

*The second (September 2022) draft for the forthcoming Spinoza Cambridge Lexicon.  
Please do not quote, but comments are welcome.*

## STRIVING (*CONATUS*)

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The doctrine of striving (*conatus*) as our “actual essence” forms the metaphysical basis for Spinoza’s ethical project. Near the start of the third part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza articulates the doctrine: “Each thing, insofar as it is in itself, strives to persevere in its being [*in suo esse perseverare conatur*]” (E3p6, translation modified). The view that animate things naturally strive to preserve themselves had for centuries been part and parcel of Western philosophy, in particular through the teachings of Stoics, for whom the impulse (*hormê*) to self-preservation forms the basis of a naturalistic ethics. Still, the intellectual landscape had altered by Spinoza’s time in a radical way under the influence of the new mechanical sciences, undermining the teleological understanding of the way in which the world and things in it were ordered. In brief, naturalistic ethics had to be rethought given that it could no longer accommodate the traditional idea of ends.

It should be noted that already quite some time before writing the *Ethics*, Spinoza defends a rather original view of striving pertaining to things. In the *Short Treatise*—most probably written in 1661–62 and only found in the 1850s—he states: “For it is evident that no thing, through its own nature, could strive for its own destruction, but that on the contrary, each thing in itself has a striving [*pooginge*] to preserve itself in its state, and bring itself to a better one” (KV I.5; G I/40). In itself, this statement prefigures Spinoza’s mature view. However, it is embedded in a remarkable philosophical context: Spinoza of the *Short Treatise* also declares that “because there is *no thing which has any power to preserve itself* or to produce anything, the only conclusion left is that God alone is, and must be, the efficient cause of all things” (KV II.16; G I/82, emphasis added). Obviously, the young Spinoza holds a rather occasionalistic view according to which finite things have strictly speaking no power of their own to strive or to be the efficient cause of anything—all power is God’s alone. There can be no doubt that by the time Spinoza crafted the relevant passages of the *Ethics*, he had changed his mind on the issue.

There is yet another particularly notable pre-*Ethics* instance of the *conatus* principle. In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza formulates it as follows: “[T]he supreme law of nature is that each thing strives *to persevere in its state* [*in suo statu*], as far as it can by its own power, and does this, not on account of anything else, but only of itself” (TTP 16.4; G III/189, emphasis added). This signals a move away from occasionalism; but the most notable difference is that instead of “being” (of E3p6) Spinoza here opts for “state.” This difference has received little attention, although it at the very least suggests that still in 1670 Spinoza had a rather modest view of *conatus* amounting to, roughly and merely, existing in the present state. As we will shortly see, here he quite faithfully echoes Descartes; interestingly and perhaps surprisingly, this will prove not to be the case in the *Ethics*.

Spinoza’s final and considered formulation of the *conatus* principle, in E3p6, nevertheless shows signs of debt to the first Cartesian law of nature, “*each thing, insofar as it is in itself, always continues in the same state*” (*Principles of Philosophy* II.37; CSM I, 240, translation modified, emphasis added). It also seems to be influenced by Hobbes’s metaphysics, according to which everything is ultimately explicable in terms of motion, the small beginnings of which Hobbes calls endeavor or *conatus* (*Leviathan* I.6). Neither the Cartesian nor Hobbesian version of striving contains anything teleological in its basic elements. This, together with Spinoza’s ardent denial of divine teleology (E1app), gives us reasons to think that Spinoza believed his *conatus* theory to be, in its essentials, also unencumbered by teleological metaphysics.

The two crucial propositions that contain the core of his theory—E3p6 and p7—are written in Spinoza’s characteristically condensed style. The demonstration of the claim that each thing strives to persevere in its being reads:

For singular things are modes by which God’s attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way (by 1p25c), i.e. (by 1p34), things that express, in a certain and determinate way, God’s power, by which God is and acts. And no thing has anything in itself by which it can be destroyed, or which takes its existence away (by p4). On the contrary, it is opposed to everything which can take its existence away (by p5). Therefore,

as far as it can, and it is in itself [*quantum potest, et in se est*], it strives to persevere in its being, q.e.d. (E3p6d, translation modified)

The demonstration, which consists of four elements (E1p25c, 1p34, 3p4, and 3p5), has been the topic of a lively discussion. Many scholars have stressed the importance of the immediately preceding propositions: for a long time, Spinoza was widely seen (by such scholars as Jonathan Bennett, Edwin Curley, Daniel Garber, and Michael Della Rocca) to derive E3p6 from the conceptual considerations of E3p4 and 3p5 alone. This trend has recently been more or less replaced by a line of interpretation (defended by, e.g., Martin Lin, Valtteri Viljanen, and Gwendolyn Marshall), according to which the *conatus* proposition is primarily about a power that strives against opposition, and that power certainly must, in Spinoza's monistic framework, have God as its source. Thus, the focus has shifted to E1p25c and 1p34, which allow Spinoza to argue that finite "expressions" of an essentially powerful or causally efficacious God are endowed with *conatus*. Here he seems to think that the very notion of expression brings with it the idea that expressions (here: finite things) retain the basic character of what they express (here: God). Thus, given that God is essentially powerful, expressions must be so too.

The point Spinoza wants to drive home in the ensuing proposition is that we are not dealing with a garden-variety feature of things: "The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing" (E3p7). From this it follows that things are strivers by their very essence or nature. For Spinoza's intended audience, the appearance of the notion of essence could hardly be a surprise: the previous proposition does, after all, state that any thing strives to persevere in its being "insofar as it is in itself [*quantum in se est*]," which arguably refers precisely to the thing's essence or nature. Moreover, the concept of essence figures in the immediate ancestry of the *conatus* principle, namely, in E3p4d, which states that "the definition of any thing affirms [...] the thing's essence." In E3p7d, Spinoza first reminds us that things are causally efficacious, or powerful, by their essences (by E1p29 and 1p36); thus, as power, striving is equated with the essence of things. The essence in question is the actual essence (*essentia actualis*) arguably because *conatus* is the power at play in constantly varying circumstances of temporal existence—in contrast to the unchanging and eternal "formal essence [*essentia formalis*]" of things. In other words, although little of what Spinoza says in the

opening pages of the *Ethics* involves anything temporal, the *conatus* principle specifies the way in which intrinsically powerful finite things act under the influence of other finite things.

The consequences of Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine are found in his views on appetite, desire, activity, and teleology. First, Spinoza defines a number of *psychological* concepts in terms of striving:

When this striving is related only to the mind, it is called will; but when it is related to the mind and body together, it is called appetite. This appetite, therefore, is nothing but the very essence of man, from whose nature there necessarily follow those things that promote his preservation. And so man is determined to do those things. Between appetite and desire there is no difference, except that desire is generally related to men insofar as they are conscious of their appetites. So *desire* can be defined as *appetite together with consciousness of the appetite*. (E3p9s)

"Appetite [*appetitus*]" is thus Spinoza's general term for *conatus* of the mind and body (which, by E2p7s, are identical) together; appetites of which we are consciously aware Spinoza in turn calls "desires." They figure prominently in Spinoza's theory of "affects" or emotions: the very first definition of affects explains that "by the word *desire* I understand any of a man's strivings, impulses, appetites, and volitions, which vary as the man's constitution varies, and which are not infrequently so opposed to one another that the man is pulled in different directions and knows not where to turn" (E3defaff1). As our essential striving is directed in varying ways, we desire different things.

Second, striving is intimately linked to what is *good* to us: "From all this, then, it is clear that we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it" (E3p9s). It is not altogether clear what the "all this" refers to; presumably, at least to the claim that willing, desiring, and so on are all forms of *conatus*. However, it is clear that in this passage Spinoza goes decidedly against a central feature of traditional teleological models: as he explains in the opening part of the *Ethics*, people mistakenly believe "that the Gods direct all things for the use of men" (E1app; G II/79). In other words, Spinoza sees final causes as central constituents of a misguided providential

worldview centered on the welfare of human beings, which dictates that there are things good for us “for the sake of which [God] willed to prepare the means” (E1app; G II/80). But Spinoza’s view of the way in which God is and acts is of a decidedly different type, for God’s production of finite things as modifications involves no choice or design. Correspondingly, there are no independent ends or goods for human beings to cognize and to achieve—on the contrary, our essential striving determines what is judged to be good in the first place.

Third, the *conatus* principle amounts to what may be called a *power enhancement* principle. This is expressed in E3p12 and p13, both based on E3p6, which read as follows: “The mind as far as it can, strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the body’s power of acting” (E3p12). “When the mind imagines those things that diminish or restrain the body’s power of acting, it strives, as far as it can, to recollect things which exclude their existence” (E3p13). Our mind does not thus rest content continuing with power-decreasing thoughts but strives to get rid of them and to think of things that increase the body’s, and hence (by E2p7) also the mind’s, power of acting. This is in interesting tension with the fact that the *conatus* principle itself is formulated in a fashion reminiscent of the Cartesian law of motion that is about continuing in the prevailing motion, whatever it may be. Still, there is little doubt that, as E3p12 and p13 testify, Spinoza takes *conatus* principle to amount to striving to increase our power, and this is also nowadays widely acknowledged. Accordingly, it is safe to say that our striving is not merely about persevering in the prevailing state but about asserting our nature and what follows from it as much as circumstances allow (which evidently equals persevering *in our being*). In fact, were this not true, it would be difficult to see on what Spinoza’s ethical project, heavily stressing becoming maximally active, is based. To put it somewhat technically, we strive to produce effects that can be conceived through our own essence alone, which equals activity (E3d2); hence the reference (e.g. in E3p12) to “power of acting.” We do this simply because from any given essence, in itself and unhindered, certain effects follow or “flow” as properties. In this respect, geometrical objects provide the model: from their essences properties were seen to necessarily follow (see 1p17s). It should be noted that be the exact relationship of this doctrine to teleology what it may, it is certainly not teleological in the traditional “full-blown” sense according to which ends are crucial in structuring or determining our essences (as they were in the Peripatetic framework where all things had their place in the grand

providential plan); what we call ends are things that simply flow from our essences, those essences in turn being what they are because they follow from God's nature.

### **Key passages**

E1p16; 1p17s; 1p25c; 1p34; 1p36; 1app; 3d2; 3p4–p7; 3p9; 3p12–p13; KV I.5; II.16; TTP 16.4.

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### **Related entries**

Affect; cause; desire; essence; individual; parallelism; perfection; *Short Treatise*; teleology; usefulness; virtue; will.