

CHAPTER NINE

SPINOZA'S ACTUALIST MODEL OF POWER

Valtteri Viljanen

*Introduction*

It seems fair to say that Benedictus de Spinoza (1632–77) is not a thinker whose philosophical system would have traditionally been seen as particularly dynamistic in character, or considered in any special way associated with concepts connected with power—or with activity, for that matter. This is echoed in G. W. F. Hegel's estimation, declaring Spinoza's substance to be "a rigid and unyielding" one that "does not open itself out, and therefore comes to no vitality, spirituality or activity".<sup>1</sup> It is, however, defective to view Spinoza along these lines, for thereby it is not properly taken into account that such concepts as power (*potentia*), force (*vis*), and striving (*conatus*) frequently appear in his works, and in focal places. Fortunately, the pertinence of these notions is nowadays all the more often duly emphasized. Indeed, since the late 1960s French scholarship has acknowledged Spinoza's dynamistic tendencies widely enough for a recent commentator to contend, "Spinozism is generally (and justifiably) considered to be a philosophy of 'power'".<sup>2</sup> Also on the other side of the Atlantic, power and related notions have begun to figure in many analyses of Spinoza's philosophy,<sup>3</sup> and interest in these aspects of his thought shows no signs of diminution.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* III, p. 288.

<sup>2</sup> Ramond, *Dictionnaire Spinoza*, p. 147, translation mine. Gilles Deleuze's *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* that appeared in the tumultuous year of 1968 is the key work; but already Sylvain Zac's *L'Idée de vie dans la philosophie de Spinoza* (1963) contains, I think, dynamistic overtones. For recent readings belonging to this tradition and classifiable as dynamistic, see Bove, *La stratégie du conatus*, Jaquet, *L'unité du corps et de l'esprit* and *Les expressions de la puissance d'agir chez Spinoza*; Rizk, *Comprendre Spinoza*; Sévérac, *Le devenir actif chez Spinoza*; Spindler, *Philosophie de la puissance et détermination de l'homme chez Spinoza et chez Nietzsche*.

<sup>3</sup> Barbone, "What Counts as an Individual for Spinoza?"; Della Rocca, "Spinoza's Metaphysical Psychology" and "The Power of an Idea"; Garrett, "Representation and

All this notwithstanding, the main concept of the present anthology, active power, is not, to my knowledge, to be found in Spinoza's oeuvre. He does, however, employ the notion of power of acting (*agendi potentia*), especially in the *Ethics*. This raises the question, if Spinoza uses both 'power' and 'power of acting', what is the difference between the two? What else could power be, for Spinoza, but power of *acting*?<sup>4</sup> What is the relationship between power and activity in his system? It is by trying to find answers to these questions that I will endeavour to locate Spinoza's position with regard to the main topic of this volume; what is more, thereby emerges what may be called an actualist model of God's power.

### *Defining the basic concepts*

#### *Power in Spinoza's monism*

We should begin by outlining the basic role the concept of power plays in Spinoza's system. Why does he allow it to his metaphysics in the first place? If we take a look at his masterpiece, the *Ethics*, 'power' makes its entrance in the eleventh proposition of the opening part—but merely in the second alternative demonstration and in the scholium of that proposition. Only near the end of the opening part we find the proposition that, to a great extent, assigns the dynamic concept its place in the Spinozistic framework:

---

Consciousness in Spinoza's Naturalistic Theory of the Imagination"; Huenemann, "The Necessity of Finite Modes and Geometrical Containment in Spinoza's Metaphysics"; Lin, "Spinoza's Metaphysics of Desire" and "Teleology and Human Action in Spinoza"; Parkinson, "Spinoza on the Power and Freedom of Man" and "Spinoza's Concept of the Rational Act"; Rice, "Action in Spinoza's Account of Affectivity" count among noteworthy Anglo-American studies. Juhani Pietarinen's ("The Rationality of Desires in Spinoza's Ethics" and "Spinoza on Causal Explanation of Action") work belongs to this tradition, and has been particularly inspiring for me; my *Spinoza's Dynamics of Being* attempts to give a unified view of the role of the concept of power in Spinoza's metaphysics (see also my "Field Metaphysic, Power, and Individuation in Spinoza" and "On the Derivation and Meaning of Spinoza's *Conatus* Doctrine").

<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank Don Garrett for pointing out to me this question and its importance.

God's power [*potentia*] is his essence itself.<sup>5</sup>

For from the necessity alone of God's essence it follows that God is the cause of himself (by p11) and (by p16 and p16c) of all things. Therefore, God's power, by which he and all things are and act, is his essence itself, q.e.d.<sup>6</sup>

For the moment we can leave aside the question of what, exactly, does it mean that 'all things follow from the necessity of God's essence', and simply focus on the fact that the quote above displays a clear connection between causal efficacy and power: the central idea seems to be that as God's essence causes everything there is, it must be equated with power. The demonstration is built on two very basic propositions, E1p11 and p16; this allows, I believe Spinoza to think, establishing a clear and unequivocal meaning to the concept of power by showing how it figures in his overall view of the fundamental causal architecture of the world. In that architecture, there is strictly speaking only one cause, the only substance, God or Nature, without which "nothing can be or be conceived" (E1p15). And precisely the propositions cited in E1p34d explicate God's basic causal capacities. First, to present things in an extremely brief manner, as existence is involved already in God's essence, God is the cause of himself and a necessarily existing being (E1p11); and so it can be said that God's causal efficacy results in his own existence. But, second, God is not only *causa sui* but also *causa rerum*, because from God's essence everything possible necessarily follows (E1p16); and so it can be said that God's causal efficacy results in active production of an infinity of modifications, also finite things such as human beings.

We are now in a position to delineate a rough working formulation of power in Spinoza's system: power means capacity to bring about effects; and given what Spinoza says about the nature of the effects of God's causality, it is only consistent that Spinoza talks about power both to exist and to act. With regard to finite things, the exact import of power's twofold meaning remains yet to be discerned, but at this point

---

<sup>5</sup> E1p34. I have used the following method in referring to the *Ethics*: a = axiom, app = appendix, c = corollary, d = definition (when not after a proposition number), d = demonstration (when after a proposition number), le = lemma, p = proposition, po = postulate, pr = preface, s = scholium. For instance, E1p8s2 refers to the second scholium of the eighth proposition in the first part of the *Ethics*.

<sup>6</sup> E1p34d.

it seems clear—and worth mentioning given the ill reputation that has overshadowed the modern history of the concept—that Spinoza shows no signs of considering this sort of notion of power as somehow obscure or in special need of defence: inserted into his philosophical system that tracks down the world thoroughly intelligible to its minutest detail, what we have is a completely proper and useful causal notion.

We should still observe one important aspect pertaining to power and Spinoza's peculiar monistic system: the radically novel philosophical theology of the *Ethics* is set up to give demystified—maybe one could say adequately 'philosophized'—accounts of such divine attributes as infinity, simplicity, eternity, and activity; no doubt, Spinoza's understanding of God's power is supposed to explicate what another traditional notion, that of omnipotence, really means. The tenet that God's causal power is ubiquitous in the world is, of course, a commonplace in philosophical theology,<sup>7</sup> and E1p34's claim that God's essence or power is ultimately responsible for everything there is can be regarded as its Spinozistic counterpart. Moreover and more interestingly, Spinoza's position can be depicted as a solution to the following old problem plaguing scholastic theology, the so-called problem of secondary causation.<sup>8</sup> Assigning powers to natural agents seemed to create a problem for the medievals, which is formulated by Francisco Suárez as, "to whatever extent efficient causality is attributed to the creature, to that extent the divine power of the creator is diminished. For either God does everything, or he does not do everything. The latter detracts from the divine efficacy".<sup>9</sup> In other words, as recent commentators have noted,<sup>10</sup> two fundamental tenets of scholasticism are in tension with each other: the omnipotence of the transcendent God and finite things' causal efficacy. And it is precisely here that Spinoza's immanent conception of divine power has its full

---

<sup>7</sup> As Alfred Freddoso ("Medieval Causation and the Case against Secondary Causation in Nature", p. 74) puts it: "Central to the western theistic understanding of divine providence is the conviction that God is the sovereign Lord of nature. He created the physical universe and continually conserves it in existence. What's more, He is always and everywhere active in it by His power. The operations of nature, be they minute or catastrophic, commonplace or unprecedented, are the work of His hands, and without His constant causal influence none of them would or could occur."

<sup>8</sup> Freddoso's "Medieval Aristotelianism and the Case Against Secondary Causation in Nature" offers a particularly enlightening treatment of this topic.

<sup>9</sup> *On Efficient Causality. Metaphysical Disputations 17, 18, and 19*, 18.1.2. It should be noted that Suárez (*ibid.*) himself did not think that this problem was a very serious one.

<sup>10</sup> Freddoso, "Medieval Causation and Case against Secondary Causation in Nature", pp. 77–78, 92–93; Des Chene, *Physiologia*, p. 251.

import. Now, Spinozistic finite things are modifications of God, and this allows Spinoza to hold that ultimately there is only one power, but one that is expressed “in a certain and determinate manner” through the essences of finite things. As Spinoza himself explains,

[t]he power by which singular things (and consequently, [any] man) preserve their being is the power itself of God, *or* Nature (by 1p24c), not insofar as it is infinite, but insofar as it can be explained through the man's actual essence (by 3p7). The man's power, therefore, insofar as it is explained through his actual essence, is part of God *or* Nature's infinite power, that is (by 1p34), of its essence.<sup>11</sup>

Spinoza puts his point also the other way around by claiming that “the universal power of Nature as a whole is nothing but the power of all individual things taken together”.<sup>12</sup> So, Spinoza holds unambiguously that we are dealing with immanent God's power in its different expressions, “God is the [...] immanent cause of all things” (E1p18); as Don Garrett succinctly puts it, “whatever power singular things have is at the same time *also* (a share of) God's power, power that God expresses *through* singular things”.<sup>13</sup> I think it is hard to deny that this scheme of things does a far better job than the traditional transcendental ones, be they of e.g. the Aristotelian or the Cartesian kind, in reconciling God's omnipotence with the causal power of finite things. Of course, how ever philosophically gratifying this kind of monistic dynamism may be, it comes with the price of heterodoxy.

Before moving on, a terminological observation is in order. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza uses both ‘power’ (*potentia*) and ‘force’ (*vis*), the former being the much more common one. On the whole, he seems to be using the two terms interchangeably: “The force of any passion, *or* affect, can surpass the other actions, *or* power, of a man, so that the affect stubbornly clings to the man” (E4p6).<sup>14</sup> In a couple of places he equates them without further ado: “[F]orce, *or* power” (E4p60d). “[T]here is also no comparison between the power, *or* [*seu*] forces, of the Mind and those of the Body” (E5pr, emphasis added). Thus, it is hard to say anything very specific about how the two notions possibly differ from each other; but judging from the contexts in which they

<sup>11</sup> E4p4d.

<sup>12</sup> *Theological-Political Treatise*, XVI.2.

<sup>13</sup> Garrett, “Spinoza's *Conatus* Argument”, p. 140.

<sup>14</sup> See also E2p45s, 4pr, p3, p5, p18d, p26d.

are most often placed, 'power' seems to be the one Spinoza practically always uses when he is dealing with the most fundamental metaphysical issues, especially those that pertain to God, whereas 'force' is sometimes used when discussing dynamism pertaining to finite things. Apart from *potentia* and *vis*, there is also a third term often translated as 'power': *potestas*. As has been suggested, that notion refers to the control or authority an individual may obtain over its environment by exercising its *potentia*.<sup>15</sup>

### *Activity and Spinoza's essentialism*

Spinoza defines activity as follows: "I say that we act [*agere*] when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, i.e. (by d1), when something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone" (E3d2). So, hardly surprisingly, also action is a causally potent notion. About the definition it can be safely observed that in Spinoza's technical usage, a thing is said to be active, or an agent, when it is the sole, complete, or total cause of an effect: a causal factor in addition to which nothing else is needed for the effect to be realized. And as it is an axiom for Spinoza that effects are known through their causes (E1a4), in such a case there is only one thing, the agent, on whom knowledge concerning the effect depends.

Things become more complicated, though, when attention is drawn to the fact that the definition contains a crucial explicative reference to what "follows from our nature" i.e., from our essence. The same phrase is, conspicuously enough, to be found also in the definition of passivity: "[W]e are acted on [*pati*] when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause" (E3d2). In other words, that something follows from a thing's nature is fundamental for both activity and passivity, thus evidently a literally essential ingredient in any kind of causal occurrence. What is here at stake? When discussing the twofold meaning of power, we noted that in E1p34d Spinoza takes himself to be entitled to claim God to be the cause of all things on grounds of E1p16, the proposition arguably explicating the nature of God's activity. Also that pivotal proposition contains a reference to what follows from the essence:

---

<sup>15</sup> Barbone, "What Counts as an Individual for Spinoza?", pp. 102–104.

From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect.)<sup>16</sup>

This Proposition must be plain to anyone, provided he attends to the fact that the intellect infers from the given definition of any thing a number of properties that really do follow necessarily from it (i.e., from the very essence of the thing); and that it infers more properties the more the definition of the thing expresses reality, i.e., the more reality the essence of the defined thing involves. But since the divine nature has absolutely infinite attributes (by d6), each of which also expresses an essence infinite in its own kind, from its necessity there must follow infinitely many things in infinite modes (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect), q.e.d.<sup>17</sup>

The first corollary of this proposition is, “[f]rom this it follows that God is the efficient cause of all things which can fall under an infinite intellect” (E1p16c1).

We can start unpacking these startling claims by observing that they presuppose a theory of definitions, essences (or natures), inferring, and following. A detailed discussion of this intricate theory and its implications, as well as its relation to geometrical thought, is out of the scope of this paper,<sup>18</sup> but simplifying matters slightly the basic idea can be presented as follows. Each and every thing, also God, has its own peculiar essence; that essence is thoroughly intelligible, it can be perfectly captured by a definition. Both the essence and the definition have a certain structure: from the definition certain properties can be inferred, and this expresses those things that necessarily follow from—evidently, are brought about by—the essence in question. Now, little of this may be, at least for us, immediately transparent; but one sure conclusion we can draw is that each and every true Spinozistic thing is causally efficacious *by virtue of its essence*. This is confirmed by such later claims as “[n]othing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow” (E1p36) and “things are able [to produce] nothing but what follows necessarily from their determinate nature” (E3p7d).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> E1p16.

<sup>17</sup> E1p16d.

<sup>18</sup> For a paper discussing these topics in length, see my “Spinoza’s Essentialist Model of Causation”.

<sup>19</sup> In fact, laying emphasis on this strand in Spinoza’s thought is nowadays one prominent position in scholarship. Garrett holds, “[i]n Spinoza’s view, something is an individual thing only to the extent that it has some nature or essence through whose genuine activity effects can be understood to follow” (“Teleology in Spinoza and Early

Thus, it is only consistent that Spinoza equips his definition of action with the reference to essential ‘following’; and given the linkage between power and causal efficacy, we can say that due to this essential causal thrust, Spinozistic things are endowed with power to bring about effects derivable from their definitions. In Spinoza’s world, the ultimate source of power is located in essences—from the adequate monistic viewpoint, in God’s essence. Thus, Spinozistic things can be said to be intrinsically dynamic in character, and when a thing accomplishes something by its own essential causal power alone, with no input from other causes, it qualifies as an agent.<sup>20</sup> On the uncontroversial assumption that things have power of acting when they are active, such a case equals exercising power of acting in bringing about the effect in question. With these basics in place, we can start fleshing out answers to the questions posed in the beginning of this paper.

### *The actualist model of God’s power*

#### *Necessitarianism and power*

It is uncontroversial that Spinoza’s God can be only purely active, ultimately the adequate cause of each and every thing (see E1p25). This is so already because there is nothing else besides God’s power that could bring about effects. But things appear more interesting, and challenging, when we consider the way in which God’s power is

---

Modern Rationalism”, p. 330), and “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” (“Spinoza’s *Conatus* Argument”, p. 150). Martin Lin, another proponent of this line of interpretation, puts things even more to the point: “[T]hings are causally efficacious only in virtue of their essences” (“Teleology and Human Action in Spinoza”, p. 343).

<sup>20</sup> In fact, here lurks a problem, to my knowledge first formulated by Martha Kneale (“Leibniz and Spinoza on Activity”, p. 217):

One surprising proposition is involved in Definition II, namely, that something can happen outside a given mode which can be clearly and distinctly understood in terms of the nature of that mode alone. This is surprising because the general doctrine of Part II of the *Ethics* seems to imply that any transaction involving two or more modes can be fully understood only in terms of the nature of all of them.

I believe a fairly satisfactory answer can be given to this dilemma (see my *Spinoza’s Dynamics of Being*, chapter 5); but discussing this would take us too far afield.

exercised. Here Spinoza's dynamism meets his necessitarianism.<sup>21</sup> One of the longest scholia of the first part of the *Ethics* reveals Spinoza's mindset concerning these matters:

Others think that God is a free cause because he can (so they think) bring it about that the things which we have said follow from his nature (i.e., which are in his power) do not happen or are not produced by him. But this is the same as if they were to say that God can bring it about that it would not follow from the nature of a triangle that its three angles are equal to two right angles; or that from a given cause the effect would not follow—which is absurd. [...]

Moreover, even if they conceive God to actually understand in the highest degree, they still do not believe that he can bring it about that all the things he actually understands exist. For they think that in that way they would destroy God's power. If he had created all the things in his intellect (they say), then he would have been able to create nothing more, which they believe to be incompatible with God's omnipotence. So they preferred to maintain that God is indifferent to all things, not creating anything except what he has decreed to create by some absolute will.

But I think I have shown clearly enough (see p16) that from God's supreme power, or infinite nature, infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, i.e., all things, have necessarily flowed, or always follow, by the same necessity and in the same way as from the nature of a triangle it follows, from eternity and to eternity, that its three angles are equal to two right angles. So God's omnipotence has been actual from eternity and will remain in the same actuality to eternity. And in this way, at least in my opinion, God's omnipotence is maintained far more perfectly.

Indeed—to speak openly—my opponents seem to deny God's omnipotence. For they are forced to confess that God understands infinitely many creatable things, which nevertheless he will never be able to create. For otherwise, if he created everything he understood [NS: to be creatable] he would (according to them) exhaust his omnipotence and render himself imperfect. Therefore to maintain that God is perfect, they are driven to maintain at the same time that he cannot bring about everything to which his power extends. I do not see what could be feigned which would be more absurd than this or more contrary to God's omnipotence.<sup>22</sup>

Undoubtedly, this kind of power should not be confused “with the human power or right of Kings” (E2p3s). But at least two interrelated subtler

---

<sup>21</sup> It has been a contested issue whether Spinoza is a necessitarianist or merely a causal determinist; but I take it that Garrett (“Spinoza's Necessitarianism”) and Olli Koistinen (“On the Consistency of Spinoza's Modal Theory”; “Spinoza's Proof of Necessitarianism”) have convincingly showed the former to be the case.

<sup>22</sup> E1p17s.

points emerge from the quote above. First, God's power could not be exercised in any other manner it is actually exercised any more than a triangle could have some other sum of internal angles it actually has. Second, all God's power is completely used in bringing about all he can understand, i.e. in realizing what can be inferred from his definition.<sup>23</sup> The upshot is that there is *no unexercised power, all power is exercised with an ironclad necessity*. In Spinoza's necessitarianism, there are neither unrealized possibilities nor power that would remain merely potential.

Here we can, I think, especially acutely feel the impact the new science has on Spinoza's thought. In the Peripatetic framework, natural changes were understood as end-governed actualisations of potentialities. Now, already the fact that the very word 'power' is in Latin '*potentia*' implies that this had a major effect on how power was conceived: powers are *potential capacities* for change that, if exercised, end in something actual.<sup>24</sup> For instance, a seed has the power or potential to become a tree; if placed in suitable circumstances, the exercise of that power begins and becomes manifested as an actual tree. With the dawn of the modern era, things begin to look quite different. Consider how radically Descartes' mechanics-inspired view on material things' power differs from the Aristotelian one: in the *Principles of Philosophy*, he considers any body to have a force (*vis*) understood simply as a tendency to persist in the prevailing state (PP II.43; CSM I, 243), and the intensity of this force can be measured in terms of speed and size.<sup>25</sup> Clearly, the Cartesian notion of force has no essential connection with actualisation of potentialities. What we are dealing with is actual causal efficacy of a certain strength and direction.

It is precisely the traditional potential-actual framework that Spinoza discards, thereby following the example set by Descartes. As Bernard

---

<sup>23</sup> Pascal Sévérac (*Le devenir actif chez Spinoza*, pp. 33–35) stresses, rightly, that God's power is always completely exhausted in producing everything it can. Also Alan Donagan ("Spinoza's Proof of Immortality", p. 248) has drawn attention to this: "As he [Spinoza] used the word, '*potentia*' fundamentally means power displayed in doing something. In God there is no *potentia* that is not exercised. Hence God's power and his action are not really distinct: whatever he has power to do, he does."

<sup>24</sup> See Des Chene, *Physiologia*, pp. 23, 29.

<sup>25</sup> See PP II.36, II.43 (CSM I, pp. 240, 243); Gabbey, "Force and Inertia in the Seventeenth Century", p. 243; Garber, "Descartes and Spinoza on Persistence and Conatus", pp. 44–45; Des Chene, *Physiologia*, p. 340.

Rousset observes, being *in potentia* was traditionally contrasted with, and thought to be inferior to, being *in actu*, because the former was taken to mean that one has not yet been realized. But this distinction does not hold for Spinoza: being powerful (*'in potentia'*) is to be actual.<sup>26</sup> Consider also the way in which Leibniz summarizes the traditional position: "If 'power' corresponds to the Latin *potentia*, it is contrasted with 'act', and the transition from power into act is 'change'."<sup>27</sup> But as the above-quoted scholium testifies, there is no such contrast in Spinoza's system, and Spinoza himself stresses the actuality of power by contending, "God's omnipotence has been actual from eternity and will remain in the same actuality to eternity" (E1p17s). This kind of actualism clearly stems from his necessitarianism, and as a consequence it is fitting, I think, to regard this as an *actualist* view to power. In contemporary metaphysics of modality, actualism is a main overall position whose general idea can be said to be that there is only one world, the actual physical one, and the only existent things are those inhabiting that actual world.<sup>28</sup> Although there is undoubtedly no room in Spinoza's ontology for any other world than the actual one, it would, of course, be bizarre and misleading to depict him as taking a stand in a contemporary debate. If, however, actualism is defined loosely as an ontological position according to which there are no unactualized possibilities,<sup>29</sup> Spinoza surely counts as an actualist,<sup>30</sup> and so does his view of power. There is thus no discrepancy between Spinoza's necessitarianism and dynamism; together, they amount to what may be called the actualist view of God's power.

---

<sup>26</sup> Rousset, "Les implications de l'identité spinoziste de l'être et de la puissance", p. 11. Charles Ramond (*Dictionnaire Spinoza*, p. 147) notes similarly that for Spinoza power does not carry the traditional connotation of incompleteness or virtuality (see also Misrahi, *100 mots sur l'Éthique de Spinoza*, p. 308; Rizk, *Comprendre Spinoza*, pp. 45–46).

<sup>27</sup> *New Essays on Human Understanding* 2.21.

<sup>28</sup> Lycan, "The Metaphysics of Possibilia", p. 307.

<sup>29</sup> Here I am following Timo Kajamies ("Descartes: Libertarianist, Necessitarianist, Actualist?", p. 53), who examines the debate concerning Descartes' alleged actualism and necessitarianism.

<sup>30</sup> Kajamies discusses briefly also Spinoza's case as a preliminary to that of Descartes and contends, "Spinoza famously endorsed full-blown actualism" ("Descartes: Libertarianist, Necessitarianist, Actualist?", p. 83).

*Power of acting and the actualist model*

The discussion thus far has mostly been structured around Spinoza's monistic commitments. I think this is justified, for otherwise his 'big picture' would be left in the dark, most probably resulting in flawed understanding of his thought. On the present interpretation, Spinoza develops an actualist model of God-Nature's power in which everything is what it is and the way it is because all possibles (i.e. everything derivable from God's definition) are realized by God's power as necessitated by the laws of God's nature. Fair enough; but what does this tell us about finite power, existence, and action? Similarly, we have seen that exercising power of acting means being the only causal source of, the only power behind, some effect. With regard to God, this makes the answer to the basic question posed in the beginning—what else could power be but power of acting?—evident: nothing. God's power can only be active, so his power equals power of acting. Once again, fair enough; but what about the situation in which we finite existents find ourselves? Spinoza's actualist view of God's power has ample implications for his theory of finite things' power, and it is precisely here that things become considerably more complicated.

We can begin by noting the general importance of the notion of power of acting: it does a remarkable amount of work in Spinoza's theory of human existence. In the third part of the *Ethics*, which deals with the origin and nature of human emotions (or affects), the concept is in play right from the start. The main topic is defined in its terms:

By affect I understand affections of the Body by which the Body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections.<sup>31</sup>

So human emotions are, ultimately, *changes* in our power of acting. From what has been said about God's power, it follows that his power of acting cannot undergo change but is always unlimited, or as Spinoza would say, infinite; but, obviously, this is not our case. The following passage tells us something decisive about the notion's role in Spinoza's system:

But the main thing to note is that when I say that someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite, I do not understand that he is changed from one essence, or form, to another. For example, a

---

<sup>31</sup> E3d3.

horse is destroyed as much if it is changed into a man as if it is changed into an insect. Rather, we conceive that his power of acting, insofar as it is understood through his nature, is increased or diminished.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, changes in power of acting can occur while the individual retains its identity (its 'essence or form' does not change—or, presumably, does not become destroyed). This reveals that Spinoza uses the concept of power of acting in order to explain changes of perfection taking place in temporal individuals; and, obviously, for his ethical theory the most notable kinds of changes in power are those that result in human emotions.

Power of acting pertains, however, only to those cases in which we are active; and, finite and limited creatures as we are, not all of our power is exercised to bring about actions. Remember that also patients are, according to Spinoza's definition, causally powerful: we are passive "when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, *of which we are only a partial cause*" (E3d2, emphasis added). A partial cause, but a cause nevertheless. We can, I think, now begin to see why 'power' and 'power of acting' cannot be identified without further ado. There is a core sense of 'exercising power': being able to cause effects, operating as a causal factor in a causal occurrence; but not all factors involved in causal occurrences are agents. I think Spinoza would say that those factors exercise power, but not power of acting. Presumably, they could be said to exercise power of existing, for even under the influence of external causes, things strive to maintain their existence, as Spinoza's famous doctrine of *conatus* power states (E3p6, p7).

I would like to suggest that the actualist line of thought concerning God's power underpins Spinoza's theory of finite human existence in the following manner. All of our power is always completely exercised. There is no power that could remain to any degree potential: things are always fully causally operative,<sup>33</sup> and are so of their own accord. In plainer words, all finite individuals always do everything they can.<sup>34</sup> Things always use all of their power to full measure, what alters is the

---

<sup>32</sup> E4pr.

<sup>33</sup> This does not, however, mean that the amount of an individual's total power could not alter, just that whatever power an individual is endowed with is always exhaustively exercised.

<sup>34</sup> My account is in concordance with what Donagan ("Spinoza's Proof of Immortality", pp. 248–249) says about power of acting (although he seems to mean by it what I would call simply power) of finite things: "[I]t does not follow, in Spinoza's view, that the power of acting of a finite thing is not necessarily exercised. Finite things differ

way in which and the extent to which this power is used to produce actions, to which extent passions. Precisely this interests Spinoza the most, and is what he finds ethically relevant: clearly, the aim of Spinoza's ethics is to be maximally active, to have a lot of power of acting, to produce actions the nature of which depends wholly on our own essence.

The aforesaid has taken place at an admittedly general and abstract metaphysical level. How could the exercise of *agendi potentia* be illustrated? When someone is having a high level of power of acting, how does it appear at the surface phenomenal level? An answer to this question that would probably be shared and accepted by many scholars is that having power of acting equals, roughly, being capable of behaving in many different ways so that one has power over one's environment.<sup>35</sup> Now, there is no doubt truth in this; it is very important for us to exercise our power of acting so that we cause certain aspects of effects that inhere in other things, because this allows us to control over our environment,<sup>36</sup> without which forming societies and ensuring suitable material conditions for fulfilling human life would be impossible. However, this is hardly the ultimate goal of Spinoza's ethics but only the means to the sort of exercise of our power of acting that equals, for Spinoza, true freedom and happiness: adequate causing of immanent effects, that is, forming adequate ideas in our minds.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, these changes in the level of our activity form the basic causal architecture of our emotions: to the extent our striving power is hindered, we feel sadness, and to the extent we succeed in freely exercising our own power, we feel joy.

To round off this discussion and to obtain still a sharper view of Spinoza's line of thought, let us consider some notable differences between Spinoza's position stemming from his actualist cast of mind

---

from infinite ones in that their power of acting is limited by other finite things. [...] Strictly speaking, everything at every moment exercises its full power of acting."

<sup>35</sup> This characterization contains features of those made by Carrero, "Spinoza on Final Causality", p. 130; Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza*, p. 46; Rice, "Action in Spinoza's Account of Affectivity", p. 157.

<sup>36</sup> On grounds of Barbone's ("What Counts as an Individual for Spinoza?", pp. 102–104) interpretation, we may in such cases be said to have *potestas* that derives from our *potentia*.

<sup>37</sup> Spinoza writes in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, III.7–8, "much can be effected by human contrivance and vigilance to achieve security and to avoid injuries from other men and from beasts" by organizing a society or state, the purpose of which "is to achieve security and ease". Without this ease, I take it, it would be impossible to engage in intellectual activities.

and some dominant traditional conceptions of natural things' power and causality. First, the idea that things are fully causally efficacious left to their own devices, needing nothing extrinsic to act, is radically at odds with the familiar Thomist tenet, "what is in potency cannot reduce itself to act".<sup>38</sup> For Aristotle and Aquinas, any transition from potentiality to actuality and, consequently, to activity, can only be brought about by something actual;<sup>39</sup> "[t]he Aristotelian does not suppose that the inceptions of a thing's changes can be referred to that thing's nature alone".<sup>40</sup> Second, the Aristotelian powers are potentialities that turn into actualities if certain processes are triggered into action. This seems to imply that the extent in which things exercise their power varies; but according to Spinoza's view, all power is always exhaustively used as necessitated by laws of God's nature, and there is definitely no room for potentialities that would not become actualized. Third, although Spinoza refuses to adopt the traditional notion of passive power, his system nevertheless contains the idea that any thing's active power matches its power—given Spinoza's terminological choice, we should probably say liability—to be under passions. In Spinozistic terms, there is a connection between *the power of acting* and *the capacity to be affected*, so that the capacity of being affected in many different ways corresponds to a great power of acting:

I say this in general, that in proportion as a Body is more capable than others of doing many things at once, or being acted on in many ways at once, so its Mind is more capable than others of perceiving many things at once.<sup>41</sup>

Whatever so disposes the human Body that it can be affected in a great many ways, or renders it capable of affecting external Bodies in a great many ways, is useful to man; the more it renders the Body capable of being affected in a great many ways, or of affecting other bodies, the more useful it is [*eo utilius, quo Corpus ab eo aptius redditur, ut pluribus modis afficiatur, aliaque corpora afficiat*]; on the other hand, what renders the Body less capable of these things is harmful.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *The Principles of Nature*, III.18.

<sup>39</sup> James, *Passion and Action*, p. 35. On the Aristotelian principle of prior actuality, see pp. 82–86 in this volume.

<sup>40</sup> Des Chene, *Physiologia*, p. 22. However, there is an important qualification to this: "Self-movement, or what Averroes called the *vis initiativa*, is in fact the delimiting feature of animate things" (*ibid.*).

<sup>41</sup> E2p13s.

<sup>42</sup> E4p38.

As we know, talented people, having extremely complexly structured minds and bodies, are not only capable of causing many different kinds of effects but are also sensitive to many different kinds of sorrow.

### *Conclusion*

I hope to have shown that Spinoza provides a compelling theory of the basic causal architecture of the world by combining the necessitarianist monistic ontology with certain ideas stemming from the new science. In this original dynamistic metaphysic there is, *sub specie aeternitatis*, only one causal agent, God, whose nature fixes “from eternity and to eternity” those possibilities his power necessarily realizes; there cannot be any unactualized possibilities, which justifies labelling this line of thought an actualist one. According to it, God’s power can only be power of acting; but, alas, this is not so in our case, for even though our power is always fully exercised, there are changes in the degree in which it brings about actions. And these are not just any changes among others, for only those changes that affect our power qualify, for Spinoza, as ethically significant.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> I would like to thank Olli Koistinen, Juhani Pietarinen, and Arto Repo for many helpful comments, as well as the audiences at the University of Turku and Uppsala University, in which I have presented earlier versions of this essay.