

'Spinoza on the Problem of Akrasia'

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1. Introduction¹

When philosophers look to the history of philosophy for insight regarding the problem of weakness of will, they have not looked to Spinoza. This is unfortunate, because one can discern a fascinating theory of weakness of will, or akrasia, from Spinoza's *Ethics*. Spinoza would not countenance a theory involving the will, of course, because he holds that there is no such faculty – he takes the will to be nothing but a fiction. He does acknowledge, however, that humans may sometimes knowingly act against their better judgement. In fact, he has a theory to explain it, though he framed his discussion around bondage to the passions, rather than employing the language of weakness of will or akrasia.

Nevertheless, this essay will draw from Spinoza's text a Spinozist theory of akrasia. This theory combines aspects of two seemingly mutually exclusive views. In this regard, this theory of akrasia is conceptually unique, a coherent hybrid of two common views that nonetheless avoids their pitfalls. Indeed, this theory of akrasia is intuitive in many ways. It presents akratic action as it must be understood – as voluntary irrational action, or voluntary action against one's better judgement.

In what follows, two common ways of explaining akrasia will be presented. Though each is intuitive in a certain way, both fail as explanations of the most interesting cases of akrasia. Spinoza's own thoughts on bondage and 'the affects' shall follow, from which a Spinozist explanation of akrasia shall be constructed.

This project will allow us a fuller understanding of Spinozist moral psychology.

In addition to this historical value, the Spinozist theory may also offer a satisfactory explanation of certain hard cases of akrasia while avoiding the problems beset by other theories. For this reason, the Spinozist account could also be seen as a useful contribution to our philosophical understanding of the phenomenon of akrasia.

2. A Few Words on Akrasia

Akratic action is voluntary, irrational behaviour; it is voluntary action performed against one's better judgement.² As evidence that akratic action is both voluntary and irrational, consider how blame is usually employed in such cases. Generally, we find akrasia to be in some sense blameworthy, while we generally excuse someone whose action we judge to be involuntary and praise someone whose voluntary actions we judge to be rational. For example, if we are unable to perform the ideal action in a given situation, we are generally not blamed for failing to do the ideal. In that case, we do not fail to do the ideal action voluntarily; we fall short of the ideal involuntarily. And it is for this reason that we may be excused. However, when we suffer akrasia, we are usually not excused, but held accountable in some sense, because we have voluntarily fallen short of the ideal. Because of this moral distinction, akrasia is rightly held to be voluntary action.³ Similarly, we must believe that what we will do is against our better judgement, otherwise we go against our better judgement accidentally. And akrasia is irrational action, simply *because* it goes against our better judgement.

Instances of akrasia may be synchronic or diachronic. Synchronic, or strict, akrasia occurs when an agent makes a judgement that doing one action is more desirable than doing another, yet at the same time voluntarily performs the less desirable action.⁴ In diachronic akrasia, on the other hand, the mind vacillates between two appearances of the good, but acts while considering only the appearance of the

option that is, in fact, less desirable.⁵ In other words, the judgement that one option is better than the other and the performance of the other action do not occur simultaneously in diachronic akrasia, but in succession. Sometimes, this kind of akrasia appears as a rash or impulsive action. For example, say that I know I ought not eat cake because it will spoil my diet. At a moment in which I am not focusing on that judgement, however, I instead consider the mouth-watering appearance of a slice of cake and succumb. In this case, I act rashly, choosing to eat the cake at the moment when I was considering its desirability and *not* my prior judgement of what would be best overall. In other words, in diachronic akrasia, the mind vacillates between the rational desire to refrain and the momentary, irrational desire to eat. Then the mind acts at the moment when it is considering only the irrational desire.⁶

Interestingly, Spinoza recognizes this phenomenon, in which the mind vacillates among several representations. He says:

This constitution of the Mind which arises from two contrary affects is called vacillation of the mind ... one and the same object can be the cause of many and contrary affects.⁷

According to Spinoza, this vacillation arises because different features of the object in question, or different aspects of us, can give rise to different desires. In considering the object, then, the mind may vacillate among these several desires. It may be that one of these desires leads us toward rational behaviour, while another leads us toward irrational behaviour. When our mind vacillates among them, we may sometimes act just as our mind turns to a desire that leads us to irrational behaviour.

Spinoza accepts the possibility of synchronic, or strict, akrasia as well. In fact, the first 17 propositions in Part 4 of his *Ethics* are hard to understand unless they refer

to synchronic akrasia. According to Spinoza there, one desire or passion overpowers or restrains another. In other words, the cases with which Spinoza is concerned here are those in which two mental states coexist in the mind, yet only one, the more powerful one, is efficacious. This does not seem to be a case of the mind attending to one desire over another or vacillating between two.⁸ Indeed, the entire language of power used to analyse the affects suggests that one affect meets another head-on and overpowers it, as occurs only in synchronic akrasia. After having explained that our desire for what we know to be best is not very powerful and can easily be restrained by passions, Spinoza quotes Medea, saying, 'I see and approve the better, but follow the worse'.⁹ This is best understood as a kind of synchronic, or strict, akrasia. Spinoza takes Medea's complaint to capture a universal human problem; it is clear he is most concerned with synchronic akrasia. In what follows, strict, or synchronic, akrasia will be the focus.

3. The Folk Explanation of Akrasia

The folk explanation of akrasia – and one commonly held in the history of philosophy – is that some brute desire overpowers or overwhelms our better judgement. Consider Descartes, for whom akrasia was the very real deficit of power the mind sometimes feels in relation to the movements of its body. Rejecting the Platonic divided soul, Descartes says:

All the conflicts usually supposed to occur between the lower parts of the soul, which we call 'sensitive', and the higher or 'rational' part of the soul – or between the natural appetites and the will – consist simply in the opposition between the movements which the body (by means of its spirits) and the soul (by means of its will) tend to produce at the same time in the gland.¹⁰

Note that what opposes our judgement here is something completely non-cognitive – it

is the brute force of the movement of our bodily appetites. In this passage, Descartes seems to affirm that, when one suffers akrasia, one's bodily appetites are more powerful than the force of one's cognitive faculties. Whether this is Descartes' considered view, of course, is a separate issue.

Indeed, sometimes it seems as though Spinoza himself believes this, even though in fact he does not. He sometimes describes the akratic agent as one who is 'in bondage to the passions', saying:

Man's lack of power to moderate and restrain the affects I call Bondage. For the man who is subject to affects is under the control, not of himself, but of fortune, in whose power he so greatly is that often, though he sees the better for himself, he is still forced to follow the worse. (4 Preface, Curley, 543; Geb II/205)

This presents a picture of an agent who is rendered unable to resist a wave of desire that has overcome him; he will be driven to act against his better judgement and when he is so driven he suffers akrasia.

This view is problematic, however, because it seems to render akratic action involuntary. For, if akratic action is the result of our reason being blinded or bound by an overwhelming physical impulse or appetite, how can we be said to act? Perhaps this occurs in the case of the addict, but surely it is not what occurs in most instances of weak will. In those everyday cases, ought we not to be blamed for behaving in this way? Indeed, when we are overcome with such a brute desire, it seems as though we are not only driven to act against our better judgement, but against our will.¹¹ But if akratic action is behaviour that we perform against our will, then akratic action will be in the same class as a sneeze or a compulsion. Of course, we may be indirectly responsible,

either for allowing ourselves to get into such a situation, or for failing to strengthen our will or discipline our bodies. Nevertheless, the action itself is involuntary.

This is not what we want from an account of akrasia. Akkratic action should be something that we do, not something that happens to us. We are the ones who are responsible for performing this action. If we are to be implicated in the akkratic action, we must mean to perform this action, while knowing or believing that it is against our better judgement. It must be something that *results from our judgements*. We must perform this action voluntarily.

So it seems that our own judgements, not just brute desires, must play a role in the explanation of akkratic action. When akrasia is discussed in terms that omit the role of desire, however, problems again arise. For example, if akkratic action is to proceed only from our judgements, it becomes more difficult to see how such action occurs, as we shall see. Indeed, in focusing exclusively on judgements, some thinkers even find reason to deny that synchronic akrasia is possible.

4. The judgement Centered Explanation of Akrasia

According to R.M. Hare's prescriptivism, our judgement 'I ought to do x ' necessarily motivates us to do x . He suggests that when I assent to the statement, 'I ought to do x ,' I am in fact issuing a prescription or imperative to myself, 'do x .' So, when I judge that I ought to do x , I will in fact do x , unless I am unable to do so. Hare presents this in the context of explaining what happens when an agent seems to make a judgement that something would be best yet fails to do it.¹² According to Hare, whenever an agent appears to fail to follow through on his practical judgement, knowingly following the lesser of two available courses of action, either (a) he does not in fact sincerely judge that he ought to do x (perhaps he only recognizes that convention

requires it), or (b) he cannot physically or psychologically do x . Thus, strict akrasia is impossible for Hare, because he either does not contravene his own judgement or he acts involuntarily.

Donald Davidson recognizes that Hare's denial of strict akrasia runs counter to our own experience. It certainly seems as though we act against our better judgement some of the time. In his essay, 'How is Weakness of the Will Possible?', Davidson attempts to answer this question by making a distinction between two kinds of judgements.¹³ On the one hand, we sometimes make *prima facie*, all-things-considered judgements, which do not involve a commitment to performing the better option. Further, these judgements do not tell us which is better simpliciter, but only tell us which is better in light of some reason r . They are more like a hypothesis than a decision. These judgements employ a kind of *prima facie* operator, as well as a condition based on reason r . So, according to Davidson, they might take the following form:

Pf(y is better than x , given r)

Here, r is the reason why y is better than x . Given r , y is better, *prima facie*. Note that this is not the kind of prescription found in Hare and, as such, does not entail a commitment either to do y or even to evaluate y to be best unconditionally.

On the other hand, we also make unconditional evaluative judgements, which Davidson sometimes calls 'evaluative judgements *sans phrase*'. These are simply of the form ' x is better than y ' or, perhaps more simply, ' x would be best do'. According to Davidson, only these unconditional judgements, *sans phrase*, and not conditional or *prima facie* judgements, may lead to action. Only these judgements issue in an intention to do x .

According to Davidson, then, we may make a conditional, or all-things-considered, judgement that *y* is preferable to *x*, but then make an unconditional, or *sans phrase*, judgement in favour of *x*, and do *x*, not *y*. Our judgement about *y*, conditional on reason *r*, does not in fact commit us to doing *y*. Only the unconditional judgement to do *x* commits us to action. Since only unconditional judgements are involved in action, and since the only conflict in akrasia is between one conditional and one unconditional judgement, it follows that akrasia is possible and, thus, there is no problem of akrasia.

This is not as satisfactory as it might at first appear, however, because Davidson's account is actually just the denial of strict akrasia. For, according to Davidson, if someone has made an unconditional judgement that *x* is the best course of action, they necessarily must try to do *x*. They cannot unconditionally evaluate *x* to be better yet fail to try to do *x*.¹⁴

Here is a description of akrasia, according to Davidson, that makes this denial explicit. The akratic agent judges course *y* to be best all-things-considered; that is, given some reason *r*, *y* is better. But then the akratic agent makes an unconditional evaluation that *x* is better and, thus, acts on *x*, not *y*. In short, the judgement that *y* is better was only hypothetical. We might judge that some action would be best, given our financial interests, or given conventional morality, yet then judge that in fact we do not find it to be best and, so, do not perform it. Thus, when we suffer akrasia, we simply choose to do one thing contrary to some hypothetical judgement we have made. Or so says Davidson in this article.¹⁵

This is unsatisfying, however, because it just denies strict akrasia. No final, unconditional, non-hypothetical judgement has been overturned or flouted. After all, these hypothetical judgements are not the kind of things that lead us to act. The only

unconditional judgement made was followed through quite consistently. Davidson denies strict akrasia and tries to offer an alternative account intended to do away with our intuitions of mental struggle. Yet sometimes we decide *sans phrase, simpliciter*, that one course of act is superior, yet perform the other. Indeed, sometimes we are determined to do one thing, yet suffer akrasia and fail to do so. This is not the failure of a hypothetical judgement, but the failure of a categorical one.

So, as we have seen, explaining akratic action by reference to brute desires that overpower our judgement is unsatisfying. And explaining akratic action as resulting from nothing but competing judgements seems to lead to its denial. Yet each of these methods also has something intuitive about them. For strength of desire does seem to be a pivotal feature of akrasia. And our akratic acts must also be voluntary, resulting from our judgements, and not merely cases of being overwhelmed by brute desire.¹⁶

For if our voluntary actions must result from our practical judgement, then it is hard to see how we could make such a judgement yet carry out some other, incompatible action voluntarily, without having revised our judgement.¹⁷ In other words, if it is a necessary condition for voluntary action that the action follow from our practical judgement, how could we act akratically in a way that does *not* follow from our practical judgement, given that akratic action must be voluntary? One way to account for this is to allow multiple competing practical judgements. And if there are multiple judgements that could result in action, we must appeal to some other feature of these judgements to determine which will be efficacious. That feature is their relative motivational power.

5. *A Spinozist Theory of Akrasia*

For Spinoza, the body is a complex mechanism of various constituent parts, or modes. Like the body, the mind is a complex mechanism of various constituent modes,

all of which he calls ideas. These ideas are all of them representational. In fact, Spinoza argues that all of them are belief-like; they all involve our affirming or judging that something is the case.¹⁸

Now let us consider for a moment Spinoza's theory of the affects, or emotions. According to Spinoza, some of our ideas represent certain states of affairs that concern our well-being. When ideas do so, he argues, they increase or decrease our power to persevere in our being. These ideas are affects; emotions, for Spinoza, are cognitions of a certain sort. They are not non-cognitive, brute phenomena, as Hume takes them to be, for example.

Spinoza regularly suggests that affects have cognitive content. Consider 4p8, where Spinoza says, 'the knowledge of good and evil is nothing but an affect of Joy or Sadness....'¹⁹ Spinoza does not mean to reduce knowledge to non-cognitive affect, of course. Instead, he wishes to suggest that cognitions have an affective dimension.²⁰ Spinoza repeats this theme at 4p14 as well, where he states, 'no affect can be restrained by the true knowledge of good and evil insofar as it is true, but only insofar as it is considered as an affect'.²¹ Again we see that one thing – knowledge in this case – can be considered as either a cognition or as an affect.²² And these unitary modes of mind, both cognitive and affective, are the spurs of action, because we are driven to act by affects.

In other words, emotions are beliefs about objects or states of affairs that we take to bear on our well-being – and these emotions sometimes cause us to act. So, for example, if we believe we could win the lottery, our belief may be felt as hope. Next, if we believe that we are able to buy a lottery ticket, that belief may be a hopeful desire to do so. And this desire may cause us to buy a lottery ticket. Whether or not this belief is

actually a desire depends on *how* the agent represents that possible course of action; if the agent believes that she has virtually no chance of winning, she may not see how buying the ticket really benefits her. Of course, she may not be reasoning very well, so she may not concern herself with her odds, focusing instead on the size of the prize. Nevertheless, in this case, the content of her beliefs concerning her well-being determines whether or not this belief involves desire or not.²³

What is key here is that these representations of our possible beneficial or harmful behaviours are at the same time beliefs as well as desires, and that these mental states are the causes of action. They are a kind of motivating belief, like a practical judgement combined with a motivating desire.

Spinoza thus advocates an unusual view, one where mental modes that are both ideas and affects compete to determine human action. In some ways, this idea of mental modes that are both cognitive and affective resembles what J.E.J. Altham calls *besires*, which are unitary psychological states that are both belief-like and desire-like.²⁴ In his discussion of besires, Michael Smith explains how a mental state could have the direction of fit of a belief and at the same time the direction of fit of a desire. He says:

Consider what we should ordinarily think of as the moral belief that it is right to ϕ ...The besire that ϕ -ing is right is appropriately described as being a state that must fit the world because it tends to go out of existence when the subject is confronted with a perception with the content that ϕ -ing is not right...

Moreover,...the besire that ϕ -ing is right disposes her to ϕ . Besires... are thus *both* expressed in moral judgements of the form “ ϕ -ing is right” *and* constitute our moral motivations.²⁵

Since akrasia concerns the broader category of practical judgements and not just moral

judgements, the relevant desires would have the content ' ϕ -ing is in my interest' or ' ϕ -ing is good for me to do'. Further, being also desire-like, these mental states also dispose us to ϕ .

When we form a belief, we may represent a behaviour as being possible and as causing us benefit or harm. Because this idea concerns our interest, we also take an affective stance when we consider it, perhaps of hope, or fear, love, hate, or desire. We may judge some action to be in our interest or contrary to our interest; furthermore, this judgement involves some motivation to act. The judgement is belief-like, while the motivation is desire-like. So, another way to describe the modes of mind is as motivating practical judgements. When we form judgements about which courses of action are in our interest, we thereby feel desires to perform those actions.

In Spinoza's moral psychology, *affects* are these sorts of mental entities, both belief-like and desire-like. It is important to note that Spinoza's affects are not the same as Altham's desires, however, for Altham closely links the desirous aspect of the desire to its belief-content. Spinoza, as we shall see, will claim that they are not so closely related. For Spinoza, and not for Altham, the strength of a desire may vary independently of the content of its constituent belief. This is what allows Spinoza to explain akrasia.

Consider the case in which we are faced with several, incompatible actions. When this occurs, it can happen that we judge one to be in our interest, yet also judge that the other action would be pleasurable or beneficial in some other way, causing us to feel a stronger pull to pursue the other action. When we have two, incompatible desire-like modes of mind, the stronger will overpower the weaker and determine the action. So, it is the affective strength of the mental modes that determines on which we act. Yet

these modes are also practical judgements – judgements about what would benefit us, either by providing pleasure, or contributing to our long-term interest. And this is roughly how Spinoza accounts for akrasia. The affective strength of our mental modes are independent from the rationality of the constituent judgements.²⁶

Now, some of the practical judgements involved in action are reached through rational deliberation, taking into consideration our long-term, overall good. Such judgements may be called rational judgements, though Spinoza would call them adequate ideas. These judgements are rational in the sense that they are reached rationally and, ideally, direct us to act rationally. And if the constituent practical judgement is rational, then the affect is rational as well. For, if we form the rational judgement that an action is best, then surely the affect that involves this judgement – the desire to act accordingly – could be called rational also.

Other of our judgements are not reached through such a rational process, but are made either rashly or without proper care or concern for our overall good. Indeed, most of these judgements consider only our immediate or partial interests. If a judgement is not reached via a process of rational deliberation, it likely does *not* take into account our overall good. Such judgements are irrational, though Spinoza might call them *inadequate*, in that they are incomplete, or partial ideas. And so the corresponding affects are irrational.²⁷

These malformed representations of value are, Spinoza believes, the origin of all akratic acts. When one of these irrational affects motivates us to act contrary to another, co-existing rational affect, then we suffer akrasia. Nevertheless, it is not the rationality of a judgement that determines whether it will be efficacious, but the relative strength of the affects.

In fact, the mere presence of a judgement that something is not in our interest – even when this is a rational judgement, or even when knowledge – is not sufficient for removing an affect opposing it. For we may also have some other, irrational judgement according to which the action appears, on the contrary, to be desirable in some way. If we perceive something to be harmful in one respect, it may still appear to be desirable in another – and we will pursue the stronger of the two appearances, or rather, behave according to their affects.²⁸

Spinoza does not discuss akrasia in these terms, of course, but he does investigate whether knowledge of our own good can remove an akratic passion. So, the question can be asked: if we come to know that something is not good, do we therefore cease to perceive it as good and, thus, cease to desire it? In other words, does a rational judgement automatically defeat or eliminate a contrary irrational affect?

Spinoza begins to answer this question, saying, 'nothing positive which a false idea has is removed by the presence of the true insofar as it is true'.²⁹ In the subsequent scholium, he explains this with his analogy of seeing the sun. The appearance of the sun in the sky as a small, relatively proximate orb is a misleading idea, because the sun is in fact much larger and more distant than it appears to the eye. Even after our having learned these astronomical facts, however, the sun still appears to us in the same way. The relative smallness and seeming proximity of the sun in our sensory perception are not dispelled by knowing the truth.

This account of the interaction of truth and the passions culminates in 4p7, where Spinoza says, 'an affect cannot be restrained or taken away except by an affect opposite to, and stronger than, the affect to be restrained'.³⁰ This principle runs throughout Spinoza's mechanistic psychology, according to which the passions interact via efficient

causation, as constituent parts in a mechanism.³¹ By arguing that affective strength determines action and not their rationality, Spinoza believes that he has shown how Ovid's Medea might have seen and approved the better, but pursued the worse.³² In quoting that passage, Spinoza implies that he believes he has explained akrasia.

To understand what Spinoza is up to here, consider a distinction on which Spinoza implicitly relies, one famously discussed by Descartes in his *Meditations*. According to Descartes, we may consider an idea in two senses, formally and objectively.³³ The formal features of an idea concern its presence in my mind as an idea, while the objective features concern its content – what the idea is of, or about. For example, take my idea of Spinoza. Considered formally, the century relevant to this idea is the 21st Century, because it exists as my idea here and now. Objectively speaking, however, the relevant century is the 17th, for that concerns its representational content.

We may speak of affects similarly. An affect is at the same time an idea that represents something as good and also as a degree of motivational power. A Spinozist might say that an affect's power to cause action is a feature of its *formal* being in our minds, while the particulars of the choice it represents are features of its *objective* being, or representational content. Importantly, features of the formal being of an idea may vary independently of its objective being. So, in other words, an idea may be more or less motivationally efficacious independently of its content. Finally, it is the formal being of the idea that determines on which ideas we act, while it is the objective being of the idea that determines the nature of that action.³⁴

This is not to say that the two are completely unrelated, however. Indeed, the content of affects are related to their motivational power in one important way. Spinoza expresses this relation in his doctrine of *conatus*. According to Spinoza, a fundamental

feature of our psychology – indeed, of every entity in existence – is that we strive to persevere in our being; in fact, we strive to increase our power of acting. This striving, or *conatus*, constitutes the essences of things. Each individual has its own particular striving that makes it what it is.

When an idea represents an action as good in some way, we necessarily feel some motivation to perform it; and vice versa – when we feel some motivation to perform an action, we must represent it as good in some respect. So, the objective content of an idea does entail certain properties of the formal being of an idea, namely, its motivation.

Nevertheless, the *conatus* does *not* favor only those judgements at which we have arrived through rational deliberation. In 3p9, Spinoza says, 'Both insofar as the mind has clear and distinct ideas, and insofar as it has confused ideas, it strives...to persevere in its being...' In other words, the *conatus* connects the formal and objective nature of *any* representation of a beneficial thing, regardless of whether this representation is rational or not. This means that if we correctly judge that something will benefit us, we shall feel some desire so to act. But if we mistake something harmful for something beneficial, we shall also desire it. And if we perceive some attractive feature of an otherwise harmful action, we may feel some desire to do it.³⁵

What's more, to represent something as increasing our power is to represent it as bringing us some sort of pleasure or happiness. Spinoza calls this feeling *laetitia*, which he uses broadly to refer to both pleasure, happiness, and joy. Therefore, if something brings us joy, pleasure, or happiness, it thereby increases our power in a certain respect. This is not simple hedonism, however, for things may bring us joy, happiness, or pleasure in ways that temporarily increase our power, but decrease it in the long run, or that bring us power in a certain regard only, but not overall.³⁶ In short, when

something makes us happy, it does so because it increases our power at that time in a certain respect. And if something makes us sad, it does so because, at the moment, it decreases our power. And if such feelings cause us to act, then Spinoza defines those feelings, or affects, as desires. For example, if an affect of joy becomes associated with eating cookies, then, in certain circumstances, the traces of that pleasure may cause us to act. When this occurs, we say that a desire for cookies moved us.

A complex interaction of factors may determine the strength of these desires. When we are hungry, for example, the sight of a delicious slice of pie might lead us to judge that the pie would bring us great pleasure. In forming this judgement, we also thus desire to eat the pie, according to the conatus doctrine. Now, it may be that we also judge that refraining would bring us pleasure, albeit of a delayed kind. Thus we have two competing judgements about the pie, both of which spur us to action, but only one of which involves our long-term or overall well-being. These two affects may come into conflict in an experience of synchronic akrasia.

One final observation should be made here. So far, the Spinozist mind contains various motivating judgements, or affects, each of which bears a certain degree of force. When they oppose, the stronger wins out and, assuming it is strong enough to overcome our natural inertia, will move us to act. Spinoza takes this to be a complete picture. Note, however, the absence of anything like a faculty of will; there is no ego that surveys the competing judgements and assents to one over another. Spinoza employs no such notion because he takes the faculty of will to be an illusion. In 2p48 and its demonstration, he says:

In the mind there is no absolute, or free, will, but the mind is determined to will this or that by a cause which is also determined by another, and this again

by another, and so to infinity.

Dem.: The mind is a certain and determinate mode of thinking (by p11), and so (by 1p17c2) cannot be a free cause of its own actions, or cannot have an absolute faculty of willing and not willing, Rather it must be determined to willing this or that (by 1p28) by a cause which is also determined by another, and this again by another, and so on, q.e.d. (Curley, 483; Geb II/129)

This is Spinoza's denial of free will; Spinoza is, after all, a determinist. Here, he connects his denial of a libertarian free will to a denial of faculty psychology. Spinoza rejects the Cartesian notion of a special faculty or power of the mind to choose. The mind acts just when it is determined by antecedent mental states.³⁷

Spinoza elaborates on this claim in the subsequent proposition, claiming at 2p49, 'In the mind there is no volition, or affirmation and negation, except that which the idea involves insofar as it is an idea'. Ideas, for Spinoza, are representational and propositional; they involve affirming some predicate of a subject, in some sense. In other words, ideas are *belief-like*.³⁸ What's more, this affirmative nature of our beliefs are *all the affirmation there is in the mind*.³⁹ There is no further event, such as an act of affirmation, a decision, or the formation of an intention, required for human action over and above a 'winning' affect. In the mind, then, there is no *decider*.

In short, human action results from an affect, with no subsequent volition or intention formation being necessary. When more than one possible action is under consideration, the strongest affect causes us to act, even when the strongest is irrational and runs contrary to our knowledge of our good.⁴⁰

The Spinozist theory might explain a case of akrasia in the following way. Say that, in some situation, we are faced with several possible actions. We deliberate and

judge that one is in our best interest. This judgement is also a rational desire to perform this action. But we also may judge that a different action is attractive in certain ways, even though it is not the best overall. Perhaps this alternative involves more intense short-term pleasures, but a diminished overall benefit. Nevertheless, we judge that it would bring pleasure or increase our power in some regard and, in so judging, we desire to do this as well. Because this affect is formed without regard for our overall interest, however, this is an irrational affect.

Now, since we have carried out a process of deliberation and formed a rational desire, we would normally proceed to act accordingly. If the mind saw the situation adequately and without distortion, it would desire the action that would in fact bring the most power, overall. And if the mind were a causally closed system, our conatus would indeed cause us always to act according to reason. But the mind is not a closed system; it is always being affected from without. So Spinoza says, 'It is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause.'⁴¹ That is, we are always subject to the passions.

What's more, the strength of an affect is determined by the strength of its cause, as he establishes when he says, 'The force and growth of any passion, and its perseverance in existing, are not defined by the power by which we strive to persevere in existing, but by the power of an external cause compared with our own.'⁴² As natural beings, we are always vulnerable to external stimuli, some of which may cause passions in us. Now, some of those external causes will inevitably have a greater power over us than our power of reason. So, when one of these powerful passions opposes a rational desire, we shall act from passion. So, even though we may have concluded that we

ought to perform the rational action, we act on the irrational affect instead. In other words, our partial or short-term judgement may be more effective in motivating us to act than our rational judgement. As a result, we act on a judgement about what we perceive to be good in some sense, against our judgement about what would be best.

This discussion mirrors one that could be had about events in the body. One of Spinoza's more interesting views concerns the relation between mind and body. For Spinoza, the mind and the body are identical, though each of these ways of talking – mental and physical – are irreducible to the other. However, the two are parallel, Spinoza says.⁴³ So it should come as no surprise that, on the view just described, the Spinozist mind functions like the Spinozist body. In this view, the belief-content of an affect functions as the direction of motion in a body and the strength of the affect functions as the force of the body in motion. When two bodies move on a direct collision path, the force of the bodies determines the outcome of the impact. Similarly, when two affects oppose one another, the content of the judgements places them at odds, but the relative affective strength determines which will lead to action.

6. Theories Compared

Let us return for a moment to the two views presented earlier. The folk view of akrasia rests on competing motivational strengths, but it seems to render akratic action involuntary, because judgement does not ultimately determine akratic action. The Spinozist view certainly employs a notion of competing motivational strengths, and so appeals to that intuition, but it avoids the undesirable consequences of the folk view. For the folk view, akratic action results from a brute, non-cognitive, bodily urge, one that overpowers our cognitive faculty. For the Spinozist view, however, akratic action results from an irrational judgement, or affect, motivating us to act contrary to a

rational affect. The Spinozist view allows that akratic action is voluntary in the same way that any other action resulting from a practical judgement is voluntary. After all, if the rational affect were to win out, the mechanism would work just the same. Indeed, if there is no conflict whatsoever, the rational affect moves us to act in the same way. Being a compatibilist, Spinoza will find no more problem accepting the voluntary nature of akratic action than in the case of absolutely unimpeded rational action.⁴⁴

In the judgement-centred account, akratic action results from a certain kind of practical judgement, perhaps an unconditional or *sans phrase* judgement. This judgement is the reason for and cause of action – once one forms this judgement, one thereafter acts accordingly. So the resulting action is voluntary and done because one has judged it a worthy action. Surely such an action is not something that happens to the agent. And Spinozist akratic action has a similar explanation – it is done with the belief that it is not in our best interest, yet is in fact what we most want to do, even though it might not be what we judge most in our interest to do – and so we do it.

The novelty of the Spinozist view rests in its hybrid nature. The account of affects locates the origin of action in the affect's constituent practical judgements in a way similar to Hare or Davidson. This sounds right; when we act voluntarily, we do so as a result of some practical judgement. We have deemed something desirable and thus judged it worthy of doing. This occurs when we form an affect that motivates us to act. When there is only one such affect, we follow through with our motivation. Sometimes, however, if we form conflicting affects, such as 'the cake surely would taste good' and 'eating the cake is bad for my diet', we feel conflicting motivations. We want to enjoy the cake, but we want to stick to our diets as well. In these cases, it is not the rationality of the content of the affects that determines on which we act, but their relative degrees of

strength. And so, Spinoza's view combines a practical judgement oriented moral psychology, akin to that found in Hare and Davidson, with a mechanistic, desire-oriented view.

Yet the Spinozist account manages to avoid the problems of those two views. For the Spinozist theory explains strict akratic action, while the Davidsonian one cannot, instead denying its existence. And, because practical judgments cause Spinozist akratic action, these actions are voluntary in a way that they would not be if a non-cognitive desire had overpowered our cognitive faculty.

7. Conclusions

Two theories of akrasia have been presented, each of which captures certain of our intuitions about akrasia. Yet both theories are also counter-intuitive in certain critical ways. The Spinozist, cognitive affect-based moral psychology is interesting for its attempt to capture the intuitions of both theories while avoiding their problems. If this theory can provide such an explanation, that fact would be a good reason to consider it as a legitimate alternative. Regardless of whether the view is ultimately successful, its originality give us good reason to consider Spinoza's philosophy as an under-appreciated resource for insight into problems in moral psychology.⁴⁵

What's more, in investigating this philosophical problem vis-à-vis Spinoza, we are led toward a new way of interpreting his thought. For Spinoza's affective psychology plays a pivotal role in his larger project. Indeed, a proper understanding of the role of this affective psychology would allow us to ground the psychological, political, and ethical theories of the later *Ethics* in the metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of mind to be found in the first half of the *Ethics*. It even allows us a new way to read Spinoza's other great work, the *Theological-Political Treatise*. And this observation –

that the mechanism of human action is affective – serves as the turning point.

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- ¹ I am indebted to the members of the Department of Philosophy at Dartmouth College, where I presented an early version of this paper and received many helpful comments. I am also indebted to an anonymous referee at this journal for a useful set of comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
- ² In this essay, I shall understand irrational action as equivalent to action against one's better judgement. This is not intended as an analysis of irrationality, however. There are certain cases where acting *against* one's better judgement may be rational and not irrational. I set aside those cases for the purpose of this essay. For an excellent discussion of this issue, see Arpaly 2000. I also shall equate akrasia and weakness of will, though some have argued for a distinction between the two. For an argument that the two are distinct, see Holton 1999.
- ³ The issue is complicated in certain cases, for example, of addiction. I do not wish to state that *all* cases of akrasia are blameworthy, but only to give some reason for

believing that akrasia is best understood as voluntary irrational action. In fact, Aristotle makes a similar argument. See 1145b32-1146a4 in Aristotle 1999.

- 4 See Davidson 1980. In some formulations, another necessary condition for an instance of strict akrasia is this: the agent must believe that he can perform the better action at the time in question. Spinoza does not discuss cases in which we fail to choose an action in our interest out of a mistaken belief that we are incapable of said action. Further, this clause is really peripheral to what is most interesting in cases of strict akrasia, which is action in the face of contrary knowledge. As such, this additional condition will not concern us here.
- 5 For a discussion of the distinction between synchronic and diachronic akrasia in the context of a Socratic action theory, see Penner 1997.
- 6 On one interpretation, this is the Aristotelian account as well. We may carry out some chain of practical reasoning that leads us to conclude not to eat the cake and then, at a later time, form another practical syllogism and conclude to eat the cake. If the second syllogism is to move us to act against our better judgement, the better judgement in question – the first practical conclusion – must *not* be active in the mind, but omitted from consciousness at the moment of action. Only after having eaten the cake may the original practical conclusion return to mind and cause us regret. See Book VII in Aristotle 1999.
- 7 3p17s; Curley, 504; Geb II/153. All translations, hereafter cited as 'Curley', of Spinoza are taken from Spinoza 1985. Original language references, hereafter cited as 'Geb', are to Spinoza 1925. I follow Curley's translation in this essay and employ the notation used by Jonathan Bennett and Michael Della Rocca, which is similar to

Curley's. So, 3p17s is Part 3, proposition 17, scholium (also, def for definition, a for axiom, d following the final number for demonstration, and c for corollary).

- ⁸ Also conspicuously absent from Spinoza's discussion in Part 4 is *stability*. This suggests that the experience of akrasia is not just a function of unstable beliefs and opinions, though Spinoza's discussion of vacillation suggests that he also allows for that to occur. Instead, in 4p17 and the surrounding propositions, Spinoza is dealing only with strict akrasia. In Part 5, Spinoza does discuss the constancy of adequate knowledge, in that it is knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis*.
- ⁹ 4p17s; Curley, 5543; Geb II/221.
- ¹⁰ *Passions of the Soul*, Part I, §47. See Descartes 1984. For the original language, see Descartes 1969.
- ¹¹ At least, this seems to be the case given a pre-theoretical, folk notion of the will. It may be that some concepts of the will, e.g., Frankfurt's, would work differently here.
- ¹² Hare discusses this in part I, section 5, titled 'Backsliding', in Hare 1977.
- ¹³ Davidson 1970.
- ¹⁴ ...assuming that they believe themselves to be capable of *x*, of course.
- ¹⁵ It may very well be that other of Davidson's works allow him tools to revise or amend this account and thereby to avoid some of these criticisms. I do not doubt that this is so, but it is irrelevant here, for this Davidson article is only being used to illustrate a judgement-centred view. It is this view, not Davidson, that is my real target here.
- ¹⁶ Strict akrasia is here taken to be voluntary, irrational action. Elsewhere it sometimes taken to be *intentional* irrational action. This understanding of akrasia does not lessen these difficulties. Let us assume that intentional action must proceed from

something like a practical judgement, which serves as the *reason* for and cause of the action. Now, if our intentional actions must result from our practical judgement, how could we intentionally perform an action *against* our practical judgement, without having revised said judgement? The folk explanation fares no better. It remains to be seen whether the Spinozist account can resolve this problem.

- ¹⁷ It may be too strong to say that *all* voluntary action must follow from a practical judgement. Saying so renders impulsive actions involuntary, which is wrong. Nevertheless, in the interesting cases of strict akrasia, our akratic actions do involve judgement. Indeed, they involve our awareness that we have judged one action to be superior, yet we have decided to perform the inferior action instead. So it may be that a separate account is needed for cases of *impulsive* akratic action. Those cases may be left to one side, for they could likely be included in an account of diachronic akrasia.
- ¹⁸ The view that Spinozist ideas are representational and belief-like is widely accepted among commentators. For example, Della Rocca, says, 'when Spinoza speaks of ideas, he means psychological items that have content, that are about something'. See Della Rocca 1996.
- ¹⁹ 4p8; Curley, 550; Geb II/215.
- ²⁰ Allison agrees, citing both 4p8 and 4p14; see Allison, *Benedict De Spinoza : An Introduction*, 145-7.
- ²¹ Curley, 553; Geb II/219.
- ²² Garrett also suggests that affects and ideas are related in the same way as I argue here. Garrett says, 'Spinoza construes the affective and the representational as two aspect of the *same* mental events or entities'; see Garrett, "Spinoza's Ethical Theory,"

²³ For an in-depth discussion of Spinoza's theory of the affects, see Marshall 2008.

²⁴ Altham 1986.

²⁵ See Smith 1995. Smith rejects *besires* because an agent may sometimes have the idea accompanied by the desire and other times not, suggesting that the two cannot be identical. The Spinozist response would be to note that ideas gain and lose their affective/desirous aspect depending on the circumstances and how the ideas are interrelated. In other words, beliefs can gain and lose affectivity, i.e., a degree of power to affect us in different contexts; nevertheless, when an idea gains affectivity, the affectivity is a feature of the idea itself, rather than a distinct mental object. If we understand affects in this way, Smith's primary critique of *besires* does not apply to them. This is not to say that he would accept a Spinozist account of affect, however.

²⁶ For presentations of Spinoza's claims about bondage to the passions without regard to the contemporary question of weakness of will, see Della Rocca 1996 and Lin 2006.

²⁷ Naturally, this is a simplification of affairs. Imagine a case where an agent deliberates and reaches the rational conclusion, *given the data available to her*. We would call this a rational judgement, even though it might not be true. But if the judgement is false, it must be an inadequate idea. In other words, the adequate/inadequate distinction in Spinoza does not map onto the rational/irrational distinction employed here. Thus, *akrasia* could occur between an adequate and inadequate idea or between two inadequate ideas. Spinoza would deny that it could ever arise between two adequate ideas, since the true always agrees with the true. As should become clear below, Spinoza's account works similarly in cases of competing

inadequate ideas as well as in cases of a clash between an inadequate and an adequate idea.

²⁸ See also Koistinen 1996, who makes a similar point, though his discussion is significantly different from my own.

²⁹ 4p1; Curley, 547; Geb II/211. This seems plausible, given that the truth and falsity of ideas are extrinsic to them.

³⁰ 4p7; Curley, 550; Geb II/214.

³¹ For more on Spinoza's mechanistic psychology, see Davidson 1999 and Allison 1987.

³² 4p17s; Curley, 554; Geb II/221. This passage is often cited as a locus classicus for *akrasia*, both in Ancient and early modern authors. For example, John Locke quotes exactly the same passage when he takes up the question of how one could knowingly act against one's good. For Locke, it is possible because *uneasiness* determines the will to act, not knowledge of the good. See Book II, chapter xxi, section 35 of Locke 1975.

³³ See Descartes' Third Meditation for this distinction. For a discussion of this feature of Descartes' theory of ideas, see Chappell 1986.

³⁴ For a different account of the relation between the power of an idea and its content, see Della Rocca 2003. I hold that the power of an idea is in part conditioned by its relation to other ideas in the mind and thus may vary independently of its content as its relational properties change. Della Rocca would deny this, because he ascribes to Spinoza the seemingly Leibnizian doctrine that, within each individual idea, the whole of the mind is reflected. Thus, a mere relational change must be reflected in the content of the idea, he claims. For this reason, he cannot allow the content to vary

independently of the power of an idea. Because I deny this holism, however, I may allow it.

³⁵ For further discussion of how the conatus does not distinguish between rational and irrational ideas, see LeBuffe 2004.

³⁶ In addition to the first seventeen propositions of Part 4, which are discussed in the articles on akrasia in Spinoza written by Della Rocca and Lin, cited above, one should also note the overlooked 4p60, where Spinoza says, 'A desire arising from either a joy or a sadness related to one, or several, but not to all parts of the body, has no regard for the advantage of the whole man'.

³⁷ For more on this denial of a faculty of will, see Della Rocca 2003.

³⁸ For discussions of this identification, see Bennett 1984, Delahunty 1985, and Allison 1987. Delahunty, employing an idea from Geach, states that, for Spinoza, ideas are both propositional in structure and assertoric in force. When we discuss ideas, then, we refer to their propositional content. When we refer to volitions, we refer to their assertoric force. Curley 2004 also makes reference to Geach on this point. For further discussion, see Della Rocca 2003.

³⁹ Spinoza's view that every cognition involves an affirmation may strike some as odd, though it has some historical precedent. According to a widely held Scholastic view, for example, when the mind forms propositions, it affirms some predicate of a subject. See the Scholastic textbook of Scipion Dupleix 1623, *The Corpus of Philosophy*, excerpted in Ariew 1998. See also Part 2, ch. 3, in Arnauld 1996. Even Descartes says, 'existence is contained in the idea or concept of every single thing, since we cannot conceive of anything except as existing' in his Second replies; CSMK

II, 117; AT VII/166. Perhaps Spinoza is following Descartes in holding that even simple apprehension to be an act of affirmation.

⁴⁰ This account of judgement is strongly Hobbesian. For Hobbes, human action arises from the will, which is nothing but the last motion of the mind. In *De Homine*, ch. 11, 2, he says, 'the last appetite [either of doing or omitting], the one that leads immediately to action or omission, is properly called the will', Hobbes 1991. See also chapter 6 of Hobbes 1994. For both Hobbes and Spinoza, when two competing courses of action are available, action will always follow from the stronger affect. For a helpful discussion of Spinoza's account of judgment as well as Hobbes', see James 1997.

⁴¹ At 4p4; Curley, 548; Geb II/212.

⁴² 4p5; Curley, 549; Geb II/214.

⁴³ See 2p7, where Spinoza says, 'The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things', Curley, 451; Geb II/89. See also 3p2s, where Spinoza says, '...the Mind and the Body are one and the same thing, which is conceived now under the attribute of Thought, now under the attribute of Extension. The result is that the order, or connections of things is one, whether nature is conceived under this attribute or that; hence the order of actions and passions of our Body is, by nature, at one with the order of actions and passions of the Mind' Curley, 494; Geb II/141.

⁴⁴ Like other early compatibilists Hobbes and Locke, Spinoza faces challenges in defining voluntariness, freedom, compulsion, and coercion in his system. To provide those details is a larger enterprise than can be provided here. For a discussion of Spinoza's compatibilism, see section 4 of Sleigh 1998.

⁴⁵ Perhaps what marks Spinoza's theory as so foreign to contemporary ways of thinking is its denial of the belief-desire model. Spinoza denies that there are such distinct mental entities that come together in action, instead positing his cognitive affects. Another moral that could perhaps be drawn from this discussion is this: the pitfalls that beset the two traditional views may be *inherent* to any attempt to explain akrasia via a standard belief-desire model. For each of the traditional accounts prioritize one aspect over the other, but fall into troubles in doing so. The seemingly indissoluble problem might originate in the division of mental content into beliefs and desires.