

Suicide and Self-sacrifice in Spinoza's Philosophy

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*“Much is esteemed more highly by life than life itself; yet
out of esteeming itself speaks —will to power!”*

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

ABSTRACT

In this thesis I aim to delve into the debate of Spinoza's metaphysics with respect to the possibility or impossibility of suicide and —as a concomitant topic— *self-sacrifice*, and whether his statements are properly explained given his discursive abstractness. I explore his metaphysics of individual modes and the conatus theory by discussing both his epistemology and his theory of freedom. I argue that self-sacrifice can be conceived as a form of behavior that is systematically distinct from suicide and which can be described as a free or rational action in Spinozistic terms. The essay is developed throughout three chapters. The first focuses on the main exposition of the conatus theory in the *Ethics* in E3p4-E3p7. The second chapter offers a brief discussion of the criticisms and analyses of the conatus theory by J. Bennett, D. Garrett, and A. Youpa. I partially defend the consistency of the conatus theory by developing a distinction of *immediate* and *mediated* consequences of modes: the immediate is what is always understood to be adequately caused by a mode and is in complete harmony with its essential activities or processes; mediated consequences are those that require the intervention of external modes to explain the effects of the original mode in question. Afterwards, still in the second chapter, I move to examine Spinoza's theory of the three 'kinds of knowledge' as instrumental in understanding the obscure or vague formulation of the conatus theory. In the third chapter I move to employ the vagueness of the conatus theory in conjunction with my distinction of immediate and mediate consequences in order to formulate a concept of free or rational self-sacrifice in Spinozistic terms. I create —and focus on— an example

of an expecting mother and the possibility of her dying by giving birth to the child: I argue that she can 'sacrifice' herself in order to bring the pregnancy to terms and still be understood to have made such a decision freely; i.e., that she can freely or rationally sacrifice herself. I conclude that from this understanding for the possibility of rational self-sacrifice within Spinoza's philosophy, it would be prudent to shift our description of Spinoza as an 'egoist' and seriously reconsider the ethical social consequences of his metaphysics.

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INTRODUCTION

After confronting Spinoza's *Ethics*, the reader can be left with conflicting feelings. The *Ethics* is at one time a highly comprehensive work of philosophy —ranging from metaphysics, all the way through theories of epistemology, physics, psychology, and politics, up to ethics. However, it is at another time an incomplete achievement: the *Ethics* can appear so abstract as to seem to offer few truly specific or operational theories of reality. This concern with abstractness and inapplicability is one of the background issues faced in this brief research project, though not merely as a negative characteristic of the obscurity of many of its proposals, but also as constitutive of the interpretative richness it allows. Beyond this, and more specifically, I aim to delve into the debate of Spinoza's metaphysics with respect to the possibility or impossibility of suicide and —as a concomitant topic— *self-sacrifice*, and whether his statements are properly explained given his discursive abstractness.

This research topic is derivative of one of Spinoza's pivotal philosophical concepts: the *conatus*, i.e., a *striving* or *tendency* in all things to persevere (yet, the meaning or goal of said 'persevering' is one of the interpretative tasks I undertake). Moreover, Spinoza argues that this *conatus* is the essence of all modes of substance¹ and how we begin to understand what they are in themselves: perpetually active entities that always express in a certain way the power of God

¹ Della Rocca (2008) suggests that we can extend the *conatus* concept to also describe the essence of God. pp.152-3; however, Spinoza never explicitly speak of God's *conatus*.

under some attribute of God (E1def5, E1p25c). Moreover, it is no exaggeration to say that the conatus concept is at the heart of all of Spinoza's work insofar as it is foundational to Spinoza's theory of virtue. Its importance should continually stand out to all readers of the *Ethics* as they become aware that the conatus is fundamental for explaining the behavior of all kinds of entities, and —given Spinoza's particular project in the *Ethics*— to explain human life.

In this project, however, I am interested in a very specific subset of assertions that are either foundational to —or immediate consequences of— the conatus: I am interested in other potential consequences that follow from Spinoza's denial of any possibility for any entity to self-destruct in virtue of its essence alone; i.e., in virtue of its conatus. Hence, we may acquire a deeper understating of his overall philosophy by a careful approach to Spinoza's clarifications on issues that are deeply connected to the conatus, such as suicide (e.g., E3p4, E4p20sch) and lethally radical honesty (E4p72sch). Those familiar with Spinoza's philosophy, nonetheless, may consider this to be a nonissue: our author explicitly states that suicide is logically impossible. However, I will make an effort to show that Spinoza might have said too little on the topic; and that death, suicide and self-sacrifice might not be as easily identifiable as they can seem in common sense discourse, hence allowing us the possibility to derive further unexpected consequences from his philosophy. I believe that in fleshing out what suicide and self-sacrifice can amount to within his framework, we simultaneously discover much of the richness —and the limits— of his philosophy.

In other words, I will try to show that Spinoza's metaphysics and conatus concept are sufficiently underdetermined to allow for additional implications in the realm of suicide and self-sacrifice, consequences that Spinoza himself did not derive. This is not to say, however, that all additional derivations can be accurate. I will defend one interpretation over others so as to allow for the possibility of positing the topic of self-sacrifice within this framework. At this point I will link much of my arguments with recent work by Andrew Youpa², where he explains some of the misunderstandings by several important Spinoza scholars within the project that is interpreting the conatus theory. Youpa's main contribution in the debate is to substitute discussions on 'self-preservation' with the term 'perfection-enhancement', which opens the way for us to see that the conatus doctrine need not imply a tendency to mere existence extended in time, but, instead, to a more 'perfect' or 'complete' existence that is not necessarily fulfilled by its temporal duration.

Having this in mind, I will maintain that Spinoza's explicit metaphysics does not rule out completely the possibility for free or rational 'self-sacrifice', even though Spinoza's own inclinations could have been to argue otherwise. Perhaps regrettably, Spinoza never spoke of self-sacrifice within his work. It is possible that he would think that such a term could only denote a specific form of suicide. However, in this essay I will attempt to show that Spinoza's metaphysics provides us with the tools to develop an explanation of behavior that could be adequately named 'self-sacrifice' and not be a mere subset of suicidal conduct. In any case, I

² Youpa (2003).

believe that the topic of self-sacrifice may be one of the most profound problems one can tackle through Spinoza's philosophy: it is a dilemma that brings to bear most of his fundamental metaphysics and philosophical psychology to respond to a primary human concern: the issue of the limits of rational or virtuous behavior. The whole of this interpretative project is carried out along three chapters.

The first chapter will offer an overview of the various places in Spinoza's *Ethics* where the conatus and suicide are discussed. Here I concentrate in Spinoza's own words, to see how these concepts are employed and in what context. Moreover, I explain how the notion of conatus is undetermined due to Spinoza's own acknowledgment that he cannot offer an operational description of individuals. I show the various points at which Spinoza reveals his ignorance and the limits of his concepts in order to determine what would be the complete essence or conatus of any specific or actual entity.

The second chapter will offer an overview of interpretations and attacks on the conatus theory and concomitant topics by various recognized Spinoza scholars. Yet, after analyzing these authors' contributions and Youpa's useful suggestion for change of vocabulary in describing the conatus, I argue that there is an additional reason for miscomprehensions of the conatus in the literature: not distinguishing between the three kinds of knowledge that Spinoza mentions in his *Ethics*. I try to show that it is necessary to determine whether the conatus concept is in fact defined in the *Ethics* from an abstract perspective that limits the way Spinoza can explain himself to his readers (i.e., whether the conatus is defined and employed

from what he calls the “second kind of knowledge”, which only offers qualities common to many things and exclusive to none).

Finally, the third chapter, informed by the discussion in the previous two, offers a series of conjectures as to the limits of Spinoza’s theory of suicide and what coherent interpretation can be developed stemming from these limits. Note, however, that this interpretation will not be submitted as the only possible reading of the issue, but merely as one of the various possible views that can be consistent with the foundations that Spinoza assembled. Given that —as I will argue— various key concepts remain underdetermined in Spinoza philosophy, I wouldn’t venture to insist that my reading is unique in its being able to cohere with what Spinoza already offered. In the end I will again explain how the kind of knowledge from which the conatus is expressed is critical for the possibility of inferring the additional unanticipated consequence from the conatus theory: the possibility of free self-sacrifice.

The three chapters are then connected in the following way. The first focuses on Spinoza’s ontology and its problematic abstractness with respect to the conatus and the notions of individual. The second chapter tackles the best-known criticisms of the conatus theory by shifting the discussion to Spinoza’s epistemology. This shift is necessary for explaining why Spinoza’s description of the conatus and individuals remain so difficult and why they offer little in terms of unambiguous descriptions of actual entities. The third chapter then points to Spinoza’s theory of freedom and how it can be connected to our highly abstract understanding of any given individual given Spinoza’s epistemology: how the

indeterminateness of the conatus concept affects our understanding of what kinds of actions are 'free', including what I later label 'free self-sacrifice'.

CHAPTER 1. CONATUS IN SPINOZA'S OWN WORDS

In the following sections I shall offer an overview of the main locations where Spinoza employs or defines the conatus concept and concomitant topics. However, only in the second and third chapter shall I offer detailed arguments for how one can expand upon them. For now I shall point out peculiarities of each deployment and explain the significance of their use in each stage.

The main purpose of this chapter is to begin to illustrate how the conatus doctrine is related to our more general topic: suicide and self-sacrifice. However, given that self-sacrifice is a topic that Spinoza never seems to tackle explicitly, we will now limit ourselves to a discussion of suicide and self-destruction. Only by the third chapter shall we have the conceptual tools that allow for a substantiated and systematic distinction between self-destruction or suicide, and rational self-sacrifice.

1.1 Ethics

The *Ethics* is considered by most as Spinoza's magnum opus, and where nearly all his foundational beliefs are expressed and developed. Its complete title in Latin is *Etica ordine geometrico demonstrata*, which can at once be distracting and intimidating. It is significant to point out its title given how discussions on this piece frequently focus more on the metaphysical theories and less in its ethical proposals. This is understandable given how the *Ethics* is composed: it begins with a series of metaphysical propositions (part I of the *Ethics*) and moves on to argue

for his theory of mind and knowledge (part II) until it reaches his theory of affects, bondage, and freedom (parts III, IV and V respectively). As the title suggests, Spinoza's propositions on any given topic throughout the *Ethics* frequently rely directly on previous statements.³ Hence, if the metaphysics constitute the first part of the book, then much of the rest must find support in his metaphysical theories. However, the goal of the book as a whole is not to simply offer an interesting and coherent worldview, but to develop —as the title aptly points out— a theory for life, an ethics: a philosophy that may help us in directing our affairs and achieving the highest degree of *blessedness*.

Yet, among the numerous concepts that he develops and employs throughout the *Ethics*, one cannot overestimate the importance that the conatus plays for his project. It is the main concept that allows Spinoza to bind his metaphysics of nature to the human condition, and ultimately to his ethical theory. Coincidentally, the conatus is presented and defined for the first time in the *Ethics* in its third or middle part, as if fastening together two halves of a book: tying together his metaphysics and epistemology to his theories of bondage and freedom.

1.1.1 Foundations of the conatus concept

To begin to understand this concept of conatus, it is convenient to focus on its more common English translations: *striving* or *tendency*; i.e., as some form of

³ Note, however, that many exceptions can be found to this argumentative interdependence. This is especially the case with many of his *scholia*, where he explains propositions, but also adds much information that is never offered in geometrical fashion nor systematically defended.

endeavor.⁴ In common sense discourse, all these terms are transitive, one not only *strives* or *tends* or *endeavors*, but one *strives* or *tends* or *endeavors* to do something. For now, this observation is appropriate and sufficient to begin to appreciate the sense in which the conatus doctrine is first expressed. However, before the initial explicit mention of the *conatus*, Spinoza offers two basic propositions that set the foundations for this concept.⁵ Moreover, the whole notion is originally developed along four consecutive propositions, though now I focus only on these first two.

E3p4: *Nothing can be destroyed except through an external cause.*⁶

E3p5: *Things are of contrary nature, that is, cannot be in the same subject, insofar as one can destroy the other.*⁷

The first of these propositions is unusual within the *Ethics* because it is the only proposition in the entire book that does not have a ‘proper’ demonstration (i.e., the demonstration itself makes no reference to previous definitions, axioms or other propositions). Spinoza merely tells the reader that this proposition should be self-evident given that “the definition of anything affirms, and does not deny,

⁴ Nadler (2006) says that all three are adequate translations for conatus, but mainly employs ‘striving’, as is the convention.

⁵ Spinoza previously employed the concept of conatus in his *Theological Political Treatise* (e.g., *TTP* ch. 16, sec. 1), but he offered no proof or detailed explanation for his use.

⁶ E3p4 in Latin: ***Nulla res nisi a causa externa potest destrui.***

Demonstration: This proposition is evident through itself. For the definition of a thing affirms, and does not deny, the thing’s essence, or it posits the thing’s essence, and does not take it away. So while we attend only to the thing itself, and not to external causes, we shall not be able to find anything in it which can destroy it, q.e.d.

⁷ E3p5 in Latin: ***Res eatenus contrariae sunt naturae, hoc est, eatenus in eodem subiecto esse nequeunt, quatenus una alteram potest destruere.***

Demonstration: For if they could agree with one another, or be in the same subject at once, then there could be something in the same subject which could destroy it, which (by E3p4) is absurd. Therefore, things and so on, q.e.d.

the thing's essence [...] so while we attend only to the thing itself, and not to external causes, we shall not be able to find anything in it which can destroy it."

This is one of the many controversial assumptions displayed by Spinoza, given the examples we will shortly discuss. We may call it an assumption to the degree that he requires of us to consider it as a self-evident truth. Yet, conveniently, this also allows us to start a discussion of the *conatus* at this point of the *Ethics*. We do not commit too much of an injustice by avoiding—for now—a review of previous arguments of his metaphysics within the book. However, he does offer some explanation for his reasoning at this point, so I shall offer an analysis of it.

Spinoza here notes that the essence⁸ of a thing posits or causes the existence of the thing and cannot—under any circumstance—be the sole reason for its own destruction. In other words, an essence cannot be contradictory: it cannot (by definition at least) both posit and take away the existence of a thing. At first glance this might seem as a reasonable idea to hold, but common sense and a bit of imagination quickly seem to offer straightforward counterexamples to E3p4, e.g., suicide. Suicide—understood as a situation where people are intentionally the main cause of their own death—seems to disprove Spinoza's statement if we consider that the essence of the person both posits their existence together with their capacity for self-destruction, hence the controversy about the legitimacy of this proposition. Other examples might come to mind, such as an exploding time

⁸ E2def2: "I say that to the essence of anything belongs that which, being given, the thing is also necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is also necessarily taken away; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing."

bomb, a burning candle, ageing⁹, autoimmune diseases, etc. Note, however, that Spinoza is not saying that partially self-inflicted death or destruction is altogether impossible. He is arguing that a thing itself (what I will also call a ‘true individual’)¹⁰ cannot merely by itself instigate its own destruction or death; i.e., it requires the intervention of some external element to be initiated. Hence, we begin to understand the relation E3p4 holds to E3p5.

We must note here, as is seen in the demonstration for E3p5 (see footnote 7), that this proposition does not add any new content to the discussion, but simply reveals an unavoidable implication of E3p4. For now, this can unfold into multiple interpretations of what superficially seem as cases of suicide or self-destruction. First of all, one can maintain Spinoza’s proposal by assuming that in any case of seeming self-destruction, what in fact was witnessed was the decomposition or separation of already distinct individuals. In the case of an exploding time bomb this could mean that we shouldn’t say that a true individual self-destructed, but say that separate things that were accidentally held together came apart given the nature of the individuals involved in the phenomenon of the explosion. However, this same argument becomes highly unorthodox in the case of suicide. To make an analogous case for suicide would require that we assume at least one of two things. First, one could imagine that the ‘suicidal person’ had already come apart before the ‘suicidal act’ was commenced; i.e., that the individual person had already ceased to exist before the seeming attempt of suicide. This is to say,

⁹ Examples discussed by the following authors respectively: Della Rocca (2008) pp. 140-43; Curley (1988) p.110; Nadler (2006) p. 197.

¹⁰ By this I do not mean that the singular thing that is a ‘true individual’ is indivisible, but only that it is a specific *mode* of substance.

seeming acts of suicide would actually be a plurality of true individuals being separated under certain circumstance that only *look* like self-destruction.¹¹ Secondly, we may imagine, as Spinoza does, that the closest thing to suicide (commonly understood) that his metaphysical theory allows is partially self-inflicted destruction: the suicidal victim still existed as a true individual at the moment of destruction, but the action was initiated as a process that required intervention from a source that is external to —i.e., distinct from— the victim itself. Moreover, suicide is always seen as a sign of weakness, and never as a virtuous action that can be explained solely by the victim's essence.¹²

Yet, by this point we need to be aware that there is a serious need for a theory or definition of individuals. Notice that we need a definition of individual *modes*, and not individual *substances*; the unity or individuality of substance is a proof that is offered apart from that of modes;¹³ hence perhaps there are multiple senses in which one can understand individuality in Spinoza's philosophy. Alas, Spinoza does not offer a unique definition of 'individual mode'. There are at least two ways in the *Ethics* in which he explains what constitutes a single true individual mode. The first explanation of what I mean by a 'true individual' is found under the definition for 'singular things' in E2def7, where he states that:

¹¹ This example becomes very bizarre if we try to imagine other implications of allowing for a plurality of true individuals to be held together in a way that denies the existence of a person, even though we are at the same time imagining a person-like structure that has all the capacities of a 'real human', and where the only way of confirming the inexistence of the true individual is if the conglomerate behaves in a way that we would commonly denominate 'suicide'. Bennett (1984, p. 251) also points to a similar issue.

¹² Cf. E4p20sch for Spinoza's interpretation of Seneca's suicide and compare to definition and explanation of virtue in E4. I later discuss these in more detail.

¹³ On individuality of substance, see E1p12 & E1p13.

“By singular thing I understand things that are finite and have a determinate existence. And if a number of individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing.”

One virtue of this definition is that it can be applied across modes of all attributes since it doesn't offer any explanation that seems exclusive to the behavior of modes under any one specific attribute. Also, note that given this definition we may be able to trace an identity between the concepts of 'singular thing', 'individual', and 'mode' (i.e., treat them as interchangeable). First of all, the definition speaks of 'singular things' as finite and being of a determinate existence, and we can find in previous passages (e.g., E1p28 and its demonstration) that to speak of determinate finite entities is the same as speaking of finite modes. Moreover, the only things that can 'concur in action' with finite modes are other finite modes (again, see demonstration of E1p28). Hence, the 'individuals' that concur as to have for an effect a finite mode must themselves be finite modes. Therefore, when speaking of finite modes, we can treat the terms 'singular thing', 'mode' and 'individual' as interchangeable and there would be no reason to think that there may speak of individuals that are not singular things (or vice versa).

The second tentative definition that Spinoza offers for individual or singular things in the *Ethics* is found in the brief treatise on physics that intersects E2p13 and E2p14. In a definition, he states that:

“when a number of bodies [...] are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon one another, or¹⁴ if they so move, whether with the same degree or different degree of speed, that they communicate their motions to each other in a certain and fixed manner, we shall say that those bodies are united with one another and that they all together compose one body or individual, which is distinguished from the others by this union of bodies.”

The more important characteristic of this second explanation is that it only explains individuality for modes under the attribute of Extension; i.e., bodies. In the best-case scenario, this explanation is useful for modes of other attributes only to the degree that we trace an identity relation among modes of different attributes to those that we determine to be individuals under Extension. This can be accomplished, for example, by allowing for a conglomerate of movement-communicating bodies to have a corresponding expression of its essence under the attribute of Thought. This is done by recognizing God’s necessary power to have an idea of each and every mode that follows from its essence under each of its attributes, or just the same by the so called ‘parallelism theory’ of all modes under all attributes of God (E2p3 and E2p7), such that by determining that an aggregate of bodies is an individual in Extension, we can also suppose that the representation of that individual under Thought is also an individual, and so forth

¹⁴ It can be worth noting that this ‘or’ is probably used as a form of equation between the earlier and later parts. It is common to see in Spinoza this use of the grammatical disjunction as a semantic identification. For example, the more infamous example of this use of the disjunction is his proclamation of “*Deus sive Natura*”, where he explicitly identifies God and Nature (E4pref.).

for all other attributes.¹⁵ In this case we ought to envision that for any given individual in Extension, there is a corresponding idea in Thought that is equally rich and complex as the body that it represents (E2p15).

Moreover, by itself, this second definition seems very distinct from the one presented earlier for ‘singular things’. The first definition determined that a plurality of entities is a ‘singular thing’ by causal cooperation in bringing forth a single effect. Yet, in this second definition, it seems that causal cooperation in bringing about a singular effect is not the key condition for being an individual, but simply the specific kind of communication of movement among parts of the aggregate. However, one can just as well consider the possibility that the specific pattern of communication of movement and rest among numerous bodies is precisely what must be imagined as a bodily cooperation in bringing forth some effect: the entity as such.

This identity between both definitions can be traced by keeping in mind that, for Spinoza, to be an existent mode is not only to be something that is brought into durational existence as an expression of some attribute of God, but also something that is perpetually bringing forth some effect (E1p36). Moreover, given that nothing exists except substance and its modes (e.g., E1p4dem), to speak of

¹⁵ This is actually how Spinoza argues in E2p15 in beginning to discuss the human mind. Yet, I confess that the ‘identity’ of modes under different attributes is something that remains somewhat incomprehensible to me. Della Rocca (2008) has offered an interesting argument for this identity: given that properties under different attributes cannot be invoked in order to explain the non-identity of modes (for this would amount to cross-attribute explanation, which Spinoza takes to be impossible), then we must consider that they are one and the same thing, since there isn’t sufficient reason to deny the identity (pp. 99-104). However interesting such an argument may seem, I remain under the impression that I cannot grasp what this identity means.

anything other than substance is to speak of modes. Hence, it is viable to trace an identity between the previous seemingly unrelated definitions of individual and singular thing so as to allow for them to be explanatory of the concept of ‘mode’, though in different respects.

However, one critical question remains unanswered: What pattern —or as he puts it: “certain and fixed manner”— of movement counts as one that constitutes the cause of an individual mode? On this point Spinoza remains mute, or what is more correct, he confesses ignorance. For example, in Letter 32¹⁶, writing to Oldenburg on the topic of individuals and their interconnectedness, Spinoza says:

“I do not know absolutely how [individuals and their parts] really cohere and how each part agrees with the whole. To know this would require knowing the whole of Nature and all its parts.”

Though he later adds:

“By the coherence of parts, then, I understand nothing but that the laws or nature of the one part so adapt themselves to the laws or nature of the other part that they are opposed to each other as little as possible.”

This last quote speaks of ‘natures adapting to each other’ so as to ‘be opposed as little as possible’. If we ask for a true concrete example and explanation of these

¹⁶ Note that this letter is from 1665, that is, around ten years before what is estimated to be the time at which Spinoza had more or less finished writing the *Ethics*.

expressions of substance, Spinoza might have again insisted that this would require knowledge of the whole of Nature, all at once. Nonetheless, I believe that we can imaginatively illustrate it, for example, by considering the relationship that various organs hold to each other within a single organism. We might say that the digestive system and the nervous system are two of the various entities that compose an average human. In so far as they maintain some form of healthy balance in the way they interact and preserve the whole person, we may say that they oppose each other as 'little as possible'. The degree of opposition is lowered in so far as each contributes to the other's possibility to continue behaving or acting as would follow from its particular essence. But, why say that they oppose each other at all? I suppose that this is simply an acknowledgment that any two things that are in some way distinct from each other can also oppose each other to some degree: if they have distinct essences then each may acquire the capacity of destroying or harming the other if certain circumstances obtain. Two distinct entities always oppose each other in some way precisely because their essential activities are distinct.

In any case, even though these passages from outside the *Ethics* may be helpful, I believe that we continue to see how this topic of 'individuals' is exemplary of how Spinoza's metaphysics can remain too abstract. Moreover, this problem of the indeterminateness of the "certain and fixed manner of movement" is similar to another fundamental question about the identity and unity of true individuals, for example, why is it that my pen and my hand count or do not count as an instance of a true individual mode?

In a more simple case of the problem of identifying true individual modes, we can wonder about the spatial proximity of my hand as it grips the pen, and ask whether this is sufficient for claiming a true individual has come into existence at the moment that I reach for it and clasp it between my fingers. Likewise, this question can be asked in terms of patterns of movement. Is it the case that the whole of my body becomes essentially unified to the pen for as long as I use it to write and for as long as it holds such relations of movement and proximity to the rest of my body? This problem continues to deepen, and becomes stranger, as we imagine how one can arbitrarily ‘cut out’ sections of the world and ask whether the pattern of movement that holds among those bodies count as a specific true individual. For example, is the pattern of movement between my hand and the books that lay next to me on the table sufficient for giving existence to an individual? I find no substantial reason to argue that this is impossible, even though it is somewhat unpalatable.

The best we could do at this point is consider that if some pattern of movement allows for seeming self-destruction, then there is no true individual, but only a mere collection of individuals. However, Spinoza does allow for *levels* of identifying individuals both as specific finite modes and as parts of some higher order individual (such as when we think both of organ systems and of the whole organism at once).¹⁷ In any case, I suspect that no clear answer can be offered on this issue; though another query then arises: would Spinoza care to answer such

¹⁷ See Letter 32 and the discussion at E2p13le7sch, where he explains that, to an extent, all individuals are constitutive of the infinite individual that is the whole of nature. Yet, it must be noted that his conjecture of the whole of nature as a single individual can be problematic if we want to take seriously E3p5, which insisted that two individuals of contrary natures couldn’t exist as constituents of one and the same thing.

questions? It may be the case that Spinoza was never in the business of submitting a metaphysics that can accommodate our common sense beliefs about the identity and boundaries of ourselves and other entities.¹⁸

1.1.2 Conatus as essence of modes

In the previous section the doubt remains as to what patterns of movement among modes of Extension would count as those that determine a true individual to exist. I confess that I suspect that this question must remain unanswerable, though it will be further discussed in Chapter 3, where I shall describe further potential consequences of Spinoza's theories. Nonetheless, we can now move on to discuss the next two propositions that complete the main initial exposition of the conatus concept:

E3p6: *Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being.*¹⁹

E3p7: *The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing.*²⁰

¹⁸ Nonetheless, Spinoza's examples throughout his opera tend to suggest that he frequently imagines many boundaries in the same way we imagine them in popular discourse; though one could also say that he only meant them as imaginative examples to illustrate his point, and never to be taken as accurate descriptions of actual modes.

¹⁹ E3p6 in Latin: *Unaquaeque res, quantum in se est, in sue esse perseverare conatur.*
 Demonstration: For singular things are modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way (E1p25c), that is (by E1p34), 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 E3p4). On the contrary, it is opposed to everything which can take its existence away (by E3p5). Therefore, as far as it can, and it lies in itself, it strives to persevere in its being

²⁰ E3p7 in Latin: *Conatus, quo unaquaeque res in suo esse perseverare conatur, nihil est praeter ipsius rei actualem essentiam.*

These are the very first instances in which *conatus* or *striving* is explicitly brought forth in the book. The most important initial observation to make about this passage is that this *striving* should not be psychologized.²¹ All modes, i.e., all individual things, ‘strive’ to persevere in being; but not all modes are necessarily ‘aware’ of this striving; or, the awareness is not what distinguishes the striving, but the fact that it *tends* to do something; i.e., tends to cause some effect. Still, on this point, as in many others concerning Spinoza’s philosophy, there is no clear agreement in the literature on whether some or all modes are considered—to great or lesser degree—to be ‘aware’. Some scholars²² have insisted that Spinoza actually holds that *all* modes of Extension have a corresponding mode in the attribute of Thought which expresses some degree of consciousness. In this case, the degree of consciousness or self-awareness is a function of the complexity of the body that is the object of the idea in Thought (see for example E2p13sch where Spinoza suggests that all modes are animated to some degree that corresponds to the complexity of the constitution of the entity). Under such an interpretation, even rocks are conscious to some degree, though it is near impossible for us to imagine what such consciousness would be like. Other scholars, given the oddity of such a reading, suspect that Spinoza would only attribute awareness to the ideas or *minds* of bodies that have some particularly complex capacities that allow

Demonstration: From the given essence of each thing some things necessarily follow (by E1p36), and things are able [to produce] nothing but what follows necessarily from their determinate nature (by E1p29). So the power of each thing, or the striving by which it (either alone or with others) does anything, or strives to do anything—that is (by E3p6), 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.

²¹ In wanting to avoid a psychologized reading of *conatus*, I believe that it would be better to speak of ‘tendency’ instead of ‘striving’, but I will continue to speak of striving given that it is the convention.

²² Most notably Della Rocca (2008).

for ‘awareness’; e.g., a central nervous system such as humans tend to have. In any case, I believe that this issue is unimportant for the continued analysis of these passages, so I avoid defending either side.

In E3p6, unlike E3p5, Spinoza actually adds new content to the discussion. E3p5 merely emphasized the impossibility of self-contradictory essences; i.e., that entities are incapable of self-destruction, but E3p6 adds that modes play some active role as an existent being. This is an important addition, for it *prima facie* doesn’t seem necessary to derive from the clause of non-contradiction in essences (E3p4) the now mentioned characteristic of ‘striving to persevere’. In considering the non-contradiction clause by itself, we need not believe that an entity would resist change or destruction, or be active throughout its durational existence: we are only entitled to insist that an essence simply cannot be the sole cause of its own destruction. Yet, to explain and defend this transition from non-contradiction to active existence, we can no longer avoid confronting some of the metaphysics of the first part of the *Ethics*. Given Spinoza’s underlying theory of God’s infinite power and its relation to modes, we also come to understand that all entities are perpetually active (i.e., have some capacity to bring forth effects, and in fact always bring forth some effect). This is partly what Spinoza offers as proof for E3p6 in invoking E1p25c and E1p34:

E1p25c: *Particular things are nothing but affections of God’s attributes,
or modes by which God’s attributes are expressed in a certain
and determinate way.*

E1p34: *God's power is his essence itself.*

Insofar as the attributes are identified with God's essence (see E1p11), and insofar as God's essence is identified with its power (see above E1p34), then to be an expression of the attributes of God is nothing else but to be an expression of God's essence or power. Ultimately, existence pertains to God's essence, which also entails an infinite productive capacity to bring forth infinitely many modes (E1p16). Thus, these three propositions (E3p4, E1p25c and E1p34) entail, for Spinoza, that in virtue of the fact that God's attributes are expressed in some specific mode, the mode perpetually expresses power that we understand as a *striving* or *tendency* to persevere. There is nothing in virtue of that very expression of God's power that would negate that expression or mode (since modes are assumed to never be self-negating). Hence, the mode may only be negated or destroyed by some other mode that is somehow contrary to the first mode's nature; i.e., by some other specific expression of God's power that is contrary to the first. That is, a mode is contrary to another in so far as their essential activities do not correspond (which can seem very obvious in comparing the relationship that an elk holds to a wolf, but which is actually true in all cases of distinct individuals that tend to do different activities which can potentially be disruptive of one another's).

In addition, as already mentioned, all these propositions have the function of showing that modes cannot be passive entities that can exist devoid of any activity (i.e., as isolated entities that have no effect whatsoever). Insofar as they are expressions of power, they must entail some kind of activity, for what is it to have

power if not to be of actual consequence for the environment and for oneself? I propose we define ‘power’ in this way (as the fact of being of actual consequence to the environment and to oneself) given that Spinoza himself does not offer an explicit definition. As is the case frequently with many of his technical terms, the reader needs to construe the meaning given Spinoza’s deployment of the word and how—in many cases—it is identified with other concepts that might be clearer.²³ Interestingly, the proof for E1p36 also refers back to E1p25c and E1p34 (two of the main propositions used to prove E3p6). For this reason we must see E3p6 and E3p7 as immediate results of E1p36:

E1p36: *Nothing exists from whose nature some effect doesn’t follow.*

From this we can add that, in a somewhat crass manner, for Spinoza, ‘to be’²⁴ is to be both a cause and an effect, for even God is *causa sui*.²⁵ In any case, what I am trying to show is that E3p6 can in fact follow naturally from what Spinoza has offered previously throughout the *Ethics*. Moreover, this identity of ‘modes’ with an activity is precisely how Spinoza moves forward in his discussion of the conatus. E3p7 explicitly identifies the striving or activity of the mode with its

²³ Hence, I identify *power* to an *actual* capacity to influence the environment and oneself; i.e., there is no *inactive power*: power is always actualized. See also E3def2 (the definition of *act*). Deleuze (1970; Index of main concepts; *power*) also points to this important *identity* of power and action: “All *potentia* is act, active and actual.”

²⁴ I say “in a crass manner” because Spinoza argues that terms like ‘being’, ‘thing’, etc. (what he calls ‘transcendental terms’) are all the product of our incapacity to imagine all modes clearly and distinctly. Insofar as we are exposed to so many ‘things’ in life, our minds confuse and mix their images, and this is reflected in language through use of transcendentals. (E2p40sch1).

²⁵ See Della Rocca (2008) for a fascinating interpretation of Spinoza’s philosophy that focuses on this element of his metaphysics: that everything has a cause. Della Rocca centers on this point to argue that Spinoza’s whole metaphysics is motivated by—and can be explained through—a commitment to the Principle of Sufficient Reason (understood as the belief that there is a cause both for the existence or inexistence of anything). Deleuze (1988, p.97) also emphasizes this dual quality of modes of always being cause and effect.

essence. Moreover, the proof for E3p7 also directs us back to E1p36: the insistence that all things express God's power in some determinate way in so far as they always involve bringing forth some effect or consequence.

However, one thing has remained unexplained: the final clause on E3p6, where Spinoza notes that each thing strives to "persevere in its being". This I believe is one of the passages that has been most influential in how many come to interpret this proposition (and, consequentially, much of Spinoza's ethical philosophy) as insisting that all things strive to persevere *as much time as possible*. This is to say, that many readers of the *Ethics* have taken this proposition to say something akin to: "Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to survive or exist as much time as possible." This reading suggests that Spinoza's clause of "persevere in its being" refers not only to persevering as the power or activity that the mode itself is (for that is its essence), but also refers to the length of its durational existence.

At this point I will only acknowledge that such an interpretation would constitute an absolute obstacle to arguing that Spinoza's metaphysics —and the psychological theories derived from it— allow for anything close to what I will call 'free or rational self-sacrifice'. This is due to Spinoza's theory of *virtue* or *rational behavior* being dependent precisely on his theory of the conatus. If the essence of things were imagined to be nothing but an effort for continued existence extended over time, then any behavior that would be contrary to one's extended existence over time would at the same time constitute a form of *irrational* or *passionate* behavior. However, at this point I will not argue against such a reading. A discussion of this issue will be offered in Chapter 2. For now it is only imperative

that one recognize that a great deal of how we understand Spinoza's philosophy hinges on how we interpret that clause of "persevere in its being". Suffice it to say that, whatever the conatus ultimately entails, it is the essence of all modes.

Before we continue on to discuss the conatus concept with respect to humans, we need to reconsider what has been said up to this point. After an effort to meticulously investigate the first instances of the conatus within the *Ethics*, I was still unable to offer a specific or actual illustration of the concept. I was able to trace some of its connections to other central issues of Spinoza's metaphysics, but never offered a paradigm case of the conatus that could illustrate the matter. For example, I have not offered a description of the conatus of some common sense discourse object such as the conatus of a rock, or a dog, or a human. I contend that the absence of any substantial description is somewhat necessary at this point if we wish to avoid digressing into Spinoza's epistemology. Hence, I will ask the reader to allow me to continue discussing the conatus in the somewhat intangible manner that we have done so far. The reasons for this abstractness will be explained soon enough.

1.1.3 Virtue and the human conatus

Given that my goal is to argue for the possibility of rational self-sacrifice in Spinoza's philosophy, I need to focus on the nature of conscious entities such as ourselves (which I will generally call 'humans', though it is unclear whether

Spinoza believes that there are universal shared essences such as ‘human’).²⁶ Also, given that Spinoza’s goal is to develop an ethical theory for us, he quickly goes on to discuss the consequences of the conatus theory for our understanding of human nature. In E3p9 and its scholium Spinoza reveals that, essentially, humans are — just like all other modes— a certain conatus, or what we may call a *quantum of power*.²⁷ In accordance with Spinoza’s naturalist tendencies, we see that humans occupy no privileged position within his ontology, we are only distinguished from other entities by the complexity or power of our constitution (which in Extension is explained by the pattern or ratio of motion and rest among the parts of the body; and explained in Thought by the representation of the logical structures of ideas about modes under any given attribute).

However, in the case of humans (and probably many other complex entities) there is an acute awareness of this conatus. This is to say that, *at the same time* as we *strive* we have a representation in our minds of that striving (mainly see 2p7 and 2p23). This Spinoza calls *appetite* or, in many cases, *desire*. Hence, *desire* (or, “appetite together with the consciousness of the appetite”) is the essence of humans.²⁸

²⁶ See for example his way of speaking about how we form universal notions of species and similar terms in E2p40sch1. Vidal Peña, in his notes to his Spanish translation of the *Ethics*, takes E2p40sch1 to be good textual evidence for declaring Spinoza a nominalist. See also E2p48sch.

²⁷ I borrow from Nadler (2006, p.195) this characterization of any *mode* as ‘quantum of power’.

²⁸ For this very reason, I think that to call Spinoza a ‘Rationalist’ can be misleading. G. Kaminsky (1990) has suggested that we call Spinoza a ‘passionalist’. One can understand this given that, for Spinoza, the essence of humans is not exactly ‘reason’ (as many of the other so-called Rationalists might hold), but *desire*. With Spinoza we no longer find an opposition of *reason* and *affects*, but an identification of reason (i.e., having rational ideas) as an affective state: Spinoza’s goal is to make the most powerful affects out of the knowledge of the world (see E4p1 – E4p19) Yet, given that, for Spinoza, the essence of minds is a *striving to represent* (i.e., to form adequate ideas; e.g., E3p1, E3pp3, E4p23), the name ‘Rationalism’ does not do complete injustice to Spinoza’s intentions.

E3p9sch: *This appetite [...] 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.*

Again we find in this passage Spinoza tracing a connection between the nature or essence of the thing and the preservation of the thing. For now it seems that it can be interpreted in either of two ways: (1) “*from whose nature necessarily follow those things that promote his preservation*” may refer to some external effect brought about by a thing’s *activity* (i.e., its *conatus* or essence) as something that is also beneficial to the thing itself. For example, a beaver may build a dam so as to have refuge from predators, and this is something that seemingly follows from its nature and promotes its preservation; and as such we would think that all outwards production should fit into the conservation of the thing. Or, (2) the passage can refer to something more intrinsic, or redundant, about the activity or essence that defines the thing: that the thing effectively behaves in a way that is always in accord with its powers of production. For example, the way our internal organs function, in a manner that presumably harmonizes with the thing that we are and which promotes our capacity to have power over our environment. So, in saying that “*man is determined to do those things*”, we can say that it only means that we are determined to persist as the thing that we are in ourselves: an organic being with certain ‘self-sustaining’ processes that also facilitate us with the means

to interact with the world. I will later defend this second more intrinsic reading of “preservation” clauses.²⁹

The purpose of discussing the human conatus is to be able to understand Spinoza’s theory of *virtue*. In order to do this, I skip for a moment to the fourth part of the *Ethics*. Here we find the definition of *virtue* and discover its strong relation to the essence or conatus of the person:

E4def8: *By virtue and power I understand the same thing, that is (by E3p7), 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.*

I believe this is a very important passage for various reasons: first of all, given Spinoza’s remarkable style of writing in which he brings his readers in through the use of popular vocabulary and, bit by bit, tries to convince them that a term which is prevalently used one way would best be suited to describe something else: the way that Spinoza employs the expression. Consider for example that *virtue* is a very loaded moral term. However, most readers of Spinoza agree that his philosophy has forsaken any notion of realist moral truths or duties.³⁰ In the same way that we find him re-deploying terms like ‘good’ and ‘evil’ (E4def1,

²⁹ Hampshire (1951, p.76) offers a similar analysis of the matter.

³⁰ One need not look much further that his famous first statements in the early *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. But also, one finds him being very explicit on this point all throughout the preface of the fourth part of the *Ethics*.

E4def2), we also find him reusing *virtue* as a means to both explain his metaphysics and instill in us a sense of respect for that notion that he develops. His denial of moral duties does not entail that he has just the same forsaken all desire to promote certain forms of behavior or values in others. Hence, we see the importance of looking at such a definition carefully.

Secondly, this passage is exciting in that it speaks of essence and power, but makes no use of a “preservation” or “perseverance” clause, as we have seen before at various key places.³¹ Additionally, we see that he doesn’t define virtue as the capacity for surviving long periods of time, but, very distinctly points to the “power to bring about certain things”. I believe this is one good point of textual evidence in favor of understanding the conatus as a theory of *active existence*, and not merely about *persistence* through time. Again, returning to the third part of the *Ethics*, we can understand this definition of virtue in a more technical manner by looking at the definitions for ‘adequate cause’ and of ‘act’:

E3def1: *I call that cause adequate whose effect can be clearly and distinctly perceived through it. But I call partial, or inadequate, if its effect cannot be understood through it alone.*

E3def2: *I say that we act when something happens, in us, or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, that is (by E3def1), when something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and*

³¹ See also E3p58sch for Spinoza’s definition of ‘*strength of character*’, where he speaks of ‘*tenacity*’ as “the desire by which each one strives, from the dictate of reason, to persevere in his being.”

distinctly understood through it alone. On the other hand, I say that we are acted on when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause.

In saying that virtue “*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*”, he is referring to the degree of adequacy of our actions as the measure of virtue itself. We are virtuous to the degree that our actions, behavior, or desire can be explained by our power, essence or conatus; i.e., whether it is self-explanatory or autonomous. Virtue is not measured by the longevity of our time in existence. And, given Spinoza’s identification of virtue and our essence, we find all the more reason to believe that “perseverance” or “preservation” clauses may be best understood separately from any reference to the longevity of the thing itself. In fact, this is exactly what he expresses by the end of the preface of the fourth part of the *Ethics*:

E4pref: *Finally, by perfection in general I shall, as I have said before, understand reality, that is, the essence of each thing insofar as it exists and produces an effect, having no regard for its duration. For no singular thing can be called more perfect for having preserved in existence for a longer time.*

At last, we can begin to more seriously regard that to express our powers more fully, i.e., to realize one’s essence more completely, is to be more active, for our power to flourish. The *tendency* of modes described by the conatus concept is not

one bound to longevity, but directed at its own power's actualization to the highest possible degree. Again, the actual essence of a thing, its *conatus*, its *striving*, is not directed at extending durational existence; but, to presently be as active as possible without any explicit regard for time. The best evidence for the identification of *activity* with *essence* perhaps is found in E4p24:

Acting absolutely from virtue is nothing else in us but acting, living, and preserving our being (these three things signify the same thing) by the guidance of reason, from the foundation of seeking one's own advantage.

Yet, to wholly comprehend this aspect of a mode's essence, it would be convenient to conceive, more *specifically*, what kind of power or activity a thing *is*. However, we've noted that there is some trouble with the abstractness in Spinoza's explanations on many issues concerning his metaphysics and ontology. To best understand this we shall take a look at his epistemology.

CHAPTER 2. THE DEBATE ON CONATUS AND SUICIDE

Statements such as “*Man is a god to man*” (E435sch); or “*A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death.*” (E4p67) show an incredibly affirmative or positive approach to human life and the knowledge thereof. Yet, in this chapter, I aim to discuss a potentially darker topic by means of Spinoza’s philosophy: the fact of death, or, more specifically —as common parlance puts it— suicide. Here I agree with Camus that suicide can be a topic of the utmost importance in our philosophizing³², even though Spinoza probably would have shaken his head in disagreement. Though I have made an effort of modestly reconstructing and defending the legitimacy of Spinoza’s conatus concept that insists on the impossibility of the self-destruction of any mode, the theory has nonetheless been severely criticized.

For this reason, in this chapter we will consider some of the observations on the conatus by various eminent scholars, and afterwards investigate what might be the underlying reason for so much controversy on the consistency or incoherence of Spinoza’s position. In the first section I focus on the debate as is tackled by J. Bennett, D. Garrett and A. Youpa; and how I believe that Youpa in particular has offered an incredibly enlightening rephrasing of the issue: not interpreting the “preservation” clauses in terms of longevity, but in terms of present efficacious existence. In the second section I offer what I take to be the cause of so much interpretative struggle: ignoring the epistemological perspective from which the

³² *The Myth of Sisyphus*, An Absurd Reasoning.

conatus is offered in the *Ethics*; i.e., the so-called *second kind* of knowledge or *reason*.

2.1 Arguments for and against the conatus theory

Up to this point I have tried to explain Spinoza's ontology and its connection to his theory of virtue and free action. And, as an extension of that discussion it then becomes pertinent to analyze those matters as Spinoza applies them to daily life. In particular, where he discusses what is commonly called suicide, and argues that—as a consequence of his conatus theory and E3p4— 'freely' committing suicide is impossible.

To say that freely committing suicide is not possible, nevertheless, can now be explained in Spinozistic terms. To say that an act is free, for Spinoza, is to say that it is explained by the essence or power of the thing that acts in whatever way it does.³³ In other words, if one were to attempt to give an account of *why* a mode behaves in a certain way, we must give an account of the causes involved in the process. Now, if the cause of the behavior is the thing itself—the essence or power that defines it— then we say that such behavior is done freely, we say that the thing is an adequate cause of its own actions.³⁴ If we understand something of the essence of a particular mode (e.g., a tree) and see that it does something that follows from its essence or defining constitution (e.g., synthesizes energy from

³³ Cf. E1def7 and E3def1, the definitions of 'free' and 'adequate cause' respectively. The notion of adequate cause has been discussed in the previous chapter as well.

³⁴ Cf. E1def7 for Spinoza's definition of 'free'.

light into chemical energy), then we can say, in that respect, the thing is preserving its being, it is active, it is behaving freely.

However, some actions or behavior of a mode can be caused by other modes that are distinct from it. In that case, and to that degree, we say that the thing is an inadequate cause of its actions: we say that the power or activity that defines the thing is insufficient for explaining its deeds. Furthermore, Spinoza argues that what is commonly called suicide is a form of behavior that cannot be explained by the sole essence of the thing, hence he considers that suicide cannot be done freely—it cannot be explained by the power or activity that defines the thing: to speak of suicide as a free action determined by the thing's essence amounts to allowing for self-contradictory essences, which he takes to be “as impossible as that something should come from nothing”. Hence, he explicitly says about suicide in E4p20sch:

No one, therefore, unless he is defeated by causes external, and contrary, to his nature, neglects to seek his own advantage, or to preserve his being. No one, I say, avoids food or kills himself from the necessity of his own nature. Those who do such things are compelled by external causes, which can happen in many ways. Someone may kill himself because he is compelled by another [...] because he is forced by the command of a tyrant (as Seneca was) to open his veins, that is, he desires to avoid a greater evil by submitting to a lesser [...]

His point seems fairly straightforward (especially considering what has already been discussed about E3p4); but some commentators remain unconvinced. And, as I have mentioned before, if the conatus theory and its derivative propositions fail, much of Spinoza's ethical project goes down with it: the conatus doctrine is the foundation on which Spinoza attempts to cement his ethical theory, without this foundation, his ethical theory is baseless. For this reason I believe it is crucial to try to salvage this position —within the logic and tools of his system.

Bennett, for example, has been somewhat harsh against Spinoza on this particular topic, going so far as to simply say: “since the conclusion is false, the argument is faulty”.³⁵ Of course, Bennett offers various arguments against Spinoza's derivations from the principle of non-contradictory essences, but I submit that the main reason he disagrees is due to a misunderstanding of the “persevere in its being” clause of E3p6; he says that E3p6 means that the conatus is an activity defined by an effort for longevity: simply put, “to stay in existence”.³⁶ And, as I have tried to show, this is a fundamental miscomprehension; moreover, it is clear that it must be mistaken given that Spinoza rightly insists on distinguishing the *existence* of a mode from its *essence* (e.g., E1p24), hence the “persevere in its being” clause of E3p6 might be referring not to “stay in existence” as Bennett puts it (i.e., longevity), but to thrive as the thing that one is in one's own being: an activity of doing something that is not merely remaining in existence, but something that, in so far as it exists, brings forth various effects and essentially continues to do so as long as it is not disrupted by modes distinct from itself.

³⁵ Bennett 1984, p. 234.

³⁶ Bennett 1984, p. 235.

Of course, part of any finite activity (i.e., modes insofar as they exist) is discovered within the confines of duration (E4p21). However, as I've repeatedly argued up to this point, it is not longevity toward what the activity works, but just to express the power that the thing is. This 'activity' is understood in Extension as particular bodies composed of various individuals that preserve (or accomplish) some specific ratio of movement among themselves. And, in Thought, the 'activity' is understood as a series of ideas that represent bodies (or modes of other attributes); ideas that represent the same succession of events concerning the modes that they have for their object (E2p7, E2p11).

Bennett, in his criticism of E3p4, focuses on E4p20sch to argue that Spinoza has not offered sufficient reasons for denying the possibility of free suicide:

When the knife did its work, Seneca's body was not transmitting forces from the outside. The causally sufficient conditions for his act were stored within him; the action flowed from his nature as it then was, including his various strengths and frailties, his attitudes to pain and shame, his capacities to think things through [...] I conclude that Seneca falsifies E3p4. I suppose that Spinoza would deny this, saying that I have misunderstood the notion of Seneca's 'nature'. What, then, does he mean by nature?

In response to this assessment we find Youpa offering both a reinterpretation of the "perseverance" clause and a direct response to Bennett's concern with the

meaning of 'nature'. Youpa's reinterpretation of the clause is very similar to mine: instead of speaking of self-preservation, Youpa suggests that we speak of "perfection-enhancement" in trying to move us away from a 'longevity' reading of the conatus. But, precisely because Youpa understands the conatus as the perfection, reality or activity that the thing is (see again E4 Preface above), we find him insisting that the activity that defines the thing cannot be the denial of that activity. Yet, this explanation is fuzzy, it is very abstract and it rests on an unspecified 'activity' that is never self-negating. Or does it? It seems that in this respect we at least discover some of Spinoza's assumptions on the essence of 'human' bodies: whatever that activity is, it is not one that—in virtue of itself alone—tends towards wounding itself and putting its persistence in danger. It seems that Spinoza assumes that the activity that is definitive of a 'human' body is more of a self-sustaining and productive kind.

In any case, the denial of suicide by Spinoza is best understood as a denial of the possibility for a certain mode (a certain activity that expresses the power of God) to do something—in virtue of its essence alone—that immediately has as a consequence the denial of the mode in question. In other words, we can say that self-destruction can be imagined to be of two kinds: (1) on the one hand there is *mediated* self-destruction that may follow from the thing that one is (e.g., I have certain capacities that can be expressed in various ways, such as moving my arm in a certain way that at the same time involves pressing a sword against my stomach and lethally wounding myself); or, (2) it can be imagined as an *immediate* denial of the conatus itself (e.g., that the activity that defines it is immediately directed at the cancellation of that very activity). The second example, of course,

remains very abstract only for the reason that it is very difficult to imagine a process that is *immediately* self-negating.

To be clearer on this last point, mediated and immediate consequences are not meant to be distinguished by time, but by essence. By this I mean a distinction that is analogous to the one that Spinoza draws between *substance*, *infinite immediate modes*, and *infinite mediate modes*. Infinite immediate modes are said to be those that follow from God's essence without any other explanation besides the most basic properties that pertain to substance under any given attribute; those which imply God's power in the most fundamental way. Secondly, infinite mediate modes are those that are understood to follow from God's power or essence modified by some more fundamental expression of its power (i.e., modified by the infinite immediate mode). This distinction between infinite immediate modes and infinite mediate modes is not a distinction in time, but of essence. Both kinds of modes exist eternally, but nonetheless we distinguish between them in virtue of their 'essential proximity' to God (E1p21- E1p23).³⁷ In the same vein, I want to suggest we can imagine a similar distinction of consequences can be drawn within the process that define each finite mode. Immediate consequences are those that are the more intrinsic expression of the activity that defines the thing and which harmonize with itself. On the other hand, mediated consequences are those that require both an immediate consequence in conjunction with some other external element that is distinct from the essence of the mode in question (e.g., there are

³⁷ Admittedly, these are very obscure notions, but Spinoza did offer some helpful comments in his correspondence with G. H. Schuller (Letters 63 and 64). Spinoza identifies the infinite immediate mode in Extension as 'movement and rest', and in Thought as 'the absolute infinite intellect'. The infinite mediate mode, on the other hand, is not qualified by Spinoza under some specific attribute, and is merely said to be "the face of the whole universe".

the immediate consequences that are all the self-fostering and productive consequences of the processes that define a human body, such as metabolism and moving itself, while there are all the mediated consequences, all those effects that are achieved only by the body's interaction with the environment).

The mediacy and immediacy of the consequences of actions can also be considered with respect to conatus in its positive aspect. This is to say that when Spinoza speaks in E3p6 of each thing necessarily and always “striving to persevere *in its own being*”, he means to speak of the immediate consequences of the essence of the mode: the immediate consequences of the activity that the thing is. And as such, we see that E3p6 does not refer to mediated positive practices of the mode such that it “perseveres in its own being”, e.g., it does not mean that given my essence, all my actions (including those that are explained by inclusion of external modes) will unconditionally have positive consequences for myself. What follows immediately from the power that I am is always beneficial to myself, but those consequences that follow from my actions mediated by other elements distinct from myself (such as the sword that pierces my abdomen through the force of my arm) need not always be useful.³⁸

Fundamentally, mediated consequences are consequences that require a protagonist mode in addition to other external modes in order to be understood

³⁸ For another attempt at imagining self-negating entities, see Della Rocca (2008, p. 137-53) and his example of the ‘essential time bomb’. That example is different from mine in that it doesn’t consider the issue of immediacy such as I have presented it here; but it does present another interesting point: something that has a specific duration as part of its essence. Della Rocca also offers arguments against the possibility that something of this sort could —for intrinsic reasons— necessarily cease to exist at a certain point in time.

or explained. Take the following contrived example. Imagine that there is some contraption that has a button that, if pressed and only while being pressed, makes the machine transfer harmful doses of radiation where the finger and the button make contact. Now if I press the button (considering my essence by itself) the process of moving my hand and my finger are immediately in harmony with the powers that define me; nonetheless, there is a mediated consequence that is simultaneous and harmful to myself. Hence, we may imagine how we can have a distinction of immediate and mediated consequences that are distinguished by essence instead of time.³⁹ Similarly, many of our actions require for us to interact with modes distinct from ourselves, hence few of our actions can be considered wholly adequate (since they require of other things to be explained), and due to the dimension of inadequacy that is involved in interacting with the world, we can say that many of the consequences of our actions involve a dimension of the mediated kind, which can always run the risk of being harmful for us. Nonetheless, there is a special subset of activities that may reveal complete adequate causality and which are explained in a way that is limited to immediate consequences, i.e., rational thinking and emotional self-understanding; but this I leave for the discussion of the third chapter.

I believe that these considerations help in explaining why Bennett partly feels uncomfortable with Spinoza's position on suicide. Given that Bennett doesn't insist on the difference between *mediate* and *immediate* consequences of actions or activities, he thinks that Spinoza is trying to prove that all our actions should be

³⁹ Nadler (2006, p. 196, n.7) speaks of the conatus as an 'innate principle of activity', and I suspect that this explanation that I propose of the 'immediate harmony' is helpful in fleshing out what such an innate principle may entail with regard to E3p6.

unconditionally (to time or external modes involved) beneficial for ourselves. One way that he rephrases his interpretation of Spinoza is: “If he does it, it will help him.”⁴⁰ Of course Bennett would disagree with Spinoza if that were a correct rephrasing: this is absurd, obviously there are things that we do that have consequences that are harmful to our constitution (though in that case we need to add modes external to ourselves in order to explain the whole action or its consequences).

I suspect that by this point it should be clear that —within the logic of Spinoza’s system— it is appropriate to consider suicide as impossible. Yet, we can now also define suicide with the terms that I have used to argue up to this point:

By *suicide* I understand a negation of a person’s existence that follows immediately from the conatus or essence of the person. Yet, given that (by E3p6) each thing strives to persevere *in its being*, such immediate self-negation is impossible (by E3p4).

Given this definition, and reconsidering Seneca’s case, we should see that it is not in virtue of Seneca’s essence alone (the self-fostering activity that defines him) that he was driven to suicide, but, given a series of interactions with modes external to himself, we find that his behavior has the potential to initiate a destructive process —a process which requires external modes to be explained.

⁴⁰ Bennett (1984), p.244.

On this issue I guess that Bennett is not allowing for less obvious visible causes and interactions that determine a thing to behave in a certain harmful way, and so insists on speaking and conceiving of Seneca as a somewhat isolated entity at the moment that it brought death onto itself. However, we should recognize that spatial-temporal ‘distance’ doesn’t necessarily change the influence that a thing has had on another: if Nero’s message had a certain harmful or debilitating effect on Seneca, and if there was no other event that would mend his weakened state, then we should take seriously how Nero’s influence is an actual and negative determining factor for Seneca’s self-destructive action at the moment of ‘suicide’. Moreover, in paying close attention to how Spinoza describes what is commonly called ‘suicide’ (i.e., not what we defined in technical terms above), we find that suicide should not be treated as any different from any other death inducing circumstance. What is commonly called suicide is nothing more than certain external causes having an influence over oneself that reach the point of destruction, just as would happen if one accidentally ingested poison or died of a disease (see E4p18sch).⁴¹

Now, if I am correct in my phrasing of the concept of suicide for Spinoza, we can still face another more interesting issue that is related to our behavior and death as its consequence: lethally radical honesty. By this I am referring to E4p72 and its scholium, which would be good to have in their entirety:

E4p72: *A free man always acts honestly, not deceptively.*

⁴¹ See Gabhart (1999) for a detailed argument identifying what is commonly called ‘suicide’, and Spinoza’s discussion of it, with any other form of [mediated] demise’.

Scholium: *Suppose someone now asks: What if a man could save himself from the present danger of death by treachery? Would not the principle of preserving his own being recommend, without qualification, that he be treacherous? The reply to this is the same. If reason should recommend that, it would recommend it to all men. And so reason would recommend, without qualification, that men should make agreements to join forces and to have common laws only by deception —that is, that really they should have no common laws. This is absurd.*⁴²

This fragment can be puzzling because it seems to allow for some form of immediate self-destructive behavior in a free man; i.e., one might think that Spinoza is allowing for a free agent to be the adequate cause of their coming annihilation (due to his being defined as free, and given that freedom is explained as self-determining one's states, as being autonomous). Insofar as the agent is aware of the consequences of his action (that telling the truth will surely conclude in his murder), one would think that the 'rational' thing to do is lie and save oneself. This is especially problematic if we think that the desire for honesty that defines the free man in part involves the knowledge of its lethal consequence, hence suggesting that the conatus is at that moment in a self-negating disposition. Yet, surprisingly, Spinoza's answer to the dilemma (from the perspective of a "free man") is to tell the truth.

⁴² Youpa (2003), Gabhart (1999), and Nadler (2006) all suggest that this passage can be seen as an interesting precedent of a Kantian categorical imperative.

Garrett has dedicated an article to this seeming paradox⁴³, which Youpa attempts to unravel and solve by our interpretation of the conatus as an effort for actual expression of the activity that defines us, instead of an effort for the greatest possible longevity. Garrett's solution to this apparent paradox is to say that E4p72 does not describe what would be appropriate or rational for us normal folk who are not perfectly free, and live entrapped by ignorance and very limited understanding. Garrett explains:

“when someone has not yet achieved a certain kind of existence [i.e., a degree of freedom and wisdom such as that of the ‘free man’], the actions that one must perform in order to achieve it are not necessarily the actions that one will characteristically perform once one has achieved it.”

So Garrett goes on to recommend that “we interpret Spinoza as holding both that the ideal model free man would never act deceptively, and that deception may under some circumstances nevertheless be good for actual human beings who have not fully achieved this ideal.”⁴⁴ In response, Youpa insists that Garrett has replaced an apparent paradox for a real one, for to declare that the freedom of our actions is explained differently from that of the model ‘free man’ would amount to saying that our freedom is not defined by the dictates of ‘reason’, which is very troubling considering that E3p3 states that *“the actions of the mind arise from*

⁴³ Garrett (1990).

⁴⁴ Garrett (2002, p.230)

adequate ideas alone [...]” From what Garrett suggests, we would come to the conclusion that there are cases where our actions are best called free insofar as they are determined not only by reason, but, for example, by some passive affect such as fear or hate (of death).

I believe that Garrett struggles to reconcile E4p72 with E3p6 only because he interprets the “persevere in its being” clause as referring to longevity instead of an effort to presently achieve—to the highest possibly degree—an ample expression of the essence that defines each of us. That is to say, Spinoza doesn’t consider that one has ‘preserved’ oneself insofar as one has increased the potential for longevity, but only insofar as we’ve expressed more perfectly those things that adequately follow from our essence. Again, to say that something ‘perseveres’ or ‘preserves itself’ is to say that that thing thrives as the power or activity that defines it; likewise, Spinoza states that “no singular thing can be called more perfect for having preserved in existence for a longer time” (E4 Preface), so we mustn’t interpret preservation in terms of longevity.

To best understand E4p72 we must look at its demonstration, in which Spinoza refers us back to E4p24 (quoted), where he offers the identity between acting, living, and preserving our being from the dictates of reason (for now I leave to the side why reason would dictate honesty, since I first need to explain what reason actually is). Joined to the considerations of time as unimportant for perfection, we understand why Youpa is probably correct in saying that “Spinoza does not hold that it would be good for an individual to try to suffer a decrease in overall activity as a means to acquiring greater overall activity later.” As interesting support for

his position, Youpa points to E3p44sch as textual evidence that Spinoza believes that reason never dictates that we allow ourselves to become ill in favor of a potential future joy.

2.2 Conatus and the second kind of knowledge

I have insisted up to this point that one of the main interpretative difficulties centers on the “persevere in its being” clause of E3p6. Now I want to present an additional element that I take to be just as important in solving the riddle that is the conatus theory: the epistemological perspective from which the conatus theory is developed and explained. However, in a way this is a question even more fundamental: it is an inquiry into the *perspective* from which the *Ethics* itself is written. In E2p40sch2 Spinoza distinguishes between what he called three ‘kinds of knowledge’. This project of distinguishing kinds of ideas or knowledge is one that he dragged along with him since the beginning of the development of his philosophy. We find instances of this topic in the *Short Treatise* as well as in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*; but I will leave them aside (given that they are considered to fall outside of Spinoza’s mature philosophy)⁴⁵ and only focus on its discussion within the *Ethics* itself. I offer part of the passage in order to discuss it in detail; E2p40sch2:

[...] it is clear that we perceive many things and form universal notions:

⁴⁵ Deleuze (1988, p.82) believes that the concept of common notions (E2p40) was required for Spinoza to develop his mature theory of knowledge; insofar as this concept is not available in his earlier work, his description of the types of knowledge is also altered.

- I. *from singular things which have been represented to us through the senses in a way which is mutilated, confused, and without order for the intellect (see E2p29c); for that reason I have been accustomed to call such perceptions knowledge from random experience;*
- II. *from signs, for example, from the fact that, having heard or read certain words, we recollect things, and form certain ideas of them, like those through which we imagine things (E2p18sch); these two ways of regarding things I shall henceforth call knowledge of the first kind, opinion or imagination;*
- III. *finally, from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things (see E2p38c, E2p39, E2p39c, E2p40). This I shall call reason and the second kind of knowledge.*
- IV. *In addition to these two kinds of knowledge, there is [...] another, third kind, which we shall call intuitive knowledge. And this kind of knowing proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the formal essence of things.*

Various things must be noted from this exposition. First, Spinoza purports to cover all possible ways of thinking or knowing within these three kinds of knowledge. Hence, the content of the *Ethics* itself must fall within some of these. I work under the (undefended) exegetical principle that Spinoza takes all his propositions to be true. What is more, Spinoza notes that only knowledge of the first kind is the cause of falsity or error, and that knowledge of the second and third kind are always true

and lead to further adequate ideas (E2p41, E2p42). Hence, all propositions in the *Ethics* should fall under the second or third kind of knowledge. However, it is unclear what these kinds of knowledge mean exactly (he offers an example at the end of E2p40sch2, but I do not include it in this discussion since I don't think it is particularly helpful).⁴⁶ As it is with many things concerning Spinoza, this is another point of disagreement: the amount or specificity of information that each kind of knowledge entails. Some suspect that the second kind of knowledge only refers to the *common notions* i.e., concepts that we form in virtue of adequately perceiving something that is common to many things, but which is exclusive to none (see E2p38 – E2p40). Moreover, one commentator believes that knowledge of the second kind —‘*reason*’— may entail only very general or superficial knowledge of things (as might be assumed from E3p38c in directing the reader to E2p13L2, which only speaks of knowledge of the nature of Extension).⁴⁷

On the other hand, some consider that the second kind of knowledge may offer much more than mere knowledge of general truths such as axioms and the recognition of the attributes. This is to say that, by means of the second kind of knowledge we may be able to acquire distinct knowledge of the essence of particulars beyond the mere fact of their extrinsic necessary existence or that they

⁴⁶ Yet, I include Spinoza's example here if the reader wishes to see it: "I shall explain all these [three kinds of knowledge] with one example. Suppose there are three numbers, and the problem is to find a fourth which is to the third as the second is to the first. Merchants do not hesitate to multiply the second by the third, and divide the product by the first, because they have not yet forgotten what they heard from their teacher without any demonstration, or because they have often found this in the simplest numbers, or from the force of the demonstration of P19 in Book VII of Euclid, namely, from the common property of proportionals. But in the simplest numbers none of this is necessary. Given the numbers 1, 2, and 3, no one fails to see that the fourth proportional is 6 —and we see this much more clearly because we infer the fourth number from the ratio which, in one glance, we see the first number to have to the second."

⁴⁷ Allison (1987, pp. 117-18) offers an interpretation of the second kind of knowledge as highly general: only allowing a mind the knowledge of axioms and the attributes.

are a mode of some attribute. This richer reading of the second kind of knowledge can be supported by looking at E2p39c, where Spinoza states that the amount (or the richness) of information that we can acquire by the second kind of knowledge is proportional to the complexity of our bodies and how it can be affected by many different things.⁴⁸ I believe that this second interpretation is the more adequate—precisely because of E2p39c—; hence, I take the second kind of knowledge to include all possible true knowledge that is in some respect true of many things, but not only axioms, or the knowledge of attributes.

The third kind of knowledge, and the more controversial, has been compared by some to mysticism and imagined to show that Spinoza allows for some unmediated knowledge of the world through God. This is far from the truth, if we attend to the passage (or even the example in footnote 46), it simply states that it is a form of synthesis⁴⁹ of information that allows us to go from knowledge of the second kind (knowledge of that which is common to many things) to knowledge of the third kind: knowledge of a particular insofar as we've managed to combine our general knowledge about many things in order to understand one specific individual.

Now the question is reconsidered: what kind of knowledge does the *Ethics* mostly convey? I believe that, in the most part, it is knowledge of the second kind that is offered by its propositions.⁵⁰ Most propositions purport to explain fundamental

⁴⁸ Nadler and Yovel support this richer interpretation. For a defense, see Yovel (1989, Ch. 6).

⁴⁹ I borrow from Yovel (1989) the concept of 'synthesis'.

⁵⁰ Or this is the case in the first few readings one makes of the *Ethics*. Yovel argues that, after apprehending the contents of the book, a reader would be expected to see the first part of the *Ethics* in a new light, now synthesized in a way that one comes to understand God and one's own place in

qualities of reality, but never offer information of the complete essence of some particular entity. Hence, if all propositions are true, but mostly of a universal kind, then, with respect to the conatus, it must be the case that the concept is formulated in the second —general— kind of knowledge, so as to be true off all entities, but exclusive to none.

This then is the fundamental reason why Spinoza's metaphysics on individuals and the conatus seems so abstract: because it needs to be linguistically formulated such that it allows for describing a great collection of things that are in various respects very distinct from each other. This second kind of knowledge may also help explain how it is that Spinoza believes he came to have the knowledge of the axioms that he needs to get the *Ethics* off the ground; in fact, I believe E2p47⁵¹ is a key point in the development of the *Ethics*: here the book comes full circle and discloses how it is that a person could have knowledge of God in the first place, the knowledge that one needs in order to adequately conceive anything about the world (E1p15). Yet, I develop this point no further in order to continue the discussion on the conatus.

I propose that the conatus concept is a perfect example of a *common notion*,⁵² a 'rational' idea or the second kind of knowledge; it is something that we can know of many things (being about all modes in the case of the conatus), and which is exclusive to none. Hence, the way that Spinoza expresses his idea in E3p6 remains

nature by the third kind of knowledge. (1989, pp. 164-67) Though the propositions themselves, each one separately, remain expressed in the tone of the second kind of knowledge.

⁵¹ E2p47: "The human mind has an adequate knowledge of God's eternal and infinite essence."

⁵² Cf. E2p40 and E2p40sch1.

open to all forms of entities or modes, but without telling us anything particular about any one of them. For this reason it seems as though the conatus theory is at once highly illuminating and completely useless. It is only when we combine other knowledge that we have about entities together with the idea of the conatus that we can flesh out how the conatus of any one particular mode should be described in its specificity. However, here I believe that Spinoza simultaneously shows wisdom and humility in facing the nature of reality within the confines of scientific knowledge of his time: he recognizes that our knowledge of bodies is very limited (E3p1sch). There is one passage of the *Ethics* that is key recognizing Spinoza's modesty and the limits of his explanation:

E4p62sch: *[...] we can have only a quite inadequate knowledge of the duration of things, and determine by reason their times of existing (E2p31), and we determine their times of existing by the imagination (E2p44sch) [...] That is why the true knowledge that we have of good and evil is only abstract, or universal, and the judgment we make concerning the order of things and the connections of causes, so that in the present we may determine what is good or evil for us, is imaginary, rather than real. [...]*

This coincides with the same issue of identifying what constitutes actual or specific individuals in the world (discussed in the first chapter). It seems that — as happens in metaphysics— a concept, in this case 'individual', is only comprehensible as a concept, but not clearly verifiable or operational. On this

point Bennett makes the mistake of demanding that Spinoza offer an operational theory of individuals that is applicable in experience in a way that allows for us to non-circularly determine what are the boundaries of actual individuals and in order to be able to then ascertain what is beneficial for each of them.⁵³ Bennett recognizes that whilst the concept of individual remains underdetermined, the argument for the conatus seems un-falsifiable. However, I believe that by having in mind the passage above, one should recognize that Spinoza never expected his metaphysics to be verifiable (and much less falsifiable). His metaphysics was not offered as a basis for scientific research, but directed at strengthening the character of the reader through a formal understanding of the nature of one's mind and its relation to the rest of the world (more on this below).

On this note we can conclude this chapter: directing our gaze at this seemingly underdetermined concept of individual given the nature of the second kind of knowledge and the restrictions that this places on Spinoza's capacity for explaining the conatus such that all individuals are subsumed by it.

⁵³ Bennett (1984, pp. 249-51).

CHAPTER 3. TOWARDS A THEORY OF RATIONAL SELF-SACRIFICE

In this final chapter I will attempt to prove that Spinoza's theory of conatus allows for an interpretation where behavior that we could call 'self-sacrifice' —as opposed to suicide— can fall under the set of actions that can be considered free or rational in Spinozistic terms; i.e., as following from the essence or activity that defines us. To do this I discuss in more detail the account of 'freedom' and 'reason' in the *Ethics*, so that afterwards one may more clearly see its important connections to the indeterminacy previously discussed with respect to the concepts of 'individual' and 'conatus'. I conclude that this development of the conatus towards the possibility of rational self-sacrifice is not exactly a necessary consequence of the conatus theory as is developed by Spinoza, but a possible one which may allow us to reconsider the tone in which his ethical theory is usually taken to be created: pure egoism for self-perseverance in terms of longevity.

3.1 Free or rational behavior

Within philosophy at large, the term 'freedom' is not without its serious complications, and with Spinoza we find a peculiar definition:

E1def7: *That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone. But a thing is called necessary, or rather compelled, which is determined by another to exist and to produce an effect in a certain and determinate manner.*

From this definition found early on in the book, we see that Spinoza does not conceive freedom in the way that common sense discourse frequently imagines: as ‘freedom of indifference’, a ‘free will’ that can just as well act or not act. For Spinoza, however, there is no distinction of *will* and *idea*; a mind does not have a cognitive faculty of affirming or denying, but, as Spinoza puts it:

E2p49: *In the mind there is no volition, or affirmation and negation, except that which the idea involves insofar as it is an idea.*

To best appreciate this passage we must remember that for Spinoza there is no ontological distinction between ‘mind’ and ‘idea’: the mind is no more than a composite idea, the term ‘mind’ is used just to refer to that composite mode in Thought that is a representation of our body (E2p11, E2p13, E2p15). The mind is just as rich and complex as the body that it represents. To this extent, the human mind does not escape the determinate processes of nature; it is necessarily determined to act in a certain way, as all other modes of God (E1p27, E2p11c).

This conception of the mind would indicate to many readers that, given how the mode that is the human mind is just as determined to exist and behave by the laws of nature as any other inanimate object, it is ironic —if not straight out dishonest— to speak of the possibility of human freedom. However, for Spinoza, ‘freedom of the will’ as is commonly imagined is in fact an abstract notion that people form due to their ignorance of the true cause of their actions and the nature of reality (E1Apendix, E2p48sch). In fact, it may seem that without Spinoza’s way of conceiving freedom (acting in those ways which *necessarily* follow from the

essence of the thing, and not determined by outside forces, E1def7), the concept itself is rather incomprehensible. What is freedom if not a power that I have to determine my actions? And how does one comprehend this power to determine oneself if it is not through our understanding of the actions that follow from our essence?

In any case, we see that the ‘will’ is nothing but that affirmation that is part of any idea itself. There is no *epoché*, not in the Cartesian sense (E2p49sch, see Spinoza’s denunciation of ideas as “mute pictures on a panel”). Our actions and thoughts are determined by the nature of the parts of our body or mind respectively, by our constitution as a mode of Nature and as a mode that interacts with its environment. Spinoza also denies the distinction of *will* and *intellect* to the point of tracing an identity between the two (E2p49c). Hence, we find that all our (mental) behavior is explained through the ideas that constitute our minds *and nothing else*. Moreover, in our discussion of the three kinds of knowledge we found that Spinoza names ‘reason’ as the second kind of knowledge. This is to say, just as the *will* is not an abstract faculty distinguished from the content itself of the ideas that constitute our (thinking) being, neither is *reason*. Therefore, we are said to be ‘rational’ not because we employ a faculty of ‘free will’ based on justified belief, but just to the extent that adequate ideas *are* the determining factors of our behavior (E3p1, E4p23).

Yet, there remains the issue of what makes it so that some idea is the driving force of our behavior, instead of another. This is explained, surprisingly, by reference to the body (E4p1 – E4p19). In so far as the mind is a mode of Thought that

represents the mode that is our body, the mind just as well reflects the determining affections of the body as the determining ideas of the mind (E2p7). More interesting still is this fact that Spinoza explains the content of the mind by reference to the body without inconsistency with his conviction on the impossibility of interaction between the mind and the body (E2p6, E3p2). The significance of conceiving the behavior of the mind through an understanding of the body is that, for that reason, gaps in the knowledge of our bodies (and other modes of Extension) will reflect in a way as gaps in our understanding of the mind. And, in fact, Spinoza openly recognizes the ignorance that we have of the body:

E2p24: *The human mind does not involve adequate knowledge of the parts composing the body.*

E3p2sch: *[...] no one has yet determined what the body can do, that is, experience has not yet taught anyone what the body can do from the laws of Nature alone, insofar as Nature is only considered to be corporeal [...]*

In not knowing what the body can do from the laws of its nature alone, we cannot always know what behavior of one's own body adds up to an action; i.e., to an event that is explained by the essence of our body alone. See that Spinoza later adds in E3p2sch that "the body itself, simply from the laws of its own nature, can do many things which its mind wonders at." This ignorance is important for one of my attempts at showing that the conatus concept is underdetermined in a way that allows for what I will soon define as rational self-sacrifice. But before that, I

need to explain in what cases we can know that we are *acting* or are the adequate cause of our actions or affections.⁵⁴

Earlier I mentioned that the function of the *Ethics* is best understood not as a treatise for the foundations of empirical research of nature, but more focused towards offering the reader a means for emotional wisdom and strength of character. We recognize this on various occasions, such as when Spinoza points out in the preface to part 5 of the *Ethics* that the point of that last section is to explain the power of reason (of our adequate ideas) over the passive affects (our inadequate ideas and the source of bondage). Throughout this last part of the book he argues that—independently of the fact that we do not have clear and distinct ideas about the parts that make up our bodies—we can achieve clear and distinct knowledge about the *affects* of our bodies (see E5p3, E5p4, E5p10). So, we find an important division in the kind of knowledge that the *Ethics* alleges to have offered the reader: on the one hand we have the possible adequate understanding of our emotions or motivations (the affects), though on the other hand, we recognize our ignorance with respect to many other determining factors on our bodies and minds. Yet, given that we presumably achieve adequate knowledge about various matters, we can better understand what Spinoza means when he says:

E4p27: *We know nothing to be certainly good or evil, except what really leads to understanding or what can prevent us from understanding.*

⁵⁴ See again the E3def1 and E3def2 above.

This passage is not meant to insist that the only possible good that we can acquire is knowledge of the second or third kind,⁵⁵ but that given the limits of our understanding of the world and ourselves, the only thing that we can be *certain* that is good for us is knowledge itself; i.e., those ideas that are adequate in us and which can give us greater power over our emotions; i.e., over our tendencies or behavior (though never absolute; by E4p4). Again, saying that we have greater control over our desires is nothing else but to say that our desires and tendencies are determined by the set of powers that define our essence, and not by external causes that can move us to a less perfect state of being (to be less of an adequate cause of our behavior, to be less autonomous).

3.2 New possible consequences of the conatus theory

So far I have tried to show how some of the basic elements of Spinoza's metaphysics are underdetermined with respect to the identity of individuals (the boundaries and activity that define them), and as a consequence, the limits of the conatus concept also remains unclear: What kind of activity falls outside of the spectrum of behavior that counts as '*persevering in its being*'? Lastly, I've offered a brief account of 'free action' with respect to modes, and hinted at the problem of ignorance that Spinoza says that we have in many respects about the nature of our own bodies and those that are external to us. Furthermore, given this lack of knowledge of the body, there also remains a potentially wide set of behavior types

⁵⁵ Cf. E4p45sch where Spinoza recognizes that many things besides knowledge can be favorable for the individual. The point is that, we are only certain of the benefits of knowledge, whilst we may remain uncertain about the benefits of other worldly pleasures given that we do not have adequate knowledge of the parts of that compose our body, and how exactly they are affected by other entities.

that may follow from the essence that defines us, but of which we have no knowledge and which is difficult or impossible to recognize as such. Here I quote again E3p2sch: “the body itself, simply from the laws of its own nature, can do many things which its mind wonders at.”

Given all these gaps in theoretical content, I believe that it is possible to formulate additional consequences or propositions that fit within the basic metaphysical framework that Spinoza created, especially on the topic of conatus and free action. Yet, if my previous definition of suicide was correct, then one thing remains certain: the concepts of conatus and free action cannot be deployed in order to describe suicide as a free action or to say that we can be the one and only adequate cause of our self-destruction or desire to self-destruct. However, I do consider that something like ‘free self-sacrifice’ is possible to defend even within this framework. Moreover, I believe that Spinoza gave a particularly useful case that helps me in defending the possibility of free self-sacrifice: his controversial stance in E4p72. In that example Spinoza insisted that a ‘free man’ would be honest, and would not lie even if to save his life.

However, to make sense of such a scenario, it is important to speculate about the motivations of this character. For this fatally honest character to count as a free agent, it must be the case that he will be honest not because he knows and desires the consequence of death in and of itself, but because he knows and desires the consequences of honesty. For example, Spinoza (in his defense of E4p72) employs E3p31c, which states that *reason* (or knowledge of the second kind in so far as it has the appropriate affective power on our behavior) moves us to endeavor to

make other things coalesce with our nature in constructive ways. Though, even if such an effort will be a failure (by hypothesis of being killed due to being honest), it still follows that it is a free action due to its being motivated by the adequate knowledge of the positive consequences of honesty.⁵⁶ Notice, also that the free and honest man in this case is the cause of his death only in *mediate* terms (his destruction is explained by the intervention of powers beyond himself), so that this example does not go against our explanation of why suicide is impossible, nor does it count as suicide. Only to this degree can one say that he *acts* and is an *adequate cause* as suggested in E4p72. This free man—in order to count as such—must be moved to say the truth in virtue of positive affects, and not because of an emotional weakness (such as the mere ambition of wanting to be admired for being honest under the risk of death).⁵⁷

Now, in virtue of this analysis of E4p72 that I offer, I believe that we may formulate a case for ‘self-sacrifice’ as a potentially free act. Yet, it must be said that to meet the conditions for free self-sacrifice we shall have to avoid many of the usual motivations that are referenced as the ‘purest’ or ‘noblest’ in much of popular discourse when speaking of this topic. If an agent puts herself in danger in order to protect another, and does this knowing that such action may culminate in her death, then only a very specific set of affective states should be explanatory of such behavior to count as free. First, however, let us note those that do not show the

⁵⁶ It probably is the case that we, as readers, will find this proof weak or unsatisfying; yet, my purpose here is not to determine whether Spinoza’s philosophy is correct, but only to unpack its theoretical content and—assuming that his philosophy is sufficiently consistent overall—to speculate about additional theoretical consequences that fit into this framework.

⁵⁷ See E3, Definitions of the affects, 44 for the definition of *ambition*.

agent as adequate cause of her action: neither *fear*, nor *pity*, nor *compassion*⁵⁸ may be the motivating affect in order to count as free. For example, imagine the unfortunate case of a father that sees his young child is about to be run over by a car. In many cases parents are very willing to put themselves in harms way for the protection of their child, and in such cases the father would possibly be willing to throw himself at the car in order to protect the child. However, one may recognize that such instincts are usually motivated by a mixture of *fear* (of losing one's child), compassion for the child, and any number of other passive affects.⁵⁹ In such a case we neither say that the parent has committed technical suicide (which is impossible), nor freely sacrificed himself for the child (due to the passive affects being the determining force of his action). Such impulsive behavior may fall only under a partial action of the agent.

Yet, as imagined for the case of E4p72, we may formulate the scenario in a way that places a parent under the influence of *reason* and some other positive affect that explains the action in virtue of the *conatus*, or essential activity that defines him as a mode. This should be viable, if only because Spinoza explicitly argues for this possibility:

E4p59: *To every action to which we are determined from an affect that is a passion, we can be determined by reason, without that affect.*

⁵⁸ E3, Definitions of the affects, 13, 18, 24 respectively.

⁵⁹ Please let it be noted that I do not wish to speak ill of any parent who would give their life for their children, but only to analyze the situation in Spinozistic terms.

Even though in general we are all continuously determined by both active and passive affects, Spinoza argues for the theoretical possibility that any behavior that is undertaken in virtue of a passion, to just as well be possible under the influence of reason. Actions, in and of themselves, are neither good nor bad, but only acquire this qualification in relation to how we understand them to follow from us or affect us (E4 preface, E4p59sch⁶⁰). Though probably highly exceptional (and so much so that some might say it is practically impossible); we can posit a case where an individual is (actively) willing to behave in a way that helps others at the cost of the individual's own life. For example, imagine another unfortunate scenario: a expecting mother is informed by her doctors that the birth process — given some physiological complication— will bring about her death, but that she has the option, if she wishes, to terminate the pregnancy and save her own life. In this case it would be interesting to ask Spinoza what he believes to be the rational choice.

If we interpret Spinoza's conatus theory in the way that I have previously taken to be false (i.e., as an endeavor for *longevity* more than for *activity*), then we would imagine Spinoza suggesting that the rational choice for the mother is to terminate the pregnancy and save her own life. However, under my interpretation (i.e., where the *conatus* is a striving for higher degrees of *activity*, not longevity), I

⁶⁰ Here Spinoza offers the following illustration: "The act of beating, in so far as it is considered physically, and insofar as we attend only to the fact that the man raises his arm, closes his fist, and moves his whole arm forcefully up and down, is a virtue, which is conceived from the structure of the human body. Therefore, if a man moved by anger or hate is determined to close his fist or move his arm, that [...] happens because one and the same action can be joined to any images of things whatever. And so we can be determined to one and the same action both from those images of things which we conceive confusedly and [from those images of things] we conceive clearly and distinctly."

believe that both choices can be rational (insofar as the mother is motivated by positive affects and an adequate understanding of the situation). If the mother chooses to save her own life, not out of fear of death, but out of love for her own life—and she believes that she can face her decision without suffering regret and self-hatred—, then I suspect Spinoza would not have the tools to implicate her as an inadequate cause of her dispositional state.

On the other hand, and just as well, if the mother—out of strength of character, and motivated by the joy that she has in contemplating her own power as a creator of life; i.e., not out of fear of what others would think of her if she chose her life over her child's—, then I suspect that her action of sacrifice may be called free or rational: it follows from her understanding of herself and the circumstances, and is motivated not by sadness and compassion for the child, but out of joy and love of being the cause of the existence of a new life.

At this point it can be suggested that my argument is faulty if it allows for seemingly contradictory actions to be rational. However, such an impression is only possible if one misunderstands what kind of behavior is actually entailed by reason in each case. In fact, both cases are identical in that reason induces a motivation that is consistent with the power or activity that defines the parent: the power to bring about certain consequences by means of the capacities of the individual. In the first case reason and other positive affects involved in the process allow the parent to actively organize her emotions and then make certain decisions (i.e., is then determined to desire the termination of the pregnancy in virtue of her understanding of the situation in conjunction with her desire to

continue existing in order to achieve further things in life). On the other hand, the second case offers again an example of reason inducing some motivation that is consistent with the definitive powers of the mother: behaving in a way that allows for the complete development of the child and later its birth.

The important difference between the two cases is not what is brought about, but how it is brought about. In both cases the mother is motivated through her understanding of the situation and a conjunction of other positive affects that involve her developing an emotional state that is explained in virtue of her own capacity to connect and organize her emotions or affects (such as Spinoza says is possible in E5p10). Nonetheless, if I were pressed to opt for one case as the ‘more rational’, or if I were shown that they are in fact contradictory actions, and that reason cannot motivate opposing behaviors, then I believe that the self-sacrifice example might be the most consistent illustration, especially if we wish to develop our argument as a continuation of lethally radical honesty.

Moreover, in the case of self-sacrifice, she is an adequate cause of a behavior that is *immediately* good for her⁶¹, but *mediately* destructive. It is *immediately* good for her in so far as it is an action or a state of being that implies her essence and is an expression of her thriving conatus as an active entity (given that she is determined to behave in such a way through reason and positive affects). It is, nonetheless, *mediately* destructive in so far as we consider that, by intervention of the childbirth, her life will come to an end. And, most importantly, it is distinct from

⁶¹ As has been discussed in Chapter 2, about the difference between mediated and immediate consequences of the conatus or essence of an entity.

suicide given that her action is not one that is *immediately* directed at her own destruction, but directed at bringing to fruition what she was committed to achieve: bringing forth a new human into the world.

In light of these two examples, I propose we take the following as the technical definition of free or rational self-sacrifice:

By free or rational self-sacrifice I understand an action in which the agent is determined to behave in a certain way that will knowingly bring about their death, but which is undertaken as an expression of the power that defines them. It is an action that, as all adequate actions are, is immediately beneficial (given that it is a state of being in which the capacity for autonomy is preserved, the essence is fully expressed), but it is mediately destructive in so far as external influences will bring about their death.

These examples are coherent with the rest of the system only as long as we retain these highly underdetermined concepts of *individual* and *conatus*. If we are not clear on what types of patterns of movement and rest among the constitutive parts of a body are those that qualify as conducive to the existence of an entity, then almost any kind of behavior may count as consequence of the essence or power that defines a mode. What remains clear is that, if an entity is defined by activity X, then it cannot immediately follow from X itself that $\sim X$.

Furthermore, the indeterminacy of the *conatus* concept is a direct consequence of the indeterminacy of the concept of individual. It is precisely due to Spinoza's reliance on the 'second kind of knowledge' that makes it difficult to know which kinds of individuals are even possible. This is then one of the more significant shortcomings of his fundamental metaphysics: the lack of a theory individual modes in Extension. Moreover, since the mind is apprehended as a representation of the body, then the concept of mind is also at risk of problematic ambiguity.

CONCLUSION AND CLOSING REMARKS

My goal in this brief discussion was threefold: (1) unpack and analyze the conatus concept; (2) evaluate the more recognized arguments against the conatus and analyze the effects that follow from an essence by means of my distinction of immediate and mediated consequences; and (3) show that the concept of the conatus, even after reinterpretation, remains sufficiently underdetermined to allow for an expansion that includes self-sacrifice as a potentially free or rational action, even though suicide is never possible as a free form of behavior.

In my analysis of the conatus concept I showed that to best understand what kind of expression or activity a thing is, it would be useful to have a theory of individuals that explains what kind of corporeal constitutions are conducive to the existence of actual individuals. However, I found that Spinoza offers too little information on the topic for us to have any clear understanding on the matter, or to facilitate a discriminative system with which to determine the basics of the fixed ratio that is presented as the definitive aspect of the form of a body. To the best of my knowledge, the most we can extract from the conatus theory as is presented by Spinoza, is that the conatus is always an activity or process that is an expression of the infinite power of God, and which cannot immediately posit its own non-existence. Then, in closing the first chapter, I explain that the conatus concept is foundational for Spinoza's theory of virtue, which in turn determines what kinds of behavior we are allowed to classify as free or rational.

Afterwards, I interrupt the focused analysis of the conatus theory in order to consider some of the main attacks or critiques brought forth against the conatus concept and its related assumptions. I insisted that many misunderstandings stem from a miscomprehension of the last clause of E3p6, which reads “*Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being.*” I argue that the final phrase —“*strives to persevere in its being*”— has been misinterpreted as an essential effort in all finite modes to extend their *longevity* as much as possible. However, in reinterpreting the clause as referring to a thing’s tendency to express the power or activity that defines it, I believe that we can react to most of the important issues brought forth against the conatus theory, and more importantly, it helps dispel certain apparent paradoxes between Spinoza’s statements on the impossibility of suicide in conjunction to his contention that a free man would not lie, even if to save his own life. In the end, I add to my evaluation of the debate a discussion on the epistemological perspective from which Spinoza develops and expresses the conatus theory. I maintain that the conatus is a concept of the second kind of knowledge as Spinoza defines it in E2p40sch2. Given that the second kind of knowledge can only furnish us with an understanding that is true of many things but exclusive to none, we then see that the vagueness of the formulation of the conatus is probably due to Spinoza’s effort to express himself in a way that allows for the term to subsume all finite modes of God under one description.

In the third and final chapter I came back to the conatus concept, and armed with the discussions of the previous two chapters, I tried to explain how the notions of *freedom* and the *conatus* are connected. I point to the main passages where

Spinoza defines freedom as nothing else but to necessarily act in virtue of one's essence and not be determined to act in virtue of the negative influences that external entities may have on us; i.e., autonomy. To be the adequate cause of our actions —to be free— is explained to follow from positive affects in conjunction to adequate knowledge of the world (be it of the second or third kind). Ultimately, I try to show that nothing that Spinoza explicitly offers in his explanations of freedom and the conatus exclude the possibility of that which I defined as free or rational self-sacrifice (in Spinozistic terms combined with my mediate/immediate conception of the consequences of the essence of a thing). I conclude that self-sacrifice can be conceived as a free action to the degree that the agent who undertakes such an action is not motivated by any form of passive affect and has clear understanding of the consequences of his or her actions.

In closing, I confess that the main motivation for this research topic was not merely to analyze the conatus concept in greater detail; but to make an effort to shift the discussion of Spinoza's philosophy as one of egoism, to one of self-improvement and freedom. The terms "psychological egoism" or "egoism" are too ubiquitous in Spinoza scholarship, especially in analyzing his conatus concept. I only hope that reinterpreting the conatus in terms of a continuous endeavor to express the powers that define us (irrespective of longevity) will help show that 'egoism' is too crude a word to describe the potential richness of the psychological explanations that derive thereof. Moreover, if my argument for free self-sacrifice is at all adequate, then all the more so to stop calling Spinoza an egoist, and allow ourselves to rediscover his metaphysics and determine what kind of ethical theory truly emerges from his philosophy in the social sphere.

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