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Please do not quote, but comments are welcome.]

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STRIVING (*CONATUS*)

It is uncontroversial that the doctrine of striving (*conatus*) as our actual essence forms the basis for Spinoza's ethical project proper. Slightly after the beginning of the third part of his masterpiece, Spinoza declares: "Each thing, insofar as it is in itself, strives to persevere in its being" (3p6, translation modified). I will start by delineating the context of the principle, after which I will provide a reading of the two propositions that contain the very core of the theory. This in turn will enable me to explain how Spinoza's theory of *conatus* is connected to his views on appetite, desire, activity, and teleology.

The view that animate things naturally strive to preserve themselves had for centuries been part and parcel of Western philosophy most importantly through the teachings of Stoics, for whom the impulse (*hormé*) to self-preservation forms the basis of a naturalistic ethics. Still, the intellectual landscape had altered by Spinoza's time in a radical way with the breakthrough of the new mechanical sciences: most importantly, the teleological view of the way in which the world and things in it were ordered was under strong pressures to which Spinoza was quite sensitive. In brief, naturalistic ethics had to be rethought given the questionability of final ends.

The way in which Spinoza's *conatus* principle is formulated betrays its debt to the first Cartesian law of nature, "each thing, insofar as it is in itself, always continues in the same state" (*Principles of Philosophy* II.37; CSM I, 240, translation modified). It also seems to echo Hobbes's metaphysics, according to which everything is ultimately explicable in terms of motion, the small beginnings of which is endeavor. Neither of these doctrines contain anything teleological in their basic elements. This, together with Spinoza's ardent denial of divine teleology (1app), gives reasons to think that Spinoza believed the *conatus* theory to be, in its essentials, unencumbered by teleological metaphysics. Be this as it may, it can be safely said that the *conatus* principle expresses in a new intellectual climate Spinoza's view of the doctrine that is part of a long and venerable tradition concerning the natural operations of things.

The crucial twin propositions—3p6 and p7—are written in Spinoza's trademark condensed style. We should pay attention not only to their argumentative ancestry, referred to in the demonstrations, but also to their progeny, especially to what Spinoza takes himself to be entitled to derive directly from them. 3p6 is the nexus through which certain key tenets of the opening part of the *Ethics* find their way to the latter part of the work. Its demonstration reads:

For singular things are modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way (by 1p25c), i.e. (by 1p34), 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, as far as it can, and it is in itself [*quantum potest, et in se est*], it strives to persevere in its being, q.e.d. (3p6d, translation modified)

The demonstration, which consists of four elements, has been the topic of a lively discussion. Jonathan Bennett's criticism set its orientation in the sense that Spinoza was widely seen to derive 3p6 from the immediately preceding conceptual considerations (i.e., 3p4–p5) *alone*. Perhaps because the notion of power—long in disrepute—has recently been rehabilitated in analytic metaphysics, the beginning of the demonstration invoking God's power does not feel as otiose as it did before; be this as it may, that the demonstration builds on Spinoza's dynamic tendencies seems to be nowadays not only quite widely acknowledged but regarded sympathetically. Obviously, we are dealing with *a power that strives against opposition*, and that power certainly must, in Spinoza's framework, have God as its source. Obviously, Spinoza combines 1p25c with 1p34 to claim that finite *expressions* of an essentially powerful or causally efficacious God are endowed with *conatus*. Here he seems to think that the very notion of expression brings with it the idea that expressions (here: finite things) retain the basic character of what they express (here: God). Thus, given that God is essentially powerful, expressions must be so too.

Even if the argument for the *conatus* principle were not as airtight as some would like, the aforesaid shows that, within his framework, Spinoza has solid grounds to think that he has given his readers enough reasons to endorse the principle. The next point he wants to drive home is that we are not dealing with a garden-variety feature of things: "The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing" (3p7). In other words, *things are strivers by their very essence or nature*. For Spinoza's intended audience, the appearance of the notion of essence is hardly a surprise: the previous proposition does, after all, state that any thing strives to persevere in its being *insofar as it is in itself* ('*quantum in se est*'), which refers precisely to the thing's essence or nature. Moreover, keeping in mind that the concept of essence figures in the immediate ancestry of the *conatus* principle (3p4d), the ground is already prepared for the notion to do real work. In 3p7d, Spinoza first reminds us that things are causally efficacious, or powerful, by their essences alone (by 1p29 and 1p36); thus, as power, striving is equated with the essence of things. The essence in question is precisely the actual essence (*essentia actualis*) presumably because *conatus* is the power

at play in constantly varying circumstances of temporal existence—the contrast being with the unchanging and eternal formal essence (*essentia formalis*) of things. In other words, if little of what Spinoza says in the opening part of the *Ethics* involves anything temporal, the *conatus* principle specifies the way in which intrinsically powerful finite things act under the unswerving influence of other finite things or, to put it in Spinoza’s idiom, “external causes.”

With regard to the progeny of the *conatus* propositions, I would like to highlight four elemental points that make their presence felt through the rest of the *Ethics*. First, Spinoza defines a number of psychological items in terms of striving:

When this striving is related only to the mind, it is called will; but when it is related to the mind and body together, it is called appetite. This appetite, therefore, is nothing but the very essence of man, from whose nature there necessarily follow those things that promote his preservation. And so man is determined to do those things. Between appetite and desire there is no difference, except that desire is generally related to men insofar as they are conscious of their appetites. So *desire* can be defined as *appetite together with consciousness of the appetite*. (3p9s)

Appetite (*appetitus*) is thus the general term for *conatus* of the mind and body (recall 2p7) of any finite thing; appetites of which we are consciously aware Spinoza calls *desires*. Precisely they figure prominently in Spinoza’s theory of affects or emotions: the very first definition of affects explains that “by the word *desire* I understand any of a man’s strivings, impulses, appetites, and volitions, which vary as the man’s constitution varies, and which are not infrequently so opposed to one another that the man is pulled in different directions and knows not where to turn” (defaff1). Clearly, Spinoza is sensitive to the fact that our existence is often a troubled affair, and his view of the dynamics of actual existence is firmly based on the idea that as our essential striving is directed in varying ways, we desire different things.

Second, striving is intimately linked to what is *good* to us: “From all this, then, it is clear that we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it” (3p9s). It is not altogether clear what the “all this” is from which this should be clear; presumably, that willing, desiring, and so on are all forms of *conatus* introduced a few propositions earlier, but there is no shortage of interpretative leeway. However, it would be, I think, very difficult to deny that here Spinoza goes decidedly against one central feature of traditional teleological models, namely against what may be called the thesis of *intrinsic normativity*. According to Spinoza, people mistakenly believe in final causes as independent goods because they maintain “that the gods direct all things for the use of men” (1app). In other words, Spinoza sees such final causes as part and parcel of a misguided providential

worldview in which God has a grand plan, very much centered on the welfare of human beings, which dictates that there are intrinsically good things “for the sake of which he [God] willed to prepare the means” (1app). In this framework, given the ends chosen by God, things with natures suitable to produce those ends must be created. In this brand of essentialism, *final causes as intrinsic goods* are *ontologically prior* to essences, for they determine the kind of essences there must be. But Spinoza’s essentialism is of a decidedly different type: God’s production of finite things as modifications involves no choice or planning, and the essence of those modifications, in turn, is the striving that manifests itself as desires and appetites, the objects of which are judged good. Thus, “[w]hat is called a final cause is nothing but a human appetite insofar as it is considered as a principle, *or* primary cause, of some thing” (4pref); *our striving determines what is judged to be good* in the first place.

Third, Spinoza signals that the *conatus* principle amounts to what may be called *power enhancement*. This is expressed in 3p12 and p13, which are not only notable in themselves but also the veritable testing stone for any interpretation of the *conatus* doctrine. They read as follows:

The mind as far as it can, strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the body’s power of acting. (3p12)

When the mind imagines those things that diminish or restrain the body’s power of acting, it strives, as far as it can, to recollect things which exclude their existence. (3p13)

What does he have in mind here? Let us take a look at the argument for the latter proposition:

So long as the mind imagines anything of this kind, the power both of mind and of body is diminished or restrained (as we have demonstrated in p12); nevertheless, the mind will continue to imagine this thing until it imagines something else that excludes the thing’s present existence (by 2p17), that is (as we have just shown), the power both of mind and of body is diminished or restrained until the mind imagines something else that excludes the existence of this thing; so the mind (by p9), as far as it can, will strive to imagine or recollect that other thing. (3p13d)

The demonstration begins by reminding us that the power of mind and body go hand in hand. The middle part of the demonstration states that when the mind thinks about something that decreases its power, it cannot but continue thinking about it unless there is something else that takes it away. As the reference to 2p17 indicates, this claim is based on the mechanist strain in Spinoza’s psychology. The final part of the demonstration is the most interesting

one: based on 3p9, which in turn is based on the *conatus* principle, the mind will strive to imagine that which opposes the thing which we think decreases our power. The claim is thus that our mind does not rest content continuing with the power-decreasing thought but strives to get rid of it. It is thus understandable that 3p12 and p13 are commonly read as saying that we strive to increase our power; however, it is worth keeping in mind that the *conatus* principle itself is reminiscent of the Cartesian law of motion that is about continuing in the prevailing motion, whatever it may be.

That *conatus* amounts to, in many if not most circumstances, striving for power-enhancement is confirmed by a much later definition central for Spinoza's whole ethical enterprise and with a direct reference to the *conatus* propositions: "By virtue and power I understand the same thing, that is (by 3p7), virtue, insofar as it is related to man, is the very essence, or nature, of man, insofar as he has the power of bringing about certain things, which can be understood through the laws of his nature alone" (4d8).

But things, or effects, "which can be understood through the laws" of a human being's nature *alone* are *actions*: "[W]e act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, that is (by d1), when something in us or outside us *follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone*" (3d2, emphasis added). The only conclusion to draw is that our striving is not merely about persevering in the prevailing state but about asserting our nature and what follows from it as much as possible. In fact, were this not true, it would be difficult to see on what Spinoza's ethical project, heavily stressing activity as it does, is based.

Fourth, on the basis of the general *conatus* principle, Spinoza sets out to overturn familiar views of human action. As we have seen, much in the *conatus* doctrine revolves around natures or essences. We have also seen that the idea behind the claim that striving is our actual essence is that essences are causally efficacious, and the very same idea underpins the notions of appetite, desire, and virtue. To put things in the least controversial terms, things as strivers constantly produce effects—that is, they constantly act in the non-technical sense of the term—and to the extent that those effects follow from their own nature alone, they are active, whereas when strivers produce effects in conjunction with other causes they are (at least somewhat) passive. But the analysis above shows that Spinoza's theory of action also contains much more controversial ideas. The way in which a certain property (e.g., fulfilling the Pythagorean theorem) *follows from the essence of a figure constituted in a certain way* (e.g., from a triangle that is right-angled) sets the Spinozistic paradigm for our the determination of our specific strivings; a certain desire always corresponds to a certain constitution of our essence. Moreover, finite things—human and nonhuman alike—strive to do more than just prolong their psychophysical existence; they *strive to be active*, that is, to produce effects that can be conceived through their own essence alone. They do this simply because from any given

essence, considered in itself, certain effects follow or “flow” as properties. Here geometrical objects provide the model: from their essences properties were seen to necessarily follow (see 1p17s).

Indeed, the view that activity consists fundamentally in bringing about effects that follow from an essence allows Spinoza to account for human activity while rejecting the notion that we are pulled, as it were, by the intrinsic goodness of things. Of course, Spinoza admits that things can be called “good”—but this judgment of goodness depends on our striving, rather than the other way around (3p9s). Still, even if our essential striving determines what is good in the first place, one might well ask whether or not this kind of striving to realize one’s own nature is teleological. It is *not* teleological in the traditional “full-blown” sense that ends would be involved in *structuring or determining our essences* (as they were in the Peripatetic framework where all things had their place in the grand providential plan); what we call ends are things that simply flow from our essences, those essences in turn being what they are because they follow from God’s nature.

However, less robust senses of Spinozistic teleology have been presented and defended. If teleology is, for instance, understood *not* as a doctrine concerning the very *makeup of things* but merely as *a form of explanation* which proposes to explain things by their (probable) effects, it would be difficult—and probably unnecessary—to deny that the *conatus* doctrine allows teleological explanations. Most famously, “[w]e 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” (3p28) seems rather straightforwardly to license explaining at least some of our strivings in terms of their consequences. What is distinctive about Spinoza’s account, though, is that he is able to reconcile this minimal sense of teleology as *acting for the sake of something* with the essence–property model of causality by reducing final causes to appetites, or manifestations of one’s striving. Thus, while there is still a lively scholarly debate concerning whether or not Spinoza endorses teleology, and if he does in what sense, there can be no doubt that he at the very least profoundly problematizes the familiar teleological picture of human action.

Key passages

1p16; 1p17s; 1p25c; 1p34; 1app; 3d2; 3p4–p7; 3p9; 3p12–p13; 3p28; 4d8.

Secondary literature

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Related entries

Affect; cause; desire; essence; individual; parallelism; perfection; teleology; virtue; will.