

# 10 Spinoza on Activity and Passivity

## The Problematic Definition Revisited

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The Eleatic Stranger of Plato's *Sophist* suggests that "anything has real being that is so constituted as to possess any sort of power either to affect [*to poiein*] anything else or to be affected [*to pathein*]" (*Soph.* 247d–e). For Aristotle of the *Categories* (2a3–4; CWA I, 4), activity or "doing: cutting, burning" and passivity or "being-affected: being-cut, being-burned" belong to the ten highest categories. Ever since, the notion of activity and passivity, or to put the issue more colloquially, the conviction that a line can be drawn between those things that *do* or *make happen* and those that *undergo* has formed part and parcel of the Western intellectual outlook. Thus, it is no surprise that it can also be found in Descartes's and Spinoza's writings, and the distinction receives its very own—and rather intricate—definition, E3d2, in the *Ethics*. Indeed, Spinoza's ethical project, according to which the central goal is to become as active and as little passive as possible, is closely tied to the distinction. Despite this, the crucial definition poses such difficult interpretative problems that it is far from clear what, exactly, Spinoza means by activity and passivity.

I will begin this chapter by outlining the basic idea of the definition (section 1) and situating it in its historical context (section 2). Then I will analyze, and offer a solution to, a problem that has been seen to plague Spinoza's definition of activity (section 3). After this, I will turn my attention to the definition of passivity, discuss a puzzling feature in it, and show how my interpretation can throw light on the way in which Spinoza thinks about the nature of passive affects or emotions (section 4). I hope that the resulting reading increases our understanding of Spinoza's theory of activity and passivity, which underpins much of his moral psychology and his view of happiness.

### 1. The Definition Outlined

Before defining activity and passivity, Spinoza tells us what he understands by adequate and inadequate cause: "I call that cause adequate

whose effect can be clearly and distinctly perceived through it. But I call it partial, or inadequate, if its effect cannot be understood through it alone.” (E3d1) After this, he 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, action is a causally potent notion; in Spinoza’s technical usage, a thing is said to be active 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 cause of the effect, namely the agent, on whom knowledge concerning the effect depends.

Things become complicated, though, when attention is drawn to the fact that the definition contains a crucial explicative reference to what “follows from our nature,” that is, from our essence. The same phrase is, conspicuously enough, to be found also in the definition of passivity:

On the other hand, I say that we 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 and thus a basic ingredient in any kind of causal occurrence. Here it is helpful to note that also E1p16, the pivotal proposition arguably explicating the nature of God’s activity, contains a reference to what follows from the essence, “[f]rom the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes” (E1p16). The demonstration begins with the contention, “[t]his 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)” (E1p16d).

We can start unpacking these claims by observing that they presuppose a specific theory of definable essences (or natures).<sup>1</sup> A detailed discussion of this intricate theory and its implications is beyond the scope of this chapter, but simplifying matters slightly the basic idea can be presented as follows.<sup>2</sup> Each and every thing, including God, has its own particular *essence* that constitutes the thing; the 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—are realized by—the essence in question. Much here is part and parcel of the philosophical landscape of Spinoza's times, but it should be noted that a specific feature of his thought strongly pushes him to think in this way, namely the conviction that geometrical objects reveal in an exemplary fashion the inner structure of things. He famously states that an infinity of things follow from God's essence "by the same necessity and in the same way" (E1p17s) as from the essence of a triangle follows the property of having internal angles summing to two right angles. Regardless of how much of this is for us immediately transparent, there is one certain conclusion for us to draw: 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).<sup>3</sup>

It may thus be said that we act in the same sense as God does when an effect follows by necessity from our nature *alone*, that is, when we have power to bring about that effect with no contribution from other causes. This is the basic meaning of acting. Moreover, while E3d2 reveals that also patients contribute to the causal process in which they are involved, Spinoza still thinks it makes sense to talk about the active and passive aspects of a causal phenomenon. Thus, I believe it is safe to preliminarily outline the basic idea of the definition to be as follows: in action, the effect is brought about by the essence of one thing alone, whereas passions involve the essential efficacy of more than one thing.

## 2. Contextualizing the Definition

To understand Spinoza's definition of activity and passivity, it is helpful to take a look at what Descartes and Hobbes, his immediate predecessors, and Aristotelian scholastics, the bearers of the traditionally dominant philosophical outlook, say about the topic. Of course, many other contexts could be suggested; but I hope to show that the ones I have chosen are particularly apt to throw light on how Spinoza thinks about the issue.

Descartes famously asserts in the very first article of *The Passions of the Soul* that:

[W]hatever takes place or occurs is generally called by philosophers a "passion" with regard to the subject to which it happens and an "action" with regard to that which makes it happen. Thus, although an agent and patient are often quite different, an action and passion must always be a single thing which has these two names on account of the two different subjects to which it may be related.

(CSM I, 328)

So the agent and the patient do not have to be different things but usually are,<sup>4</sup> in which case we are dealing with a phenomenon that has both an active and a passive aspect.<sup>5</sup> Hobbes proceeds along similar lines:

A BODY is said to work upon or act, that is to say, do something to another body, when it either generates or destroys some accident in it: and the body in which an accident is generated or destroyed is said to suffer, that is, to have something done to it by another body; as when one body by putting forwards another body generates motion in it, it is called the AGENT; and the body in which motion is so generated, is called the PATIENT; so fire that warms the hand is the agent, and the hand, which is warmed, is the patient. That accident, which is generated in the patient, is called the EFFECT.

(DCo II.9.1)

So what we have is a production or destruction of *an accident as the effect* of the interaction between two or more causally efficacious things—the agent(s) and the patient; the thing in which the accident is generated (and hence in which the accident inheres) is passive; the other thing(s) involved is active.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Hobbes (DCo II.9.3) seems to disregard the possibility that the agent and the patient could be the one and same thing.

Already a quick look reveals that Spinoza's definition differs from the ones just cited in its reference to *natures* of things as the sources of activity and passivity—it seems that Descartes and Hobbes are not committed, at least as far as their understanding of activity and passivity is concerned, to anything like the essentialism to which Spinoza is so eager to refer. Because of this and despite the fact that Spinoza's essentialism in many notable ways differs from the traditionally dominant Peripatetic essentialism, it is worthwhile to relate his conception of action and passion to the one developed by Aristotelian scholastics.

The following general formulation offers a useful initial approximation of the scholastic position: *when a substance acts upon another substance to bring about a certain state of affairs, it is active (an agent), the substance acted upon passive (patient)*.<sup>7</sup> However, the metaphysical grounding of activity and passivity is a thorny issue, with different scholastic authors defending (more or less) differing positions. It is nevertheless clear that hylomorphism (according to which substances are composites of substantial form and prime matter) and the teleological framework (with its distinction between potentiality and actuality) underpin all of the Aristotelian-scholastic theories, however much may they differ in details. It is safe to say that, within the Peripatetic framework, passivity pertains to the matter side of the hylomorphic composite, whereas activity pertains to form.<sup>8</sup> Now prime matter is completely passive; as one medieval thinker puts it, prime matter can be said to possess *infinite passivity*, for it can take up any form.<sup>9</sup> This is in keeping with Aristotle, who

states that “matter is potentiality, form actuality” (*De anima* 412a9–10; CWA I, 656); and since “actuality is the action” (*Metaphysics* 1050a22; CWA II, 1658), the role of (substantial) forms can be characterized as follows: “[S]ubstantial forms are the primary agents in the sublunary natural world. They both determine the superficial appearance of things, and account for a thing’s unity and persistence.” (Pasnau 2011, 564) Indeed, substantial forms are those principles of action by virtue of which things behave and change the way they characteristically do.<sup>10</sup> Acting equals realizing the form, and doing this leads eventually to the actualization of the *telos*. Since form is a constituent of a thing’s essence it can be said that, for Aristotelians, action is essence-originating behavior.

With regard to passivity, the following passage is important: while discussing different kinds of potentiality, Aristotle remarks that “one kind is a potentiality for being acted on, i.e. *the principle in the very thing acted on, which makes it capable of being changed and acted on* by another thing or by itself regarded as other” (*Metaphysics* 1046a11–13; CWA I, 1651, emphasis added). Susan James captures this very well by stating that “things are passive in so far as they have the potentiality to be changed by other things for better or worse, and in all cases this potentiality is both *made possible* and *limited by* what Aristotle calls *the principle of the thing* in question” (James 1997, 33).<sup>11</sup> Now, what is here meant by the “principle of the thing” is not altogether clear, but, obviously, it has to do with something intrinsic to the thing in question. Thus, also passivity involves the hylomorphically conceived essence or at least something that necessarily belongs to the thing in virtue of that essence.

For our purposes the important point to be extracted from this examination is that, whatever their exact nature may be, the Aristotelian conception of action and passion is essentialist in character: whether we are considering an agent or a patient, explaining behavior requires reference to the essential principles. Accordingly, despite his antiteleological tendencies, Spinoza’s essentialist conception of action and passion seems to be in this respect closer than those of Descartes and Hobbes to the Peripatetic view of activity and passivity. However, I hope to have shown that Spinoza has reasons of his own, stemming from his model of causation, to include the reference to natures in E3d2. I believe it is correct to say that Spinoza attempts to present a novel form of essentialism, one purged of teleology, and that this can also be seen in the way he defines activity and passivity.

### 3. The Problem of Activity

#### 3.1 *The Puzzling Definition*

Given the centrality of E3d2, it is no surprise that it has received its fair share of attention. We can begin our examination by considering Michael

Della Rocca's claim that a cause can come "to be able to be active to a greater degree with regard to a certain effect,"<sup>12</sup> which implies that there can be less-than-complete causes that are nevertheless active and whose degree of activity can vary over time. Although this view is, in itself, quite plausible, it is uncertain whether Spinoza would be ready to endorse it. He seems to be thrust toward a position according to which the criterion of action and activity is being the entire cause of an effect: if a given effect *e* does not follow from *x*'s essence alone, then *e* does not qualify to be *x*'s action at all. This is most probably the reason why Spinoza nowhere explicitly refers to things' less-than-complete degrees of activity *with regard to a certain effect*.

Most importantly, the aforesaid signals an acute problem pertaining to Spinoza's doctrine of causation: the criterion of activity he formulates seems to be far too strict, for it leaves us with the following problem. In cases in which *x* causes a passion in *y*, for instance when a tennis player hits the tennis ball, the effect, namely the ball's movement (which is the ball's passion), is a *joint product* of the player and the ball, and cannot therefore count as an *action* of the player. This implies that in this kind of situations the cause which we would be strongly inclined to regard as the agent does not, at least *prima facie*, meet Spinoza's requirements of agency. And this means that although, for instance in the tennis example, Spinoza's definition of passivity captures quite well the situation of the ball, it is hard to know what to say about the player. It is simply counter-intuitive to classify her, too, as a patient; in fact and accordingly, it seems that Spinoza disqualifies her from being one by the "when something happens *in us*" clause of the definition of passivity, since the effect does not inhere in her. But then again, as the effect (the ball's motion) is not caused by the player's essence alone, she does not meet the requirement Spinoza sets for the agent, either. Martha Kneale has noticed what I think is the source of this problem and formulates it as follows:

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.<sup>13</sup>

Although this passage dates already from the 1970s, no-one, to my knowledge, has explicitly attempted to give an answer to Kneale. Paul Hoffman has more recently noted the same issue, although without referring to Kneale, and frames it very well:

For us to act on something outside us entails that something which happens outside us can be clearly and distinctly understood through

our nature alone, but that would seem to be impossible, since something happens outside us only if something else is at least a partial cause of it. But it seems paradoxical to say, what Spinoza's definitions of action and passion seem to entail, that we never act on anything else, but instead always undergo something, when we are the partial cause of something outside us.<sup>14</sup>

This makes us face what I would call the activity puzzle: how can we be the adequate cause of an effect outside us?

The problem at hand is not a minor one, for it seems to plague *every* case of intermodificationary causation, or transeunt causation taking place between finite modes (for instance when a moving billiard ball hits another ball at rest, causing it to move); in other words, only intramodificationary (or immanent) causation, that is, when a finite  $x$  produces an effect *in itself*, seems with certainty to count as a Spinozistic action, for then the effect results from  $x$ 's essence alone. I presume the paradigmatic instance of this would be mental action, for instance forming an idea of the essence of a geometrical figure in one's mind and deriving other ideas from that idea, namely ideas of those properties that necessarily follow from the figure's nature.

### 3.2 Previous Attempts to Solve the Problem

One rather obvious way of trying to solve this problem is to accept that only partial causes are to be found in any intermodificationary causal occurrence but that it is still possible to identify certain partial causes as agents, others as patients. Actually, Della Rocca's talk about "the greater degree" of activity with regard to a given effect points to this direction: it implies that  $x$  can be both (1) a partial cause of  $e$  and (2) active with regard to  $e$ , that is, that activity and partiality do not exclude each other. So maybe Spinoza's idea can be interpreted to be as follows. Given that he says that we "act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause" (E3d2), in transeunt causation the "something" being adequately caused cannot be the total effect (e.g. the tennis ball's motion) but only the *aspect* of the effect that follows from the agent's nature alone (e.g. the impact given to the ball by the tennis player, transferring a certain magnitude of kinetic energy to the ball). This makes sense, but leaves us with the question of how—since neither one of the causal *relata* is the complete cause of the total effect—can we identify the agent side and the patient side of the causal occurrence?

Here it is helpful to consider the context formed by Spinoza's most immediate predecessors. The answer they would give to this question is, I think, clear: both Descartes and Hobbes emphasize that a causal occurrence is a whole involving both an agent and a patient, and the patient is *the one in which the effect takes place or inheres*. This is evinced by

Descartes's contention that an occurrence is "a 'passion' with regard to the subject *to which it happens* and an 'action' with regard to that which makes it happen" (CSM I, 328, emphasis added),<sup>15</sup> and by Hobbes's assertion that "when one body by putting forwards another body generates motion in it, it is called the AGENT; and the body *in which* motion is so generated, is called the PATIENT [. . .].] That accident, *which is generated in the patient*, is called the EFFECT" (DCo II.9.1, emphases added).

Could Spinoza's definition of activity and passivity be interpreted in a similar fashion? Would it be consistent with his definition to hold that in transeunt causation all causal *relata* are only partial causes, but the patient is marked off by being the *relatum* whose state is being altered; all other *relata* are agents? Now the trouble is that if E3d2 is taken as it stands, it is not evident that the answer to this question can be affirmative: in the solution just proposed, also the thing in which the newly produced state inheres can be said to cause *adequately* a certain aspect of the causing (e.g. from the tennis ball's nature it follows that it has a certain kind of elastic structure, for its part responsible for the motion the ball acquires after having been hit by the player),<sup>16</sup> and this means that since Spinoza allows that the effect adequately brought about by the agent can happen not only outside but also *in it*, also the thing in which the state inheres would qualify as a Spinozistic *agent* with regard to the component of the total effect it produces. This in a sense short-circuits Spinoza's definition and leaves us with no unambiguous way of distinguishing agents from patients.

There is another kind of solution offered by Hoffman. It runs as follows:

[S]omething's following from my nature alone is not, on Spinoza's view, incompatible with its following solely from the nature of some external thing that affects me. Insofar as an external thing affects me through some property I have in common with it (and that property need not even be a common property, that is, a property that is equally in the part and in the whole) something happens in me which follows from my nature alone, but it also follows from the nature of the external thing. Thus although the external thing is acting on me, I am also acting, not undergoing something. So acting is not necessarily contrasted with being affected by something external; it is contrasted only with undergoing, and undergoing involves being affected by (or affecting) something external *through a property that the things do not have in common*.<sup>17</sup>

Now it is undeniable that the *relata* of transeunt causation must have something in common in order to enter into causal relation with each other; at the very least, they must be things of the same attribute (E4p29d).<sup>18</sup> And it is true that according to Spinoza, causal occurrences can be depicted in terms of agreements and disagreements: when something acts



on us through what it has in common with us, it agrees with us and can only produce joy in us (E4p30—p31); whereas people torn by passions can disagree with and thereby be contrary to each other, which gives rise to sadness (E4p33—p34). However, as far as I know, Spinoza nowhere uses these ideas in a way that would address, even in passing, the distinction between activity and passivity. Moreover, as Hoffman admits, it is an implication of his position that when  $x$  affects  $y$  through a property they do not have in common,  $x$  also *undergoes* something. But this surely sounds strange: whenever  $x$  affects  $y$ —regardless of how this happens—I take it that we would understand the verb “to affect” in such a way that we would want to say that  $x$  is the agent,  $y$  the patient.<sup>19</sup> Due to these troubles, I think we should look further still for an interpretation of Spinoza’s notion of activity.

### 3.3 *The Definition Newly Explicated*

To my mind, the source of the difficulties thus far encountered is that Spinoza fails to make his definition complex enough to accommodate both immanent and transeunt causation. It is as if he simply used his understanding of God’s causality to define activity, just adding the additional “outside us” remark. But as such claims as E1p18 make clear, Spinoza’s model of causation is, in fact, an account of one kind of *immanent* causation, and, as the problems just encountered indicate, as such it cannot be used for defining intermodificationary causation, which is one kind of *transeunt* causation, without a considerable amount of revision work.

I do, however, think that Spinoza can be interpreted as trying to articulate in E3d2 the following rather understandable line of thought concerning activity. First, in immanent modal causation, that is, when a finite thing brings about something in itself, it is the adequate, or entire, cause of the effect and hence necessarily active; no patient is involved. Second, in transeunt modal causation, that is, in causation taking place between finite modifications, all causal *relata* contribute adequately to a certain aspect of the resultant total effect, and the *relatum* in which the effect inheres can be called the patient, others agents.

This reading takes it for granted that the distinction between activity and passivity is exhaustive, that is, that each and every cause must fall into either category. However, it may be claimed that perhaps Spinoza does not regard the distinction as such, and hence it is not a problem that he does not tell us what we should call a thing that is in a causal process (1) a partial cause (and hence not active) but nevertheless (2) not the bearer of the effect (and hence very uneasily classified as passive). Moreover, this lacuna could be regarded as unimportant, for instance because in cases in which several things together bring about something it is not always easy to say whether or not they should count as agents (for

instance, when a vast number of people stand on a bridge and thereby make it collapse),<sup>20</sup> or because these kind of cases are not at the core of the moral life celebrated in the *Ethics*. In other words, the status of cases in which we accomplish something together with other causes (for instance, when a tennis player learns to hit the ball hard and accurately) is unclear; it might be justified to see them as insignificant for Spinozistic ethics, ultimately very much focused on intellectual activity.

However, mainly because Spinoza's predecessors do not even hint that there could be room for causes that are neither active nor passive and hence seem to regard the distinction as exhaustive, it seems simply too big a leap to claim that Spinoza entertains—without anywhere explicitly confessing to do so—the idea that there are non-passive but still partial causes that fall somewhere in between agents and patients. After all, Descartes states in no uncertain terms: “[W]hatever is not an action is a passion.” (CSMK, 270) Further, an opponent of the exhaustive reading should still spell out Spinoza's reasons for including the “outside us” passage in the definition of action, which does not seem to be an easy task, for anything taking place outside a supposedly active thing seems to inevitably involve causal factors other than the thing's nature, hence debaring it from being an agent in the proper Spinozistic sense. Moreover, the “in us or outside us” passage could be interpreted as referring to both immanent (“in us”) and transeunt (“outside us”) causation, and if this is what Spinoza has in mind, it at least suggests that E3d2 is supposed to cover all kinds of causal relations.

To summarize, solving the activity puzzle requires elaborating the activity—passivity distinction in a way that is fine-grained enough to take into account the profound difference between immanent and transeunt causation. Although this is not the most parsimonious interpretative path to take and makes defining activity and passivity a relatively complex affair, I believe that it not only captures quite well what Spinoza is attempting to say but also gives him conceptual resources to distinguish between agents and patients in instances of transeunt causation (such as the one depicted by the tennis example). So, in immanent causation the effect is brought about by the agent's power alone; in transeunt causation, both the agent and the patient are causally efficacious, and the resulting effect inheres in the latter.<sup>21</sup> I think that Spinoza's failure to give an adequate formulation to his thoughts could well stem from his strong commitment to the monistic framework: as far as God's causality and activity are concerned, the perplexities plaguing finite causation simply do not come up. In fact, given Spinoza's general metaphysical outlook, it seems he should be constantly reminding us that causation can be adequately conceived only from the monistic viewpoint according to which all talk of transeunt finite causation should be, as it were, translated into talk of God's immanent causation—our outside is, after all, God's inside.

## 4. The Problem of Passivity

### 4.1 *The Puzzling Definition*

We have seen that Spinoza endorses an essentialist view of causality in which essences operate as centers of causal efficacy: effects follow from the natures of things, as their properties.<sup>22</sup> Spinoza refers to this also when defining passivity; recall: “I say that we are acted on when something happens in us, or *something follows from our nature*, of which we are only a partial cause” (E3d2, emphasis added). However, this gives rise to the following conundrum. It would seem that if something follows from our nature, then we are its complete, or only, cause. But this would go against the very idea of passivity as something that always involves at least two things, the agent and the patient—which is arguably why Spinoza thinks that the reference to being “only a partial cause” is in order. The problem is thus: how can passions both follow from our nature and be only partially caused by us?<sup>23</sup>

Here it may be pointed out that Spinoza says that when an action follows from our nature, it can be understood through that nature *alone* (E3d2), but he does not say the same of passions. However, this only pushes the problem one step further: if something follows from our nature, as any passion does, how could it not be adequately understood through that nature alone?

The key to answering the aforementioned questions lies in finding out how something can follow from our nature so that adequate cognition of it requires understanding not only our nature but something else, namely the external cause, as well. Here it is singularly helpful to turn to what may be called Spinoza’s theory of constitution,<sup>24</sup> according to which one and the same essence can be, and in fact is, differently constituted, as the causal context varies: “[A]s each [man] is affected by external causes with this or that species of Joy, Sadness, Love, Hate, etc.—i.e., *as his nature is constituted in one way or the other*, so his Desires vary” (E3p56d, emphasis added). “[B]y an affection of the human essence we understand any constitution of that essence, whether it is innate [NS: or has come from outside]” (E3defaff1exp). These passages explicate being affected by external causes (i.e. being passive) *in terms of* one’s nature or essence *changing its constitution*. When an external cause affects us without destroying us, it does not alter our essence (that would equal our destruction (E4pr)), only (re)determines its constitution. Now understanding *how* a new constitution comes about requires cognition not only of our own nature but also the nature of the external cause(s),<sup>25</sup> but once an essence is constituted in a specific way, certain properties as effects necessarily follow from it. This can be illustrated geometrically. There are many different kinds of triangles: equilateral, isosceles, right-angled, scalene, etc. Now each of these can be conceived of as the triangle constituted in

a certain way: equilaterally, isosceles-wise, right-anglely, scalenely. Let us take a triangle constituted equilaterally: from its essence necessarily follows the property of equiangularity—there cannot be an equilateral triangle without this property. Now if we change the triangle's constitution to a right-angled one, the property of equiangularity does not follow from its nature; instead we have the property of fulfilling the Pythagorean theorem (which in turn does not follow from the nature of the equilateral triangle).

The aforesaid indicates that Spinoza's theory of the passions is built on the idea that external causes act on us *by determining the constitution of our essence*. To understand a passion we need to understand the external cause and our nature,<sup>26</sup> and from the latter as determined by the former the passion follows. This is what he means, I would argue, by saying that the basic kinds of passive emotions or affects—desires, joys, and sadnesses—arise from certain external causes: “We say that we are acted on when something arises [*oritur*] in us of which we are only the partial cause (by 3d2), that is (by 3d1), something which cannot be deduced from the laws of our nature alone” (E4p2). That Spinoza really has the geometry-inspired essence–property structure in view when he analyzes the emotions is confirmed in a late scholium of the fourth part of the *Ethics*, which offers a valuable elaboration of the mission statement of E3pr, of considering emotions “just like other natural things”: the aim is “to demonstrate the nature and properties of things,” and the things he says to follow from the affect of pride he has just discussed follow from it “as necessarily as it follows from the nature of a triangle that its three angles are equal to two right angles” (E4p57s). Consistently enough, the same model also applies to *emotions themselves* as properties endowed with their essences from which different effects follow as the causal context varies: “[F]rom the same property of human nature from which it follows that men are compassionate, it also follows that the same men are envious and ambitious” (E3p32s).

In Spinoza's analyses of passive emotions, external causes as proximate causes figure prominently,<sup>27</sup> which is in keeping with the methodological strictures set already in the early *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TIE). The first criterion of a good definition is that it should “include the proximate cause” (TIE § 96; C I, 39) by which the defined thing is produced. Spinoza thinks, quite traditionally, that to understand something is to know its causes, or the way in which it is generated. The other criterion of a good definition is that “all the thing's properties can be deduced from it” (TIE § 96; C I, 40). Accordingly, an adequate definition of a specific emotion must state (1) the external cause as the proximate cause that determines the constitution of our essence and (2) the emotion that follows as the property of that essence. This explains why Spinoza defines passivity the way he does: even though a passion follows from a determinately constituted essence, it cannot be adequately understood

through that essence alone; for that, knowledge of the determining proximate cause is required as well.

#### 4.2 *The Nature of Passive Emotions*

The present interpretation of passivity invites us to reconsider Spinoza's understanding of passive emotions. We have thus far been focusing on causes, essences, and properties. However, the issue could also be framed in dynamic terms: as God's modifications all finite things express God's power, which makes them intrinsically powerful strivers (E3p6–p7). In this framework, the agent can be said to determine the intrinsic power of the patient so that that power is exercised in a certain way. To the extent that this intrinsic power of ours is not hindered, it is what Spinoza calls *power of acting*.<sup>28</sup>

Spinoza acknowledges that passive emotions are not necessarily harmful: they can be both negative and positive, emotions of sadness and of joy.<sup>29</sup> Andrea Sangiacomo has claimed that my account, by stressing the geometrical model and the essentialism it involves the way it does, is vulnerable to the following criticism: “[S]hould power of acting consist in nothing but bringing about what follows from our essence alone, Spinoza would not be entitled to claim that external causes can *increase* our power of acting by determining our nature. From this point of view, in fact, ‘joyful passions’ [. . .] would be inconceivable.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Sangiacomo seems to think that I and Don Garrett conceive of external causes “only as a possible threat, at best, for activity.”<sup>31</sup> But as Sangiacomo correctly points out, this cannot be the case, since Spinoza often talks about passions having a positive effect on our power of acting. So how can the thus far presented interpretation account for the nature of passive emotions, especially joyful ones, external causes give rise to in us?

The notion of power of acting is connected to the idea of being completely active: to the completely unimpeded use of our intrinsic power so that we are totally self-determined, only cause effects that can be understood through our nature alone. For us limited beings, this is something unreachable, for “[i]t is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause” (E4p4). Given that we can be active but never completely so, it is all a matter of degree here: at any given moment, many things follow from our nature, and to the extent that following is to be understood through our nature alone, we are active and self-determined. However, given that we are deeply connected to the causal network of the universe, it seems evident that, at least usually, most things we do and feel are passions, determined by the interaction between our nature and the nature of the external causes affecting us.

According to the present geometry-inspired model the nature of passive emotions is to be understood as follows. Let us assume that being constituted equilaterally is what a triangle would be in a state of complete self-determination. Next, think of the triangle being constituted scalenely, which is a state far removed from the self-determined one. Should there be an external cause that determines it to a right-angled constitution, the triangle would reach a state in which it is more self-determined than before; consequently, that transition, should the triangle be capable of emotions, would give rise to the passion of joy. The triangle is still not completely self-determined: for instance, it still does not have the property of equiangularity. When things are taken to the reverse direction so that constitutions further removed from the self-determined one result, humans (and other sentient creatures)<sup>32</sup> undergo passions of sadness. Triangles are *entia rationis*,<sup>33</sup> and as such without causal power,<sup>34</sup> but for *real* Spinozistic things the aforesaid can be expressed in dynamic terms as follows. External causes determine the extent to which the intrinsic power of things is exerted passively or actively; they can increase things' power of acting by determining them to be closer to the constitution in which they would be completely active and self-determined. In such a case, the powers of things can certainly be said to be combined,<sup>35</sup> it is an overarching contention of Spinoza's moral psychology that a definite dynamics determines the character of our emotional lives. But we should not forget that *whether* things are useful or harmful to, or agree or disagree with, each other depends on the constitution of their natures,<sup>36</sup> and *what* exactly the thing determined brings about with its power is ultimately fixed by its essence—constitution—property structure.<sup>37</sup> This makes, for Spinoza, his essentialism in at least one important respect more explanatory than his dynamism (i.e. the view that things are essentially dynamic entities interacting with each other).

The aforesaid has remained at a very abstract level and raises the question, how does the fundamental constitutional architecture of emotional dynamics appear on the phenomenological level? In the third and fourth parts of the *Ethics*, Spinoza's analysis of passive emotions operates within what may be termed the familiar parallelist framework in which increases or decreases in our power of acting are explicated both in mental and physical terms. He himself gives the following example that illustrates particularly well the way in which differing constitutions underpin our perfectly quotidian psychophysical operations:

For example, when we imagine something which usually pleases us by its taste, we desire to enjoy it—that is, to consume it. But while we thus enjoy it, the stomach is filled, and the body constituted differently. So if (while the body is now differently disposed) the presence of the food or drink encourages the image of it, and consequently also the striving, *or* desire to consume it, then that new constitution

will be opposed to this desire, *or* striving. Hence, the presence of the food or drink we used to want will be hateful. This is what we call *disgust* and *weariness*.

(E3p59s)

In cases like this, the essence of our mind and body does not change, it is just constituted anew, with the corresponding disposition of the body, imaginative ideas of the mind, and such emotions as an appetite, or a disgust, for food and drink.

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, I hope to have established that the puzzle concerning Spinoza's definition of activity can be solved by taking into account its historical context and by making explicit what is left implicit in the E3d2, namely the distinction between immanent and transeunt causation. The source of the difficulties lies, I have suggested, in Spinoza's monistic mindset to which transeunt causation is in a sense more foreign than immanent causation. As for Spinoza's definition of passivity, I have argued that it turns out to be quite understandable if we acknowledge that external causes cause can, and most often do, (re)determine the constitution of our essence, from which essence passions then necessarily follow even though adequate knowledge of those passions require knowledge not only of our essence but also of external things as proximate causes. According to this geometry-inspired theory of emotions, the basic causal architecture of such quotidian feelings as hunger, thirst, anger, and gratitude is formed by transitions from one constitution to another.<sup>38</sup>

## Notes

- 1 As far as I can see, Spinoza uses the notions of essence and nature interchangeably. For the view that the same does not apply to Descartes, see Deborah Brown's contribution to this volume.
- 2 For my detailed account of the theory, see Viljanen 2011, 8–21, 44–46.
- 3 I defend a specific interpretation of this claim in Viljanen 2011, chs. 2–3 and label Spinoza's view *dynamic essentialism* (*ibid.*, 73–82). However, it should be noted that in its general outlines, the position I endorse is nowadays widespread in scholarship; see e.g. Garrett 2002, 150; Lin 2006, 343.
- 4 Descartes of the *Passions*, of course, states that there are also pure mental actions, namely volitions “which terminate in the soul itself” (CSM I, 335). This kind of volitions do not involve a patient.
- 5 On action and passion in Descartes, see also Brown's contribution to this volume.
- 6 In other words, the activity of  $x$  and the passivity of  $y$ —both evidently representing different types of causal efficacy, namely active and passive power—together result in the accident as the effect. So the accident is certainly one thing, but activity and passivity pertain to different entities. As we will see below, Spinoza views what is called transeunt causation rather similarly.

- 7 Here I am following Alfred Freddoso: “Typically, substances (agents) act upon other substances (patients) to bring about or actualize or produce states of affairs (effects)” (Freddoso 1988, 79).
- 8 Cf. e.g. Des Chene 1996, 161–62.
- 9 The thinker in question is Albert of Saxony (Pasnau 2011, 40).
- 10 See, e.g., Lear 1988, 33; Des Chene 1996, 65–66; Ariew and Gabbey 1998, 429–31; Pasnau 2011, 561–63.
- 11 Emphases added. See also Ariew and Gabbey 1998, 430.
- 12 Della Rocca 1996, 211. Charlie Huenemann seems to agree: “[W]e can parcel out the portions of its [the body’s] behavior that are due to the body’s own powers, and speak of *the extent to which* a body’s behavior is self-determined” (Huenemann 2008, 102).
- 13 Kneale 1976, 217.
- 14 Hoffman 1991, 178.
- 15 See, however, note 4 in this chapter.
- 16 For a similar line of thought, see Rice 1992.
- 17 Hoffman 1991, 178–79.
- 18 Thereby Spinoza avoids the main problem plaguing Descartes’s interactionism.
- 19 Here we would have the Western tradition on our side, as Plato’s Eleatic Stranger quoted in the beginning of this chapter testifies.
- 20 I owe this example to Koistinen. However, it seems to me that there is no shortage of cases (such as a group of people lifting a heavy object together) in which it is quite natural to identify some of the causal factors involved as active, others as passive.
- 21 Again, it should be recalled that the same distinction, although not stated explicitly, forms part of the Cartesian framework; see note 4 in this chapter.
- 22 Cf.: “[E]ffect, or property” (E3defaff22exp).
- 23 To my knowledge, there is no discussion in the literature of this problem, perhaps simply because until fairly recently not much attention has been given to Spinoza’s essentialist understanding of causation.
- 24 For my earlier exposition of this theory, see Viljanen 2011, 151–57.
- 25 As E3p56d explains, “the nature of each passion must necessarily be so explained that the nature of the object by which we are affected is expressed.”
- 26 It should be noted that external causes are causally efficacious through their essences, the constitution of the patient being the joint product of the patient’s essence and the external cause(s) essence(s).
- 27 Since Spinoza assumes the human nature—like any nature—as such to be unchangeable, it is understandable that his catalogue of the passions is structured around the different kind of proximate causes, or external causes that affect us: “There are as many species of joy, sadness, and desire, and consequently of each affect composed of these [. . .] or derived from them (like love, hate, hope, fear, etc.), as there are species of objects by which we are affected” (E3p56).
- 28 For a detailed discussion of this, see Viljanen 2011, 77–82.
- 29 Moreover, we should not forget that there are also active emotions, which can only be joyful.
- 30 Sangiacomo 2015, 532n29.
- 31 Sangiacomo 2015, 539. Sangiacomo refers to Garrett 2002; Viljanen 2011, 125–32.
- 32 See E3p57s.
- 33 See letter 83 (C II, 487).
- 34 For more on this, see Viljanen 2011, 62n31.



- 35 This is something Sangiacomo 2015 emphasizes; see, e.g., E4p18s.
- 36 This, as I see it, is the force of E4p30–p35: humans often disagree with each other despite the fact that in themselves (as constituted rationally) their natures necessarily agree.
- 37 Here I agree with Justin Steinberg, although he puts his point in terms different from mine: “The emotion marks a kind of structural change; the desire is the functional effect of this change” (Steinberg 2016, 75).
- 38 I would like to begin by expressing my deepest gratitude to Juhani Pietarinen, whom I miss very much, for many helpful and inspiring discussions also on the topics of this chapter. I would also like to thank Lilli Alanen for so generously hosting me in Uppsala in 2008: some parts of this chapter hark back to that visit. Many thanks also to Olli Koistinen, Arto Repo, the Helsinki History of Philosophy Research Seminar, and the Turku Rationalist Club for constructive comments on the chapter. Special thanks to Justin Steinberg for detailed written comments, and to the editors of this volume for several insightful suggestions. Finally, I would like to acknowledge that the work on this chapter has been financially supported by the Academy of Finland (project number 275583).

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