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Lin, Martin.

Journal of the History of Philosophy, Volume 44, Number 3, July 2006,
pp. 395-414 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/hph.2006.0045](https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2006.0045)



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Spinoza's Account of Akrasia

MARTIN LIN*

PERHAPS THE CENTRAL PROBLEM that preoccupies Spinoza as a moral philosopher is the conflict between reason and passion. He belongs to a long tradition that sees reason's mastery over the passions as the key to happiness and virtue. This mastery, however, is hard won, as the passions often overwhelm reason's power and subvert its rule. When reason succumbs to passion, we act against our better judgment. Such action is often termed 'akratic.' There are, of course, cases of reason succumbing to passion that are not akratic. For example, passion might prevent one from ever coming to a rational judgment about the best course of action in the first place, and so one could not be said, in such a case, to act against one's better judgment. Spinoza, however, focuses his discussion of human bondage to the passions on the issue of akrasia. He does so for two reasons. First, akrasia is pervasive and pernicious.¹ Thus understanding how akrasia works and what can be done about it would greatly help our efforts to be more virtuous. Second, the general aim of Spinoza's discussion of human bondage is to discover the relative power and weakness of reason and passion,² and reflection on akrasia is a particularly useful exercise for this purpose: when agents behave akratically reason and passion are both fully on display.

Some commentators have alleged that the psychological principles introduced by Spinoza to account for akrasia are *ad hoc* modifications to his moral psychology

¹ It is clear that Spinoza views akrasia as a pervasive phenomenon when he says, summarizing his account of akrasia, that "true knowledge of good and evil . . . often yields to lusts of every kind" (IVP17S, my emphasis). That he thinks it is pernicious is clear from his account of virtue as acting from the dictates of reason (IVP26D). All citations from Spinoza are from *Spinoza Opera* [G], ed. C. Gebhardt, 4 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925). Most English translations are from *The Complete Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), with occasional modifications. References to the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* are abbreviated TdIE. References to the *Tractus Theologico-Politicus* are abbreviated TTP. In citations from the *Ethics*, I use the following abbreviations: Roman numerals refer to parts; 'P' means proposition; 'C' means corollary; 'S' means scholium; e.g., 'EIVP37S' means *Ethics*, part IV, proposition 37, scholium.

² Spinoza begins the preface to part IV, entitled "On Human Bondage, or the Powers of the Affects": "Man's lack of power to moderate and restrain the affects I call Bondage. For the man who is subject to affects is under the control, not of himself, but of fortune, in whose power he so greatly is that often, though he sees the better for himself, he is still forced to follow the worse."

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that enjoy no systematic support from his philosophy of mind more generally.³ This is not so. If we correctly understand the connection between Spinoza's cognitive and moral psychology on the one hand, and his account of causation on the other, we shall see that these principles are, in fact, derivable from more general features of Spinoza's system.

Not only does Spinoza's account of akrasia derive from his more general psychological picture, but it also has features that are attractive in their own right. Many philosophers have wished to distinguish between akrasia and compulsion. According to them, akratic agents are responsible for what they do in ways that compulsive agents are not. Many accounts of akrasia which, like Spinoza's, make akrasia a matter of passion overwhelming reason appear to have difficulty making this distinction. I shall argue that Spinoza's theory of action can accommodate these intuitions about akratic action where other similar attempts fail.

I shall conclude by arguing that the principles that form the basis of Spinoza's account of akrasia entail an interesting and distinctive picture of the place of reason in human nature. Many of Spinoza's predecessors thought that reason and passion correspond to different faculties or parts of the soul, and that virtue is a matter of the rational part mastering the irrational part. As we shall see, Spinoza's account of akrasia involves no such partition of the soul. What is more, Spinoza's account of akrasia is an important part of his effort to develop a naturalistic account of human nature, in particular, his effort to develop an account according to which human psychology is law-governed.

I. SPINOZA'S THREE PSYCHOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

Spinoza sets forth his account of akrasia in the first seventeen propositions of part IV of his *Ethics*. His principal claims are the following:

- (1) "We are affected more intensely toward a future thing which we imagine will be quickly present, than if we imagined the time when it will exist to be further from the present." (IVP10)
- (2) "A desire which arises from a true knowledge [*cognitione*] of good and evil can be extinguished or restrained by many other desires which arise from affects by which we are tormented." (IVP15)
- (3) "A desire which arises from a [true]⁴ knowledge [*cognitione*] of good and evil, insofar as this knowledge concerns the future, can be quite easily restrained or extinguished by a desire for the pleasures of the moment." (IVP16)

In other words: (1) The intensity of our desires for future goods decreases the longer we expect to have to wait for them. (2) Rational desires, i.e., those desires that "arise from a true knowledge of good and evil," are sometimes weaker than desires that arise from irrational passions. (3) The motivational power of our *rational* desires for future goods decreases the longer we expect to have to wait for

³ E.g. Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* [*Study*] (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1984), p 284; and Michael Della Rocca, "Spinoza's Metaphysical Psychology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 242.

⁴ Curley interpolates the word 'true' into his translation of this passage. But the subsequent demonstration makes clear that Spinoza, in this passage, does indeed mean to speak of true *cognitio* and not just *cognitio simpliciter*.

them. Thus (3) simply restates (1) for the special case of rational desires. That this is an accurate interpretation can be seen from Spinoza's argument for (3). He starts with the premise from which he derives principle (1), IVP9, which says that an affect toward a thing that we imagine to be in the future is less intense than an affect toward a thing that we imagine to be present. His next premise is principle (2), that rational ideas can be less powerful than irrational ones. He then concludes that rational desires for future goods can be easily restrained by desires for pleasures for the moment. The only difference between his argument for (3) and his argument for (1) is the inclusion of the premise that passions can be stronger than rational desires. This leads us to conclude that the only difference between (1) and (3) is that (3) concerns rational desires specifically and (1) does not.

Spinoza sums up what he takes himself to have accomplished in propositions 10–16 in IVP17S where he writes:

With this I believe I have shown the cause why men are moved more by opinion than by true reason, and why the true knowledge [*cognitione*] of good and evil arouses disturbances of the mind, often yields to lust of every kind. Hence that verse of the Poet: . . . *videor meliora, proboque, deteriora sequor* . . .⁵

In quoting this line of Ovid, one of the stock classical references for early modern discussions of akrasia, Spinoza signals that he intends the preceding propositions to form the basis of an account of that topic. According to those propositions, it is possible that I have a rational idea (true knowledge of good and evil) which pushes me to do ϕ , but simultaneously have an irrational passion which pushes me to do ψ , an action incompatible with ϕ . I will, *ceteris paribus*, do ψ , instead of ϕ , just in case the passion which urges ψ is capable of extinguishing or restraining the idea which pushes me to do ϕ (the possibility of which is asserted by principle (2)). Furthermore, a passion can gain an advantage over a rational idea if, *ceteris paribus*, the good at which ϕ aims is further in the future than the good aimed at by ψ (by principle (3)). I will have acted against my better judgment by ψ -ing because I possess a rational idea that pushes me to do something incompatible with ψ .

The psychological principles upon which Spinoza rests his account of akrasia are very nearly platitudes, and the fact that Spinoza's moral psychology includes them is, in itself, of comparatively little interest. Arguably, any plausible moral psychology must do so. But Spinoza's moral psychology is not merely consistent with these psychological principles; rather, I shall argue, it entails them.

Readers of Spinoza have sometimes alleged, on the contrary, that these principles are not supported by any systematic considerations and that they are just *ad hoc* modifications of Spinoza's system that in no way follow from the propositions cited in their putative deductions.⁶ For example, Jonathan Bennett points out that Spinoza argues for both claims (1) and (3) on the basis of IVP9, which in turn is supposed to follow mainly from IIP17. These derivations are, unfortunately, flawed. IIP17 says:

⁵ The reference is to Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VII, 20–21: "I see the better and approve, yet still the worse pursue."

⁶ Bennett, *Study*, 284; and Della Rocca, "Spinoza's Metaphysical Psychology," 242.

If the human body is affected with a mode [i.e. is in a particular state] that involves the nature of an external body, the human mind will regard the same external body as actually existing, or as present to it, until the body is affected by an affect that excludes the existence or presence of that body.

Dem.: This is evident. For so long as the human body is so affected, the human mind (by P12) will regard this affection of the body, i.e. (by P16), it will have the idea of a mode [i.e., an external body] that actually exists, an idea that involves the nature of the external body, i.e., an idea that does not exclude, but posits, the existence or presence of the nature of the external body. And so the mind (by P16C1) will regard the external body as actually existing, or as present, until it is affected, etc. q.e.d.

That is, once my mind is affected by an external cause, it will regard that cause as existing until it is affected by another cause which precludes the existence of the previous cause. IVP9 says:

An affect whose cause we imagine to be with us in the present is stronger than if we did not imagine it to be with us.

Dem.: An imagination is an idea by which the mind considers a thing as present (see its definition in IIP17S), which nevertheless indicates the constitution of the human body more than the nature of the external thing (by IIP16C2). An affect, therefore (by the general Definition of the Affects), is an imagination, insofar as [the affect] indicates the constitution of the body. But an imagination (by IIP17) is more intense so long as we imagine nothing that excludes the present existence of the external thing. Hence, an affect whose cause we imagine to be with us in the present is more intense, or stronger, than if we did not imagine it to be with us, q.e.d.

That is, an imagination is “more intense” [*intensior*] if we imagine that its object is present than if we imagine it as nonexistent. The problem, according to Bennett, is that IVP9 claims something about the intensity of ideas, and IIP17 does not, so there is no way to derive IVP9 from IIP17. If we cannot get IVP9, then (1) and (3) have no support.

Bennett is right. Spinoza does not give good arguments in his demonstrations of these propositions. I believe, however, that Spinoza does have the resources internal to his philosophy of mind to get IVP9 and ultimately claims (1) and (3). To show this, I shall first explain Spinoza’s account of the difference between rational ideas and passions and what accounts for their respective powers. I shall then examine Spinoza’s theory of time perception, and show how our temporal imagination can affect an idea’s power or intensity.

2. RATIONAL IDEAS AND PASSIONS

According to Spinoza, passions are a species of affect (*affectus*).⁷ Affects are “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 idea of these affections.”⁸ Insofar as

⁷ Some translators, e.g., Shirley and Elwes, have rendered *affectus* as ‘emotion.’ In contrast, Curley, in his standard translation, adopts ‘affect.’ Lee Rice argues persuasively (in “Emotion, Appetition, and Conatus in Spinoza,” *Revue internationale de philosophie* 31 (1977), 119, 105) that ‘affect’ is superior to ‘emotion’ as the latter suggests mind-body interaction and passivity. There is, however, no such interaction in Spinoza and affects may be active, despite Spinoza’s careless reference to affect as a *pathema animi* in the explication of the affects that follows part III of the *Ethics*.

⁸ EIID3.

we are not the adequate cause of an affect, it is classified as a "passion" (*passio*). In other words, when we move to a greater or lesser power of acting relative to our current state, and external causes contribute to this change, we suffer a passion. Under the attribute of extension, a passion is an externally caused affection of the body which results in an increase or decrease of our body's power of acting. Under the attribute of thought, a passion is an externally caused idea which results in an increase or decrease of our mind's power of thinking.

According to Spinoza, passions are, among other things, a function of the impact of the external world upon us. For him, as for many of his predecessors, one of the defining features of the passions is their passivity. When we suffer passions, we are not self-sufficient, or self-directed, but are instead responding to forces beyond our control, i.e., we are passive.

Whether or not we are self-directed, i.e., the adequate causes of our actions, depends upon the quality of the ideas that generate our action. We are the adequate cause of our own states or affections insofar as we have adequate ideas; we then act in light of adequate representations of the world and ourselves. When we are the inadequate cause of our actions, the representations which guide us are mutilated and confused; they are inadequate. Insofar as we have inadequate ideas, our mental states are partially caused by external factors which distort our reason and cloud our judgment. Consequently, passions insofar as they concern the mind are inadequate ideas.⁹ A passion which indicates an increase in power of acting, Spinoza calls joy. When we undergo a change for the better—when we become more powerful—we experience joy. A passion which indicates a decrease, he calls sadness.¹⁰ When our state worsens—when we become less powerful—we are sad. Spinoza calls joy and sadness primitive passions and thinks that all other passions are complex ideas made up of either joy or sadness together with different kinds of beliefs.¹¹

Let us now turn now from Spinoza's account of irrational ideas or passions to what he calls "true knowledge of good and evil" (*cognitionem boni et mali*). Spinoza defines knowledge of good and evil as "nothing but an affect of joy or sadness, insofar as we are conscious of it."¹² In defending this claim Spinoza defines good and evil in terms of self-preservation.¹³ Something is good just in case it is help-

⁹ This does not mean, however, that all inadequate ideas are passions. A state of mind partially determined by an external cause but which does not reflect a change in our power of acting is not a passion. Only inadequate ideas which register a greater or lesser power of thinking relative to previous states are called passions

¹⁰ EIIIP11S.

¹¹ In a number of passages, Spinoza includes desire in his list of primitive or primary passions. This suggests that desire is a passion distinct from and on a par with joy and sadness. But in yet other passages, Spinoza indicates that every instance of joy or sadness includes desire as a constituent. This is not the place to try to sort out this complicated issue, and so I have simplified Spinoza's account by omitting mention of desire as a possible primitive passion. For the purposes of the following discussion, this omission is unimportant.

¹² IVP8.

¹³ Spinoza operates with a number of distinct but related notions of good and evil. The one that Spinoza uses in this proposition pertains to what helps or hinders our striving for self-preservation. See also IVP38 and 39. In the preface to part IV and in IVD1 and 2 Spinoza sets forth an alternative conception according to which good is that which is "useful for approaching nearer to the model of human nature we set before ourselves," (Part IV, preface), and evil is that which prevents us from

ful for preserving our being. Something is bad just in case it harms our ability to preserve our being. The greater our power, the more we can do to preserve our being, the less our power, the less capable we are in this regard. Because joy always indicates an increase in our powers, joy is good.¹⁴ Likewise, because sadness always indicates a decrease, sadness is bad.¹⁵ Our awareness of joy is knowledge of good and our awareness of sadness is knowledge of evil.

What then is *true* knowledge of good and evil? One might have thought that “true knowledge” was a pleonasm because knowledge is factive: one cannot know falsehoods. But the Latin word that Curley, Elwes, and Shirley all translate as ‘knowledge’ is *cognitio*, and *cognitio* must be distinguished from knowledge strictly speaking (in Latin, *scientia*). ‘Idea,’ ‘notion,’ and ‘cognition’ number among the adequate translations of *cognitio*. In this context, I think that the meaning that Spinoza intends to express with the phrase *cognitio boni et mali* is something like an *experience as if of good and evil*. That is, a non-factive psychological state with representational character which depicts the world in a certain way with respect to good and evil. So when Spinoza speaks of “true knowledge” of good and evil, he means an experience as if of good and evil which represent its objects truly. True ideas are, for Spinoza, adequate ideas, i.e., ideas of which the mind is the adequate cause.¹⁶ So true knowledge of good and evil must be consciousness of an affect of joy or sadness of which we are the adequate cause. In propositions 58 and 59 of Part III, Spinoza describes affects of which we are the adequate cause, or what he calls “active affects.” These are adequate ideas which register an increase (but never a decrease) in our power of acting. Whenever I acquire an adequate idea, my power of acting increases. (Spinoza defines action in terms of having adequate ideas.¹⁷) Therefore, I have an idea of which my mind is the adequate cause, and which registers an increase in my power of acting. That is to say, my idea is an active affect of joy. True knowledge of the good is thus an *adequate* idea, which *ipso facto* registers an increase in the agent’s power of acting.¹⁸

enjoying some good. Yet another sense of good is introduced at IIP39S where Spinoza writes, “By good here I understand every kind of Joy, and what ever leads to it.” In what follows I shall disregard these other two notions both because the first is the one that Spinoza has in mind in his discussion of “true knowledge of good and evil” and because it is the more fundamental notion (conforming to the model is good because it conduces to self-preservation and joy is good because it registers an increase of power, which helps us preserve ourselves).

¹⁴ IIP39S.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ In IIP34 Spinoza says only that all adequate ideas are true, not that all true ideas are adequate. We can derive the latter claim, however, from IIP35, which says that inadequacy is constitutive of falsity. It is very reasonable to suppose that one property constitutes another only if it is sufficient for it. So, every inadequate idea is false. Or, contrapositively, all true ideas are adequate. Such ideas are adequately caused by the human mind. This follows from the fact that adequate ideas are in God insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human mind. That is to say, they need no other ideas than those found in the human mind in order to be conceived or explained. Since conception implies causation, adequate ideas are caused by nothing outside of the human mind. Hence, the human mind is the adequate cause of adequate ideas. IID4; IIP34; IIP38; IIP40.

¹⁷ IIP1.

¹⁸ We can never have an active sadness because my nature alone could never be the cause of any decrease in my power of acting (IIP59D). Thus all sad ideas are inadequate and hence in some way or another, misrepresent the world. We can never be said, therefore, to possess a true idea of evil. When Spinoza speaks of a true idea of good and evil, he is being careless, which he as much as concedes

Our next task is to see why Spinoza thinks that ideas which represent their objects as existing are more intense than those which do not (i.e., what is asserted in IVP9). In order to do so, it will be necessary to look at Spinoza's account of judgment.

3. INTENSITY

Spinoza's theory of judgment has frequently perplexed commentators. According to Spinoza, every idea is, as such, affirmed, not by a separate mode of thought, but as an intrinsic feature of the idea itself. That is, I cannot have an idea which represents a triangle as a three sided figure the sum of whose interior angles equals one hundred and eighty degrees without affirming it. More surprisingly, I cannot even have an idea which represents a winged horse without affirming it.

It will perhaps be easier to understand what this puzzling doctrine means and why Spinoza holds it if we see it as an extension of and reaction to Descartes's new theory of judgment. Prior to Descartes, the most influential theory of judgment was Aristotle's, according to which judgment is a matter of the logical form of a thought. Ideas like APPLE and RED by themselves do not express judgments and are therefore neither true nor false. Treating such ideas, however, as subjects and predicates and appropriately combining them results in judgments which are either true or false, e.g., "This apple is red." Whenever a predicate is attributed to a subject, a judgment results.

Descartes rejects this picture of judgment. For Descartes, in addition to a thought with the right logical form, judgment also requires a psychological act: the will must affirm or deny the thought in question. Affirming is judging true, while denying is judging false. Such a theory of judgment has a number of advantages over the Aristotelian model. First, it nicely accounts for different cognitive attitudes such as suspension of belief and negation in a way parallel to the explanation of affirmation. Second, the will is a particularly good candidate for accounting for these different cognitive attitudes because of systematic similarities that exist between cognitive and conative attitudes. For example, conative attitudes differ in intensity (e.g., I can want something with all my heart, or only have the slightest passing fancy for it); this difference in intensity is relevant to the explanation of action—the more strongly I desire something, the greater effort I will make to get it; and finally, this difference tracks features of the object of my conative attitude—the more attractive it is, the more strongly I desire it. Similarly, cognitive attitudes differ in intensity (e.g., my conviction can be strong or weak); this difference in intensity is relevant to the explanation of action—the more convinced I am that a particular possibility obtains, the more likely I am to perform an action whose success depends on it; and this difference tracks features of its object, viz. plausibility.¹⁹

in IVP64 and its demonstration. See Pascal Sévérac, "Passivité et désir d'activité chez Spinoza," in *Spinoza et les affects*, eds. F. Brugère and P. F. Moreau (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1998), 39–40.

¹⁹ The preceding is indebted to David Rosenthal's "Will and the Theory of Judgment," in *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 411–16.

Spinoza's theory of judgment can be seen as an adaptation of Descartes's theory, modified so as to cohere with his mechanistic philosophy of mind. To accomplish this, Spinoza rejects the notion of an independent faculty of will capable of affirming, denying, and suspending judgment. Instead, every idea as such is affirmed. That is to say, it determines the mind to think and act as if it were true. This has the advantage of eliminating the will as a separate explanatory factor, but it stands in need of some account of cognitive attitudes other than belief, such as doubt and denial. In order to see how he accomplishes this, let's look more closely at Spinoza's account of the relation between affirmations and ideas.

Spinoza describes the psychological attitude involved in judgment as mental *action*.²⁰ The notion of action, for Spinoza, is closely related to the notion of *causal efficacy*. He says that something acts when it is the adequate cause of some effect. Action is causal efficacy.²¹ The claim that every idea as such involves an affirmation thus means that every idea is causally efficacious—it produces effects. This is just what we should expect given that Spinoza believes that all modes have causal properties and that ideas are just modes of thought.²² What kinds of effects are produced by ideas? The effects can be external (overt, publicly observable behavior) or internal (ideas or inferences).²³

Causal power, i.e., a thing's disposition to act or produce effects is, for Spinoza, a function of a thing's conatus, the striving for self-preservation that Spinoza thinks animates all of nature.²⁴ So the actions which follow from a given idea will be those which conduce to the preservation of the mind's existence or being. Ideas are thus, on Spinoza's account, belief-like. If we think of a belief as a disposition to act, then all ideas, for Spinoza, are beliefs because they, in virtue of their very essence, carry with them dispositions to act.²⁵

We can better understand how this account of belief works in Spinoza by way of an example.²⁶ Suppose that I have the idea of a glass of water on the table in front of me, and that drinking it would help me persevere in my being. I will thus reach out and bring the glass to my lips. It is in this sense that my idea of the glass of water is a belief; it determines how I will act. Now suppose that instead of the idea of the glass of water, I have an idea which represents the glass containing not water, but turpentine. Insofar as I strive to persevere in my being, I will not bring the glass to my lips. But what if I have both ideas? Will I bring the glass to my lips or not? That depends on which idea is more powerful. If the idea that the glass contains water is stronger than the idea that it contains turpentine, then I will

²⁰ IIP48; IIP48S. The account presented here is closely based on Michael Della Rocca's "The Power of an Idea: Spinoza's Critique of the Idea of Pure Will" ["Power"], *Nôus* 7 (2003), 200–31.

²¹ IIID2.

²² IP36.

²³ Spinoza says in IIID2 that we act when we are the cause of some event inside or outside of us. Presumably, under the attribute of thought, events "inside of us" are inferences (insofar as we are the adequate cause) and associations (insofar as we are the inadequate cause); events "outside us" are the ideas parallel to the events which the motions of our bodies cause in external bodies, i.e., publicly observable behavior.

²⁴ IIP7.

²⁵ Cf. Bennett, *Study*, 162–66; E. M. Curley, "Descartes, Spinoza and the Ethics of Belief," 159–90; and Della Rocca, "Power," 211–12.

²⁶ My example closely follows the one developed by Della Rocca in his "Power," 209–11.

bring the glass to my lips. The idea the glass contains turpentine does not cease to exercise its causal power—the power that would determine me, *ceteris paribus*, to abstain. It is simply overwhelmed by the superior causal power of the stronger idea which opposes it.

The story so far is far from complete. In particular, it stands in need of an account of what determines the causal power of an idea. We noted previously that the causal power of a thing is a function of its conatus. This is true but requires qualification. The causal power of a thing, insofar as it is in itself—i.e., insofar as it is independent of external causes—is a function of its conatus. To the extent that its state or affection is partially determined by external causes, its causal power is a function of *both* its conatus and the conatus of the external causes.²⁷ We possess rational ideas, according to Spinoza, only insofar as we are active,²⁸ so they can be understood through our essence alone.²⁹ Therefore, the power of a rational idea is the power of our conatus *tout court*.³⁰ Irrational ideas, or passions, on the other hand, are defined by the power of their external causes in combination with our own power. But it is possible for the power of external causes to be greater than the power of any one individual by an indefinite degree.³¹ Passions can thus be easily more powerful than rational ideas. Thus this account of intensity explains why Spinoza thinks that irrational ideas can be more intense, i.e., have more causal power, than rational ideas, as indicated in principle (2).

We can also see in this conception of ideas a rejection of the Cartesian theory of cognition. For Descartes, ideas are like “mute pictures,” which by themselves do not constitute judgments or beliefs.³² Only after being affirmed or denied by an act of will do they acquire the status of being judgments. For Spinoza, on the contrary, every idea carries with it an affirmation, not as a separate mode of thought which acts upon it, but in virtue of its having intrinsic causal power.

On Spinoza's account, negation and suspension of belief are not basic attitudes. Rather, negation and suspension of belief result from the dynamic context in which an idea occurs. Negation is explained by the presence of two mutually opposed ideas, one of which is stronger than the other. Suspension of judgment is simply a standoff between two opposed but equally powerful ideas.

Let us now turn to the question of why Spinoza thinks that ideas which represent their objects as existing are “more intense” than ideas which do not—i.e. what is asserted in IVP9, which in turn is used to support principles (1) and (3). When speaking of the intensity of an idea, Spinoza doesn't mean to refer to the phenomenological character of the idea, e.g., vivacity or vividness. Nor does he mean to refer to clarity or distinctness. He means rather its causal power. What becomes of the causal power of an idea which, as a result of the dynamic context in which it occurs, is not represented as existent? Take our example of the glass of water. Imagine that I first believe that there is a glass of water before me, but

²⁷ IVP5.

²⁸ IIP3.

²⁹ IIP2.

³⁰ IIP7.

³¹ IVP3.

³² I presume that Descartes is one of the intended targets of IIP49S, where Spinoza criticizes those who do not see that ideas *per se* involve an affirmation or negation.

then later come to believe that there is no such glass. My initial belief in the glass of water must be the result of my having an idea, call it idea A, which represents the glass of water. On Spinoza's theory of judgment, I can only come to believe that there is not a glass of water before me by acquiring some new idea, call it idea B, opposed to and stronger than idea A, e.g., an idea that represents the glass as containing turpentine. What does it mean to say that two ideas are opposed to each other? It means that their causal dispositions are opposed. For example, idea A might, considered in itself, cause me to drink from the glass.³³ Idea B, on the contrary, might, considered in itself, cause me not to drink from the glass. If my possession of idea B is enough to ensure that I do not believe that there is a glass of water before me, then idea B must be at least as powerful as idea A. The causal power of the idea of the glass of water will be suppressed by its powerful rival, and I do not drink from the glass. We can say it is less *intense* because it doesn't motivate action, as it would if there were no idea of greater power opposed to it. Thus ideas which lead the mind to regard their objects as present or existent are more intense than those that do not, and we can see why Spinoza holds IVP9. Let us now examine how Spinoza uses IVP9 to establish principles (1) and (3).

4. INTENSITY AND TIME

According to Spinoza, reason demands that we follow that course of action which leads to our greatest profit over the long run. This reflects the fact that reason comprehends all things *sub specie aeternitatis*, or under the aspect of eternity.³⁴ Because reason does not view things in relation to time, it doesn't have preferences with respect to time. That is, it does not prefer a present good to a future good, or vice versa. Rather, it seeks to maximize goods over the whole course of existence.³⁵

We are, unfortunately, unsuited to this rational task. As finite creatures existing in time, we must plan for the future. Rational ideas represent things *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is to say, without relation to time, or as not existing at any particular time. Spinoza gives as examples of things about which we can have adequate ideas: properties common to all things, God, and the essences of individual things. He describes these ideas as "abstract and universal."³⁶ Presumably many of the moral pronouncements contained in Part IV of the *Ethics* are of this sort. "Pity, in a man who lives according to the guidance of reason, is evil in itself, and useless" (IVP50). "Affects of Overestimation and Scorn are always evil" (IVP48). "The freeman always acts honestly, not deceptively" (IVP72).

In order for such ideas to result in future directed action, they must be related to our ideas of individual particular things. But our thoughts about particular things are inadequate and subject to the laws of the imagination.³⁷ Given this, one

³³ Of course, this needs to be reformulated so as to be consistent with Spinoza's parallelism, e.g. "cause the idea parallel to my hand reaching out for the water." For the sake of ease, I use language which suggests mind-body interaction because such reformulations are trivial but cumbersome.

³⁴ EII44CD.

³⁵ IVP62, P62D, P62S.

³⁶ IVP62S.

³⁷ EIIP30, IIP31, IVP62S.

might reasonably wonder if adequate ideas can ever be involved in deliberation. Since reason can only represent to us very general and abstract features of the world and not particular things and their positions in the order and connection of causes (and hence their temporal properties), then how can reason ever tell us what to do? And if reason cannot ever give us counsel regarding particular actions and goals, then how could it ever really come into conflict with passion?³⁸

One possible answer is that Spinoza does not conceive of reason as either on or off. Ideas can be more or less reasonable. When we act rationally, we act from laws of our nature alone. That is, we are the adequate cause of what we do—we act in the strict sense defined in IID2—and our actions are motivated by adequate ideas. When we act irrationally our behavior is determined by an external cause and our behavior is motivated by passions. The solution to our problem is that all of these concepts admit of degrees.³⁹ It is not simply that our behavior is either caused by the laws of our own nature alone or by some external cause. What I do may be partially caused by the laws of my own nature and partially by an external cause. To the extent that it is caused by the laws of my own nature, I am rational. To the extent that it is caused by an external cause, I am irrational. Only when my ideas are perfectly rational (and consequently represent objects that are perfectly universal, abstract, and timeless) does it look like they are incapable of entering into my deliberations about specific goals and actions. But when I am perfectly rational, i.e., the adequate cause of whatever happens to me, I do not need anything. I am entirely self-sufficient. Spinoza belongs to an ethical tradition—which goes back at least to the ancient Platonists—which holds that to be virtuous is to be like God. For Spinoza, when I am completely rational, and hence completely self-sufficient and the adequate cause of everything that happens to me, I am just like God with respect to his self-sufficiency and self-causation. But of course, as finite creature I am never fully rational. External causes always affect me, and my goal directed actions are always influenced by these external causes. The extent to which they are so, however, can be more or less.

So we can compare two competing ideas—for example, my idea which represents a slice of chocolate cake and which motivates me to eat it, and my idea which represents good health in the future and which pushes me to abstain from eating it—with respect to their relative rationality. The idea which owes more of its power to the laws of my own nature, and thus contributes more reliably to my ability to preserve myself, is more rational than the idea which owes more of its power to the power of external causes. In this case, neither idea is adequate, strictly speaking. So both can represent a particular state and some particular time. But the idea of good health may still be more rational than my idea of the chocolate cake if it depends more on the laws of my own nature. In that case, if I then go ahead and eat the cake, I will have acted akratically since the less rational idea has defeated the more rational idea. If I abstain, I act rationally insofar as the more rational idea defeated the less rational idea.

³⁸ See Alexandre Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1988), ch. 6, and Pierre Macherey, *Introduction à l'Éthique de Spinoza: quatrième partie, la condition humaine* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 102–03.

³⁹ See Don Garrett, "Spinoza's Conatus Argument," in *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes*, eds. O. Koistinen and J. Biro (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), 139.

How does the thought that I will benefit from the pleasures of good health in the future motivate me to adhere to a strict diet today? Spinoza's answer is, quite simply, that the anticipation of pleasure is itself pleasurable.⁴⁰ According to him, we are capable of remembering a past event, or anticipating a future one, only by being in a state qualitatively the same as the one past or future.⁴¹ That is, if perceiving x is identical to an affection or state s of the perceiver, then remembering x is also identical to state s (or one sufficiently like it). Likewise, anticipating x is identical to being in state s . So if s is a sad or joyful passion, then remembering or anticipating x will entail experiencing that passion. In this way, if I anticipate the benefits that I will enjoy tomorrow, then I *ipso facto* derive pleasure from the state of anticipation itself. Simply put, I cannot imagine or anticipate the pleasure without being in that very same pleasurable state. In this respect, anticipation and memory are indistinguishable. (We shall see how Spinoza can account for the difference between them presently when we examine his account of temporal imagination.)

Although the qualitative character of an idea is the same whether it is a perception, a memory, or an anticipation, Spinoza claims, in the first and third of his three psychological principles, that the intensity of an idea fades to the degree that it represents its object as further in the future. We have just seen that intensity means, for Spinoza, causal efficacy. Ideas have less power to bring about their effects the further in the future they represent their objects as being. What accounts for this drop off in intensity or causal power?

In order to see how to answer this question, we need to look more closely at Spinoza's account of time perception. Spinoza begins to distinguish ideas about the future from ideas about the present by noting that ideas about the future do not represent their objects as present. All ideas, *considered in themselves*, represent their objects as present, regardless of whether their objects are in fact present. Only in the context of an external cause incompatible with the present existence of the idea's object, can an idea fail to represent its object as present. Spinoza writes: "the Mind still imagines them [ideas whose objects are not present] always as present to itself, unless causes occur which exclude their present existence."⁴² I assume that here Spinoza does not think that it is enough for these excluding causes to occur, but that it is also necessary for us to be aware of these causes. This recalls Spinoza's account of how we can have the belief that something does not exist: we must have ideas opposed to and stronger than our idea of the thing whose existence we deny.

Spinoza's account of time perception builds upon his associationism. If we once experience two things simultaneously, then if we subsequently encounter one of these things alone, our thoughts spontaneously turn toward the other.⁴³ So if I see Peter and Simon together, the next time I see Peter, I will automatically think of Simon. Likewise, if I experience a certain sequence of events, I will,

⁴⁰ EHIP18. My account of anticipation in Spinoza is indebted to Della Rocca, "Psychology," 223–30.

⁴¹ IIP18D.

⁴² IIP44S.

⁴³ IIP44S.

when confronted again with the first item in that sequence or one sufficiently like it, spontaneously imagine the whole sequence.⁴⁴ So if I saw Peter for the first time yesterday morning, but saw Simon, at noon, and James in the evening, and I see Peter again this morning, I will imagine Simon at noon, and James in the evening. So my imagination of James will be of the future. Objects, regarded by the mind as nonexistent, will thus be represented as existing in the future if they belong to a chain of associations an earlier element of which is represented as presently existing. (Likewise, memories can be distinguished from anticipations in that they belong to a chain of associations whose *later* element is represented as presently existing.)

These considerations allow us to see why Spinoza thinks that the motivational power of a desire grows weaker the longer we expect to have to wait. Our ideas about the future are located in time by a chain of associations which originates with an idea of something currently present. The greater the number of intervening links between the present element and the anticipation, the greater its temporal distance. Each link of the chain together with its predecessors constitutes a complex idea which represents some future state of affairs. This explains why intensity fades as a function of time. If idea A represents some good at time T_1 , and idea B represents some good at T_{1+n} , then the chain of ideas intervening between the idea of the present and the idea of B is longer than the chain linking the present to A. Each link of these chains together with their predecessors composes a complex idea incompatible with the present existence of the future good. So the idea of the future good with the longest chain, i.e., the future good located furthest in the future, will have more opposing ideas to overcome. More of its motivational force will be consumed with the effort of overcoming the countervailing force exerted by the chain of associations that serve to place it in the future. As a result, anticipations grow weaker as their objects recede further into the future. (Memory works along the same principle, except whereas the chain of associations runs forward from the present in the case of anticipations, it runs backward in the case of memory.) Thus we see how the mechanisms of our temporal imagination lead us irrationally to discount future goods.

Now, one might object to Spinoza, what is irrational about this? Surely it is not irrational to discount future goods. Bankers get rich doing it. But why is it rational to do so? It is not that present goods are intrinsically more desirable than future goods. Rather, it is because the future is uncertain and waiting typically involves opportunity costs.⁴⁵ Spinoza recognizes that rational considerations like uncertainty and opportunity costs sometimes lead us to discount future goods.⁴⁶ But, in addi-

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ If I lend you \$100 today, then I may want \$150 back next year. I am in effect choosing \$150 a year from now over \$100 today. If you offered me only \$110, I may very well prefer the \$100 dollars now. Why? Well, the \$110 dollars in the future is less certain. In a year's time, you may not have the money to pay me back. You may be dead. I may be dead. I have to discount the \$110 dollars to reflect this uncertainty. Also, I forgo all the opportunities for investment and consumption that having \$100 dollars now would present. I could buy a bicycle with my \$100 now and get a whole year's enjoyment from it. The \$110 you give me next year might not make up for that loss. I could also invest it elsewhere and get more than \$110 back in a year.

⁴⁶ See, for example, TTP, ch. XVI.

tion to such considerations, Spinoza thinks that we act irrationally to the extent that we additionally discount future goods simply because they are future.⁴⁷

But given Spinoza's insistence that the only end that we rationally pursue is self-preservation, can he consistently maintain that our preferences may not be rationally time-indexed? The way we pursue self-preservation, according to Spinoza, is by maximizing our power of acting. But we would do a very poor job of pursuing this goal if we did not also have preferences as to how that power was temporally distributed. So for example, on Spinoza's account, I should prefer a course of action that results in one unit of power today and ten tomorrow to a course of action that results in five units of power today and five tomorrow, because the former results in greater integrated power with respect to time. But this would be a successful strategy only if I were reasonably sure that while I face little danger today, I will face a great deal tomorrow. If, on the other hand, I had reason to believe that the probability that I will face great danger today and little tomorrow is the same as that I will face little today and a great deal tomorrow, then clearly the latter strategy is superior. That is, successful pursuit of self-preservation will require assigning probabilities to the distribution of danger over time and a willingness to sacrifice power when we predict danger will be relatively low for the sake of power when we predict danger will be relatively high. But this violates Spinoza's requirement that rational desires disregard time.⁴⁸

One possible line of defense for Spinoza would be to claim that success in self-preservation is not measured in terms of duration. That is, x does not more successfully strive for self-preservation than y if and only if x exists for a longer time than does y . Support for something like this might be discerned in the last paragraph of the Preface of Part IV:

by perfection in general I shall understand reality, i.e., the essence of each thing insofar as it exists and produces an effect, having no regard to its duration. For no singular thing can be called more perfect for having persevered in existing for a longer time.

As I understand this passage, perfection is the quality that things have to the extent that they are not limited by external causes.⁴⁹ Thus something is more perfect the more its state and actions are determined by the laws of its own nature alone. To what extent something's state and actions are determined by the laws of its own nature alone cannot be determined by simply looking at the duration of its existence. Through sheer luck, an extremely passive individual whose state and actions are largely dictated by external causes might survive for a very long time indeed. The reason why it is more desirable from the point of view of the conatus to be more perfect, i.e., more active, is that such states more *reliably* or *non-accidentally* determine self-preservative actions, whereas whether less perfect states determine

⁴⁷ It should be noted that this still sets Spinoza apart from modern decision theory. Time-indexed preferences violate none of the axioms of decision theory, which demand only consistency and place no restrictions on the content of desires. Spinoza, however, does not shy away from placing rational restrictions upon the content of desires. Most notably, Spinoza claims that it is irrational to want anything other than self-preservation. In Spinoza's thought, the rational and the good are not independent issues.

⁴⁸ This assumes that self-preservation is, for Spinoza, on/off.

⁴⁹ IV, Preface, G II/208–09.

self-preservative or self-destructive actions partially depends upon factors outside of the individual's control, viz. the nature of external causes. In other words, individuals in less perfect states are more at the mercy of fortune.⁵⁰ Thus, although this passage asserts that *perfection* is not measured by duration, it says nothing about how *self-preservation* is measured. Given this, there is no reason not to take at face value the many passages which suggest that self-preservation is measured by duration.⁵¹

Another way that Spinoza might defend himself would be by pointing out that, according to him, reason perceives things not only *sub specie aeternitatis* but also as necessary. Because we cannot both be unsure of something and regard it as necessary, insofar as we are rational, we never suffer from the kind of uncertainty that could make the latter strategy superior. The problem with this line of defense is that we are never fully rational. In particular, we can never know what Spinoza calls "the common order of nature"—that is, the infinite chain of finite causes which determine any given finite mode to exist, adequately or rationally. So we must always regard finite things as contingent.⁵² Given this, it seems that either the rational requirement that we not time-index our preferences is conditional upon an epistemic requirement (that we have adequate knowledge of the common order of nature) that is never fulfilled, and thus is not binding for us, or this requirement can conceivably result in a sub-optimal strategy for self-preservation, which would violate Spinoza's conatus doctrine. That is, either the conditions for its being binding for us are never met, or it does not aim at self-preservation. I think it safe to say that Spinoza would find neither alternative palatable.

5. NON-IMPULSIVE AKRASIA

Leaving aside these difficulties, I would now like to consider what Spinoza has to say about non-impulsive akrasia. Many of our akratic actions are impulsive. We pursue immediate or imminent gratification, even though we recognize that it is in our long-term interest to abstain. But not all akratic actions are impulsive. Consider the following case taken from Davidson.⁵³ A man is lying in bed, trying to sleep. He suddenly remembers that he did not brush his teeth. But he also realizes that if he gets up now to brush them, he will have a lot of trouble falling asleep and quite likely he will have a sleepless night. He has important business the next day, and being well rested will be vital to its success. He decides that missing one night's brushing is unlikely to have terrible consequences and that it would be better to get to sleep. Despite his better judgment, he akratically gets up and brushes his teeth. What can explain this man's irrational action? Spinoza's account of the distorting influence of temporal distance on motivation clearly will not help, since getting up to brush his teeth is not a case of seeking immediate gratification. He akratically chooses a long term good, healthy teeth, over short-term pleasure, relaxing in bed. Even if the man takes pleasure from acting out of habit (as opposed to healthy teeth), he still prefers a deferred good over an immediate good, since he

⁵⁰ IVP, Preface, G II/205; IVP46S; IVP47S.

⁵¹ IIP8, IIP8D, IVP18S, IVP20S, IVP21.

⁵² IIP30, IIP31.

⁵³ Donald Davison, "How is Weakness of the Will Possible?," in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

is already relaxing in bed and the pleasure of brushing must be deferred at least as long as it takes him to get up and move to the sink.

But the account of akrasia we have been considering so far is only part of Spinoza's explanation of akrasia. To explain cases of non-impulsive akrasia, Spinoza need only advert to principal (2): irrational ideas can easily be more powerful than rational ideas. As we saw earlier, the motivational force of a rational idea is derived from the causal power or conatus defined by the nature of the human being. The motivational force of passions, on the other hand, is derived by a combination of external causes and human nature. Since there is no upper bound on the strength of external causes, their power may exceed ours by any indefinite degree.

Taking the case of the man who gets up and brushes his teeth, we can imagine that he has a rational idea, the intrinsic causal power of which, in conjunction with his ideas about his particular circumstances, pushes him to stay in bed, and an irrational idea, the intrinsic causal power of which pushes him to get up and brush his teeth. Which action will he perform? The answer depends on which idea is more powerful. The power of the rational idea is determined by the man's own nature. The power of the irrational idea is determined partially by the man's own nature and partially by that of the external cause, e.g., the conditioning that produced the habit of brushing his teeth before bed. If the external cause is stronger than the man, then the irrational idea will defeat the rational idea and the man will get out of bed and brush his teeth.

6. AKRASIA AND ACTION

In this section I shall attempt to situate Spinoza's account of akrasia within his account of action. In particular, I shall attempt to show that on Spinoza's account there is an important sense in which the akratic agent genuinely acts.

It might be thought that, strictly speaking, there is no akratic *action* at all, for Spinoza. In IID₂ Spinoza defines 'action' as the production of effects, in or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause. In IID₁, he defines 'adequate cause' (*causa adaequatam*) as any cause "whose effect can be clearly and distinctly perceived through it." 'Partial' or 'inadequate' causes are then defined as those causes whose effects "cannot be understood through it alone." When an individual *x* is active, the essence (i.e., the conatus) of *x* fully determines *x*'s state, condition, or behavior. When *x*'s state and behavior are partially explained by *x*'s essence, and partially by reference to some external cause, then *x* is passive, i.e., *x* suffers passions. Passions have external causes, so we are not the adequate cause of what follows from them. Since Spinoza explains akrasia in terms of passion overcoming reason, it would seem that, under those circumstances, we do not act at all.

We should not be misled by the definition of action into thinking that it is, for Spinoza, all or nothing. On the contrary, as Della Rocca has shown, throughout Parts IV and V of the *Ethics* Spinoza speaks of action as something which admits of degree, and describes the central task of ethical life as a process of acquiring more and more freedom—of becoming more and more active.⁵⁴ To see this, we

⁵⁴ In what follows I am indebted to Della Rocca's "Power," 205–06. Michael Schrijvers argues for the similar claim that activity and passivity lie on a continuum for Spinoza in his *Spinozas Affektenlehre* (Stuttgart: Verlag Paul Haupt, 1989), 180–81.

should begin by noticing that Spinoza uses the term 'action' and its derivatives (*actio, agere, agens*) in both a strong and weak sense. IID₂ defines the strong sense of action: we strongly act when we are the adequate cause of some effect that takes place either inside or outside us. This sense has the rather limited task of distinguishing actions from passions.

Yet even when we are passive—i.e., are under the sway of emotions or passions—we still *do* things. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that the passions determine the overwhelming majority of human actions. This is the weak sense of action. The fact that Spinoza never officially defines a weak sense of action obscures this point somewhat, but consider what Spinoza says in the definition of desire that he gives at the end of Part III: "Desire is man's essence, insofar as it is conceived to be determined, from any given affection of it, to do [*agendum*] something." He further adds that 'affection' means "any constitution of [the human] essence, whether it is innate, or has come from outside." So by this formulation, we can act (*agere*) even if we are determined to do so by an affection or state of our essence that has "come from outside."⁵⁵

Moreover in IIP₁₃S he writes:

in proportion as the actions [*actiones*] of a body depend more on itself alone, and as other bodies concur with it less in acting [*agendo*], so its mind is more capable of understanding distinctly.

Here Spinoza explicitly says that external causes can help produce the actions of a body. Therefore, although such a body acts, it is not the adequate cause of its action.

Furthermore he writes in IVP₅9:

To every action to which we are determined from an affect which is a passion, we can be determined by reason, without that affect.

If we can be determined to an action by an affect which is a passion, then external causes (which are necessary for the production of passions) can help determine our actions. Clearly then, Spinoza often employs the term 'action' in a weak sense which comprehends both 'action' in the strong sense in which the agent must be the adequate cause and also 'action' in the weak sense in which the agent is only a partial cause.

We can illustrate this by means of an example. Say I can lift some heavy object. My own power explains what happens. I am the adequate cause of its being lifted. I act, in the strict sense stated in IID₂. But suppose I am not strong enough to lift some heavy object without the aid of someone else. When we join together, we are strong enough to lift it. I am not as active in this case as I am in the case where I am strong enough to lift it all by myself, but I am not altogether passive either. I do something. My nature still helps to explain what happens. My power is still involved in causing the event to occur. But my causal contribution is only partial.

On Spinoza's account of akrasia, when passion overwhelms reason, the resulting behavior will still count as some kind of action (although not an action in the highest degree), so long as the agent's nature plays a significant role in what she

⁵⁵ IVP₄7, IVP₅4.

does. In general, our natures *will* play a significant role in explaining why external causes affect us with the passions that they do, and hence the behaviors that those passions cause. This is because the same external cause, Spinoza claims, can result, for example, in love in one person but hate in another due to their differing constitutions.⁵⁶ The causal properties of the resulting passion cannot be totally explained by either the essence of the external cause or by the essence of the affected person alone. It is, rather, a function of both the essence of the external cause and the essence of the affected person.⁵⁷ Because the causal properties of any passion are partially explained by the affected agent's nature, any action caused by a passion is partially explained by the agent's nature, and, to that extent, such a passionate agent acts. So, just as I argued previously for the case of rationality, action too comes in degrees for Spinoza.

This has important consequences for Spinoza's account of akrasia. Philosophers have frequently claimed that akratic agents are responsible for what they do. They are free but weak. As such, it makes sense to blame and punish them. One reason why we blame and punish only behavior for which the agent is responsible is that part of the point of blame and punishment is to give wrongdoers a new motive for behaving well. Motives are relevant only when deliberate actions are at issue.

These considerations allow us to distinguish, on Spinoza's account, akratic actions from coerced or compulsive behavior, on the one hand, and non-intentional behavior, on the other. We have seen that, for Spinoza, when an agent's better judgment is overwhelmed by passion, she can nonetheless act if her nature is a significant part of the explanation of what she does. That is, if in order to understand the action in question, we would have to understand the nature of the agent and how it contributed to the piece of bad behavior. In cases where there was nothing in particular about the agent, where anybody would have behaved similarly in the same circumstances, if the external causes were simply overwhelming, there is little point to punishment, since a new motive would probably not be sufficient for counteracting the force of such overpowering external causes. If the external causes in question were not so powerful that giving her a new motive would not help, then punishment would be worthwhile, and we call the agent free but weak.

The same is true of non-intentional behavior. If the bad behavior in question is the result of ignorance, then what is needed is not punishment, but information or evidence. A new motive will not help because my beliefs (setting aside cases of self-deception) are not shaped by desire. And indeed, Spinoza claims, in the course of arguing for toleration, that belief cannot be coerced because fear of punishment cannot affect belief.⁵⁸ Likewise, such punishments cannot do much to prevent accidents, because threatening me with punishments cannot do much to make me less clumsy. (Although they may, in certain cases, serve to make me more careful; accident must therefore be distinguished from negligence.)

⁵⁶ EIIIP₅I, IIP₅ID, IIP₅IS.

⁵⁷ EIVP₅, IVP₅D.

⁵⁸ TTP, ch. 20.

7. RATIONALITY, MORALITY, AND HUMAN NATURE

I would like to end by exploring some of the differences between Spinoza's account of akrasia and certain classical accounts, such as those of Plato and Aristotle, which also explain akrasia in terms of passion overwhelming reason. First, it might appear that Spinoza's main advantage over his classical predecessors is that whereas they partition the soul into discrete parts or faculties, he does not. A psychology based on such a divided soul might be accused of engaging in "homuncular explanation," a charge that Spinoza's more unified account of mind might seem to evade.⁵⁹ I do not think that such an assessment is warranted, for two reasons. First, there is absolutely nothing wrong with homuncular explanation so long as the explanandum is, in fact, composed of homunculi. Dismissing a theory on that basis begs the question. Second, it could be reasonably argued that Spinoza's account of the mind is more, not less, homuncular than divided-soul psychologies. Each individual idea, on Spinoza's view, is itself a locus of conviction and aspiration. Every idea is a belief and a desire. There is no central office of command and control from which individual ideas are selectively endorsed. What the person as a whole believes and wants is arrived at through the composition of the vast collection of beliefs and desires, often at odds with one another, which jointly constitute the mind.

Spinoza's account does, nevertheless, have certain advantages over the psychologies of his predecessors. By the seventeenth century, the paradigm that encompassed faculty psychology was widely viewed as regressive, both conceptually and empirically. Spinoza aspires to what could be described as a mechanistic psychology, parallel under the attribute of thought to the mechanistic physics he endorses under the attribute of extension, and which portrays the mind as an *automa spirituale*.⁶⁰ His account of akrasia is fully consistent with that goal. It does not rely upon any conception of faculties, and it is fully explained by the local interactions between individual ideas and the psychological laws that govern them.

Not only are there differences between Spinoza and his predecessors over the nature of scientific explanation, but his account of akrasia also paints a very different picture of the moral status of the human being. Philosophers have frequently viewed the human being as a parcel of different parts or natures—and as a site of conflict between these parts. The animal contends with the rational, the body with the soul. As we have seen, Spinoza too thinks that conflict between the parts of a human being forms a large part of the drama of a human life. Moreover, he too sees rational control over irrational passions as one of the central moral challenges. But here the similarities end. Other philosophers typically identify the rational and ruling aspect of an individual with a certain subset of natures or parts, relegating

⁵⁹ Some cognitive scientists cheerfully adopt the description 'homuncular explanation' for any explanation of a phenomenon in terms of the subsystems, e.g., mental modules, which execute smaller tasks, or sub-routines, in the service of the larger phenomenon being explained. I am not sure that anyone finds that objectionable in principle. What I mean here by 'homuncular explanation' is explanation in terms of subsystems to which a "minimum rationality" can be attributed. See Ronald de Sousa, "Rational Homunculi," in *The Identities of Persons*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 220–21.

⁶⁰ TdIE II/32.

the other parts to the role of obedience. For example, philosophers who consider the human being a rational animal see it as a bicameral creature—part rational, part animal. In a good human life, the rational rules the animal. We can see Plato, Aristotle, Thomas, and Descartes as all representatives of this tradition.

Spinoza takes an entirely different tack. Instead of identifying the rational and governing aspect of an individual with some subset of its parts, he holds that all innate tendencies are rational. Only desires that are alien—i.e., those whose existence is owed in part to an external cause—are irrational, and require domination. Spinoza's originality lies in holding that no part of an individual has special claim to rationality; that is, no subset of innate needs or tendencies enjoys special privilege. For Spinoza, each part has an equal claim on the individual as a whole. No doubt, human beings are by nature finite creatures, and finite creatures are, by necessity, determined by external causes. So there is a sense in which we are, by our very natures, subject to passions. Nevertheless, there is no passion that we could not, at least in principle, extirpate, since no passion follows directly from our nature. When passion overwhelms reason, as in the case of *akrasia*, what happens is not that an innate but inferior part usurps power, but rather that external causes have intervened, distorting the contours of the agent's desires.