try to build a more extensive case for attributing such a view of efficient causality in what follows.

4.2 *Conatus and Expression* in *Cogitata Metaphysica* and the *Political Treatise*

Two important texts shed light on how Spinoza understands the argument from expression in the demonstration of IIP6: Part II, Chapter 6 of *Cogitata Metaphysica*, and a passage from Chapter II of the *Political Treatise*.

In the appendix to his exposition of Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy*, the *Cogitata Metaphysica*, Spinoza writes:

What life is, and what it is in God:

So we understand by life the force through which things persevere in their being [...]. But the power by which God perseveres in his being is nothing but his essence. So they speak best who call God life.³⁶

Spinoza also says that life should be attributed to all things, thus everything has a force through which it perseveres in its being.³⁷ This clearly amounts to an early version of the *conatus* doctrine. God too has life, and this power of self-preservation is identified with his essence.³⁸

³³ IP36D.

³⁴ Deleuze (1990, 169–186) also notes the connection between Spinoza's concept of expression and the Neoplatonic notion of emanation.

³⁵ DPP, I, D4, and I, A8.

³⁶ CM, Part II, chap. VI, G/I, 260.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Cf. Augustine, *The Confessions*, Book I.

In Chapter II of the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza argues that the power whereby natural things exist and persevere in existence is nothing other than the power of God:

Each natural thing can be adequately conceived whether it exists or not. Thus, neither the beginning of existence nor the persevering in existence of a natural thing can be deduced from its definition. For the idea of its essence is the same after it has begun to exist as it was before it existed. Therefore, neither its coming into existence nor its persevering in existence can follow from its essence; on the contrary, it stands in need of the same power to come into existence as to persevere in existence. It follows that the power whereby natural things exist, and whereby, in consequence, they act [*operantur*], can be none other than the eternal power of God himself: for if it were some other power created by God, then not being able to maintain itself, it consequently could not maintain natural things either, but it would itself need the same power in order to persevere in existence as it needed to be created.

It follows from the fact that the power of natural things by which they exist and act [*operantur*] is clearly the very power of God, that we can easily perceive what natural right is. For since God has a right to everything, and God's right is nothing other than God's power insofar as it is considered absolutely free, it follows that each natural thing has as much right from nature as it has power to exist and act [*operandum*]; since the power of a natural thing by which it exists and acts [*operatur*] is nothing but the power of God himself, which is absolutely free.³⁹

This passage begins by reciting a familiar argument for divine concurrence. In order to continue in existence, the created world must be continually sustained by God's power. At every moment, God is causally responsible both for the world's existence and for the causal activity of all things. Such an idea is altogether commonplace in the history of philosophy. It is ubiquitous among medieval philosophers and constitutes an important theme in Cartesian philosophy.⁴⁰ Among many of Descartes' followers, this doctrine develops into occasionalism, or the view that created things are causally inert and that all causation must be directly ascribed to God.⁴¹

Spinoza, on the contrary, understands divine concurrence in a way that does not preclude the causal activity of creatures. The power by which creatures exist and act belongs at one and the same time both to

³⁹ TP, chap. II, §§II-III; G III/276.

⁴⁰ For an example of a medieval discussion of divine concurrence see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 3, Part I, chaps. 65–70 (SCG hereafter).

⁴¹ On the question of whether or not Descartes himself is an occasionalist, see Garber 1983, 1987, and 1992. Also, Hatfield 1979. For an opposing view, see Della Rocca 1999.

God and to the creatures themselves. We can see that Spinoza understands it in this way from the fact that he infers that the rights of creatures extend as far as their powers do from God's having a right to everything in his power. If creatures had no causal agency, as the occasionalists would have it, then the idea that the right of creatures is coextensive with their power would lead to the conclusion that creatures have no right because they have no power. Spinoza draws the opposite conclusion. Furthermore, in a series of letters to Tschirnhaus, Spinoza criticizes the Cartesian view that bodies are causally inert and owe all of their seeming activity to divine concurrence.⁴² Spinoza does not deny divine concurrence, but believes that it is somehow compatible with the causal efficacy of creatures.

How can both God and one of his creatures be the cause of the same effect? The philosophical tradition gives at least two answers. First, God and a creature may both be the cause of some event in the sense that God is the first cause and the creature is a secondary cause which depends upon the action of the first cause.⁴³ We can understand this idea by analogy to a person throwing a baseball and breaking a window. God is like the person who threw the baseball in that he is the first cause which sets in motion a series of events that eventuates in an effect analogous to the breaking of the window. The creature is like the baseball in that it depends upon the action of the first cause just as the baseball ultimately derives its causal power from the action of the person who threw it. Nevertheless, the baseball is a genuine cause of the breaking of the window in that its properties (e.g., position and momentum) directly explain the event caused.

The second way is a subset of the first. God and creatures may both be the cause in that the creature is an image of God and thus depends upon God for its power. Perhaps the following example can help illustrate. A film starring Cary Grant makes me laugh. Both the image of Grant on the screen and Grant the man are the causes of my laughter, but my laughter is causally connected to Grant only insofar as the image resembles him. Similarly, as causal agents are images of God, both the created agent and God are the cause of some effect.⁴⁴

Spinoza's answer is quite different from either of the traditional views. According to him, finite things are modes of God, or the one unique substance in which all things inhere. Spinoza's understanding of

⁴² *Letters* 81, 83.

⁴³ Thomas, SCG, III, 70.

⁴⁴ Thomas, SCG, III, 22.

the relationship between modes and substance is a matter of some controversy, but a few basic observations will suffice for our purposes. A mode, in early modern thought, is a way or manner that a substance of a certain kind exemplifies its principle attribute. For example, a body's principle attribute is extension and a mode of a body is the particular way that a certain body is extended. The shape of a body and its motion are examples of modes of extension or body. Thus, motion might be a mode of a baseball (considered as a substance or body). Spinoza introduces an unusual variation on this early modern theme by claiming that all individuals are modes of one substance. The precise meaning of this claim is a contentious matter, but if the central logic of the mode-substance relationship is retained, then the way in which a mode (or finite individual in Spinoza's metaphysics) and the substance in which it inheres can both be the cause of a single event is clear enough. Whereas for the scholastic, creatures are to the baseball as God is to the person who threw the baseball, for Spinoza creatures are to the momentum of the baseball as God is to the baseball itself. (Since God is *causa sui*, we must imagine that, in this analogy, that the baseball throws itself.) So God and creatures can both cause the same event in the same way that a baseball and its momentum can both cause a window to break. In order to transpose this analogy into a genuinely Spinozistic key, we must remember that, for Spinoza, there is only one substance, and all singular things (such as baseballs and windows) are modes of that substance. When singular things interact with each other, both the singular things themselves and God are causally responsible in a way analogous to the way that singular things and their properties (e.g., a baseball and its momentum) are causally responsible for what they do. Creatures are determinate and finite expressions or modes of God's power and for this reason their existence and action depend upon God.

The above passage from the *Tractatus Politicus* also indicates a way in which Spinoza's understanding of expression differs from those versions of Neoplatonic emanation which hold that effects resemble or imitate their causes. The power of creatures, according to Spinoza, does not resemble or imitate the power of God. Rather, it is the very power of God itself, manifested in a finite form. I shall try to say more precisely what it means for something to be a finite manifestation of an infinite thing later in this paper, but for now I propose that we see how far we can get with this still somewhat vague notion.

From the above passage from the *Tractatus Politicus* and the text from *Cogitata Metaphysica* we can construct an argument in favor of the *conatus* doctrine. Moreover, I believe that this argument is essen-

tially equivalent to the argument given in the demonstration of IIP6 (which I shall attempt to show in the next section). According to Chapter II of the *Political Treatise*, the power possessed by each thing whereby it exists and acts is the power of God himself expressed in a finite form. God's power is his essence (EIP34), and, according to *Cogitata Metaphysica*, his essence is his life, which is the force by which he perseveres in being. Thus the divine power which natural things manifest or express is the force by which God perseveres in being. Since natural things possess the power which they express, they themselves possess a force of persevering in being.

To summarize:

- (1) The power whereby things exist and act is the power of God himself expressed in a finite form (TP II).
- (2) God's power is identical to his essence (EIP34).
- (3) God's essence is his life (CM II, chap. 5).
- (4) Life is the force of persevering in being (CM II, chap. 5).
- (5) God's power is his force of persevering in his being (from 2, 3, and 4).
- (6) The power whereby things exist and act is God's force of persevering in being expressed in a finite form (from 1 and 5).

Conclusion

- (7) Each thing possesses a force of persevering in being.

4.3 The Metaphysical Basis of the *conatus* in the *Ethics*

We have thus succeeded in recreating an argument for the *conatus* doctrine from a diverse number of Spinozistic texts. However, none of these texts, taken individually, contains all the premises of this argument. The fact that Spinoza commits himself at various times to positions that jointly entail the *conatus* doctrine does not mean that such an argument can be found in the demonstration of IIP6. In particular, it would appear that premises (3) and (4) above are out of place in the *Ethics*. How could the God described in Part I of that work possess a power of preserving his being? It might seem reasonable to assume, on the contrary, that an absolutely infinite being who is totally immune from interference from external causes hardly stands in need of such a force. I believe, however, that this argument is in fact equivalent to the argument given in the demonstration of IIP6.

First of all, a number of the premises of the argument developed in the previous section can be found in the demonstration of IIP6. For example, Spinoza says in the demonstration that modes express God's power, which means the same thing as the above quoted passage from the *Political Treatise*, i.e., that the power whereby things exist and act is the power of God himself manifested in a finite form. Thus premise (1) above can be found in the demonstration of IIP6. The proposition that God's power is identical to his essence, comes directly from the *Ethics* and is cited in the demonstration as IP34. Thus premise (2) is secured. The assumptions missing from the demonstration of IIP6 and which are needed to make the argument work are (3) and (4), viz., that God's essence is his life and that life is a force of persevering in being. These are just the premises that seemed most problematic from the standpoint of the mature view developed in the *Ethics*.

Without (3) and (4), we can conclude no more than that all things are active. Recall that in addition to activity, the *conatus* must have the following two features, (1) it must promote self-preservation and (2) it must do everything it can to achieve this goal. Is there any reason to think, based solely on material contained in the *Ethics*, that the power expressed by the modes has these two characteristics? Without helping ourselves to the identity of divine essence and life asserted in *Cogitata Metaphysica*, how can we move from the expression of divine power to the *conatus*?

I submit the following hypothesis: Spinoza believes that these two characteristics of the *conatus* follow from the fact that the divine power has the following two features: (1) it is the source of God's causal relation to himself and (2) God does everything in his power.

According to Spinoza, God is his own cause or *causa sui*. This means that his existence follows necessarily from his own essence. Moreover, all other things follow necessarily from his essence. Since his essence alone suffices to bring about his existence and the existence of all other things, his essence must be his power – the power whereby he brings himself and everything else into existence. God's essence is his power.⁴⁵

On my interpretation of the meaning of expression in Spinoza, for a singular thing to express a substance is to manifest and contain its essence in a finite form. Each thing thus receives divine power by virtue of the fact that it expresses divine power. The power of each individual thing is the very power of God himself in a finite form which he trans-

⁴⁵ IP34D.

mits to them in an act of expression. Each singular thing is thus, to borrow a phrase from Matheron, a *Deus quatenus*.⁴⁶

I believe, following an interpretation developed by Don Garrett, that we can see the self-preservative action of individual modes as exemplifying the power by which God is the cause of himself.⁴⁷ Just as God is responsible, through his power, for his own existence, so too are singular things responsible, to a lesser extent, for their own existence through the self-maintaining activity of the *conatus*.

One might object that the power that finite modes express is the power by which God produces the modes not the power by which God is *causa sui*. After all, it is the causal relation between God and the modes, not between God and himself, that entails the expressive relationship between God and the modes. Thus, one might be led to think that the self-causing power of God was not expressed by the modes because it does not stand in the right causal relation to them. But Spinoza says, "God must be called the cause of all things in the same sense in which he is called the cause of himself"⁴⁸. As Jean-Luc Marion points out, Spinoza makes striking use of the principle of *causa sui* which goes far beyond that of Descartes.⁴⁹ Instead of representing a unique borderline case of efficient causality, Spinoza makes *causa sui* the basis of all causality whatsoever. Therefore it does not make any sense to object that while modes express the power by which God is the cause of all things, they do not express the power by which he is cause of himself. The same power, applied with the same sense, explains God's action (by which he produces the modes) and self-causation.

It might also be objected that, even if the power of singular things expresses the power of God, there is no reason to assume that just because God's causal power is directed at maintaining *his* own existence, that the power of singular things will be directed at maintaining *their* own existence. Why couldn't the power of singular things be directed, for instance, toward maintaining God's existence? Or the existence of other singular things (which are, after all, affections of God)?

Spinoza's reasons for thinking that it couldn't might lie in his conception of *causa sui*. Spinoza defines the concept as follows: "By cause of itself I understand that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing." *Causa sui* is thus said of

⁴⁶ Matheron 1969, 291.

⁴⁷ Garrett 2002, 144.

⁴⁸ EIP25S.

⁴⁹ Marion 1994, 68f.

something that has a certain kind of conceptual, and hence, causal link between its essence and existence. But essence and existence cannot be thought of as two independent factors. According to Spinoza, existence is the realization of an essence.⁵⁰ Therefore, God's power is the causal and conceptual link that relates his essence to its own realization. Furthermore, God's essence is his power. So God's existence is both an effect of his power and the realization of that power. This idea could perhaps be expressed in the following formula:

x is *causa sui* if and only if $((x$ has the power of bringing about the existence of $y)$ and $(x = y)$.

Thus the finite form of such a power would be described as:

x is *causa sui* in a finite way if and only if $((x$ has the power of bringing about the existence of y in a finite way) and $(x = y)$.

Of course, no finite thing can bring itself into existence, but, as Don Garrett has observed in this connection, it can bring about its *continued* existence.⁵¹ The power of a finite thing to bring about its own existence would thus be a power of continuing in existence.

This formulation rules out the possibility that singular things express the power whereby God is *causa sui* by bringing about the existence of God or some other singular thing by making self-reflexivity a defining feature of divine power. Of course, this assumes that the qualifier 'in a finite way' properly attaches to the predicate 'has the power of bring about the existence of' and not the conjoined statement of identity. But this is a natural assumption since identity is not the sort of relationship that admits of qualification, whereas 'has the power of bringing about the existence of' does. Identity is all or nothing, but power can vary in strength. In the next section, I shall try to say more precisely what 'in a finite way' means by looking more closely at Spinoza's conception of finitude.

We have seen why Spinoza thinks that individual modes are not passive but rather act, and why these actions must aim at persevering in existence. But why must things do everything in their power to maintain their existence? That is, why does Spinoza reject the weaker formula 'If x does φ , then φ helps preserve x 's existence' in favor of the biconditional ' x does φ if and only if φ helps preserve x 's existence and x can do φ '?

⁵⁰ IID2. Cf. Garrett 2002, 137.

⁵¹ Cf. Garrett 2002, 144.

As discussed earlier, if the first formulation were correct, then knowing an individual's powers and advantage would not enable us to make positive inferences from an agent's advantage to an agent's actions. We could make negative inferences of the form: if φ hurts x , then x will not do φ , but no more. This would be the case, for example, if the striving to produce self-preservative effects were a mere *tendency* on the part of any individual. It would then be impossible to say with certainty what a particular individual will do in a given set of circumstances. Perhaps the behavior of individuals is probabilistic and at best we can provide a probability distribution. The stronger formulation would thus be false because the antecedent does not logically entail the consequent; it only makes it likely. This and similar scenarios, however, are inconsistent with Spinoza's determinism and necessitarianism. There are no probabilistic tendencies in Spinoza's world. A given state of affairs has determinate consequences which follow with logical necessity.⁵²

A more significant possibility, and one that Spinoza takes the trouble to consider, concerns free will. If certain agents, human beings for instance, had a free will, then knowing their powers and advantage would not enable us to make positive inferences about their future behavior from facts about their advantage. Because they are free, the actions of such agents are not necessitated but are rather freely chosen. Thus, although all things have a tendency to do that which preserves their being, agents with free will may choose to do otherwise.

Spinoza denies that human beings, or anything else for that matter, possess a free will. The *conatus*, on the contrary, impels things to do everything in their power to preserve their existence. How does this follow from the fact that each thing expresses divine power? I propose that Spinoza sees this feature of the *conatus* as the expressive analogue of the fact that God does everything of which he is capable. God, according to Spinoza, does not have the option of exercising his omnipotence to a greater or lesser degree. He cannot refrain from an act of which he is capable.⁵³ Spinoza's God does not act voluntarily but rather out of what the scholastics would call "natural necessity"; that is, he cannot help but produce all those effects which follow from his nature. We can sharply contrast Spinoza's view of divine power with a more traditional view, such as Thomas', that God, in the free exercise of his power, cre-

⁵² EIP26, IP27, IP28D, IP29D, IP33D, IP33S.

⁵³ IP17S.

ates as much or as little of those possibilities which are consistent with his goodness and wisdom. For Thomas, God's goodness and wisdom constrain the possibilities of divine action. God may only choose among those options consistent with his reason and goodness when creating the world. Nevertheless, God is still free because he is not obligated to create any one particular possibility that might be consistent with his wisdom and goodness; in fact, he is not obliged to create anything at all. He is completely at his liberty to create as little or as much as he likes.⁵⁴ Spinoza's God enjoys no such liberty and must produce everything that follows from his nature.

Spinoza thinks that the fact that the *conatus* determines human beings to do everything in their power to preserve their existence follows as a consequence of the fact that God acts by natural necessity to do everything in his power.⁵⁵ If human beings were able to not do those things of which they are capable and which would be to their advantage, that is to say, those things that follow from their nature, then from where would they acquire this negative power? They cannot acquire it from God since God does not have any such power and cannot give what he does not have. If they cannot acquire it from God, then they cannot acquire it at all because another source would require a nature other than God, which would not cohere with Spinoza's monism.

The Augustinian freedom asserted by many of Spinoza's predecessors whereby we can renounce the good and pursue evil for its own sake supposedly follows from the fact that God made human beings in his own image. This freedom is thought to be nothing other than a dark and perverted imitation of divine omnipotence. Similarly, Spinoza too thinks that our powers manifest God's power, but he differs from the tradition represented by Augustine and Thomas in denying that God has any freedom apart from the perfection that follows from the necessity of his nature. Because our actions express the divine power whereby God creates everything he can, we too must strive to do everything in our power. If an action will help preserve our existence, we must perform it insofar as we can.

To summarize: the *conatus* doctrine requires that finite modes have the following three characteristics: (1) they act, (2) their actions aim at persevering in existence, and (3) they perform every self-preservative

⁵⁴ *Summa Theologiae*, Q. 19, Art. 3.

⁵⁵ TP, chap. II.

action in their power. These three characteristics can be ascribed to each mode on the basis of the *expressive* relationship that obtains between modes and God. Divine power has three characteristics that correspond to the three characteristics of *conatus* driven modes: (1) it eventuates in divine action, (2) it is responsible for God's own existence, (3) it produces everything of which it is capable. I believe that these expressive correspondences explain why Spinoza holds the *conatus* doctrine to be true.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Garrett 2002 reaches a similar conclusion by means of a very different argument. He sees the demonstration of the *conatus* as based on the notion of what it is for something to be "in itself" (*in se est*). A substance is in itself, which, according to Spinoza's conception of inherence, means that it is both caused by and conceived through itself. Each thing, in so far as it is in itself (*quantum in se est*), is like substance insofar as it contributes causally and explanatorily to its own perseverance in existence. So, as Garrett writes, "[we] can now see that the primary work of 3p6 is accomplished by the Inherence Implies Causation Doctrine. [The claim that singular things express God's power] provides additional support to 3p6 chiefly by showing the compatibility of that conclusion with the doctrine that all power is God's power." (145) IIP4 shows that nothing could have an internally generated power of obstructing the *conatus*. So, like me, Garrett sees IIP4 as *confirming* the *conatus* doctrine rather than serving to establish it initially, or, as Garrett puts it, it shows *how* IIP6, not merely *that* it is true. IIP5 shows, according to Garrett, that each thing excludes the existence of anything incompatible with its own existence. This, too, confirms the *conatus* doctrine by showing how a singular thing's opposition to things which can destroy it can be conceived through and hence caused by it. I believe that Garrett's interpretation of inherence in Spinoza is exactly right and think that the notion is vitally important to Spinoza's understanding of *conatus*. Moreover, my own interpretation is indebted to Garrett's on a number of points (see especially fn. 48). There are, nevertheless, a number of important differences between our interpretations of Spinoza's demonstration of IIP6. First, I think that Garrett fails to show why any singular thing should be in itself at all. He does correctly point out that Spinoza thinks that singular things express divine power, but he gives no account of why Spinoza thinks so and what it means. In this respect, my interpretation could be seen as supporting Garrett's by providing a missing piece of the puzzle. Secondly, while Garrett thinks the claim that singular things express God's power shows mainly "how to reconcile singular things' having power whatever finite power they may possess with the doctrine that all power is divine power" (144). I think that the this claim, properly interpreted, directly entails the *conatus* doctrine. These criticisms are mainly quibbles, and I think that Garrett's interpretation does shed considerable light on Spinoza's thinking in IIP6D and succeeds in highlighting important systematic connections between Spinoza's metaphysical notions of substance, mode, inherence, causation, and conception.

4.4 *Expression as Finite Manifestation*

As indicated earlier, the main weakness of my interpretation so far is the vagueness of the notion of finite expression. Even if we grant that the power of a singular thing is the finite manifestation of divine power, how could we rule out the following alternatives to the *conatus* doctrine?

- (1) Singular things, insofar as they are in themselves, sometimes strive for self-preservation, and sometimes fail to perform self-preserving actions of which they are capable.
- (2) Singular things, insofar as they are in themselves, sometimes strive for self-preservation, and sometimes act self-destructively.
- (3) Singular things, insofar as they are in themselves, sometimes strive for self-preservation, and sometimes perform actions neutral with respect to self-preservation.

It could be reasonably argued that each of these alternatives is perfectly compatible with singular things manifesting divine power in a finite form. Each of these alternatives depicts the power of finite modes as being like, but falling short of, divine power, i.e., manifesting God's power in a finite way.

I believe that this objection can be answered and the notion of expression clarified by considering the difference between the finite and the infinite in Spinoza. Spinoza begins by defining the finite as that which is limited [*terminatur*] by another thing of the same nature.⁵⁷ A body is limited by a greater body, a mind by a greater mind. There are two puzzles here. What is the nature of the limitation imposed upon the finite thing, and why must the limiting factor be of the same nature? I believe that the limitation in question is a causal limitation and that the limiting factor must be of the same nature as the thing limited because causation cannot take place between attributes. Spinoza later elaborates his definition of finitude with the following remark: "being finite is, in fact, a partial negation, and being infinite is an absolute affirmation of the existence of some nature"⁵⁸. Spinoza thinks that a partial negation of existence requires a cause. In his proofs of the existence of God in IP11D, Spinoza puts forward the following principle: "For each thing there must be assigned a cause, or reason, as much for its

⁵⁷ ID2.

⁵⁸ IP8S1. My translation.

existence as for its nonexistence.” This demand for a cause or a reason is not a demand for one of two distinct things. As previously noted, Spinoza collapses causal and conceptual relations together. The only thing that could rationalize the existence or nonexistence of a thing is a cause, and the only thing that could cause the existence or nonexistence of a thing is something that would rationalize it. Because being finite is a partial negation of the existence of a thing, there must be a cause which explains this negation. Such a thing must be both external and “of the same nature”. It must be external because a well-formed definition expresses nothing incompatible with the realization of the *definiendum*'s essence, i.e., its existence.⁵⁹ And it must be “of the same nature” because in order for two things to causally interact, they must have an attribute in common, e.g., both be bodies or minds. So we can conclude that finite modes are finite because there are external causes belonging to the same attribute capable of limiting their existence, and God is infinite because there are no external causes capable of so limiting his.

I propose that the *only* difference between God's power and its expression in the power or *conatus* of singular things is that God's power is infinite in the sense of being free from interference from external causes, and that the power of singular things is finite in the sense of being subject to external causes. As Spinoza says, the power of singular things is the very power of God manifested in a finite form. Thus we should expect no difference to obtain between the power of God and the power of singular things apart from those differences that obtain between infinite and finite things. Apart from interference from external causes, singular things always strive for and achieve self-preservation, just as God does. But since singular things have only finite power, their striving is limited by the power of external causes. We can, therefore, rule out the three alternatives mentioned above, because they involve deviations from the nature of divine power which go beyond mere limitation by external causes.

We can use Spinoza's understanding of finitude to make more precise our characterization of finite expression. By substituting the phrase ‘subject to limitations imposed by external causes’ for the phrase ‘in a finite way’ we get the following formula, which specifies what it is for a singular thing to express a *causa sui* being:

⁵⁹ IIP4. This formulation is indebted to Don Garrett's discussion of this proposition in Garrett 2002, 141.

x is *causa sui*, subject to limitations imposed by external causes, if and only if ((x has the power, subject to limitations imposed by external causes, of bringing about the existence of y) and ($x = y$)).

This interpretation also helps us understand how expression can be a matter of degrees. Only God is *causa sui*, eternal, and free, strictly speaking, since each of these characteristics, according to Spinoza, pertains exclusively to something whose existence follows necessarily from its essence.⁶⁰ God's existence follows from his essence because he is completely independent of external causes, and an external cause is needed to explain the nonexistence of any non-self-contradictory thing. But between complete independence from and complete dependence on external causes, there is room for finite manifestations or expressions of a self-caused being. The less dependent on external causes a singular thing is, i.e., the more powerful it is, the more self-causing, long-lived, and free it is, and hence the more perfectly it expresses divine nature.

5. *An Historical Precedent for IIP6D*

If Spinoza intends in demonstration of IIP6 to make the argument that I have developed above, then why does he not do so more explicitly? A number of factors help explain this failure. First, an excessive economy of expression is by no means uncommon in the *Ethics*, and if the demonstration of IIP6 is obscure because terse, unfortunately, it is hardly unique.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, there is a long tradition of deducing a desire for self-preservation from the fact that God creates his creatures after his own likeness.⁶¹ Spinoza could probably expect his contemporaries to be familiar with such arguments, and thus see the significance of the demonstration of IIP6 more readily.

Let us consider a version of this argument as developed by Thomas. He writes:

Created things are made like unto God by the fact that they attain to divine goodness. If then, all things tend toward God as an ultimate end, so that they may attain His goodness, it follows that the ultimate end of things is to become like God.

Again, the agent is said to be the end of the effect because the effect tends to become like the agent; hence "the form of the generator is the end of the generating action". But God is the end of things in such a way that He is also their first agent. Therefore, all things tend to become like God as to their ultimate end.

⁶⁰ On this point, see Garrett 2002, 139.

⁶¹ For example, Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, Books XI, XVII; Boethius, *Philosophiae Consolatio*, Prose XI; Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, B, 13.

Besides, it is quite evident that *things 'naturally desire to be', and if they can be corrupted by anything they naturally resist corrupting agents* and tend toward a place where they may be preserved, as fire inclines upward and earth downward. Now, all things get their being from the fact that they are made like unto God, Who is subsisting being itself, for all things exist merely as participants in existing being. Therefore, *all things desire as their ultimate end to be made like unto God.* (my emphasis)

Thomas claims that all things desire to be or exist and, from that desire, resist those things that can destroy them. This is clearly very similar to what Spinoza claims in IIP6. Even more significant is the argument that Thomas employs to establish this conclusion. First, he claims that effects tend to become like their causes, and since God causes all things, all things tend to become like God. Next, from the fact that God is "subsisting being itself" and the cause of the existence of things, he concludes that things try to be like God with respect to his "subsisting being". This trying to be like God with respect to being results in a "desire to be" and a tendency to resist "corrupting agents".

Clearly then, in some of its main features, the argument from expression found in the demonstration of IIP6 recapitulates an orthodox argument regarding how the causal relationship between God and his creatures determines the ends or desires of created things. All things, according to both Spinoza and Thomas, desire their own existence. What is more, both view this desire as arising from the causal relationship between God and his creatures. According to Spinoza, creatures "express" God's power as a consequence of this causal relationship; and according to Thomas they "become like" God. For both, this "expression" or "imitation" of God is manifested in a striving for self-preservation.

Let me stress at this point that, despite these striking similarities, I do not mean to suggest that Spinoza and the orthodox view represented by Thomas completely agree with one another on the subject of the relationship between God and his creatures. On the contrary, it would be more accurate to say that the disagreements between them are vast and the agreements comparatively narrow, even with respect to the above discussed argument.

An appreciation of these important differences can be gained by contrasting the notion of "expression" as employed by Spinoza with the notion of "likeness" as employed by a traditional Christian philosopher such as Thomas. Recall that on my interpretation of the expressive relationship between singular things and God, the power of singular things does *not* resemble the power of God. Rather it *is* that very

power, but in a finite form. According to Spinoza, it is a consequence of the fact that creatures *express* divine power that they have a right to everything in their power, because he thinks of expression as a finite manifestation, i.e., a mode, of divine power. Since God has a right to everything in his power and the power of creatures is the very power of God himself expressed in a finite form, creatures have a right to everything in their power.

For Thomas, on the other hand, things are *like* or *imitate* God insofar as they desire their own existence, but this likeness or imitation is *defective*.⁶² Creatures are only imperfect or limited images of God and through their defects or privations they can fall prey to evil. Of course, God does not create imperfections *per se*; these imperfections are merely privations. Everything that God creates is good, but the goodness of creatures can be more or less good, more or less limited. Because human beings can sin, they do not have a right to everything they do and some of their actions may diverge from the divine law.

In general, I think that these differences arise from crucial differences in the conception of divine causality. For Spinoza, God is the *immanent* cause of creatures. This means that creatures inhere in God as modes in a substance. The traditional view represented by Thomas, in contrast, views God as a *transcendent* cause. An ontological gulf separates creatures from God, so that though they imitate him, creatures can be no more than images which resemble God by analogy. Thomas says, “The form of an effect [...] is certainly found in some measure in a transcending cause, but according to another mode and another way [...] God gave things all their perfections and thereby is both like and unlike all of them”. This imitation of God “according to another mode and another way”, in many Christian philosophers, can involve a considerable difference between what imitates and what is imitated. For example, Augustine, as mentioned earlier, considers love of sin for its own sake an imitation of divine omnipotence.⁶³ It goes without saying that neither Augustine nor any of his intellectual heirs thinks that a lover of sin has any right to the actions motivated by that love, although it imitates divine power.

Another interesting difference between Spinoza and many philosophers in the Christian tradition deserves comment. For many scholastic philosophers, the desire to exist is merely one way in which creatures imitate God. The desire for other goods – e.g., glory, friendship,

⁶² Cf. Thomas, SCG, III, 20.6.

⁶³ Augustine, *The Confessions*, Book II.

wealth, honor, knowledge, etc – are all ways in which creatures tend toward or imitate God. In desiring these things we wish to be like God with respect to his glory, love, wisdom, etc., which are all one in God but multiple in creatures. Spinoza reduces this pluralism of goods to a single good which determines all others: the desire for existence. This contrast marks a crucial difference in the conception of the nature of God. According to Spinoza, God is not glorified, loving⁶⁴, or wise⁶⁵; he is merely powerful, i.e., he creates infinitely many things in infinitely many ways from the power by which he produces his own existence. Creatures thus do not seek glory, love, or wisdom, but merely express this power in the form of a striving to persevere in existence, or rather, if they seek those things (as of course they do) it is not as ends in themselves but as means to the end of self-preservation.

6. Counterexamples to the conatus Doctrine

It is possible to object that, regardless of his argument for it, Spinoza's conatus doctrine is plainly false because it is vulnerable to a host of counterexamples. The world overflows with self-destroying individuals. Yves Tanguy once built a sculpture, *Hommage à New York*, that destroyed itself by design.⁶⁶ More mundane examples abound: lit candles burn themselves out, time bombs explode, suicides open their veins, etc. These putative counterexamples are often thought to belie Spinoza's claim in IIP6 that all singular things strive for self-preservation.

Additional counterexamples might be found in cases where a person performs an action that leads to her self-destruction, not because of a self-destructive desire, but rather due to a false belief. For example,

⁶⁴ By this I mean that Spinoza's God is not the sort of God that one can pray to with the expectation of an answer. As Don Garrett as pointed out to me, Spinoza's God loves himself (VP35 and VP36) and consequently men (VP36C) insofar as they are affections of God.

⁶⁵ Don Garrett has pointed out to me that there is one sense of 'wise' according to which God certainly is wise, because all truths are contained in the divine mind. Here I mean 'wise' in the sense of intelligently ordering the world for the sake of the best or in accordance to a providential plan.

⁶⁶ Howard Stein drew my attention to this example. This work, constructed in the in the sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City was a rambling mechanical contraption which set fire to itself which lead to the detonation of explosives. The fire department was called in to squelch the ensuing conflagration.

Peter drinks a glass of wine containing poison. He believes that the glass does not contain poison, thus his intention in drinking it is not self-destructive. His action, nevertheless, does not tend toward his self-preservation, but rather its opposite.⁶⁷

For some of these cases, Spinoza can deny that the individual in question constitutes a genuine individual. It would not be implausible to claim that some putatively self-destructive individuals, e.g., Tangle's sculpture or a time bomb, involve parts that never succeed in constituting genuinely integrated wholes. His argument would rest on IIP4 and his understanding of essence. Any genuine individual can be given a real definition. That is, the necessary and sufficient conditions for the individual's existence can be stated. The definition of an individual thus cannot contain anything incompatible with the realization of the thing's essence, i.e., incompatible with its existence. If, for example, a time bomb could be given a definition, then the satisfaction of this definition would entail its existence, and not its nonexistence. But the satisfaction of a time bomb's putative definition entails both its existence (before the hour at which it is programmed to detonate) and its nonexistence (after that hour). So its putative definition is not a real definition, since real definitions provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for a thing's existence and nothing besides.⁶⁸

Another line of defense turns on Spinoza's conception of action. Recall that, in Spinoza's technical sense of the term, 'action' refers only to those behaviors of which the agent is the adequate cause. Adequate causes are those causes the effects of which can be understood through them alone without reference to any additional causal factors. The phrase "*quantum in se est*" is meant to alert us to the fact that the "striving" mentioned in IIP6 refers to actions in this technical sense. All Spinoza needs to show in order to elude the force of alleged counterexamples is that the behavior in question is not determined exclusively by the agent's own nature – that the behavior is at least partially explained by the influence of external circumstance. For example, lit candles do not light themselves.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ A version of this objection can be found in Della Rocca 1995, 220f.

⁶⁸ Incidentally, this line of defense allows us to assign a positive role to IIP4 in defending IIP6. On my interpretation, Spinoza need not appeal to IIP4 in initially establishing IIP6, but it does provide a perspicuous way of diffusing a certain kind of objection to it.

⁶⁹ Della Rocca suggests this line of defense in his 1995, 201f.

Similar considerations can help with cases where self-destructive behavior results from false beliefs. According to Spinoza, all true beliefs are adequate and all false beliefs are inadequate. My ideas are adequate if and only if my mind contains all of their causal (and hence conceptual) antecedents. Conversely, my ideas are inadequate if and only if my mind does not contain all of their causal (and conceptual) antecedents.⁷⁰ Since the causal antecedents of my false beliefs lie outside me, insofar as they determine my behavior, I cannot be said to act. Self-destructive behavior that results from a false belief does not impugn the *conatus* doctrine, because that doctrine concerns only the behavior of singular things *quantum in se est*, i.e., insofar as external causes play no role in determining their behavior.

Is the *conatus* doctrine altogether mute with regard to cases in which external causes help determine the behavior of a singular thing? It would be disappointing indeed to learn that the *conatus* doctrine gave us no purchase whatsoever on cases where external causes help determine the behavior of singular things because such cases vastly outnumber cases of complete independence from external causes. But, when external causes constrain the action of singular things, their *conatus* for self-preservation is still active. The difference is that now the effect that it produces is only partially caused by the *conatus* and partially by the external cause.⁷¹ Given the right external cause, this can result in behavior that tends toward self-preservation in a sub-maximal way, or even in self-destructive behavior. Take the example of the man who drinks the poisoned glass of wine. He might drink the poisoned wine both because wine is good for his health, and because he has an inadequate and false idea that the glass contains only wine and no poison. In this case, both his *conatus* determines him to drink (because wine is good for him) and external causes determine him to drink (because they result in an idea which doesn't adequately represent the glass as containing poison). The relative influence of a thing's *conatus* is a function of the power of that thing relative to the power of the external cause. The greater the relative power of the thing's *conatus*, the more the action taken preserves the thing's being. The less its relative power, the less a thing's action preserves its being.

I would like to conclude this discussion by considering how Spinoza can handle the case of suicide, which is often thought to be the toughest

⁷⁰ IIP11C, and IIP29S. See Della Rocca 1996, 53–57.

⁷¹ IIP9D, IVP5D.

test case for his theory. Suicide is such a difficult case because IIP9 requires that singular things strive for self-preservation even when external causes help determine their behavior. Most other cases of self-destructive behavior can accommodate this demand because they can be explained as resulting from the interplay of self-harming and self-helping impulses. But it is very difficult to see how suicidal behavior is ever partly determined by self-preserving impulses.

There are a number of Spinozistic responses to objections from suicide. To begin with many suicides are really botched attempts to win sympathy or otherwise manipulate loved ones, not sincere attempt to take one's own life. Such cases present no real problem for Spinoza. Many of these cases could be handled by showing that the person who accidentally killed herself was mistaken about, for example, how many pills of a particular kind constitute a fatal dose. Such people accidentally kill themselves for reasons similar to the man who accidentally drinks the poisoned wine.

With respect to genuine suicide, Spinoza says two things, neither of which is straightforwardly successful. First, Spinoza says that someone might kill herself because coerced. Spinoza gives two examples of such coercion. Someone could twist the arm of another so that the sword he holds is directed toward his own heart. But of course, no one would call that suicide. Secondly, someone might kill herself at the command of a tyrant as Seneca did. This too is problematic. The command is effective because it is accompanied by a threat: "Commit suicide tonight, or die a more painful and undignified death in the morning."⁷² But if people are really only ever motivated by a desire for self-preservation, then Seneca should prefer a painful and undignified death in the morning (and consequently a somewhat longer life) to a painless death tonight (and consequently a shorter life). Even if the choice was presented as synchronous ("Commit suicide now, or be tortured to death now"), one should prefer the painful death to suicide. The threat of a painful death can only be made good after the non-performance of the suicide, and so would involve a marginally longer life.

⁷² Nothing hangs on the nature of the threat. For example, Seneca probably sees his choice in the following terms: "Die freely by my own hand tonight, or die unfreely by the hand of another tomorrow." Similarly, Socrates was presented with a choice between committing suicide and breaking the law, which he saw as forcing him to commit suicide. But regardless of the bad thing one wants to avoid, the logic of the coerced suicide is the same.

The other explanation that Spinoza offers concerns uncoerced suicides. He says that a man might commit suicide "because hidden external causes so dispose his imagination, and so affect his Body, that it takes on another nature, contrary to the former"⁷³. Presumably this is meant to explain what happens in cases of extreme depression or mental breakdown. According to Spinoza, if depression or psychopathology has turned a man into someone else, then there is no real suicide. The person doing the killing does not kill himself but rather someone else. As Jonathan Bennett has argued, stated in this way, Spinoza's explanation makes no sense.⁷⁴ If after his mental breakdown Hemingway becomes Hemingway₁ and then kills himself, then Hemingway₁ kills Hemingway₁ not Hemingway. Suicide has not been explained away. Perhaps a more promising variation of this strategy would be to claim that the mental illness results not in a new person, but rather fractures the person into a number of mutually destructive parts. Since (according to IIP5), a single individual cannot comprise mutually destructive parts, the suicidal person ceases to be a genuine individual. The suicide can be thus handled in much the same way that the time bomb can, i.e., as a collection of individuals that do not jointly constitute a single integrated whole and which mutually destroy one another. In this way, the apparent suicide is explained away. (Once again we see that a premise from the failed argument from self-destruction can help Spinoza defend IIP6 against putative counterexamples.)

Although Spinoza cannot account for coerced suicides in a way compatible with IIP6, he can successfully explain away many cases of putative suicide. If coerced suicide remains an anomalous case, Spinoza can take comfort from the fact that theories rarely collapse under the weight of a single anomaly.

7. Conclusion

I have shown that the skepticism with which many commentators have regarded Spinoza's demonstration of the *conatus* doctrine is unwarranted. By taking into account the expressive relationship between modes and God, we see that the *conatus* doctrine does indeed follow quite naturally from the premises stated in the demonstration of IIP6. These premises go to the heart of Spinoza's metaphysical enterprise, and thus IIP6 must be seen as a reasonable consequence of the fundamental assumptions of

⁷³ IVP20S.

⁷⁴ Bennett 1984, 239.

Spinoza's system. In the demonstration of IIP6, we thus not only get an ingenious argument for one of the most important claims in the whole of the *Ethics*, but also find Spinoza elaborating and ramifying some of the most interesting and most distinctively Spinozistic aspects of his metaphysics.⁷⁵

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⁷⁵ I would like to thank Michael Della Rocca, Daniel Garber, Don Garrett, Jean-Luc Marion, Martha Nussbaum, Ian Mueller, Howard Stein, and two anonymous referees for many helpful comments.

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