

## On the Derivation and Meaning of Spinoza's *Conatus* Doctrine

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Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine, the main proposition of which states, 'each thing, to the extent it is in itself [*quantum in se est*], strives [*conatur*] to persevere in its being' (EIIIP6; translation modified),<sup>1</sup> has been the subject of growing interest. This is understandable, for Spinoza holds that this striving is the innermost essence of all things, human beings included (EIIIP7); in other words, Spinozistic things are all *strivers* of different kinds. Most importantly, this insight is the key ingredient in Spinoza's psychology and ethics: not only are our passive responses to things affecting us based on the *conatus* principle,<sup>2</sup> but Spinoza also claims our active understanding and virtue to equal unhindered striving.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows, I shall examine the way in which Spinoza argues for the crucial EIIIP6 in its demonstration. This argument has been severely criticized for being defective in many ways: the relevance of all the elements it consists of is by no means evident, and scholars strongly disagree on which ones are truly important for the main proposition. Also, the consistency of the derivation has been questioned. For Spinoza, these accusations are not a minor problem: as it is a central undertaking of his to derive, in geometrical fashion, true ethics

<sup>1</sup> I am using Edwin Curley's translation of the *Ethics* (C).

<sup>2</sup> A typical, although especially important, proposition with regard to human motivation is EIIIP28: 'We strive to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to Joy, and to avert or destroy what we imagine is contrary to it, or will lead to Sadness.' Propositions referring to striving in similar fashion abound in the third and fourth parts of the *Ethics*.

<sup>3</sup> See especially EIVP26. For a very instructive account of Spinoza's ethical theory and its relation to the *conatus* doctrine, see Don Garrett, 'Spinoza's Ethical Theory' ['Ethical Theory'], in Don Garrett (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 267–314.

from sound metaphysical principles, what is at stake here is nothing less than the overall cogency of his system. Thus, were Spinoza's arguably most ardent contemporary critic, Jonathan Bennett, right in claiming that the derivation of *EIIP6* is 'irreparably faulty', it would also be justified to hold, as Bennett does, that 'the *Ethics* in fact is broken-backed'.<sup>4</sup> Before moving on to presenting my own views, which aim at defending Spinoza, I shall provide a brief exposition of what I take to be the most influential interpretations of the *conatus* argument to be found in the literature. After this, I shall argue that having a proper grasp of Spinoza's concept of power and the related ontological framework enables us to discern the argument's general idea; moreover, as it seems that the structure of the derivation has not thus far been correctly understood, showing how its various ingredients fit together is an important task I shall undertake. Of course, the main issue here is the validity of Spinoza's derivation, but I would like to emphasize that a careful analysis of *EIIP6D* provides us also with an improved understanding of the *meaning* of the doctrine. This enables us better to appreciate the compelling and highly original view of human existence and perfection Spinoza presents.

## I. SOME INFLUENTIAL INTERPRETATIONS OF *EIIP6D*

The proof of *EIIP6* runs as follows:

For singular things are modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way (by *IP25Cor.*), i.e. (by *IP34*), things that express, in a certain and determinate way, God's power, by which God is and acts. And no thing has anything in itself by which it can be destroyed, or which takes its existence away (by *P4*). On the contrary, it is opposed to everything which can take its existence away (by *P5*). Therefore, to the extent it can,

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers. Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume*, i [Six Philosophers] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 222. In fact, Bennett (*A Study of Spinoza's Ethics [Study]* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 234–46) thinks that Spinoza's argument contains altogether four fallacies of equivocation; and, as Michael Della Rocca (see n. 7 below) has identified still one more apparent equivocation in it, Don Garrett ('Spinoza's *Conatus* Argument' ['*Conatus* Argument'], in Olli Koistinen and John Biro (eds.), *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 127–58, at 128) is right in concluding somewhat sarcastically, 'the argument thus appears to be one of the most egregiously equivocal in all of early modern philosophy'.

and is in itself [*quantum potest, et in se est*], it strives to persevere in its being, q.e.d. (EIIIP6D, translation modified)

So, Spinoza cites EIP25Cor., P34, IIP4, and P5 in his argument. To give an overall idea of what EIIIP6D is built on, I quote all these relatively concise passages in full, with their demonstrations. In order of appearance, they are as follows:

Particular things are nothing but affections of God's attributes, or modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way. The demonstration is evident from P15 and D5. (EIP25Cor.)

God's power is his essence itself. (EIP34)

For from the necessity alone of God's essence it follows that God is the cause of himself (by P11) and (by P16 and P16Cor.) of all things. Therefore, God's power, by which he and all things are and act, is his essence itself, q.e.d. (EIP34D)

No thing can be destroyed except through an external cause. (EIIIP4)

This Proposition is evident through itself. For the definition of any thing affirms, and does not deny, the thing's essence, or it posits the thing's essence, and does not take it away. So while we attend only to the thing itself, and not to external causes, we shall not be able to find anything in it which can destroy it, q.e.d. (EIIIP4D)

Things are of a contrary nature, i.e., cannot be in the same subject, insofar as one can destroy the other. (EIIIP5)

For if they could agree with one another, or be in the same subject at once, then there could be something in the same subject which could destroy it, which (by P4) is absurd. Therefore, things etc., q.e.d. (EIIIP5D)

There is a considerable amount of disagreement over this argument. Many commentators have contended that only some, or even just one, of its ingredients do real work in the argument. Recording everything that has been said about this derivation would, were it possible, not make sense; so I shall only generally delineate those discussions that deal directly with the question of how the derivation works. Needless to say, they form the indispensable background against which I shall develop my own views.

It is helpful to note that in the literature there have been, roughly, two different types of approach to the *conatus* argument. The dominant

one has emphasized the conceptual discussions included in the latter part of the derivation—that is, *EIIP4* and *P5*, according to which no thing can destroy itself or contain anything self-destructive; the striving to persevere in one's being is supposed to follow from this. The *locus classicus* of modern *conatus*-criticism, Bennett's *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, proceeds along these lines,<sup>5</sup> and much of the subsequent discussion has followed its lead. Most importantly, Bennett succeeds in locating what is, at least in this approach, by far the weightiest problem in Spinoza's argument: *EIIP6* can be interpreted as saying, 'any thing *exerts itself against* anything destructive', but it appears simply impossible to derive something this strong from the mere 'any thing *is unlike* anything destructive' of *EIIP5*.<sup>6</sup> In other words, if *EIIP6* is derived from *EIIP4* and *P5* alone, obviously no answer can be given to the question: Where does a focal element of the *conatus* principle, resistance to opposition, come from?<sup>7</sup> Viewed in this light, the argument seems to be, as Bennett claims, fallacious.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Emblematically and interestingly, Bennett has not budged from this position; in his recent work (*Six Philosophers*, 218) he still insists that *EIP25Cor.* and *P34* 'do not enter into the proof' and that the metaphysic of the opening part of the *Ethics* does not find its way to the derivation.

<sup>6</sup> Bennett, *Study*, 242. Bennett claims that *EIIP4* does not have any real role to play in *EIIP6D*.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Daniel Garber ('Descartes and Spinoza on Persistence and Conatus' ['Conatus'], *Studia Spinozana*, 10 (1994), 43–67, at 60–2, 64) contends that from *EIIP4* and *P5* it follows only that any true thing will persist in its existence until abolished by something external, not that it would oppose destructive factors. Michael Della Rocca ('Spinoza's Metaphysical Psychology', in Garrett (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, 192–266, at 200–6) argues that Spinoza regards *EIIP4* as entailing *P6* and claims Spinoza to be guilty of conflating two different readings of *EIIP4*, one ('no *state* suffices for the destruction of its bearer') being at work in the derivation of *EIIP6* from *P4*, the other ('no *essence* suffices for the destruction of the thing which essence it is') in *EIIP4D* itself. However, on no reading that Della Rocca provides does anything stronger than 'for each *X*, *X*'s state is such that, unless prevented by external causes, *X* will persevere in its being' follow; so Della Rocca's Spinoza, too, is left without a proper notion of resistance.

<sup>8</sup> Edwin Curley and Richard N. Manning, who endorse the same basic approach as Bennett does, endeavor to defend Spinoza. Curley suggests that the following solution is available for Spinoza: 'To imagine *P6* false, we would have to imagine that, without any external interference, a thing does what will not maintain it in existence in its present state, i.e., something which would destroy it. And it does seem that this would violate *P4*' (Edwin Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method: A Reading of Spinoza's Ethics [Method]* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 109). However, as Garrett ('*Conatus* Argument', 155) observes, equating 'not doing what maintains oneself in existence' with 'acting self-destructively' can be questioned, and it is difficult to see how Curley's way of arguing could solve the problem of 'from-unlikeness-to-exertion-against'.

Another type of approach to the *conatus* argument, less popular but nevertheless significant, has been to emphasize the material located in the beginning of *EIIP6D*—that is, *EIP25Cor.* and *P34*. The key idea here is that if things are proved (by *EIP25Cor.* and *P34*) to be active or intrinsically powerful, the *conatus* principle follows; the conceptual examinations directly preceding the demonstration are regarded as subsidiary or somehow preliminary, if even that.<sup>9</sup> Now, it is a good idea to take the beginning of the demonstration seriously because it grounds, as I shall later on explain, the notion of resistance to opposition; but an informative reading should give us a balanced view

Manning ('Spinoza, Thoughtful Teleology, and the Causal Significance of Content', in Koistinen and Biro (eds.), *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes*, 182–209, at 185–6) holds that *EIIP6* can be derived from *P4* and *P5* because the notion of contrariety found in those propositions is already that of active exertion against. But, as *EIIP4* and *P5* make no mention of activity, pushing towards opponents, or some such, Manning's position seems to be left without textual support. Consequently, it is not surprising that Bennett (*Six Philosophers*, 220–1) reports being unmoved by it. Juhani Pietarinen's ('Spinoza on Causal Explanation of Action' ['Action'], in Matti Sintonen, Petri Ylikoski, and Kaarlo Miller (eds.), *Realism in Action: Essays in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003), 137–54, at 143) reading of *EIIP6D* is similar to Manning's in claiming that the notion of power is implicitly involved already in *EIIP4* and *P5*.

<sup>9</sup> Alexandre Matheron (*Individu et communauté chez Spinoza [Individu]* (1969; Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1988), 10–1) and Henry E. Allison (*Benedict de Spinoza: An Introduction [Spinoza]* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 131–3) read Spinoza along these lines. Drawing from Matheron, Allison (*Spinoza*, 133) claims *EIIP6* to be a 'reformulation' of *EIIP4* and *P5* in positive terms: 'since things act, and since ... they cannot act in ways ... which tend to their self-destruction', the *conatus* principle results. Moreover, 'first, ... insofar as a thing acts, this opposition to whatever tends to destroy it is expressed as an actual resistance; and second ... for a thing to act in such a way as to resist whatever tends to destroy it is to act in a self-determining way' (Allison, *Spinoza*, 134). However, Matheron and Allison write on our topic exceedingly briefly, and it is difficult to say what is the precise meaning of the suggested reformulation. For a position similar to theirs, see Pierre Macherey, *Introduction à l'Éthique de Spinoza. La Troisième Partie. La Vie affective* (Paris: PUF, 1995), 84. More recently, Martin Lin ('Spinoza's Metaphysics of Desire: The Demonstration of *IIP6*' ['Metaphysics of Desire'], *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 86 (2004), 21–55, at 25–43) has argued for the second approach. According to him, Spinoza offers not just one but two separate arguments in favor of the *conatus*: an unacceptable one based on *EIIP4* and *P5*, and a valid one based on *EIP25Cor.* and *P34*. The good argument is grounded on the expressive relationship that obtains between finite things and God's power: 'Because our actions express the divine power whereby God creates everything he can, we too must strive to do everything in our power' (Lin, 'Metaphysics of Desire', 42). Although I do not think *EIIP6D* contains two arguments, Lin is surely right in emphasizing the notions of power and expression, both topics for further discussion. It should be noted that, although Curley (*Method*, 112) claims Spinoza thinks of essences as powers or forces and the mention of *EIP25Cor.* and *P34* is not idle in *EIIP6D*, he ultimately estimates the reference to power as mysterious.

of the relationship *EIP*<sub>25</sub>*Cor.* and *P*<sub>34</sub> have with *EIIP*<sub>4</sub> and *P*<sub>5</sub>, and no account of this type succeeds in this.<sup>10</sup>

It seems, then, that a fully satisfactory interpretation of Spinoza's argument still remains to be given. As it is my contention that *EIIP*<sub>6D</sub> is basically valid and contains no idle elements, the challenge is to offer an enlightening reading of the derivation that shows how, exactly, it is supposed to work. My analysis is, of course, more in line with some of the previous accounts than with others, and so I shall situate it in the context of the two types of approach and explicate some of the more notable differences between my views and the ones presented in this section.

## 2. *EIIP*<sub>4</sub> AND *P*<sub>5</sub>

As Spinoza is often interpreted as trying to derive *EIIP*<sub>6</sub> from *P*<sub>4</sub> and *P*<sub>5</sub> alone, we can begin by analyzing the latter part of the demonstration: 'And no thing has anything in itself by which it can be destroyed, or which takes its existence away (by *P*<sub>4</sub>). On the contrary, it is opposed to everything which can take its existence away (by *P*<sub>5</sub>). Therefore, to the extent it can, and is in itself, it strives to persevere in its being, q.e.d.' (*EIIP*<sub>6D</sub>; translation modified). Spinoza regards *EIIP*<sub>4</sub>—'no thing can be destroyed except through an external cause'—as self-evident; but at least for us it is far from obvious, so there is some interpretative distance to be traveled.

Already a quick look at *EIIP*<sub>4</sub> and *P*<sub>5</sub> reveals that they are based on Spinoza's theory of definitions and essences. Spinoza accepts a view, not uncommon in his time, that each thing has both an essence and a definition that captures that essence; according to his geometrized version of this view, each thing has both (1) a definition that expresses the thing's essence—this definition not only states how the thing

<sup>10</sup> Also, the outlook of Don Garrett's ('*Conatus* Argument', 136–46) on the matters at hand definitely merits attention. It is somewhat difficult to say how his position relates to the two types of approach presented above, and this stems, I believe, largely from the fact that, according to Garrett, the material cited in *EIIP*<sub>6D</sub> is there to show *how* the doctrine is true—that it is true follows already from Spinoza's views on inherence, conception, and causation, which are stated at the beginning of the *Ethics* (*EID*<sub>3</sub>, *D*<sub>5</sub>, *A*<sub>1</sub>, and *A*<sub>4</sub>). Although Garrett's elaborate paper contains a wealth of important ideas, I find it problematic to assign this kind of auxiliary or confirmatory role to *EIP*<sub>25</sub>*Cor.*, *P*<sub>34</sub>, *IIP*<sub>4</sub>, and *P*<sub>5</sub>; see n. 40.

in question is produced but also what properties it would have on the basis of its essence alone—and (2) an essence from which, once the thing is instantiated, those properties necessarily follow or flow to the extent the thing in question is unaffected by external causes.<sup>11</sup> Keeping this in mind, we can return to the demonstration of *EIIP4*: ‘the definition of any thing affirms, and does not deny, the thing’s essence, or it posits the thing’s essence, and does not take it away. So while we attend only to the thing itself, and not to external causes, we shall not be able to find anything in it which can destroy it’ (*EIIP4D*). Although there has been much discussion on what Spinoza here means by ‘the thing itself’,<sup>12</sup> the reference to definitions and essences makes it, I think, pretty clear that he is referring to a thing as it would be constituted by its definable essence alone, completely uninfluenced by other things or ‘external causes’.<sup>13</sup> For Spinoza, essences individuate things, make them what they are, indicate the manner in which substance must be modified for a definite thing to exist, or—to use Spinoza’s brief expression—‘posit’ things (*EIID2*). Given this, it does seem hard to deny that an essence could not include anything capable of taking away the thing whose essence it is, for this would only go to show that what we had was no true essence to begin with. Correspondingly, a definition states how the *definiendum* can be produced; so including something destructive to the *definiendum* goes against the very idea of a proper definition. Accordingly, in the Spinozistic scheme of things *EIIP4* is quite secure, and the approving remarks made by many commentators reflect this fact. A lucid passage by Curley can serve as an example: ‘We must imagine the definition of a thing as a formula which describes a process by which a thing

<sup>11</sup> See especially *TIE* 96 (G ii. 35; C i. 39–40); *EIP16D*.

<sup>12</sup> This discussion dates from Bennett’s *Study*; somewhat uncharitably, Bennett (*Study*, 236–7) sees Spinoza as vacillating between an essence reading, according to which X’s essence cannot destroy X, and a whole nature reading, according to which X’s total temporary state cannot suffice for X’s destruction. Bennett’s reluctance to accept Spinoza’s theory of definitions and essences is witnessed by his curious invocation of ‘naturalness’ when he claims that ‘the phrase “external cause” . . . naturally means “external to x” rather than “external to x’s essence”’ (*Study*, 237). Garrett (*Conatus Argument*, 147) offers an instructive analysis of this, and deems the ‘whole nature’ reading misguided.

<sup>13</sup> As Lee Rice has pointed out to me, *EIVP20S* also gives support for this reading. I agree with his and Steven Barbone’s contention that ‘a non-external cause is one which follows directly from the nature or essence of a thing’ (Steven Barbone and Lee Rice, ‘Spinoza and the Problem of Suicide’, *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 34 (1994), 229–41, at 235).

of that kind might be produced, as stating conditions which would lead to the existence of a thing of that kind... *So as long as we focus on that formula, we will, of course, find nothing which would entail the non-existence of the thing.*<sup>14</sup> It surely seems that Spinoza would find it unthinkable that any such ‘formula’ would entail, at any point in time, precluding the existence of the entity whose formula it is,<sup>15</sup> because that would only imply that the definition is no true definition at all, making the *definiendum* a non-thing. This suggests that Spinoza is here emphasizing the first requirement he sets for a proper definition (*TIE* 96; G ii. 35; C i. 39–40), that it must state how the *definiendum* is to be produced.

Next, what should we say about *EIIP5*? Recall that it reads:

Things are of a contrary nature, i.e., cannot be in the same subject, insofar as one can destroy the other. (*EIIP5*)

For if they could agree with one another, or be in the same subject at once, then there could be something in the same subject which could destroy it, which (by P4) is absurd. Therefore, things etc., q.e.d. (*EIIP5D*)

So the claim is that mutually destructive items are of a contrary nature and cannot be in the same ‘subject’ (*subjectum*), because this would violate the just presented *EIIP4*. The concept of subject is puzzling; it appears only twice in the *Ethics* and is never defined.<sup>16</sup> However, the fact that *EIIP4* is allowed to restrict what may inhere in a subject strongly suggests that we find also here Spinoza’s theory of definitions and essences at work. Thus, I take it that by ‘subject’

<sup>14</sup> *Method*, 111; emphasis added. For similar views, see Matheron, *Individu*, 10; Allison, *Spinoza*, 131; Alan Donagan, *Spinoza* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988), 149; Garber, ‘Conatus’, 59–60; Andrew Youpa, ‘Spinozistic Self-Preservation’ [‘Self-Preservation’], *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 41 (2003), 477–90, at 481; Lin, ‘Metaphysics of Desire’, 27, 50; Steven Nadler, *Spinoza’s Ethics. An Introduction* [Ethics] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 196.

<sup>15</sup> Bennett (*Study*, 235–6) criticizes *EIIP4* of neglecting ‘the fact that causal laws cover stretches of time’, and time differences, for their part, ‘turn lethal contradictions into harmless changes’. However, although Bennett is right in suggesting that Spinoza thinks about essences somehow ‘atemporally’, I do not understand how this would affect Spinoza’s point: even if time differences were taken into consideration, *EIIP4* could still deliver everything needed simply by saying that no change amounting to a thing’s destruction, at any point of time, can be derived from its definition alone.

<sup>16</sup> In addition to *EIIP5*, the notion appears in *EVA1*: ‘if two contrary actions are aroused in the same subject, a change will have to occur, either in both of them, or in one only, until they cease to be contrary’.



Spinoza means a thing as it would be constituted solely by its definable essence, with only those properties that necessarily follow from the essence alone. Here I am in agreement with Garrett, who contends: 'an individual . . . exists to the extent that there is instantiated a definite essence or nature that can serve as a locus of causal activity. *Where there is such an essence, properties follow (both causally and logically) from that essence, and hence one can speak of a "subject" in which affections exist*'.<sup>17</sup> That 'subject' is here given a very special essentialist sense is made clear by Garrett's probably surprising-sounding claim that, to the extent qualities of things are produced by external causes and thereby not conceived solely through the subject of which they are predicated, they do not inhere in that subject.<sup>18</sup> In *EIIP*5 Spinoza seems thus to be highlighting the other requirement for a proper definition (*TIE* 96; *G* ii. 35; *C* i. 40), that from it must be derivable all those properties that follow from the *definiendum's* essence alone.

Given the aforesaid, how should *EIIP*5 be read? Now, if the properties derivable from an alleged definition would involve logical opposition, the *definiendum's* essence would involve a contradiction and thus be self-negating. But this is precisely what *EIIP*4 precludes. So, for instance, from no proper definition can be deduced both the property of having a hypotenuse whose square equals the sum of the squares on the other two sides, and the property of having the sum of the internal angles equaling that of four straight angles, because the first property implies the negation of the second. In other words, granted the theory of definitions and essences underlying Spinoza's somewhat peculiar views on subjecthood, it is well founded to claim that no subject can involve anything self-destructive—that is, contradictory—for that would only prove that we did not have a true thing or subject, with a definable essence, to begin with.<sup>19</sup> I think this is the reason why Spinoza feels himself entitled to assert that 'things are of a contrary nature, i.e., cannot be in the same subject, insofar as one can destroy the other'.

<sup>17</sup> Garrett, 'Conatus Argument', 150; emphasis added. <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 140.

<sup>19</sup> Thus I agree with Nadler's recent formulation, 'there cannot be in any thing two elements that derive from the thing's nature and that are contrary to each other' for 'this would be to admit into the essence of the thing an inconsistency, which would render the essence itself contradictory and the thing an impossible non-thing' (Nadler, *Ethics*, 196).

Unfortunately this does not mean that Spinoza would be out of trouble. For, as Kant with his customary brilliance and instructiveness teaches us, a distinction between two kinds of opposition should be kept in mind: (a) *logical* opposition through contradiction (when something is simultaneously affirmed and denied of the same thing), having the consequence of an unthinkable and impossible nothing, and (b) *real* opposition in which two properties are opposed and cancel each other out, but without contradiction; in this latter kind of opposition, the conflicting determinations can exist in the same subject (for instance, a body may have a certain motive force to go left and a force of the same size to go right, resulting in the state of rest, not in the impossibility of the body).<sup>20</sup> Now, Spinoza's way of using *EIIP*<sub>5</sub> in *EIIP*<sub>6D</sub> (any thing 'is opposed to everything which can take its existence away [by P<sub>5</sub>]' ) obviously refers not to logical but to real opposition. This is only to be expected given the fact that *conatus* is one form of power, and oppositions of powers are real, not logical in character.<sup>21</sup> So the problem can be put as follows: if *EIIP*<sub>5</sub> is taken to mean that from no definition items in logical contradiction can be derived, there is no way to squeeze the opposition thesis of *EIIP*<sub>6D</sub> out of *EIIP*<sub>5</sub> alone, for a completely different sort of opposition pertains to *EIIP*<sub>6</sub> than to the proposition preceding it. I shall later present some suggestions on how this problem might be solved, but, because of this defect, *EIIP*<sub>6D</sub> seems to be unsatisfactorily formulated.

However, I do not think that Spinoza is trying to derive the *conatus* doctrine from *EIIP*<sub>4</sub> and P<sub>5</sub> alone, so the fact that that cannot be done is not, as such, perilous. Instead, we need a proper interpretation of the role played by the material cited at the beginning of the proof, which is what I shall try to offer next. I believe that a firm grasp of *EIP*<sub>25Cor.</sub> and P<sub>34</sub> enables us to see *EIIP*<sub>4</sub> and P<sub>5</sub> in a new light and to discern how the whole derivation is supposed to work.

<sup>20</sup> Immanuel Kant, 'Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy' ['Negative Magnitudes'], in Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 204–41, at 211–12, 215–16. I am indebted to Olli Koistinen for pointing Kant's helpful text out to me.

<sup>21</sup> For instance, Kant ('Negative Magnitudes', 228–9) thinks that real opposition pertains not only to physical world and operative forces in it but to our mental life as well, especially to our emotions.

## 3. EIP25COR. AND P34

The by now familiar beginning of the *conatus* argument runs as follows: 'For singular things are modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way (by IP25Cor.), i.e. (by IP34), things that express, in a certain and determinate way, God's power, by which God is and acts' (EIIIP6D). EIP25Cor., in turn, states: 'Particular things are nothing but affections of God's attributes, or modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way. The demonstration is evident from P15 and D5' (EIP25Cor.). And EIP34 is brief to the extreme: 'God's power [*potentia*] is his essence itself' (EIP34). The general structure of this part of the argument is clear enough: modes express attributes in a certain and determinate way (EIP25Cor.), attributes constitute or express God's essence (an implicit premise (EID4, D6, P10S)), and God's essence is his power (EIP34); thus, particular things as finite modes express in a certain and determinate way God's power.

We can begin unpacking all this by concentrating on EIP34. What, exactly, does the identification of God's essence and power mean? The way Spinoza anticipates EIP34 already in EIP17S ('God's supreme power, or infinite nature') suggests that he considers this identification quite unproblematic.<sup>22</sup> Now, the concept of power, much used in scholastic philosophy, was hardly in vogue among those early modern philosophers impressed by the advance of the science of mechanics. According to them, scientific explanations should be made in terms of motion of particles of matter that form relatively stable structures,<sup>23</sup> and offering empty *virtus dormitiva* type of pseudo-explanations should be avoided altogether.<sup>24</sup> But, obviously, Spinoza thinks that the

<sup>22</sup> This is not the first time Spinoza states this identity: he has already identified God's power and essence in *Descartes' 'Principles of Philosophy'*, where he notes, after using them interchangeably, that 'the power by which the substance preserves itself is nothing but its essence, and differs from it only in name' (IP7S; G i. 163; C i. 250).

<sup>23</sup> See Steven Nadler, 'Doctrines of Explanation in Late Scholasticism and in the Mechanical Philosophy', in Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, i (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 513–52, at 520.

<sup>24</sup> As Curley (*Method*, 115) explains, in this kind of explanation 'the cause is identified only in terms of the kind of effect it has'; this is what happens when, for instance, opium

much-disputed concept can be put to good philosophical use. The demonstration of the very proposition under scrutiny, *EIP*<sub>34</sub>, offers us a revealing starting point for examining the notion's place in the *Ethics*: Spinoza claims God's essence to be power because 'from the necessity alone of God's essence it follows that God is the cause of himself (by *P*<sub>11</sub>) and (by *P*<sub>16</sub> and *P*<sub>16</sub>Cor.) of all things. Therefore, God's power, by which he and all things are and act, is his essence itself, q.e.d.' (*EIP*<sub>34</sub>D).

It should be noted that this shows the roots of the *conatus* doctrine to run deep, right to those propositions of the *Ethics* that deal with the basics of existence and causation (*EIP*<sub>11</sub> and *P*<sub>16</sub>). To simplify matters slightly, the main line of thought in *EIP*<sub>34</sub> is that, since God's essence is the cause of everything, Spinoza claims it to be power.<sup>25</sup> Here we can see a strong connection between causality and power, a connection that often makes its presence felt in Spinoza's philosophy;<sup>26</sup> he clearly finds it natural and useful to talk about causality in terms of power. To take an important example, the notion of power of acting (*agendi potentia*) has a central place in Spinoza's ethical theory: in a sense, the idea is to achieve a maximally high level of power of acting. Now, as 'power' means being able to cause effects, and 'acting' being the sole and complete cause of an effect (*EIIID*<sub>2</sub>), having 'power of acting' obviously equals being capable of bringing about effects of one's own accord, with no regard to other things. Of course, the linkage between causality and power is not an eccentric one: still in our days 'power' is commonly taken to refer to causal capacities,<sup>27</sup> and this has been so at least from the heyday of scholasticism. Spinoza's overall idea is arguably that when a thing X causes by itself—that is, in virtue of having the kind of essence or nature it does—an effect E, we can say that X has power to E. The interconnectedness of power and essence means

is said to put people to sleep because it has dormitive virtue, which, in turn, is simply the power to put people to sleep.

<sup>25</sup> For a similar reading of *EIP*<sub>34</sub>D, see Lin, 'Metaphysics of Desire', 38.

<sup>26</sup> That Spinoza considers this connection as self-evident is expressed already in the early *Metaphysical Thoughts* (II. 12; G i. 280; C i. 346): he claims thought to be 'a power of doing each one, of affirming and denying' and by this power, 'of course, nothing else can be understood than a cause sufficient for each one'.

<sup>27</sup> As Bennett (*Study*, 74) puts it, power is a 'paradigmatically causal notion'.

that, for instance, the power of X to E is explained by referring to X's essence.<sup>28</sup>

Underlying Spinoza's concept of power is a particular view of causation according to which causation has fundamentally to do with the fact that as things are what they are—that is, as they have the kind of essences they do—certain effects (or 'properties') are ceaselessly produced by their essences (they 'follow', 'flow', or 'emanate' from them). Most notably, the aforementioned *EIP*16, according to which from God's nature 'infinitely many things in infinite modes' follow, explicates this kind of model of causation, as does *EIP*36, 'nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow'.<sup>29</sup> This doctrine of the causal efficacy of essences together with the just presented idea of power entails that things are endowed with power in virtue of their natures. With regard to the *conatus* argument, all this suggests that the appearance of *EIP*34 in *IIP*6D can be interpreted as an extremely economical reference to a general metaphysical position, unearthenable from the first part of the *Ethics*, in which physical and mental phenomena are caused by the action of particulars that possess the power to cause effects according to their essences.<sup>30</sup>

Understanding *EIP*25Cor., 'things are ... modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way', requires a fair amount of unpacking as well. It includes once again a notion Spinoza nowhere defines, that of expression. For our purposes the

<sup>28</sup> Apart from Spinoza himself, I have here been inspired, first, by Kant's (*Lectures on Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 178, 183, 328, 376) lectures on metaphysics, in which power is defined neither as a substance nor as a property, but as the internal sufficient ground of a substance to produce accidents as effects, and, secondly, by Rom Harré and Edward Madden (*Causal Powers. A Theory of Natural Necessity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 98–100, 112), who themselves note that their theory of causal power and powerful particulars bears a notable resemblance to that of Aquinas.

<sup>29</sup> For recent discussions that bring forward the causal efficacy of essences, see Don Garrett, 'Teleology in Spinoza and Early Modern Rationalism', in Rocco J. Gennaro and Charles Huenemann (eds.), *New Essays on the Rationalists* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 310–35, at 330; Garrett, 'Conatus Argument', 136–42, 150; Martin Lin, 'Teleology and Human Action in Spinoza' ['Teleology'], *Philosophical Review*, 115 (2006), 317–54, at 343–7.

<sup>30</sup> For alternative discussions of Spinoza's concept of power, see G. H. R. Parkinson, 'Spinoza's Concept of the Rational Act', *Studia Leibnitiana Supplementa*, 20 (1981), 1–19, at 9–11; Steven Barbone, 'What Counts as an Individual for Spinoza?', in Koistinen and Biro (eds.), *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes*, 89–112, at 102–4; Pietarinen, 'Action', 143–5; Lin, 'Metaphysics of Desire', 29–46.

crucial point is, to my mind at least, that in all the contexts in which it occurs a central feature of the expressive relationship is that, if *Y* expresses *X*, *Y* is, of course, in some way different from *X*, but still in such a manner that *Y* *retains* or *preserves* the basic character or nature of *X*. Substance has many attributes, none of them simply equivalent with the essence of substance, but, as all attributes are faithful to that essence in their diverse ways of constituting it, they can be said to express it. Further, finite things express their attribute, because they are manners in which a certain attribute is modified, and, as such, of course, their basic nature is that of their attribute.<sup>31</sup>

The idea of expression is closely connected to that of immanence: Spinoza claims the fact that things are expressions of God's attributes (*EIP25Cor.*) to be evident from *EIP15*, the overtly immanentist proposition proclaiming everything to be in God. Gilles Deleuze has stressed this connection; his point in its general outline seems to be that, unlike in traditional theology with transcendent God, whose being differs, because of the ontological gulf located between God and us, radically from ours, in Spinoza's immanent system all being is univocal:

Thus all imitative or exemplary likeness is excluded from the relation of expression. God expresses himself in the forms that constitute his essence . . . only univocal being, only univocal consciousness, are expressive. Substance and modes, cause and effects, only have being and are only known through common forms that actually constitute the essence of the one, and actually contain the essence of the others.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> To my mind, Lin's 'Metaphysics of Desire' and 'Teleology' provide the most informative discussions to date on expression. In the earlier paper Lin writes, very aptly, that the power of finite things 'does not resemble or imitate the power of God' because 'it is the very power of God itself, manifested in a finite form' and that 'the *only* difference between God's power and its expression in the power or *conatus* of singular things is that God's power is infinite in the sense of being free from interference from external causes, and that the power of singular things is finite in the sense of being subject to external causes' ('Metaphysics of Desire', 36, 45). However, I am having misgivings about tying up expression with causation the way Lin does in the later paper: '*e* expresses *c*'s *F*-ness just in case both *e* and *c* are *F* and *c* caused *e* to be *F*' ('Teleology', 343). But, even though attributes express the essence of substance and definitions express essences, essences do not cause attributes or definitions. As a consequence, the concept of expression should probably be kept apart from causation.

<sup>32</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 181.

Thus, Spinoza's concept of expression involves the denial of finite things as creations of transcendent God, radically separate from and only somehow analogically resembling their creator: there is only one existent, substance expressed by attributes whose expressions are finite things.

The phrase 'in a certain and determinate way' occurs quite often in the *Ethics*, but its exact meaning is not altogether clear. In a letter to John Hudde, Spinoza says that by the notion of 'determinate' he 'denotes nothing positive, but only the privation of existence of that same nature which is conceived as determinate' (G iv. 184).<sup>33</sup> Drawing from the work of Martial Guerout, Charles Ramond contends that 'determinate' can be taken to mean either 'limited' or 'well determined'. Ramond prefers the latter meaning, interpreting 'in a certain and determinate way' to mean 'in a precisely determined way'.<sup>34</sup> Although this remark is hardly surprising, it seems plausible not to think of 'certain and determinate' existence merely as something negative. I suggest that Spinoza refers by 'certain' to particularity or specificity, and by 'determinate' to limitedness; thus, 'certain and determinate' in this context means 'particular and limited'. So, *EIP25Cor.* says that finite things are of the basic character of their attribute, albeit in a particular and limited mode.

Taken together, *EIP25Cor.* and *P34* imply, in Spinoza's idiom, that things 'express, in a certain and determinate way, God's power, by which God is and acts'. We should now be able better to understand the import of this claim: any singular thing expresses God's power, because singular things, while retaining what is characteristic of God's power, modify that power in a particular limited fashion. This, I think, exemplifies the following line of thought extractable from the *Ethics*. Everything there is follows from the essence of God, making God intrinsically powerful (*EIP16*, *P34*), and, since finite things express this infinite power of God (*EIIIP6D*, *IVP4D*), they can quite plausibly be described as specifically modified portions of the total power of nature. This means that, in the Spinozistic scheme of things, finite individuals can be conceived as specifically determined centers of

<sup>33</sup> The translation is by Samuel Shirley in Spinoza, *The Letters* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1995), 207. Cf. *EIP8S1*, 'being finite is really, in part, a negation'.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Ramond, *Qualité et quantité dans la philosophie de Spinoza* (Paris: PUF, 1995), 78.

causal activity and power, individual essences operating as modifiers determining the way in which substance and its efficacy or total power are modified. So, finite things express God's power because it is, as it were, distributed through finite essences in actuality, and the frame of distribution (that is, the order of actual essences at a given time) changes from one moment of time to another, while God's total power stays infinite.

Understood in this way, a finite thing cannot be distinguished from a specifically modified portion of God's power, or a certain manner of operation and causation; already 'mere existence' requires constant causal activity, or a certain kind of power to exist. I believe Spinoza thinks it is metaphysically adequate to conceive any finite modification in a dynamic way, as a center of causal activity, because in this way something fundamental about the inner workings of things is revealed. Also the already cited *EIP36* lends support to this interpretation: 'Nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow', because 'whatever exists expresses in a certain and determinate way the power of God' (*EIP36D*); in other words, effects follow from finite essences because they indicate how God-nature's power is modified.

#### 4. THE ARGUMENT RECONSTRUCTED

How should the *conatus* argument be evaluated in the light of the present interpretation? Evidently, its beginning, built on *EIP25Cor.* and *P34*, evokes a certain dynamistic framework, in which finite things are centers of causal power, capable of producing effects in virtue of their essences. Now, the way I see it, this makes the beginning of the demonstration irreplaceable—after all, *conatus* is one form of power, and *EIP25Cor.* and *P34* not only bring the notion of power into play, but also inform us on how the power of finite things should be understood in the monistic system. So, I disagree with those commentators who see Spinoza as trying to derive the *conatus* doctrine from the conceptual discussions of *EIIIP4* and *P5*; and I think that those who endorse the approach emphasizing



activity intrinsic in things are on the right track. But this raises new questions: why are *EIIP*<sub>4</sub> and *P*<sub>5</sub> needed at all? Could *EIIP*<sub>6</sub> not be derived from *EIP*<sub>25</sub>Cor. and *P*<sub>34</sub> alone, as Martin Lin (see n. 9) argues?

A close look at what is at stake in *EIIP*<sub>6</sub> suggests that the answer to this question must be negative. For the material located at the beginning of the derivation says only that finite things are, in essence, dynamic causers; but this is not enough to guarantee that they could not act self-destructively or restrain their own power, which would make them incapable of self-preservation. However, this would go against *EIIP*<sub>4</sub>, and Spinoza uses it to claim: 'no thing has anything in itself by which it can be destroyed, or which takes its existence away.' So thus far he has proved that finite things are consistent causers—that is, entities endowed with power and, insofar as they cause effects solely in virtue of their essence, that never use their power self-destructively.

Evidently, Spinoza does not think this to be enough. The significance and role of the final plank in the demonstration, *EIIP*<sub>5</sub>, needs still to be determined. Indeed, considering its content and the way it is used in the demonstration, it seems to me to be a surprisingly decisive ingredient in the argument. Namely, that what 'each thing, to the extent it is in itself'—that is, insofar as any thing is considered disregarding everything external to it—strives to preserve is its *being* (*esse*). However, in the earlier *Theological-Political Treatise* the *conatus* principle is formulated as follows: 'each thing strives to persist in its present state [*in suo statu*], as far as in it lies, taking account of no other thing but itself' (xvi. 3; G iii. 189).<sup>35</sup> The only notable difference is thus that in *EIIP*<sub>6</sub> the 'present state' is replaced by 'being'. However, this difference seems to be almost universally ignored, and 'being' is most often read as meaning, roughly, 'existing in the present state'. But I think that we should keep an open mind here, for the shift to 'being' together with *EIIP*<sub>5</sub> and the view of subjecthood it is based on suggests that we should rethink what kind of 'being' or 'existence'

<sup>35</sup> The translation is by Samuel Shirley in Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998), 173.

is meant in *EIIP6*. Recall that, for Spinoza, each subject has a definable essence from which, as far as the subject in question is in itself, certain properties or effects necessarily follow; consequently a subject's being involves not only instantiating a certain essence, but also those properties inferable from the essence-expressing definition.<sup>36</sup> I would thus like to propose the following reading of the claim included in *EIIP6D* that, by *EIIP5*, each thing 'is opposed to everything which can take its existence away': *EIIP5* is meant to bring forward that things are not merely non-self-destroyers but subjects from whose definitions properties follow; and, as Spinoza thinks to have shown, by *EIP25Cor.* and *P34*, that finite modifications are entities of power, any subject has true power to produce the properties or effects derivable from its definition, which, Spinoza claims, implies opposing everything harmful. In other words, things exercise power as their definition states, according to their definitions, and thus bringing in the idea of things as expressers of power enables Spinoza to convert logical oppositions into real ones.

On the present interpretation, the argument for *EIIP6* is structured as follows. First, the beginning of the demonstration brings forward the dynamistic framework developed in the first part of the *Ethics*. In it, God's power equals God's ability to cause effects in virtue of God's essence alone (*EIP34*). Finite things express this power (*EID6*, *P25Cor.*), and, since in expressing the basic character of the expressed is retained, the power of finite things is of precisely the same kind as God's power, only in particular limited mode. In other words,

<sup>36</sup> As far as I know, Alexandre Matheron ('Le Problème de l'évolution de Spinoza du *Traité théologico-politique* au *Traité politique*', in Edwin Curley and Pierre-François Moreau (eds.), *Spinoza: Issues and Directions* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), 258–70, at 268–9) and Chantal Jaquet (*L'Unité du corps et de l'esprit: Affects, actions et passions chez Spinoza* (Paris: PUF, 2004), 63–4) are the only scholars who have emphasized the importance of this shift from what Matheron calls the 'very archaic' formulation of 'state' (located in the *Theological-Political Treatise*) to 'being' (of the *Ethics*). Matheron is importantly right in claiming that '“to persevere in our being” does not signify merely “not dying”, but producing effects that follow from our nature', as is Jaquet, who holds: 'striving to persevere in being implies something more than conservation of the same state... it consists of expressing all the thing's power and of affirming as far as possible all the properties contained in its essence' (translations mine). Here Matheron refers to *EIIP7*, 'the striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing', but I do not see how that proposition can be used to support the kind of reading of 'being' he and I endorse; Jaquet backs up her reading only with the observation that, instead of 'state', we find 'being' in *EIIP6*.

the idea of expression is supposed to guarantee that, just as God's power causes effects that follow from God's nature, finite things cause, with their power, effects that follow from their essences; the same model applies alike to finite and infinite things. Now, God's power cannot encounter any opposition already for the simple reason that nothing but God exists, but finite things do not find themselves in such happy conditions: temporal reality is a field of constant contest, and consequently finite things do not get to exist and to operate in a hindrance-free, 'frictionless' world. Alan Gabbey articulates nicely the way in which this idea was commonly understood in Spinoza's time:

Taking seventeenth-century 'dynamics' as a whole, insofar as this is permissible, it can be said that the great majority of its practitioners understood force in its functional sense as that concomitant of a body—expressed in terms of its whole speed and corporeal quantity—which could be identified with the body's relative capacity to overcome a similarly understood resisting force, whether potential or actual, irrespective of the speed and corporeal quantity in terms of which the contrary force was expressed. *Interactions between bodies were seen as contests between opposing forces*, the larger forces being the winners, the smaller forces being the losers ...<sup>37</sup>

Gabbey dubs this the 'contest view of force'. Now, it is not, as such, particularly strange to suggest that there is a linkage between power and resistance; and especially, given the way of thinking about interactions between bodies that has just been presented, the concept of power was obviously seen to imply that, in the case of opposition, things truly *resist* opposing factors with their power. This applies also to the concept Spinoza endorses: were things simply to cease their causal activities when facing obstacles, the concept of power involved would turn out to be extremely feeble, hardly to be counted as a proper concept of power at all. Further, Spinoza frequently equates power and striving without feeling any need to provide a separate

<sup>37</sup> Alan Gabbey, 'Force and Inertia in the Seventeenth Century: Descartes and Newton', in Stephen Gaukroger (ed.), *Descartes: Philosophy, Mathematics and Physics* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), 230–320, at 243, emphasis added. Evidently, this line of thought underlies the following formulation Descartes puts forward in his *Principles of Philosophy* (II. 45): 'it only requires calculating how much force there is in each of these bodies to move or to resist motion, because it is evident that the one which has the most [force] must always produce its effect and prevent that of the other' (AT ixB. 89 [the French 1647 edition]).

argument for this equation,<sup>38</sup> and this together with his intellectual milieu strongly suggests that he sees the notion of ‘striving against’ or ‘resisting opposition’ to be inbuilt in a proper concept of power.<sup>39</sup> In other words, I submit Spinoza’s notion of power to imply that, if any thing, whether finite or infinite, encounters opposition, it strives against that opposition to cause effects determined by its own essence alone—the claim ‘if opposed, will resist’ has an impossible antecedent only with regard to God. The beginning of *EIIP6D* thus implies that, taken out of causal isolation, any being endowed with power shall, in virtue of its power, exert itself against any harmful external causes encountered.

Secondly, *EIIP4* guarantees that any thing endowed with striving power never endeavors to destroy itself, but, thirdly, is (by *EIIP5*) a subject from whose definition an array of properties not in logical opposition to each other can be inferred. Finally, given that things are expressers of power, the exclusion of logical opposition amongst a subject’s essential effects or properties is converted into real impulsion against opposing factors—that is, into striving to persevere in the kind of being determined by the subject’s essence alone. That is, *EIP25Cor.*, *P34*, and *IIP5* together imply that each thing is really opposed to, or exerts itself against, everything destructive to its being.

However, even my reading cannot save Spinoza from being guilty of, if not an error, at least sloppiness in formulating the latter part of the argument: he indicates that exertion against follows from *EIIP5* alone, and, as Bennett has pointed out, this cannot be the case. Fortunately, this is no fatal flaw, for it can be fixed by bringing in the material located in the very same demonstration.

The foregoing discussion shows that, of the two main types of approach to Spinoza’s argument, the one emphasizing activity and

<sup>38</sup> ‘The power of each thing, or the striving by which it... does anything’ (*EIIP7D*); ‘the Mind’s striving, or power of thinking, is equal to and at one in nature with the Body’s striving, or power of acting’ (*EIIP28D*); ‘The Mind’s striving, or power’ (*EIIP54D*). See also *EIIP19D*, *P20D*, *P37D*, *P55D*, *P57D*, *IVP20D*, and *VP25D*.

<sup>39</sup> As Leibniz observes in a letter to de Volder, it is one thing ‘to retain a state until something changes it, which even something intrinsically indifferent to both states does’, and another ‘for a thing not to be indifferent, but to have a force and, as it were, an inclination to retain its state, and so resist changing’ (GP ii. 170; AG 172). I would argue that Spinoza implicitly realized this and saw opposition to destruction stemming from the fact that God’s modifications are powerful strivers; hence the reference to *EIP25Cor.* and *P34*.

power of things is the preferable one. Alexandre Matheron's and Henry Allison's position (see n. 9) is especially noteworthy: they also claim that the beginning of *EIIP6D* is crucial for the argument and suggest that it can be connected with the conceptual discussions of *EIIP4* and *P5*. However, their brief accounts are hardly satisfactory; for no good reason they emphasize the notion of acting instead of power, without adequately explicating how and why activity is connected to resistance, or helping us to figure out where the opposition to destruction is supposed to come from; moreover, they do not even attempt to discern precisely the argument's structure, how its various elements work together. I hope to have shown that my account is more satisfactory at least in these important respects.<sup>40</sup>

Understood in this way, *conatus* is a principle of persevering in perfect existence, of striving for an autonomous state in which are instantiated not only the striver's essence but also everything that follows from it alone. One of the advantages of this interpretation is that it concords well with the otherwise quite puzzling fact that in *EIIP12* and *P13* Spinoza takes it to follow directly from *EIIP6* that our mind strives to *increase* its and the body's power of acting: given that we are things constantly under duress and thus practically never in a purely autonomous state, *conatus* amounts to perfection-increasing, not merely to maintaining the already attained, non-optimal state.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Moreover, Matheron (*Individu*, 11, 22) also thinks that *EIIP6D* involves a transition from logical (or 'conceptual') to real (or 'physical') opposition, but does not explain what could license it. For further criticism against Matheron and Allison, see Lin, 'Metaphysics of Desire', 26, 28–9. Based on the discussion thus far I would argue against Garrett's ('*Conatus Argument*', 144–6; see n. 10) way of giving the official demonstration what seems basically a subsidiary role: if I am right, *EIIP6D* is indispensable for demonstrating the truth of the *conatus* principle. Perhaps most importantly, the fact that it is very difficult to see how the idea of opposition to destruction that *EIIP6* contains could be derived from the material located right at the beginning of the *Ethics* increases the vulnerability of Garrett's position. Of course, my account differs from Garrett's in many other respects as well: I think he does not give a prominent enough place to the concept of power, which prevents him from providing what I take to be the most plausible account of Spinoza's grounds for the opposition thesis; he leaves, to my mind, somewhat unclear how the various ingredients of *EIIP6D* are connected with each other; and, although my reading of 'subjecthood' draws on Garrett's work, he appears not to understand the notion of being involved in *EIIP6* the way I do.

<sup>41</sup> Given the popularity of the view that *conatus* means striving to preserve oneself in the prevailing state, this may be regarded as a bold claim. It is not, however, unprecedented to connect *conatus* to increasing perfection. Andrew Youpa has recently argued quite forcefully as follows: 'what allows us to say that individual X was better able to preserve itself than

Moreover, the present interpretation squares quite well with the troubling *EIVP72* that claims that '[a] free man always' acts 'honestly, not deceptively'—even when being treacherous would save him from a present danger of death (*EIVP72S*).<sup>42</sup> Now, I think that Spinoza's general model of causation and power pushes him towards this position: to the extent we are free—that is, unhindered by external causes—we necessarily strive to bring about everything as determined solely by our essence; and, since this kind of unhindered mental activity equals reasoning, it is understandable that Spinoza claims us to preserve our being, to the extent we are free, by doing what reason dictates. To put it slightly differently, if only non-deceitful things follow from our essence and being free equals doing what follows from our essence, then, to the extent we are free, we cannot deceive. I believe Spinoza reasons as follows. Power, God's as well as ours, is power to exist and to act. Hence, we do strive to maintain our essence instantiated in actuality, but our being includes more than just that, and so, by *EIIIP6*, we strive to improve our level of perfection, and, insofar as we succeed in this—that is, insofar as we are free—we necessarily bring about things derivable from our definition, even if in some extreme cases this exercise of our power of acting would

Y is that X surpassed Y in perfection. And an individual maintains and enhances her perfection insofar as she maintains or increases her activity (*E5P40*) or, what amounts to the same thing, while she successfully maximizes her autonomy. An individual preserves herself better than another, then, insofar as she is more active and autonomous than the other' ('Self-Preservation', 480).

However, Youpa's claim that because Spinoza writes that 'the duration of things cannot be determined from their essence' (*EIVPpref.*) *conatus* does not have *anything* to do with prolonging the duration of temporal existence is too strong, for Spinoza's claim implies only that, although we do strive to keep our essence actualized, the duration of actualization cannot be determined by our essence alone because it depends on strength and nature of external causes as well. Moreover, although Matheron's reasoning concerning these matters is not quite clear to me, I want to point out that he contends that each thing tends towards 'an optimal level of actualization' (*Individu*, 49; translation mine), which obviously involves the idea that things strive to increase their perfection.

<sup>42</sup> For discussion on *EIVP72*, see Bennett, *Study*, 317–18; Don Garrett, "'A Free Man Always Acts Honestly, Not Deceptively': Freedom and the Good in Spinoza's *Ethics*", in Edwin Curley and Pierre-François Moreau (eds.), *Spinoza: Issues and Directions* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), 221–38; Lee C. Rice, 'Spinoza and Highway Robbery', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 80 (1998), 211–18.

be counterproductive with regard to prolonging the duration of our existence.<sup>43</sup> This is just the way we are built; given that truthfulness necessarily follows from our nature alone, to the extent we are free, we have precisely as little choice over the fact that we do not lie as a triangle can choose that the sum of its internal angles equals two straight ones. This cast of mind is expressed quite nicely when Spinoza notes at one point, as if in passing, the striving to preserve itself to be ‘nothing but the essence of the thing itself (by *EIIIP7*), which, insofar as it exists as it does, is conceived to have a force for persevering in existing (by *IIIP6*) and for doing those things that necessarily follow from its given nature (see the Definition of Appetite in *IIIP9S*)’ (*EIVP26D*; emphasis added).

## 5. CONCLUSION

I have argued that Spinoza reasons that each true finite thing is, in itself, an expresser of power (*EIP25Cor.*, P34) that never acts self-destructively (*EIIIP4*) but instead strives to drive itself through opponents to produce effects as they follow from the definition of the thing in question (*EIP25Cor.*, P34, and *IIIP5*). Therefore, ‘each thing, to the extent it is in itself, strives to persevere in its being’. The demonstration of *EIIIP6* has its roots deep in Spinoza’s ontology, and, since its concept of power is supposed to provide the metaphysical grounding for real opposition, the importance of *EIP25Cor.* and P34 should not be underestimated just because Spinoza—as often happens—puts his point exceedingly briefly. Moreover, the derivation is basically valid and contains no superfluous elements. All this implies Spinoza’s ethics to be based on the view that we all are, in essence, modifications of God-or-Nature’s power and therefore active causers whose ‘power to exist and act’ has *conatus* character in temporality;

<sup>43</sup> Spinoza can allow this presumably because exercising our power of acting equals understanding; and this, in turn, as Garrett puts it, ‘makes a larger part of the mind eternal, and so ensures that a larger part of the mind—though not the whole of the mind—is indeed something that has an *eternal* being. Because understanding allows one to participate in the eternal, it cannot help but constitute the most important kind of “perseverance in being”, whether the actual *duration* of one’s life is long or not’ (*Ethical Theory*, 291).

this power amounts not only to striving to prolong the duration of our actualization but also to striving to be as active or autonomous as possible—that is, to attain a state determined by our own essence alone.<sup>44</sup>

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