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Theory of Conatus

Ethics is a work of a strikingly broad range, beginning with fundamental ontological considerations and ending with explaining the nature of blessedness. It is uncontroversial that there are few stages in the journey more important than the doctrine of striving (*conatus*) as our actual essence; so much of Spinoza's ethical project depends on that doctrine. Slightly after the beginning of the third part of his masterpiece, he declares: 'Each thing, insofar as it is in itself, strives to persevere in its being' (EIIIP6).¹ Any interpretation of a work as a whole depends on the interpretation of its parts, and here we encounter a part whose importance could hardly be overemphasized: the way in which one interprets it—and one unavoidably interprets it in light of one's overall understanding of Spinoza's project—has major implications on how one understands much of what comes after it. So it should be read and interpreted with great care. I will start by delineating the context of the principle, after which I will provide a reading of the two propositions (EIIIP6 and P7) that contain the very core of the theory. This in turn will enable me to explain how Spinoza's theory of *conatus* is connected to his views on desire, activity, and teleology.

The Context of the Principle

When Spinoza arrives to the scene, the view that animate things naturally strive to preserve themselves had for centuries been part and parcel of Western philosophy most importantly through the teachings of Stoics, for whom the impulse (*hormê*) to self-preservation forms the basis of a naturalistic ethics.² What is more, Spinoza begins his ethical theorizing by telling us how our basic striving is manifested as desire and will (EIIIP9 Sch) before discussing such notions as virtue and the good (EIV D1 and D8)—thereby proceeding precisely in the order customary in ancient moral philosophy, naturalistic in its basic orientation, where ethical theorizing was to begin by psychology and not by ethical ideals.³

These affinities with ancient theories notwithstanding, the intellectual landscape had altered by Spinoza's time in a radical way with the breakthrough of the new mechanical sciences: most importantly, the teleological view of the way in which the world and things in it were ordered was under strong pressures to which Spinoza was quite sensitive.⁴ In brief, naturalistic ethics had to be rethought given the questionability of final ends. The way in which Spinoza's *conatus* principle, cited above, is formulated betrays its debt to the Cartesian first law of nature, which reads: '[E]ach thing, insofar as it is in itself, always continues in the same state' (Descartes, 1985, I, 240).⁵ It also seems to echo Hobbes's metaphysics, according to which everything is ultimately explicable in terms of motion, the small beginnings of which is endeavour (Hobbes, 1985, I.6). Neither of these doctrines contains anything teleological in their basic elements. Together with Spinoza's ardent denial of divine teleology (*EI App*), this gives one reason to think that Spinoza believed the *conatus* theory to be, in its essentials, unencumbered by teleological metaphysics. That he might well be right about this does not mean that the issue of teleology would thereby be over and done with, as we will see in what follows.⁶ But it can be safely said that contextualizing the *conatus* theory is not particularly hard, or controversial: it can be said to express in a new intellectual climate a doctrine that is part of a long and venerable tradition concerning the natural operations of things. This should not be taken to mean that Spinoza would here be somehow unoriginal. Already from the outset, it is clear that his approach is radical in the way it takes elements from doctrines pertaining to the material world and to animate entities and applies them to all of Nature: the *conatus* principle is a completely general metaphysical principle, applying to all finite things of all attributes.

The Key Argument

The crucial twin propositions – *EIIIP6* and *P7* – are written in Spinoza's trademark condensed style, which increases the interpretive challenge. Here we should pay attention not only to their argumentative ancestry, referred to in the demonstrations, but also to their progeny, especially to what Spinoza takes himself to be entitled to derive directly from them. In a way, *EIIIP6* is the nexus through which certain key tenets of the opening part of the *Ethics* find their way to the latter part of the work. Its demonstration reads:

For singular things are modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way (by *IP25 Cor*), i.e. (by *IP34*), 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. (EIIIP6 Dem, translation modified)

The demonstration, which consists of four elements, has been the topic of a lively discussion. Jonathan Bennett accused Spinoza of committing a number of fallacies in deriving this doctrine.⁷ This marked the starting point of the discussion;⁸ but it should be noted that Bennett also set its orientation in the sense that Spinoza was widely seen to derive EIIIP6 from the immediately preceding conceptual considerations (i.e. EIIIP4 and P5) *alone*. Perhaps because the notion of power—long in disrepute—has recently been rehabilitated in analytic metaphysics,⁹ the beginning of the demonstration invoking God's power does not feel as problematic, or otiose, as it did before;¹⁰ be this as it may, that the demonstration builds on Spinoza's dynamistic tendencies seems to be nowadays not only quite widely acknowledged but regarded sympathetically.¹¹ Obviously, we are dealing with a *power that strives against opposition*, and that power certainly must, in Spinoza's framework, have God as its source. More exactly, Spinoza combines EIP25 Cor with EIP34 to claim that finite expressions of essentially powerful or causally efficacious God are endowed with *conatus*. But here we encounter an assumption that has received little attention: even if one grants, as one should in the Spinozistic framework, that God-or-Nature as a whole is powerful, one might still doubt whether the same holds for all its finite modifications as well.

As I see it, Spinoza could alleviate this worry at least in two ways. First, he could say 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).¹² Thus, given that God is essentially powerful, expressions must be so too—simply to qualify as genuine expressions. Second, the claim that God is essentially powerful is *based* on the claim that God is the cause of itself (EIP11) and of infinitely many finite things as properties (EIP16). The reference to EIIIP5 could be perceived as echoing the latter proposition, as it says that entities (or properties) of a contrary nature cannot be in the same subject (or thing); it thus invokes the very same thing/property structure as does EIP16. EIIIP4, in turn, occupies a territory similar to that of EIP11 Dem, the claim that God necessarily exists in virtue of his essence, for it concerns the possible causes of a thing's existence and non-existence and declares that '[n]o thing can be destroyed except through an external cause' (EIIIP4) because 'the definition of any thing affirms, and does not deny, the thing's essence, or it posits the thing's essence, and does

not take it away' (EIIIP4 Dem). And since 'to the essence of any thing belongs that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken away' (EII D2), the upshot—easy to understand and quite uncontroversial for Spinoza's contemporaries—is that because a definition posits the essence and essence posits the thing, the essence of a thing cannot destroy or depose the thing; if it could, that would mean it was not a genuine essence (and definition) to begin with. Read from this angle, EIIIP4 and P5 thus latch onto the very same thing/essence/property ontology that underpins the claim that God is essentially powerful. Most importantly, EIP16 (on which the thesis concerning God's power is partly based) and EIIIP5 (on which the *conatus* principle is partly based) both invoke the notion that a thing, or a subject, has properties—evidently in both cases in virtue of its essence. So Spinoza could use this line of thought to defend the thesis that finite things are powerful just in the same basic sense as God is.

Striving and Essence

Even if the argument for the *conatus* principle were not as airtight as some would like, the aforesaid shows that, within his framework, Spinoza has solid grounds to think that he has given his readers enough reasons to endorse the principle. The next point he wants to drive home is that we are not dealing with a garden-variety feature of things: 'The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing' (EIIIP7). So things are strivers by their very essence or nature. For Spinoza's intended audience, the appearance of the notion of essence is hardly a surprise: the previous proposition does, after all, state that any thing strives to persevere in its being *insofar as it is in itself* ('*quantum in se est*'). It has been shown that this phrase was in Spinoza's time used to refer to what things do 'according to their nature';¹³ moreover, keeping in mind that the concept of essence figures in the immediate ancestry of the *conatus* principle (EIIIP4 Dem), the ground is already prepared for introducing the notion of essence. Still, the demonstration of the proposition is important enough to be quoted in full:

From the given essence of each thing some things necessarily follow (by IP36), and things are able [to produce] nothing but what follows necessarily from their determinate nature (by IP29). So the power of each thing, or the striving by which it (either alone or with others) does anything, or strives to do anything—i.e. (by IIP6), the power, or striving, by which it strives to persevere in its being, is nothing but the given, or actual, essence of the thing itself, q.e.d. (EIIIP7 Dem)

The demonstration is in fact quite simple. The beginning reminds us that things are causally efficacious, or powerful, by their essences alone (by EIP29 and P36); thus as power, striving is to be equated with the essence of things.¹⁴ The essence in question is precisely the *actual* essence (*essentia actualis*) presumably because *conatus* is the power at play in constantly varying circumstances of temporal existence; the contrast is, I think, to the unchanging and eternal formal essence (*essentia formalis*) of things.¹⁵ In other words, little of what Spinoza says in the opening part of the *Ethics* involves anything temporal, but the *conatus* principle specifies the way in which intrinsically powerful finite things act under the unswerving influence of other finite things, or 'external causes'.

Desire and Constitution

With regard to the immediate progeny of the *conatus* propositions, I would like to make three points, beginning with examining the grounds for the claim that our mind strives both insofar as it has inadequate and insofar as it has adequate ideas (EIIIP9). Spinoza defends this proposition by pointing out that '[t]he essence of the mind is constituted by adequate and inadequate ideas' (EIIIP9 Dem). The idea here is that under the influence of external causes, our actual essence is continually constituted anew, which, given that our essence is striving, results in corresponding changes in our causal efficacy. This topic has not received too much attention in the literature, but I think it is important. 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' (EIII Def aff1); clearly, Spinoza is sensitive to the fact that our existence is often a troubled affair, and the doctrine of striving as desire forms an important part of his view of the dynamics of actual existence.

Desire, one of the three basic human emotions, is the striving 'related to the mind and body together' of which we are conscious (EIIIP9 Sch).¹⁶ And precisely the actual constitution of the essence determines our desire: '[D]esire is the very essence, or nature, of each [man] insofar as it conceived to be determined, by whatever constitution he has, to do something' (EIIIP56 Dem). All this seems to take place with the same necessity we can find in geometry; much of what Spinoza writes later in *Ethics* III about our operations and emotions has as its paradigm the way in which a certain property (e.g. fulfilling the Pythagorean theorem) follows from the essence of a figure constituted in a certain way (e.g. a triangle that is right-angled).¹⁷ In any case, the

notion of constitution of essences is obviously designed to be the philosophically adequate analysis of the way in which a thing can remain numerically the same (the essence stays the same) while undergoing numerous changes (the constitutions vary).¹⁸ But perhaps even a more weighty consequence of all this is that human action is about being determined to desire something specific through varying constitutions of an essence the bearer of which we call 'a human being'.¹⁹

Striving and Goodness

There are few lines of the *Ethics* more often quoted than the following:

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. (EIII^p9 Sch)

It is not altogether clear what the 'all this' is from which this should be clear; presumably from what Spinoza has earlier said in the same scholium: that willing, desiring, and so on are all forms of *conatus* introduced a few propositions earlier. There is thus no shortage of interpretive leeway. But it would be, I think, very difficult to deny that here Spinoza goes decidedly against one central feature of traditional teleological models, what has been called the thesis of explanatory goodness.²⁰ On Spinoza's understanding of it, people believe in final causes because they maintain 'that the gods direct all things for the use of men' (EI App); in other words, he sees final causes as part and parcel of a misguided providential worldview in which God has a grand plan, very much centred on the well-being of human beings, which dictates that there are goods as final causes 'for the sake of which he [God] willed to prepare the means' (EI App). Thus, in this framework, given the ends chosen by God, things with natures suitable to produce those ends must be created.²¹ In this brand of essentialism, final causes as goods are ontologically prior to essences, for they determine the kind of essences there must be. But Spinoza's essentialism is of a decidedly different type: God's production of finite things as modifications involves no choice or planning, and the essence of those modifications, in turn, is in the actual world striving that manifests itself as desires and appetites, depending to an important degree on the way in which a particular striving essence is constituted; once the constitution is in place, the desire necessarily results and its object is called good. Thus, '[w]hat is called a final cause is nothing but a human appetite insofar as it is considered as a principle, or primary cause, of some thing' (EIV Pref); our striving determines what is judged to be good in the first place.

Striving and Power Enhancement

Finally, there are *EIIIP12* and *P13*, which are not only notable in themselves but also the veritable testing stone for any interpretation of the *conatus* doctrine. They read as follows:

The mind as far as it can, strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the body's power of acting. (*EIIIP12*)

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. (*EIIIP13*)

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

So long as the mind imagines anything of this kind, the power both of mind and of body is diminished or restrained (as we have demonstrated in *P12*); nevertheless, the mind will continue to imagine this thing until it imagines something else that excludes the thing's present existence (by *IIP17*), that is (as we have just shown), the power both of mind and of body is diminished or restrained until the mind imagines something else that excludes the existence of this thing; so the mind (by *P9*), as far as it can, will strive to imagine or recollect that other thing, *q.e.d.* (*EIIIP13 Dem*)

The demonstration begins by reminding us that, ultimately by *EIIP7*, the power of mind and body go hand in hand; for the present purposes, there is nothing special about this. The middle part of the demonstration states that when the mind thinks about something that decreases its power, it cannot but continue thinking about it unless there is something else that takes it away. As the reference to *EIIP17* indicates, this claim is based on the mechanist strain in Spinoza's psychology. The final part of the demonstration is the most interesting one: based on *EIIIP9*, which in turn is based on the *conatus* principle, Spinoza claims that the mind will strive to imagine the thing that opposes the thing the idea of which decreases our power. The claim is thus that our mind does not rest content continuing with the power-decreasing thought but strives to get rid of it. It is thus understandable that *EIIIP12* and *P13* are commonly read as saying that we strive to increase our power; but this is striking given that the principle itself is reminiscent of the Cartesian law of motion that is about continuing in the prevailing motion, whatever it may be.

That *conatus* amounts to, at least in many if not most circumstances, striving for power-enhancement is confirmed by a much later definition central for Spinoza's whole ethical enterprise and with a direct reference to the *conatus* propositions:

By virtue and power I understand the same thing, that is (by III P7), virtue, insofar as it is related to man, is the very essence, or nature, of man, insofar as he has the power of bringing about certain things, which can be understood through the laws of his nature alone. (EIV D8)

But things, or effects, ‘which can be understood through the laws’ of a human being’s nature *alone* are *actions*: ‘[W]e act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, that is (by D1), when something in us or outside us *follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone*’ (EIII D2, emphasis added). The only conclusion to draw is that our striving is not merely about persevering in the prevailing state but about acting—causing effects that follow from our nature alone. In fact, were this not true, it would be difficult to see on what Spinoza’s ethical project, heavily stressing activity as it does, is based.²²

Striving, Activity, and Teleology

The linkage between striving and activity calls for a reassessment of the nature of the *conatus* principle; we must take another look at the key twin propositions. Much in them—and in the definitions of activity and virtue—revolves around natures or essences. We have seen that the idea behind the claim that striving is our actual essence is that essences are causally efficacious, and the very same idea underpins the notions of activity and virtue. To put things in as uncontroversial terms as possible, things strive to cause effects according to their natures; to the extent they succeed in this, they are active. But from these non-contentious claims it follows that finite things strive to more than prolongation of their psychophysical existence; they strive to act, or cause effects that are actions, conceived through their own essence alone. Moreover, they do this not because they would aim at any goods, or ends, separate from their essence; they do this simply because from any given essence, considered in itself, effects as properties follow or ‘flow’. Nothing suggests, or requires, that there would be anything teleological in this any more than there is anything teleological in the production of finite things: ‘From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes’ (EIP16) is one of the propositions (and arguably the most important one) Spinoza invokes when he argues that ‘Nature has no end set before it’ (EI App). If there is (and I do think there is) a model of causality Spinoza has here in mind, it is the one provided by geometrical objects, from whose essence properties were seen to necessarily follow, without final ends involved.²³ Sometimes Spinoza refers to this, quite appropriately given the philosophical tradition, as emanation.²⁴ Moreover, he clearly sees this to go seamlessly together with—probably even to stem from—the

thing/essence/property ontology depicted above, and as that ontology applies to finite things just as it does to God, this gives additional support to the interpretation according to which Spinoza saw no teleology to be involved in the essential causal efficacy of things.

Indeed, the view that causality is fundamentally about effects following from an essence is the reason why Spinoza discards the thesis of explanatory goodness: we strive to bring about certain effects in virtue of our essences not because they would have some independent goodness but because those effects are simply the effects that follow from our essence alone. Of course, Spinoza admits that they can be called 'good' – but only posterior to us striving, or desiring, or wanting them (EIIIP9 Sch). But even if our essential striving determines what is good in the first place, it may be – and has been – asked, is this kind of striving to freely realize one's own nature not teleological?²⁵ Well, no and yes. It is not teleological in the sense that any ends would be involved in structuring or determining our essences (as they were in the 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. Moreover, the general notion of striving to be as active as possible and thereby (in Spinoza's terms) as perfect as possible is just one *ingredient* in traditional ('full-blown') teleological accounts, which also contain specific ends as perfections to be realized by essences;²⁶ indeed, it is not clear to me in what sense this particular ingredient Spinoza shares with Aristotelian scholastics is, in itself, teleological.

However, if teleology is not understood in an ontologically robust sense as a doctrine concerning the very make-up of things but merely as a form of explanation which 'purports to explain an event, process, or state of affairs in terms of a likely or possible consequence of that event, process, or state of affairs',²⁷ it would be difficult – and probably unnecessary – to deny that the *conatus* doctrine allows teleological explanations.²⁸ Most famously, '[w]e strive to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to Joy, and to avert or destroy what we imagine is contrary to it, or will lead to Sadness' (EIIIP28) seems rather straightforwardly to license explaining at least some of our strivings in terms of their consequences. But even here, *what it is that brings us joy or sadness* ultimately depends on what our essence is and what (non-teleologically) follows from it to the extent we are 'in ourselves', acting from our own nature alone. The thing/essence/property structure of a thing determines what exactly those things that follow from its nature are and what the thing strives 'for' when hindered from acting freely.

Conclusion

To conclude, I hope to have shown not only that Spinoza's theory of *conatus* forms an original part of a venerable tradition in Western philosophy but that it follows quite naturally from his ontology in which things are powerful because they are endowed with essences from which things follow. As such, the theory is well-equipped to form the engine of Spinoza's theory of action, emotions, and virtue—a theory according to which the optimal form of human striving amounts to forming adequate ideas and a state of the most enduring joy acquirable for finite human beings.²⁹

NOTES

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- 1 Translation modified.
 - 2 On this, see Brad Inwood's (1985), esp. Ch. 6, classic study. Indeed, it is a striking evidence of the appeal and prevalence of this view that still such a 'critical' modern reformer as Kant (1996), 395, sees organized beings 'constituted purposively for life', by which he means that their vital force manifests itself as a faculty of desire in virtue of which living beings instinctively strive to satisfy needs, thereby aiming at self-preservation. See Kant (1996), 395–396; (1996b), 420.
 - 3 Brennan (2003), 258.
 - 4 This does not mean that all kinds of teleology and the idea of providential design would have been simply discarded by early modern mechanists; for an instructive recent account of this, see McDonough (2011), 184–188, 200.
 - 5 Translation modified.
 - 6 Garrett (1999) is the classic paper defending a teleological reading of the *conatus* theory. See also Andrea Sangiacomo's contribution to this volume.
 - 7 Bennett (1984), Ch. 10.
 - 8 See e.g. Garber (1994); Della Rocca (1996); Garrett (2002); Lin (2004); Viljanen (2011), Ch. 4.
 - 9 See e.g. Ellis (2001); Marmodoro (2010).
 - 10 It should be noted that the concept of power has never been considered similarly problematic in the French tradition, as evince already such classic readings as Deleuze (1992 [1968]) and Matheron (1969).
 - 11 For a good example of this, see Marshall (2013), Ch. 3.
 - 12 For a more detailed treatment of this, see Viljanen (2011), 98–100.
 - 13 Cohen (1964), esp. 147.
 - 14 For an account of how Spinoza's essentialism developed from the early *Short Treatise* to the *Ethics*, see Viljanen (2015).
 - 15 This is the mainstream view (see e.g. Garrett, 2009); for a differing one, see Lærke (2015). For more on the distinction between temporality and eternity, see Fredrika Spindler's contribution to this volume.
 - 16 For Spinoza's theory of affects, see Alexander Douglas's contribution to this volume; for his account of consciousness, see Eugene Marshall's contribution.
 - 17 For a fuller account of this, see Viljanen (2011), Ch. 6.

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- ¹⁸ We should appreciate how radically Spinoza's solution here differs, despite the shared background of essentialism, from the Aristotelian theory of substantial and accidental forms.
- ¹⁹ For species as beings of reason (*entia rationis*), see Hübner (2015).
- ²⁰ To my knowledge, Jeffrey McDonough (2011) has introduced this thesis to current scholarship.
- ²¹ See also the beginning of Sangiacomo's contribution to this volume.
- ²² For more on this, see Viljanen (2014).
- ²³ For more on this, see esp. Viljanen (2011), Ch. 1, but also Hübner (2015).
- ²⁴ '[I]t emanates from the necessity of the divine nature' (*Ep* 75; see also *Ep* 43).
- ²⁵ See Schmid (2013), 362.
- ²⁶ I would like to thank John Carriero for helping me in developing this point.
- ²⁷ McDonough (2011), 180.
- ²⁸ On this, see also Carriero (2005), 146–147.
- ²⁹ I would like to thank John Carriero, Markku Keinänen, Olli Koistinen, Peter Myrdal, Sakari Ollitervo, Mika Perälä, Arto Repo, Matti Saarni, Andrea Sangiacomo, and Justin Steinberg for their very helpful comments on this chapter. Moreover, I would like to acknowledge that the work on this chapter has been financially supported by the Academy of Finland (project number 275583).