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Spinoza on Destroying Passions with Reason¹

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In the culminating book of his *Ethics*, Spinoza aims to demonstrate that reason has several methods for controlling the passions. One of Spinoza's most striking conclusions is that we can destroy a passion by forming a clear and distinct idea of it. My aim here is to argue that this claim is true. That is, I will argue that Spinoza successfully shows that reason is not always the slave of the passions.²

Our contemporary notion of a passion is somewhat different from Spinoza's. To get an intuitive grip on what Spinoza's claim means, and to see why we might want some method of controlling our passions, it will be useful to consider some particular examples of the sort of things he would count as passions. Consider someone who has experienced something violent or disturbing – a car crash, a mugging or an assault. Even when no bodily harm results, the psychological consequences can be long-lasting and painful. Among the most disruptive psychological consequences are recurring flashbacks of the

¹ For references to the *Ethics*, I adopt Michael Della Rocca's shorthand, where (e.g.) 2p7s indicates the scholium to proposition 7 of Book 2. The letter abbreviations are: a = axiom, c = corollary, d = demonstration, def = definition, p = proposition, s = scholium. I use Edwin Curley's translations (from the 1985 edition of the *Complete Works*).

² One might wonder whether Hume's conception of reason (as described in *Treatise* 2.3.3) has enough in common with Spinoza's for there to be a real disagreement (especially given such Humean-sounding statements as 4p7). Though I won't say much about the Humean conception in what follows, and some parts of the view I'll describe have a place in Hume (cf. *Treatise* 1.4.2.11 and 2.2.4.4), it should be clear by the end that the disagreement is genuine (likewise for Hobbes' computational theory of reason).

event. Flashbacks are typically involuntary and disruptive, involving some form of sensory recall.³ In some form or other, most people have had such experiences – even relatively minor events (e.g. accidentally offending someone or seeing someone hurt on the street) can cause one to experience flashbacks for some time.⁴

These examples can serve as an entry point with which to ascend into Spinoza's taxonomy of the affects. Spinoza would classify flashbacks as hate, or “sadness with the accompanying idea of an external cause” (3p13s), or, to the degree that they involve worrying about whether something similar will happen again, as fear, “an inconstant sadness, which has also arisen from the image of a doubtful thing” (3p18s2). Spinoza understands sadness, of which both hate and fear are species, as “that passion by which [the mind] passes to a lesser perfection” (3p11s). Our mind's 'passing to a lesser perfection' is a matter of its power of acting being diminished (cf. 3p11).

Now, a passion is defined as an affect that is “a confused idea, by which the mind affirms of its body, or some part of it, a greater or lesser force of existing than before, which, when it is given, determines the mind to think of this rather than that” (General Definition of the Affects). Since Spinoza holds that any change in the body's power of acting is paralleled by a change in the mind's power of acting (2p7), we should understand passions as involving changes in the mind's power as well. Passions include more than species of sadness, since there can be passions that increase our mind's and body's power of acting. Affects, in turn, are a broader class still (including actions in addition to passions),⁵ being “affections [i.e. modes or states] of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections” (3d3).

As a rough gloss then (focusing on the mental side of things), Spinoza's view is that

³ For a useful description of the phenomenology of flashbacks, see Ehlers, Hackmann and Michael 2004, whose conclusions concerning treatment contrast interestingly with Spinoza's.

⁴ In Letter 17, Spinoza describes a disturbing, recurring image he experienced as a result of a dream, and (in line with the proposal I make below) immediately goes on to explain its occurrence in terms of general principles of the imagination.

⁵ Sometimes Spinoza speaks as if all affects are passions (for discussion, see Bennett 1984, 257ff., but also Rice 1999), but I do not think this is his considered view. In what follows, nothing important will turn on this point.

in having a flashback, a person's thoughts are disrupted by an image⁶ that decreases his mind's power of acting by determining his mind to think of certain things. And that seems exactly right: a flashback robs a person of his ability to think about what he wants to think about, and drives him continually towards certain thoughts.

Anyone in such a position, then, has reason to carefully consider Spinoza's assertion that he has identified a method of controlling our passions through our rational powers. Spinoza in fact identifies several such methods (cf. 5p20s), but I'm going to focus on the first, which is the most perplexing.⁷ In 5p4s Spinoza describes this method as follows:

We must... take special care to know each affect clearly and distinctly (as far as this is possible), so that in this way the mind may be determined from an affect to thinking those things which it perceives clearly and distinctly, and with which it is fully satisfied, and so that the affect itself may be separated from the thought of an external cause and joined to true thoughts. The result will be not only that love, hate, and the like, are destroyed (by 5p2), but also that the appetites, or desires, which usually arise from such an affect, cannot be excessive.⁸

This is the claim I will defend on Spinoza's behalf. Since his description here is quite involved, it will be helpful to break it down. Spinoza is claiming that there is a certain *mental action or event* that

1. amounts to knowing the affect clearly and distinctly⁹
2. determines the mind to think those things which it perceives clearly and distinctly, and with which it is fully satisfied
3. involves the affect's being separated from the thought of an external cause and

⁶ For Spinoza, any image of a particular external event (such as a car crash) is confused, at least in part, because it represents both aspects of our body's nature and of the external event, and our knowledge of our own individual bodies through images is strictly limited (cf. 2p25-2p31).

⁷ It also seems to be his most original suggestion, since the other methods he describe have relatively straightforward historical precedents (see Pereboom 1994 and Rice 2002, but also DeBrabander 2007).

⁸ Contrary to what the above passage suggests, Spinoza does not think that *all* love is destroyed by this method, but only love that is not founded on reason. Intellectual love of God (*amor Dei intellectualis*) is strengthened by the higher forms of knowledge (cf. 5p32c).

⁹ This part of Spinoza's description must be read carefully, since Spinoza may be committed to the view that we cannot have clear and distinct knowledge of particulars as such. If so, then the knowledge in question could at most be, in the first instance, knowledge of very specific *types* of affects (see note 39 for more on this point).

being joined to true thoughts

4. results in the destruction of love, hate and the like¹⁰
5. ensures that the appetites or desires that arise from these affects cannot be excessive

Another important feature comes from the fact that Spinoza includes this method in 5p20s as part of the “power of the mind over the affects.” Since in the Preface to Part 5 Spinoza asserts that “I shall treat only of the power of the mind, or [*sive*] of reason, and shall show, above all, how great its dominion over the affects is,” we can say that the action or event

6. results in reason having power over the affects

Two other features concern how widely the method can be applied. The first is a hedge. Spinoza's parenthetical “as far as this is possible” implies that he doesn't think we're *always* able to perform this mental action, at least not as fully as is needed for control. This is reinforced by the fact that Spinoza criticizes Descartes and the Stoics for being excessively optimistic about how much dominion we can have over our affects (cf. the Preface to Part 5).¹¹ So the action

7. is not something we're always able to perform fully

But we shouldn't take this hedge too strongly. Spinoza describes the method as something that we can apply to *each* affect, which would mean (especially in combination with the claims of 5p3 and 5p4) that he thinks that, at least in principle, this mental action can be applied to any affect whatsoever. Moreover, Spinoza's grounds for this claim appear to be perfectly general, so he seems to think that this action can, at least in

¹⁰ DeBrabander denies that Spinoza believes we can eradicate our passions (DeBrabander 2007, 30), but doesn't explain why Spinoza explicitly states that “love, hate and the like are destroyed.”

¹¹ Letter 58 makes a similar point.

principle, be used by anyone.¹² On these grounds, we can say that the mental action

8. is something that, in principle, anyone could apply to any affect

Faced with such a list, the main objection that has been raised against Spinoza on this point is just this: *What* is he talking about? What sort of mental action could possibly have such impressive results? Even taking into account the hedge in Feature 7, it simply doesn't seem true that there's a way of coming to know our passions which necessarily or even reliably gives us control over them, much less destroy them. Knowledge by itself is, we might say, affectively inert.

This objection is presented most forcefully by Jonathan Bennett in his 1984 *Study of Spinoza's Ethics*. Bennett concludes that while Spinoza may have landed on the empirical Freudian observation that “a knowledge of causes sometimes has healing power,”¹³ nothing as strong as his actual claim stands any chance of being true. Bennett's objection appears to be widely regarded as unanswerable. Most of Spinoza's commentators avoid the issue, and those who do broach it either agree with Bennett's assessment or else argue that Spinoza's view is much more modest than his description suggests.¹⁴

My aim in what follows is to meet this objection, and so to argue that there *is* in fact some mental action that has all the features Spinoza describes. I'm not going to pursue this aim by defending the larger metaphysical picture Spinoza endorses in the earlier parts of the *Ethics*, from which he derives his claims in Part 5. Instead, my approach will draw its main support from an appeal to our knowledge of our own psychology, drawing on the rest of the *Ethics* primarily to confirm the view as an interpretation. For this reason, my argument also aims to show that we needn't accept any of the more radical parts of Spinoza's metaphysics in order to agree with him on the topic at hand (something

¹² The opening pages of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* describe Spinoza himself becoming better at controlling his passions over time, though he does not tell us how he accomplished that.

¹³ Bennett 1984, 337.

¹⁴ Lin 2009 is an example of the former, Curley 1988 of the latter. Della Rocca 2008 seems to do both (see esp. Della Rocca 2008, 191). Koistinen 1998 makes a cautious attempt to defend Spinoza on this point. Prior to Bennett's book, Stuart Hampshire favorably discussed this part of Spinoza in several works. Bennett's extensive criticisms of Hampshire (Bennett 1983, 347-55), however, also seem to be regarded as having settled the matter.

not true of all the means of passion-control he lists at 5p20s). At the same time, my conclusion, if correct, implies that Spinoza's broader model of the mind may be more plausible than it initially appears.

My argument will proceed as follows. The first section surveys other commentators' reactions, showing how they have been unable to find any plausible candidate for the mental action Spinoza describes. The next section focuses on a further problem Bennett poses for Spinoza, which I'll call the 'Changing Problem.' The Changing Problem concerns the metaphysical intelligibility of Spinoza's claim that passions can be turned into actions, and threatens to show that even on Spinoza's own terms, the doctrine is not just mysterious, but incoherent. I'll sketch two ways that this problem might be resolved. Both solutions point towards a certain way of thinking about the mental action in question, and this will provide a useful hint. Using this hint, the final sections will describe the mental process that I think Spinoza has in mind, and discuss additional textual support for the interpretation.

Four unsuccessful candidates

Answering Bennett's objection would require identifying some actual mental action that has all the features Spinoza describes. A number of commentators have offered possible responses to the objection, including Bennett himself. At least four candidate mental actions have been suggested.¹⁵

The first candidate is mentioned by Bennett himself. It comes out of noting that

¹⁵ Other would-be candidates are excluded by the fact that Spinoza counts them as separate methods in 5p20s or elsewhere in Part 5 (something Steven Nadler fails to note (Nadler 2006, 253)). This includes the method of building up new associations for affects, or understanding them as necessary (the subject of 5p6, whose derivation bypasses 5p4). Some of these methods may overlap with the method I describe here, but in order for the methods to count as distinct, the overlap must be partial. Amihud Gilead holds that behind the five different methods Spinoza lists at 5p20s, there is one core idea: that of achieving a sort of intellectual integrity (Gilead 1999, 174-75). Though he does not attempt to directly respond to Bennett's objection, Gilead's brief discussion seems to me a promising starting point for understanding Spinoza's fourth and fifth methods. One technique (which Martin Lin attributes to Don Garrett – see Lin 2009, 271) that might be added to any method comes from the fact that our mind has many more rational ideas available to it than passions, so that reason can claim strength in numbers. As Lin notes, those numbers will matter only if the rational ideas have power over the passions to begin with.

Spinoza describes the method as something that changes which thoughts our minds are determined to have (Feature 2 on our list). Perhaps what Spinoza has in mind is simply a matter of *distracting* oneself from fear or hatred by thinking of other things, specifically, of things understandable through reason alone, such as mathematics, or the propositions of the *Ethics*. Since these are 'true thoughts,' this method would also satisfy Feature 3. Of course, not everyone would agree with Spinoza that such thoughts are 'fully satisfying,' but perhaps all that's needed is that it's more psychologically healthy to think about geometry than to dwell on one's fears. If one could succeed in such self-distraction, it would seem to count as reason's gaining some control over the affects (Feature 6).¹⁶

Bennett, of course, thinks that this would not answer his basic objection. Distracting oneself through thinking of geometry is, for most people, one of the least effective means of distraction. Flashbacks make it difficult to focus even on television, so it's unlikely that geometry would be a more effective distraction. As Bennett notes, if one is looking for distraction, a better idea would be "swimming or listening to Wagner or having a good sleep."¹⁷ So if this is a method that is 'in principle' available to anyone (Feature 8), the "in principle" is so weak as to make the claim uninteresting. It is quite clear, however, that this cannot be what Spinoza has in mind. For he describes the mental action as one of forming a more clear and distinct idea *of the affect* (Feature 1), and the key to distraction of this type is thinking of something completely different.

The second candidate is defended by Alan Donagan.¹⁸ It naturally emerges if we focus on Spinoza's talk of 'separating' the affect from the idea of the external cause (Feature 3). Since, as we saw above, it's part of Spinoza's *definitions* of fear, hate, etc.

¹⁶ The opening section of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* also gives some support for this candidate, since there Spinoza states that he found relief from his passions by turning his mind instead to consideration of eternal things. At one place, H. A. Wolfson seems to accept a reading along these lines, according to which, since "[t]he mind's capacity is limited... if we fill it with one kind of content there will be no room for another kind" (Wolfson 1934, II, 270). Wolfson goes on, however, to suggest that this can be done by understanding the passions themselves, which can lead us to 'forget' the pain of the passions (ibid., 271). If we set aside the appeal to forgetting, Wolfson's suggestion is similar to the one I develop below, though he does not argue for the plausibility of the view.

¹⁷ Bennett 1984, 337.

¹⁸ Donagan 1988, 185. Like Curley, Donagan aims to emphasize that Spinoza's claims for the method are more modest than they first appear. Derk Pereboom (Pereboom 1994) is also sympathetic to this line, though he acknowledges its limitations.

that they involve some thought of an external cause, perhaps the idea is that we should stop thinking about the cause or object of our fear or hate and just think of the sad state of our own minds.¹⁹ According to those definitions, this would then result in the destruction of fear and hatred (Feature 4).

But as it stands, this candidate doesn't sound like something that would lead to control of passions in any significant way (Features 5 and 6). Perhaps once we're no longer thinking of external causes, our emotional state can no longer be properly characterized as 'hate' or 'fear,' but if the emotional disturbance itself remains as some other form of sadness, how is this any sort of improvement? Even worse, there seem to be ways of thinking about one's fear as an inner state that end up *intensifying* the fear – the more a tightrope walker recognizes her fear of falling, say, the worse that fear may become.

The third candidate is defended by Edwin Curley,²⁰ and is suggested by Spinoza's talk of the action as gaining knowledge of the affect (Feature 1). Maybe what Spinoza has in mind is changing the mistaken beliefs on which some affect is based. For instance, a child might be afraid of the dark because he believes there are monsters lurking in it. If he gained more knowledge of the matter, he would realize that there *aren't* any monsters in the dark, and his fear would then disappear. Such an action does have some of the features Spinoza mentions: it involves gaining knowledge, can result in the destruction of fears (Feature 4), and, since the child stops believing that there are monsters to which his fear is a response, can also result in no longer thinking of the external 'cause' of the affect (Feature 3).

The main problem with this candidate is that it is too limited in application. Remember that Spinoza thinks that the method of control he describes is, in principle, applicable to any affect (Feature 8). But it seems that relatively few of our affects are

¹⁹ Bennett 1984, 333-335. The Vipassana form of Buddhist meditation proceeds along these lines, and is supposed to lead to cessation of suffering (see Goldstein 1993). Though I suspect there is important overlap between Spinoza's methods those of the Buddhist's, I cannot explore that comparison here.

²⁰ See Curley 1988, 129-132. Wolfson suggests something similar, in glossing Spinoza's method as one of finding that "many of our emotions are spurious emotions" (Wolfson 1934, II, 267).

based on false beliefs.²¹ Moreover, as Spinoza himself insists (2p29s), we are not able to change our beliefs at will (more elaborate ways of changing beliefs, such as brainwashing, would no longer count as part of the *reason's* power over the affects, as Feature 6 requires). In order to change a belief, we normally have to seek out reasons for thinking that it is false. In the case of flashbacks, it doesn't seem that fears or hatred are based on any false beliefs. Of course, a fear can have involved one's overestimating the chances of something occurring again, but this seems quite contingent, and in any case wouldn't apply to hate.

The final and most intriguing candidate comes from a proposal by Stuart Hampshire.²² This candidate promises to address the problem with the third. According to Hampshire's suggestion, Spinoza thinks that, insofar as we are in the grip of any passion, we implicitly accept a naïve realism about value properties. For instance, when a child is frightened by a spider, he might think that his fearful feelings are actually a perception of the spider's property of being *objectively frightening* in just the way that his visual impression of its many legs is a perception of its many legs. If such a belief were an essential part of any passion, but were false in a way that anyone could realize by pure reasoning (cf. Features 6 and 8), then the act of coming to such realizations would seem to fit Spinoza's entire description well.

Unfortunately, this proposal lacks any clear textual support. Spinoza does think that people *sometimes* mistakenly attribute objective values to things as a sort of projection of their affects (cf. Preface to Part 4), but nothing suggests that he sees such a belief as essential to all affects or even to all instances of fear. Moreover, even if there were textual support for this proposal, this wouldn't be enough to answer Bennett's objection. The objection was that no actual mental activity fits Spinoza's characterization, so in order for this candidate to be successful, it would have to be independently plausible both (a) that all of our affects involve a naïve realist belief about value, and (b) that the falsity of this belief could be appreciated by any mind, through reason alone. But such a

²¹ Cf. Bennett 1984, 334 and Lin 2009, 272. Curley insists that Spinoza's aim was relatively modest, and so would deny that Spinoza was making a claim about *all* passions (Curley 1988, 131).

²² Hampshire 1972, 222

strong view is extremely implausible, and so is supported neither by commonsense psychology nor by contemporary moral psychology.²³

Now, I think that the first two candidates turn out to be *part* of the right answer. Before turning to my own proposal, I want to consider a further problem that Bennett raises for Spinoza. Since Bennett thinks that the problem shows that Spinoza's theory the controlling the passions is incoherent on Spinoza's own terms, it needs to be addressed. Moreover, the solutions I'll offer yield a clue as to what we should be looking for.

The Changing Problem: How could a passion cease to be a passion?

In 5p3, one of the propositions leading up to the description at 5p4s, Spinoza claims that “[a]n affect which is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it.” This appears to be a crucial part of this method, as Spinoza conceives it – since an affect must be a passion in order for it to be a bit of sadness, fear or hate (cf. 3def3 and 3p3), changing its status from a passion to an action guarantees that it will cease to be fear, hate or any type of sadness at all. Yet whether an affect is a passion for Spinoza seems to be a matter of its causal history. Spinoza's definition of passions turns on whether we could be the adequate cause of a given affect: an affect is an action if we could be its adequate cause, otherwise it is a passion (3def3). Bennett infers that turning a passion into an action would require changing the passion's causal history so that we *had been* its adequate cause, something he finds as intelligible as making oneself royalty by changing who one's parents were.²⁴ I'll call this 'the Changing Problem.' If the Changing Problem cannot be answered, then Spinoza's own philosophy of mind is

²³ Bennett states that this proposal, “though impressive, seems false” (Bennett 1984, 351). There are some contemporary defenders of part (a) of this view, but none I know of endorse part (b). John Mackie claims both that we believe in objectively prescriptive properties and that this belief is false, but holds that its falsity is something determined *empirically*. Moreover, Mackie does not claim that the false beliefs are present in all our passions (Mackie 1977). Mark Johnston defends a 'detectivist' account of certain affects in Johnston 2001, but thinks the position is plausible, and so would deny that pure reasoning would lead one to reject it. One historical figure may endorse something like (a) and (b) is Malebranche, in *The Search After Truth* (esp. Ch. 4-10 of Book V), published shortly before Spinoza's death. Spinoza never mentions Malebranche, and it is extremely unlikely he was aware of this part of his philosophy.

²⁴ Bennett 1984, 336.

inconsistent with his claims about the power of reason over the passions.

Most commentators seem to think Spinoza cannot escape the Changing Problem, even though it threatens to undermine a central tenet of his moral psychology.²⁵ There are, however, both philosophical and textual reasons for thinking that this verdict has been reached too quickly. In fact, I think there are at least two plausible lines of response. I'll discuss each enough to illustrate their promise, and to show that they both yield a certain hint about what sort of mental process we should be looking for.

Response 1

Bennett arrives at this problem because he reads 3def3 as saying that passions are all and only those affections of our minds and bodies that had at least one cause outside of us. And this naturally leads one to think that there's no possibility of changing passions into the other sort of affect (actions) since, once an affect exists, it has the causes it has, and there's nothing we can do to change the past. But a closer reading of 3def3 reveals that Spinoza distinguishes actions from passions not on the basis of whether we *are* the adequate cause, but whether we *could* be ('*Si... adaequata possimus esse causa*').²⁶ One might overlook this if one has in mind Spinoza's necessitarian doctrine that everything that is actual is necessary (cf. 1p33). In that case, the only way we *could* be the adequate cause of some affection is if we actually *were* the adequate cause – and this would justify Bennett's construal.

²⁵ In his defense of Spinoza's views in Part 5, Curley quietly passes over this issue (cf. Curley 1988, 129-33 and 168-69). Morrison (manuscript) thinks that the problem gives evidence that Bennett and others have been misreading one of Spinoza's central axioms (1a4) – Morrison's argument is ingenious, but too involved for me to discuss here. Lin maintains that the Changing Problem is not resolved by Olli Koistinen's proposal that Spinoza is really concerned not with the causal history in our sense, but rather with the reasons we have for holding some belief, which can obviously change (Koistinen 1998, Lin 2009, 271). Though Koistinen's proposal is given with little textual basis, and Lin is probably right that his suggestion by itself isn't enough to settle the matter, I think Koistinen is gesturing in the right direction. Lee C. Rice suggests something similar to my first response (Rice 1999), albeit with an unnecessary appeal to classic behaviorism.

²⁶ Both Curley and Samuel Shirley translate the "*possimus esse*" as "we can be." The main verb is in the subjunctive mood, however, so "we could be" or "we could have been" might be more accurate (a point that adds some additional support to the interpretation I'll suggest).

However, nothing in Spinoza's necessitarianism precludes him from speaking about whether someone's power is such that, other things being equal, that person *would have been* able to do a certain action.²⁷ So, in this case, an affect might cease to be a passion if it becomes something of which we *could* have been the adequate cause. This won't change the fact that a given affect had the causes it had, but, on this line of thought, the fact that the affect *actually* had a cause external to us isn't enough to determine whether it's a passion. To make this response work, we'd need an idea of what sort of thing could be and then cease to be a passion in this way (and so become the sort of the thing that could be understood through us alone, given 1a4 and 3def3). That is, we'd need some way of individuating affects that could make sense of such a change. But there's no particular reason to doubt that this question of individuation can be addressed (see below), so we can conclude that the Changing Problem is not as decisive as most commentators have assumed.²⁸

Response 2

Here's another line of response. Unlike Response 1, this approach can grant Bennett that whether something is a passion depends entirely on its actual causes. Now, most of Spinoza's talk of causal relations is in terms of causal relations between particular things (substances or modes), instead of events. Moreover, he sometimes talks of X causing (or affecting) Y even when X isn't the cause of Y's *coming into existence*, but merely of some

²⁷ For a useful discussion of how such distinctions can fit within Spinoza's necessitarianism, see Garrett 1999, 113-114. Alternatively, we might understand Spinoza's necessitarianism in a weaker way than described above (see Curley and Walski 1999).

²⁸ This interpretive suggestion is supported by the General Definition of the Affects Spinoza gives at the end of Part 3: "An affect which is called a passion of the mind is a confused idea, by which the mind affirms of its body, or of some part of it, a greater or lesser force of acting than before, which, when it is given, determines the mind to think of this rather than that." Spinoza here defines passions solely in terms of their content and their role in determining other thoughts, *not* in terms of their causal history. If this is truly meant as a definition, then an affect that wasn't a confused idea (say) wouldn't be a passion, even if its causal source was outside the subject (this is assuming, however, that there is some flexibility in the relation between the content and the causal history of a representation).

aspect of Y's features (cf. the talk of partial causes in 3d1).²⁹

Keeping this all in mind, it turns out that on a natural way of thinking about causation, things *can* lose some of their causes. To appreciate this, consider an example (not Spinoza's): say that Anna was working with a piece of clay, and shaped it into a human figure. Since she's responsible for its having a certain shape, we can say that she is a cause of the clay. Later, Brutus comes along, determined to make a chicken out of whatever clay he finds, stomps on Anna's clay figure, rolls the clay into a ball, and then shapes it into something chicken-like. Now he's a cause of the clay. But is Anna *still* one of its causes? Though this is somewhat different from how we speak about causation today, we can see that there's some intuitive plausibility in saying that Anna is no longer one of the clay's causes, since (with some simplifying assumptions about microphysical details) her influence on it has been completely wiped out. There's no trace whatsoever of her effect on it. The fact that the clay was in a human shape may have had some effect on *Brutus* and on his action (if it had already been in a ball shape, he might have made a chicken more quickly), but none of this need be evident in the clay itself. The clay would have looked just as it does now even if Anna had never touched it, or had done something completely different with it. This shows that there is some plausibility in thinking about causation in terms of the following principle: X is a cause of Y at some time only if Y shows some trace of X's influence at that time.

To be clear: this principle doesn't say that we can change historical causal facts, or make causal facts any less necessary. In the above example, it remains true that Anna *was* a cause of the clay. She just doesn't count among the *present* causes of the clay after Brutus has his influence, because there isn't presently any trace of her influence in the clay. According to Spinoza's necessitarianism, all of this would be a necessary consequence of earlier states of things. In addition, according to Spinoza's view that everything has effects (1p36), each of these things would have some effect somewhere –

²⁹ See also Spinoza discussion of God's being a cause both of the existence and of the essence of our intellect at 1p17s. According to Garrett 2002, Spinoza holds that finite things can be the cause of their own continued existence through the exercise of their *conatus*, though no finite thing can be the cause of its own *coming into* existence. In doing so, they presumably are always causes both of their own existence and of some of their own features.

but the effect of Anna's earlier influence on the clay would be outside the clay itself (say, in Brutus' memory). So the above principle is consistent with Spinoza's general views on causation.

If we attribute this principle to Spinoza, then we can respond to the Changing Problem by saying that affects *can* lose some of their past causes and so, in principle, become actions.³⁰ Bennett's example of his parents was misleading, since that is a case where the traces of the causes probably can't be wiped out without the thing itself being destroyed.³¹ If what makes something a passion is its having had an external cause, then what is needed for it to cease to be a passion is for it to be something that still exists even when all traces of external influence are wiped away, and all its features are the result of internal influence.³²

Both of these responses to the Changing Problem require the same thing: when an affect ceases to be a passion, this involves its becoming something that we at least *could* have been the adequate cause of. For Response 2, this follows from the stronger claim that an affect ceases to be a passion when we *actually* become its adequate cause. We have some reason then for thinking that the mental action Spinoza has in mind for controlling our passions must have a result along these lines. This gives us an important

³⁰ Some contemporary philosophers hold that a thing's origins are essential to it (cf. Kripke 1972, 110ff). Such a view could cause problems for both of my proposals, because if some affect had originated from, say, a reaction to a spider, then nothing could have produced *that* affect that didn't involve that spider. Since spiders are external to our minds, it would then follow that we never even *could* be the cause of that affect. Spinoza almost certainly does not hold this view about things' origins – his view of bodies, for instance, is that they are individuated just by their patterns of motion and rest (cf. 2p13s and following). Even if we accept essentialism about things' causal origins, however, the relevant point can be formulated in terms of whether we could have produced an affect *relevantly similar* to the affect in question (say, sharing all its defining, non-historical properties).

³¹ Though even there, we might be able to get an example with enough creativity (perhaps with some variation on Kafka's *Metamorphosis*).

³² This response has another important consequence. A familiar interpretive problem is that Spinoza's reliance on 1a4 ("Cognition of the effect depends on, and involves cognition of the cause") in explaining perception (cf. 2p16) has the apparent consequence that when we perceive an object, we're perceiving all of its causes. Given how far back causal chains stretch, this seems to lead to absurd conclusions – e.g. that all of us regularly perceive dinosaurs and the Big Bang (see Wilson 1980). Though appeal to the 'cause-losing' principle I've mentioned here may not preclude all such conclusions, allowing things to lose some of their historical causes would make the view significantly more plausible.

hint for identifying the relevant action.³³ 5p3 states that passions are turned into actions by our forming clear and distinct ideas of them, so the hint should lead us to ask how forming a clear and distinct idea of a passion could make it so that we could have been its adequate cause. This brings me to my main proposal.

The proposal: philosophizing and killing the mood

In this section, my aim is to identify an action that has all the features Spinoza describes. In the next section, I'll argue that the action I describe fits neatly into Spinoza's larger philosophical framework.

Consider another example. Say that you and your love interest are on a date, and romance is in the air. You are filled with love as you gaze at him across the table. There's a long pause in the conversation, and you admire your beloved as he gazes thoughtfully out the window. But then something prompts you to start philosophizing about your present feeling. Having Spinoza in mind, you realize that the love you feel would be diminished if you were to think of your beloved and his reactions to you as mere products of necessity (3p49), that this romantic love is just the sort of passion that Spinoza thinks keeps humans from agreeing in nature (4p32), that as a passion this love could overwhelm you completely (4p6) and that if things had been different, this very same person could have instead been the cause of fear (3p50). Struck by how this feeling makes a great example for each of these propositions, you realize that it's very similar to the examples you've been using to teach Spinoza, and decide to use this event as an example for your next lecture on rationalist views of the passions.

It's hard to imagine that this line of thought hasn't killed the mood (at least for you). Note, however, that this wasn't a case of simply being distracted by other thoughts (such as thoughts of geometry, the first candidate above). You were philosophizing about

³³ There is a closely related problem which I haven't addressed. Both the responses I've described assume that it's at least intelligible that we could be the adequate cause of some affect. But, as Morrison (unpublished) emphasizes, given 1a4 and our inescapable causal dependence on other modes, it's difficult to see how we could ever be an adequate cause of anything. It's possible that Response 1 above offers some resources for addressing this problem, but I can't pursue the issue further here.

the very feeling of romance you ended up destroying. Philosophizing about a mood *kills* the mood precisely because it engages with the mood and changes it. Being distracted by thoughts of geometry may take you out of the mood, but if the mood comes back, it will be just as it was.

In fact, there is a clear sense in which a philosopher is in a better position to kill the mood than a mathematician would be. A practiced philosopher can find a way to bring up philosophy in any situation where there's a chance for thought, since any situation has some bearing on philosophical issues. Even highly engaging situations offer such opportunities (consider someone who you can't watch movies with, since he constantly lapses into analyzing them). By contrast, in engaging situations, it is significantly more difficult for someone to turn his thoughts to unrelated matters. For these reasons, most philosophers have learned that if you want to enjoy a passionate moment, it's best not to philosophize about it.

But why should this be? The following seems plausible. Philosophical contemplation takes up attention. Moreover, when it goes well (e.g. when we realize that some substantive claim is *true*), it is energizing and involving. But because our attention is finite, and because philosophizing involves thinking about general, abstract truths, this activity necessarily draws attention away from the particulars of our surroundings – even when it's just those particulars that we're trying to find general truths about. Though it sounds slightly paradoxical, when you're philosophizing about your feelings for your beloved, you aren't really thinking about your beloved anymore. This has an impact on your affective state. It seems plausible to say that the conscious energy involved in grasping some general truth and its relation to the particular situation *draws conscious energy away* from your previous feelings. There isn't *room* in your conscious experience for both romantic feelings and the grasping of philosophical truths about those feelings. When your mind becomes genuinely occupied with the latter, the former diminish or disappear. This is in part because philosophizing is (again, quite intuitively) a paradigm of

mental *activity*, as opposed to passivity. So a transition to philosophizing is a transition to activity, something that seems to be necessarily joyful.³⁴

Of course, you would get a similar result if you could completely shift to deep contemplations of geometry, but – and this is crucial – that would require ignoring the passion. Intuitively, the more content two mental states share, the easier it is to transition from one to the other. The philosopher who kills the mood *uses* the vivacity of the passion as fuel for philosophizing, making it easier to engage in. It is because of this that a generalist philosopher can turn any discussion to philosophy, and do so much more easily than a geometrician can turn most discussions to geometry.

There is one more detail in the example I want to highlight. After you started realizing how some of Spinoza's (more plausible) claims applied to the feeling, you realized that you could use an example like the present one to explain Spinoza's claims to students. This wasn't a surprise ending – once someone really understands some general truth, we expect him to be able to come up with examples of it. In other words, once your attention is on the general truths, you are in a position to come up with the idea of such a passion as an example.

Parts of the description I gave (the talk of drawing conscious energy and of the limited room in one's conscious experience) are somewhat metaphorical. But the scenario should sound (perhaps uncomfortably) familiar. Moreover, it should be clear that nothing turned on the example being one of romantic love. Philosophizing can ruin a joke or the simple joys of watching the sunset. But for these same reasons, it can also kill unpleasant moods. Getting involved in considering the philosophical significance of one's fear takes one away from one's fear, and the same with hate. If you start philosophizing about a flashback, it loses its force. Of course, one cannot always start philosophizing at will. At the same time, with practice it becomes easier and easier to start doing so – in the course of developing a theory of the emotions, a seasoned philosopher becomes able to

³⁴ This is a familiar refrain in philosophy. A classic statement is Book X, Chapter 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “we think that happiness must have pleasure mixed in with it; and the most pleasant of activities in accordance with virtue is agreed to be that in accordance with wisdom. At any rate, philosophy seems to involve pleasures remarkable for their purity and stability” (Crisp's 2000 translation, 195).

take more and more emotional states as occasions for philosophizing, and thereby becomes less and less subject to them.

This is the action I think Spinoza had in mind. We are to gain control over a passion by thinking about that passion *as* a passion and by contemplating the general truths which that passion exemplifies.

Recall the features of the mental action we're looking for. That action

1. amounts to knowing the affect clearly and distinctly
2. determines the mind to think those things which it perceives clearly and distinctly, and with which it is fully satisfied
3. involves the affect's being separated from the thought of an external cause and being joined to true thoughts
4. results in the destruction of love, hate and the like
5. ensures that the appetites or desires that arise from these affects cannot be excessive
6. results in reason having power over the affects
7. is not something we're always able to perform fully
8. is something that, in principle, anyone could apply to any affect

To these we added the hint from the previous section, namely, that the application of the mental action to some affect involves that affect becoming something of which we at least could have been the adequate cause. We're now in a position to see how it's plausible to attribute all of these features to the action I've described.

Coming to appreciate general truths about a passion does indeed seem to be a matter of coming to know it clearly and distinctly (Feature 1). Those general truths can themselves also be known clearly and distinctly, and there does indeed seem to be something deeply satisfying in this – hence the joy of philosophizing (Feature 2). Once one is engaged in this activity, one's mind is no longer really on the object of the passion (Feature 3), and given the way that there's not mental room enough both for serious, intense philosophizing and for emotional engagement, this activity can destroy love, hate and the like (Feature 4). Precisely because the activity does this, if executed it plausibly can restrain the sort of appetites and desires that arise from affects (Feature 5). Philosophizing is quite plausibly an activity of reason (Feature 6), and so can only be

engaged in certain contexts (e.g. when one isn't running for one's life) (Feature 7). Though it may take practice to start philosophizing with more intense affects, it does seem in principle true that anyone could apply this activity to any affect (Feature 8). Note that here, the 'in principle' does not trivialize the claim, as it seems to with the claim that anyone can always in principle turn his thoughts to geometry. And finally, it does seem that once you've come to see how some affect exemplifies some group of general truths, it now becomes something that you could have thought up as an example (the hint – but more on this below).

Further basis in Spinoza

The fact that this intuitively familiar activity fits Spinoza's description so well (and so much better than any previous candidate did) gives us good reason to conclude that it is what Spinoza had in mind. To round out my argument, however, I want to provide some further detail about how this mental action is related to Spinoza's broader theory of the mind. Doing so will also clarify my proposal in several ways. In particular, I will say more about (a) the act of grasping general truths, (b) the energy this act involves and its joyfulness, (c) how any affect can be the basis for philosophizing and (d) how passions become actions on this proposal.

(a) A crucial part of the proposal was the appeal to philosophical contemplation, or the grasping of general truths. This is to be distinguished from merely *thinking* about general truths, or even from *knowing* them. For it is clearly possible to think about some general truth and without making any significant impact on one's affects.

Now, Spinoza in fact spends some time distinguishing different types of knowledge, not all of which are properly attributed to reason. In the *Ethics* at 2p40s2, he makes these distinctions using an example of mathematical knowledge. He asks how a person might know that, whenever one needs to determine the value of 'x' in an equation of the form ' $m/n = p/x$,' one should multiply n and p, and then divide the result by m. Some people might know this "because they have not yet forgotten what they heard from their teacher

without any demonstration” (2p40s2). But this is merely ‘knowledge of opinion or imagination,’ not knowledge of reason. Having knowledge of reason requires more. One has *this* sort of knowledge when one *appreciates the force* of Euclid’s demonstration.³⁵ That kind of knowledge comes from grasping the relation of the question to axioms and certain inferences. So we can see that Spinoza thinks about knowledge (and clear and distinct understanding³⁶) in terms of the sort of distinction needed for my proposal – not all ways of knowing are equally activities of reason.

(b) Spinoza not only distinguishes rational mental activity from mere imagination and opinion, he also thinks that the former sort of activity is necessarily joyful. He thinks that knowledge by reason is the essence of our mind (2p11), and so that the more of it we have, the greater the part of our mind that is capable of surviving (5p38). That, in turn, means that increasing our knowledge by reason amounts to an increase in our reality or perfection (2def6), which is just what Spinoza thinks joy is (Definitions of the Affects, II³⁷). So Spinoza does not think that philosophizing (at least, philosophizing that involves grasping truth) is an affectively inert activity, contrary to what a Humean model of the mind might suggest.³⁸ To the degree that examples like the one in the previous section make this part of Spinoza’s position plausible, we then have reason to question the Humean model.

(c) Another important part of my proposal was the claim that any affect could be the basis for some philosophizing.³⁹ Spinoza goes to some length to argue that there are

³⁵ In addition, one might know by reason if one simply ‘sees in one glance’ the answer. Spinoza counts this as the highest kind of knowledge. Spinoza certainly holds that this knowledge is more powerful than knowledge based on universal principles (cf. 5p36cs), but there is no clear basis for Gilead’s claim that only the highest kind of knowledge can overcome the passions (Gilead 1999, 173). Regardless, I suspect that attaining this highest sort of knowledge of the passions also fits the model I’ve described, but it’s not necessary for my purposes to show that here.

³⁶ Cf. 2p29c, where Spinoza states that clear and distinct understanding occurs when we “regard a number of things at once, to understand their agreements, differences, and oppositions.” So part of clear and distinct understanding involves understanding the relations of a given thing to other things, and it is natural to think of this being a matter of understanding certain general principles or laws.

³⁷ In Part 3, Spinoza suggests that joy is a passion (cf. 3p11s), but it later becomes clear that he also thinks there is an active version of joy (e.g. 5p32c).

³⁸ Hume is of course aware that philosophizing is joyful, but tries to explain this by appeal to mundane, contingent facts of psychology (cf. *Treatise* 2.3.10).

³⁹ One might wonder why we couldn’t do something just as effective by thinking about the laws governing

some features, common to all things, that can only be conceived adequately (e.g. 2p37 and following). This may make him seem overly epistemically optimistic. It hasn't been part of my aim here to show that he is right about this – for all I've said, there might be affects that are simply imponderable. At the same time, our own knowledge of our psychological lives suggests that all our affective states can be fruitfully contemplated (which is less than saying we clearly understand everything about them), and it is to Spinoza's credit that he has some explanation for this.⁴⁰

(d) The last point to be addressed concerned the hint I derived from considering the Changing Problem. The hint was that the mental action should turn the passion into something of which we at least could be the adequate cause. In the above example, it was plausible that the relevant philosophizing put us in a position to come up with the passion as an example of certain general truths. This added some surprising confirmation that the proposal was on the right track.

But someone might object that being able to come up with the passion as an example of some general truths isn't the same thing as being able to cause the passion

whatever the affect represents. Say that, in a flashback, the person thought carefully about the geometrical arrangement of the scene as he remembered it, and about which geometrical laws the scene exemplified. In such a case, he wouldn't be ignoring the affect, and it would seem that this too would lead to a similar sort of control over his thoughts. So why bother with the shift of attention? The reason that this shift is important for Spinoza, I think, is that some of our passions present their external objects so confusedly that we can't count on being able to use them as occasions to think about (e.g.) geometrical laws, and the method should apply to any type of affect (Feature 8). Consider fuzzy memories and aimless anger: by considering our aimless anger as just a psychological state, we can consider it in relation to a variety of laws about the mental. Of course, when we can, it will also be fruitful to relate affects to geometrical or physical laws.

⁴⁰ Spinoza in fact sets certain limits to the sort of self-knowledge finite beings like us can gain through the ideas of our affects: "The ideas of the affections of the human body, insofar as they are related only to the human mind, are not clear and distinct, but confused" (2p28). Indeed, on Spinoza's general account of knowledge (cf. 2p40s2), it looks like our adequate knowledge concerns only common features of things (which do not constitute the essence of any singular thing (2p37)), and of features we grasp via understanding God's attributes (from which no ideas of actual singular things follow directly (1p28, 2p9)). Garrett 2010 provides a useful discussion of some of these issues. Nadler 2006 (esp. 165ff.) argues that we can have adequate, albeit partial, knowledge of external things. If it is true that we cannot have fully adequate ideas of particular entities, the method I've described would have to be one on which the resulting action was knowledge of a certain (very specific) type of affect, not a token. It would be an idea that accurately captured the nature of the token passion with which one began, as well as the nature of similar passions had by other people. This may be part of why taking a romantic situation as an example of principles can kill the mood: romantic love plausibly attaches to individuals as such (it's possible to be in love with one of two identical twins), and this is something that drops out when one starts thinking of a situation as exemplifying general principles.

itself. For the former is at most a matter of producing some *idea* of the passion, not the passion itself. Strikingly, however, Spinoza has something to say on exactly this point. In the Scholium to 2p21, he says that “the idea of the mind, that is, the idea of the idea, is nothing but the form of the idea insofar as this is considered as a mode of thinking without relation to the object. For as soon as someone knows something, he thereby knows that he knows it.” So Spinoza thinks there is an intimate relation between an idea and the idea of that idea – as he says earlier in the demonstration, they are “one and the same thing.”⁴¹ I therefore suggest that when one is able to produce the idea of an affect, one can thereby be said to produce the affect itself. In the case where the affect was a passion, however, the form of it that one can produce (the idea of the passion) is an action. In fact, this is exactly what is suggested by the demonstration of 5p3, where Spinoza briefly appeals to 2p21s in explaining why forming a clear and distinct idea can turn a passion into an action.

There is much more to be said here. Indeed, if the above points are correct, then Spinoza’s theory concerning the mind’s control over the passions is deeply rooted in his substantive views about the nature of the mind and of affects. Yet if that theory is intuitively plausible, as I tried to show in the previous section, then we have special reason to consider those substantive views and to be suspicious of views of the mind that make no room for the theory.

Conclusion

I’ll conclude by noting a small piece of empirical evidence for my interpretive claims. It is quite likely that Spinoza’s struggles with his own affects are what led him to write the *Ethics* (cf. the first few sections of his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*⁴²). The

⁴¹ It is easiest to understand this passage, and Spinoza’s use of it in 5p3d, if one reads Spinoza’s talk of being ‘one and the same thing’ as being weaker than a claim of numerical identity. I argue for this reading in Marshall 2009.

⁴² The second book of the *Short Treatise* is also relevant. Though I do not have space here to discuss the view of the control of the passions there (which in any case focuses more on the effects of the intellectual

very act of figuring out the principles of the *Ethics* by focusing on his own passions, then, would have been an application of the very method he describes in its concluding chapter.⁴³

love of God), it's worth noting that Chapter 18 of the *Short Treatise* claims that knowledge of the passions "frees us from sadness, despair, envy, fright, and other evil passions" (I/88, page 128 in Curley 1985).

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