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Conatus and Perfection in Spinoza¹

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In *Ethics* 3p6, Spinoza introduces his conatus principle: “Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being.” As frequently has been observed, this principle recalls seventeenth-century statements of the conservation of motion. There is an obvious similarity, for example, between Spinoza’s formulation of 3p6, *unaquaeque res, quantum in se est, in suo esse perserverare conatur* (each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being) and

1. This paper seems especially appropriate in both its timing and its subject for a volume dedicated to Paul. I began work on it on April 27, 2010 for a conference in Turku, Finland on May 24–25, and Paul died between those dates, on May 13. The paper concerns topics Paul and I had corresponded on extensively, beginning in 2005, when my “Spinoza on Final Causality” came out. He had mixed feelings about that paper. Initially, he was worried that my account of Spinoza would not make room for, for example, what Spinoza says about the guidance of reason in Part 4. We had a lengthy e-mail correspondence about that, and we seemed to get closer on a number of points, but we did not, as I recall, reach agreement. Later on, around 2006 or 2007, Paul began working out his suspicion that there was not as much to the priority that Aquinas gives to the final cause in his theory of causation as others (including me) seemed to think because Aquinas is working with a “stripped-down understanding of final causation.” Paul’s “Does Efficient Causation Presuppose Final Causation? Aquinas vs. Early Modern Mechanism” and “Final Causation” are both parts of that project. “Final Causation,” in part a response to my “Spinoza on Final Causality,” was given at a conference on teleology in Berlin in 2009. Paul had to participate remotely via Skype because a worsening infection from a wound he’d received from a stingray while surfing kept him from boarding the plane. During his presentation, Paul’s face was projected on a large screen in a small room, giving him a larger-than-life presence that—ahem—didn’t seem entirely fair to the party being criticized. The current paper belongs to the nexus of conversations Paul and I were having at the time he died.

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(the first part of) Descartes's first law of motion in *Principles*, II, 37, *unaquaeque res, quantum in se est, semper in eodem statu perseveret* (each thing, as far as it can by its own power, always perseveres in the same state). And Spinoza gives a thing's continuing in motion as an example of conatus.²

Plainly, the conatus principle reflects a picture of activity that is meant to be continuous with plenum mechanism. (By plenum mechanism, I mean a view where the corporeal universe consists of fluidlike homogeneous matter in motion, so that different bodies are different patterns of motion.) More generally, the conatus principle reflects a picture of activity that is meant to be consistent with naturalism, as Spinoza would have understood nature. The principle applies generally and in particular to things falling under the attribute of thought as well as things falling under the attribute of extension: a mind, just like a body, so far as it lies in its power, strives to persevere in its being.

One thing that is puzzling about the conatus principle is this. When we think of something like inertial motion, persevering in being would seem to be to continue doing whatever it is you are doing (i.e. moving in a straight line, at the same speed). But that doesn't seem to be how most things in the universe behave: while very *simple* things may behave in this way, more *complex* individuals such as solar systems, hurricanes, trees, and so on don't. Rather, complex things behave in complex ways. It may be, of course, that the bottom-level (corporeal) things are simple (are what Spinoza calls the "simplest bodies"), and thus that the ultimate components of complex things behave in an inertial manner. This, in turn, may impose constraints of a sort on the activities of the more complex systems (to put it anachronistically, it is not as if new force vectors are introduced as we progress from relatively simple subsystems to more complex supersystems). Even so, the point remains that more complex systems don't seem merely to continue to do whatever it is that they have been doing.

One place in which Spinoza seems to recognize this is in 3p12 and 3p13, which come not long after he introduces the conatus doctrine (in 3p4 through 3p9). In 3p12, Spinoza claims, "[t]he Mind, as far as it can, strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the Body's power of acting (*Corporis agendi potentiam*)," and in 3p13 he claims, "[w]hen the Mind imagines those things that diminish or restrain the Body's power of acting, it strives, as far as it can, to recollect things that exclude their existence."³ Spinoza squarely grounds the striving referred to in these propositions in 3p6 and related propositions. So, 3p12 and 3p13 suggest that something more is involved in the conatus doctrine than just doing whatever it is that you are doing; they seem to suggest that things have in some sense a tendency to "improve": in the case of a mind, its conatus includes a tendency to imagine things

⁴ 2. See, for example, ●● Curley, *Cogita Metaphysica I*, (●●: ●●, ●●), chap. 6, 314, and Letter 58.

⁵ 3. In *Spinoza's Dynamics of Being*, 179–80 (Turku: ●●, 2007), Valtteri Viljanen has raised 3p12 and 3p13 as a problem for the inertial picture of conatus developed in my "Spinoza on Final Causality," in *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*, eds. Daniel Garber and Steven Nadler (Oxford: ●●, 2005), Vol. 2, 105–47. Paul Hoffman has done so as well in his "Final Causation in Spinoza," in *Final Causes and Teleological Explanations*, eds. Dominik Perler and Stephan Schmid (●●: Mentis, 2011), and a special issue of *Logical Analysis and History of Philosophy*, 14 (●●), ●●–●●. ⁶ Olli Koistinen and Martin Lin have made a similar point in discussion. ⁷

1 that will increase the body's power of acting and to recollect things that exclude the
2 existence of things that restrain its body's power of acting.

3 This raises a couple of interesting questions. How does the mind's tendency
4 to imagine those things that increase or aid the body's power square with the
5 conatus doctrine enunciated in 3p4 through 3p9, especially 3p6? What is the
6 connection between (merely?) persevering in being and imagining what increases
7 the body's power of acting? And how does positing a tendency to improve square
8 with the underlying "naturalistic" spirit of Spinoza's project? For example, does
9 Spinoza's claim that the mind imagines those things enhance the body's power of
10 acting and imagines or recollects those things that exclude what checks the body's
11 power of acting indicate that mind behaves in a fundamentally different way from
12 body, suggesting a breach of "parallelism?" Or is this claim perhaps consistent with
13 parallelism, but at the cost of attributing to at least some corporeal systems a
14 tendency toward improvement that is, on its face, hard to square with Spinoza's
15 basic mechanistic (and naturalistic) outlook?

16 17 **I. POWER OF ACTING, PERFECTION, AND REALITY** 18

19 3p12 and 3p13 specifically concern what Spinoza calls the body's "power of acting
20 [*potentia agendi*]." We should begin by considering what that is. It appears in the
21 introduction to Part 3 and in the definition of an affect and the first postulate. The
22 first place it occurs in the main line of argument is at 3p11, where Spinoza asserts
23 that things that increase the body's power of acting, increase the mind's power of
24 acting, and that things that decrease the body's power of acting, decrease the
25 mind's power of acting. (The demonstration of 3p11 is brief, referring the reader to
26 2p7, which establishes parallelism, and to 2p13, where Spinoza lays down the thesis
27 that the mind is the idea of the body. Apparently, Spinoza regards it as an aspect of
28 parallelism.) In a scholium to 3p11, Spinoza implicitly connects changes in power
29 of acting to changes in perfection: "[w]e see, then, that the Mind can undergo great
30 changes, and pass now to a greater, now to a lesser perfection." In many contexts,
31 power of acting and perfection are interchangeable, as are perfection and reality
32 (see 2d6). So I am not going to be very fussy about what differences there might be
33 between power of acting, perfection, and reality.

34 Spinoza does not offer an explanation of the difference between lesser and
35 greater perfection.⁴ The closest he comes to doing so is in 2p13s, which seems to
36 function as a sort of preface to the material on corporeal systems (a.k.a. bodies) in
37 Part 2. His remarks there, while quite schematic, are still instructive and worth
38 considering carefully. Here is Spinoza's explanation of the "excellence" of the
39 human body and the human mind:

40
41 However, we also cannot deny that ideas differ among themselves as the
42 objects themselves do, and that one is more excellent [*praestantiorem*]: from
43

44 4. This paragraph and the next five paragraphs substantially overlap with the end of Part Two
45 of my "Highest Good and Perfection in Spinoza," to appear in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*,
46 ed. Michael Della Rocca.

1 *praesto*, to stand before] than the other, and contains more reality [*realitatis*],
2 just as the object of the one is more excellent than the object of the other and
3 contains more reality. And so to determine what is the difference between
4 the human Mind and the others, and how it surpasses them, it is necessary
5 for us, as we have said, to know the nature of its object, i.e., of the human
6 Body. I cannot explain this here, nor is that necessary for the things I wish to
7 demonstrate. Nevertheless, I say this in general, that in proportion as a Body
8 is more capable than others of doing many things at once, or being acted on
9 in many ways at once [*ad plura simul agendum, vel patiendum*], so its Mind is
10 more capable than others of perceiving many things at once. And in propor-
11 tion as the actions of a body depend more on itself alone, and as other bodies
12 concur with it less in acting, so its mind is more capable of understanding
13 distinctly. And from these [things] we can know the excellence of one mind
14 over the others (Curley, 458).

15
16 Spinoza notes here two dimensions along which one body has more reality
17 than another.

18 One dimension—doing many things at once and being acted on in many
19 ways at once—is correlated with perception, Spinoza indicates. He seems to have
20 sensation and imagination in view. If so, it would seem he thinks that we both act
21 and are acted upon when we sense and imagine: that sensing and imagining
22 are both something that happens to us and something that we do.⁵ Spinoza is
23 working perhaps with the commonsensical thought that, other things being equal,
24 a body with more sensory organs, and perhaps finer sensory organs, or with a more
25 developed imaginative and memory system, is more perfect than a body that lacks
26 such organs. This is not to say that, all things considered, the one body has more
27 reality than the other. Perhaps a body that does not possess very many or very
28 acute sensory organs or that does not store images very securely or process them
29 with great facility has more reality along some other dimensions.

30 A second dimension, Spinoza indicates, is connected with understanding,
31 and so is more closely related to what Spinoza calls our *felicitas*. This dimension
32 has to do with the independence of activity, with what we might think of as
33 relative autonomy. What Spinoza has in view is perhaps less obvious here. It helps
34 to observe that Spinoza thinks of understanding as a form of cognition that is
35 independent of the vagaries of interactions with one's local environment (where
36 one's local environment may be taken inclusively, to include what one has

37
38 5. The idea that we act (as well as being acted on) when we sense may be connected with
39 Spinoza's view at 2p17c2, that the resulting image is more a product of the body's condition than
40 that of the sensed thing. In any case, the idea that our body is not (like wax impressed by a seal)
41 merely passive when we sense seems natural enough. Lilli Alanen has pointed out to me that it is
42 hard to square the idea that I act when I sense with 3d2, according to which I must be the adequate
43 cause of my actions: I am only an inadequate (or partial) cause of my sensations. Perhaps Spinoza
44 thinks I am an adequate cause of some of the goings-on in my sensory system, but not of the whole
45 process. I am not sure.

1 bumped into the past and not just what is impinging on one now).⁶ In 2p18s,
2 Spinoza says that such interactions shape one's cognition in a random and occa-
3 sional way—according to what Spinoza calls the “order and connection of the
4 affections of the human Body.” The ideas of such affections “involve both [the
5 human Body's] nature and that of external bodies.” This is imaginative cognition.
6 By way of contrast, when I work out a geometrical argument concerning a tri-
7 angle, my cognition becomes structured in the same way as the triangle: we might
8 say it becomes structured “trianglewise.” (The similarity in structure is so close
9 that in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* §33, Spinoza feels the
10 need to remind the reader that “a circle is one thing and an idea of the circle is
11 another.”) When I understand, the linkages among my ideas do not reflect my
12 body's local environment, but are “according to the order of the intellect, by
13 which the Mind perceives things through their first causes” (2p18s; Curley, 466).⁷
14 This is intellectual cognition. And just as a more excellent mind operates accord-
15 ing to the order of the intellect, in a manner relatively independent of ideas
16 external to the mind, so too a more excellent body operates in a manner relatively
17 independent of its local environment.⁸

18 I take Spinoza to be working with certain natural, pre-theoretical ideas and
19 interpreting them within the context of his metaphysics. The general thought is that
20 there is something *more*, for example, to me than to a cat, and something *more*
21 to a cat than to a squid, and that this something more is connected, in turn, with what
22 I can *do* (the extent of my “power”), that is, the sorts of things I can do and the cat
23 can't, and the sorts of things the cat can do and the squid can't. One can imagine
24 someone responding to this with a certain amount of skepticism. “A squid can do
25 as many things as a human can: it can live underwater, can sting prey, has a very
26 flexible body, and so on. So it's a tie.” Or, “A hurricane can do as much as (if not
27 more than) a human can. It can uproot trees and knock down houses. It's all a
28 matter of how you measure power.” One can imagine targeting this sort of skep-
29 ticism specifically at the two dimensions of excellence that Spinoza calls attention
30 to—ability to do and undergo many things at once, and ability to act in (relative)
31 independence of one's environment: the hurricane can do many things at once—
32 e.g. knock down trees and walls, and move lots of water—and it does what it does
33 with relatively little assistance from its local environment (the surrounding air
34 masses, let's suppose).

35 I think what these reservations show is that Spinoza is taking for granted
36 something from the tradition here (this may be why his account of the excellence
37 of the human body and the human mind is as sketchy as it is). That is, he is not

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39 6. Strictly speaking, of course, the physical environment does not shape any form of cognition
40 for Spinoza. Thus, it would be more precise to say that some aspects of one's cognition are due to
41 aspects of one's body that are responsive to the local environment, where “due to” is spelled out
42 in terms of the mind's being the body existing objectively, in the idea of God.

43 7. Margaret Wilson calls attention to this distinction in “Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge,” in
44 *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
45 1996), 103.

46 8. Only relatively because I need to breathe while I understand, and perhaps sipping an
47 espresso helps the understanding flow more smoothly.

1 trying to defend *ab initio* the thesis that some things have more reality than others.
2 Rather, he's taking for granted that there are such differences and interpreting
3 these differences within the context of his metaphysics.⁹ He's working with the
4 commonsensical thought that there is more to a cat than a rock, and one way
5 in which this comes out is that the cat has a certain kind of complexity—so that it
6 can do and undergo many things at once—that a rock lacks. And there's more to
7 me than the cat, and one way in which this comes out is that I operate in a more
8 autonomous way (to the extent that my cognition is structured according to the
9 order of the intellect as opposed to the order of the imagination) than the cat does.

10 One might quarrel with Spinoza's interpretation of the data—perhaps 2p13s
11 is too schematic to be very helpful. Nowadays, many might be tempted to reject the
12 data themselves. It might be felt that he took on this particular inheritance uncritically.
13 In fact, it is not clear to me how attractive the latter option is. Many today
14 would regard living things as somehow “more advanced” than nonliving things in
15 ways that they would find difficult to articulate, and some living things “more
16 advanced” than others, however that inchoate thought is ultimately to be worked
17 out (perhaps in terms of evolutionary history, or organizational complexity, or
18 along some other lines).

19 It might be argued against my interpretation that *Spinoza* at any rate is more
20 revolutionary and that he wants to discard the data. After all, he thinks at the end
21 of the day, it's all “just” matter in motion—and how can one system of matter in
22 motion have more reality than another? However, I don't see indication of such a
23 revisionist or reductionist tendency in Spinoza's texts. His plenum seems a rich [2]
24 arena filled with overlapping systems of variegated excellence, where variety
25 comes out in systems' power of acting (a variety that appears grounded in their
26 mechanical complexity). It might be thought that Spinoza's rejection of final causality,
27 and along with it, the good as a basic metaphysical category, would flatten out
28 his conception of perfection or reality (or excellence). I don't think so.

29 To see why, we need to get clear on what is at stake in Spinoza's rejection of
30 final causality. The point of that rejection, however, is to reject what might be called
31 an “ends first” picture of essences and efficient causality: a rejection of the idea
32 that things are structured around ends or that efficient causes operate only through
33 the intention of an end (so that the end, or final cause, is “first” in the order of
34 causality). Nothing in Spinoza's account of the excellence of things suggests that
35 things operate through the intention of ends. Further, nothing in Spinoza's remarks
36 about the power of acting implies that a thing's power is structured around some
37 end or ends.

38 Consider, for example, a complex corporeal system, a hurricane, or the solar
39 system, a tree, or the fabulously complex system that is my human body. What are
40 its “ends?” The system's internal motive tendencies determine what its power of
41

42 9. Something similar takes place with Spinoza's employment of the idea of a *ratio* of motion
43 and rest (also a part of this very schematic section of the *Ethics*). Commentators sometimes try to
44 ask too much of the notion, as if it is supposed to make for a fully articulated theory of a body. It
45 seems clear, however, that Spinoza is merely after the idea of a pattern of motion and is trying to
46 say something useful, in a rough and ready way, about what a pattern is and how patterns endure,
47 move, grow, combine to form larger patterns, and so on.

1 acting is, that is, what sorts of things it can do (and what sort of things can be done
2 to it), and so set what counts as increasing or decreasing the system's power of
3 acting. To the extent that "ends" enter the picture—and it is not clear to what
4 extent they do—they would have to be (either) posterior to (or perhaps identical
5 with) these motive tendencies, and not (somehow) prior to those tendencies. Since
6 a thing's motive tendencies are its conatus and a thing's conatus is its essence,¹⁰
7 another way to put this point is that to the extent that "ends" enter the picture, they
8 are either posterior to or perhaps identical with the system's conatus or essence.¹¹

9 There are limits, Spinoza thinks, to how much passing to a new perfection
10 (how much increase in power of activity) an individual can tolerate without being
11 destroyed. He writes near the end of the Preface to Part 4:

12
13 But the main thing to note is that when I say that someone passes from a
14 lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite, I do not understand that he
15 has changed from one essence, or form, to another. For example, a horse is
16 destroyed as much if it is changed into a man as if it is changed into an insect.
17 Rather, we conceive that his power of acting, insofar as it is understood
18 through his nature, is increased or diminished (Curley, 545–546).¹²

19
20 10. When Spinoza says a thing's conatus is "nothing other than the actual essence of a thing"
21 (3p7), I think we should hear this claim along the lines that we would hear the Aristotelian claim,
22 I *am* (my) rationality or I *am* (my) animality. *That* animality is not the same as *your* animality, and
23 (depending on your views on immortality) my animality has a durational aspect, so that it begins
24 to exist at my conception (or sometime soon, thereafter) and ends at my death. (Of course, there
25 are different theories in Aristotelianism about how my concrete (actual) essence is related to the
26 essence *human*.) The point that interests Spinoza, I believe, is this: for an Aristotelian, the basic
27 characterization of what I am runs through a set of powers and abilities that have characteristic
28 completions (indeed, the powers and abilities are *defined* through their characteristic comple-
29 tions), whereas for Spinoza, what a corporeal system (a body) is, is given through the system's
30 occurrent motive tendencies (see next note).

31 11. An Aristotelian would, I think, dispute this last point. She might argue as follows: "It does
32 not make sense to think that one power or activity (say, sensation) is more excellent than, or
33 involves more reality than, another power or activity (say, digestion), unless we bring ends into the
34 picture in a fundamental way. Unless we subscribe to a robust view of ends, activities will be
35 flattened out and we will have no way of responding to the objection that a hurricane engages in
36 as many simultaneous activities and acts as autonomously as a human being. Without ends to give
37 rhyme, reason, and value to the activities and the powers, really it's all just one damn thing after
38 another." I imagine that Spinoza would want to respond by pressing the question "Is the 'ends first'
39 conception of power and activity really necessary to back up a rich conception of power and
40 activity?" Don't we already know that understanding is a higher level of cognitive activity than
41 either sensing or imagining without bringing in an Aristotelian-style teleological apparatus? Is an
42 "ends first" conception of power and activity really required to work out the thought that the
43 things we do are more marvelous and complex than the things a cat does, or that the menu of
44 activities a cat engages in are more impressive than the limited repertoire of a squid?

45 Notice that the hierarchy does not have any specifically moral consequences: Spinoza is not
46 claiming that things with more reality or perfection have certain rights or privileges with respect
47 to things with less reality or perfection.

48 12. Andrew Youpa calls attention to the importance of this passage for understanding Spino-
49 za's views of perfection, in "Spinozistic Self-Preservation," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 31
50 (2003): 477–90.

1 For example, if someone found a way to morph a horse pattern of motion and rest
2 into a human pattern of motion and rest, she would not have thereby moved the
3 horse from a lesser to a greater perfection (increased its power of acting) but rather
4 have destroyed the horse and generated a human being.¹³ There is a difference
5 between enhancing a given pattern (*ratio*) of motion and rest, and the gradual
6 dissolution of a first pattern and the generation of a second pattern. If we were to
7 reconfigure the motive tendencies of a hurricane to produce a tree pattern or a
8 human being pattern, that reconfiguration would be the destruction of the hurri-
9 cane as opposed to the enhancement of the hurricane. So, while corporeal systems
10 can go up and down in perfection or power of acting, they come with limits; they
11 are not infinitely plastic.¹⁴

12 It is important to hear this in the mundane, commonsensical way in which I
13 believe it is intended. Corporeal systems—patterns of motion, *rationes* of motion
14 and rest—appear and disappear in the plenum. It is not merely arbitrary when a
15 pattern is gone: Hurricane Katrina is no more. However, there was no metaphysically
16 heavy marker—a substantial form or a dominant monad or something like
17 that—grounding the event, just the everyday, ordinary difference between improv-
18 ing something, on the one hand, and ruining it and replacing it with something else,
19 on the other. To be sure, in some situations, there may not be a clear distinction
20 between the two; as far as I can see, that would be fine by Spinoza’s lights.

21 So the “power of acting” available to a thing (or the levels of perfection open
22 to it) is set by its nature, what Spinoza calls “essence” or “form.” In the case of a
23 body or corporeal system, this “form” would be the pattern of motion (the *ratio* of
24 motion and rest), and Spinoza’s claim would be that a given pattern or *ratio* can
25 tolerate some alterations and not others: that is, some alterations of it will be
26 developments of that pattern as opposed to its destruction.¹⁵

27 There is one other thing that Spinoza says in the Preface to Part 4 that is
28 important for getting a hold on how he’s thinking of perfection:

29
30 Finally, by perfection in general I shall, as I have said, understand reality, i.e.,
31 the essence of each thing insofar as it exists and produces an effect, having no
32

33 13. In Letter 3 (to Oldenburg), Spinoza writes that “men are not created, but only generated,
34 and their bodies existed before, though formed differently.” I think this means, for example, that
35 the pattern of motion (the *ratio* of motion and rest) that counts as my body emerges in the plenum,
36 like any other corporeal system, for example, a thunderstorm or the jet stream. The appearance is
37 not marked by anything metaphysically very weighty—that would count as “creation,” in Spinoza’s
38 eyes.

39 14. One might hear of all this in a merely “nominal” way, so that the issue is what in the course
40 of the transformation we are going to call a hurricane or a tree, a horse or a human being. That
41 seems wrong to me, and to be at odds with his claim, the individual is “destroyed” (*destruitur*).
42 Spinoza may be resting his claim on a quasi-empirical assumption to the effect that any physical
43 path from hurricane to tree or horse to human involves the disruption/cessation of earlier patterns
44 of motion and rest; if so, the assumption does not seem unreasonable.

45 15. 4p39s is interesting in this regard. It indicates that in order for a given living pattern to be
46 destroyed, it does not necessarily need to be turned into a course (cease living). So there might be
47 a continuous transformation of a living system from a horse into a human being: such a transfor-
48 mation would count as the “death” (4p39s) or “destruction” (4pref.) of the horse, but at no point
49 in the transformation would the morphing system cease to be alive.

1 regard to duration. For no singular thing can be called more perfect for
2 having persevered in existing [*in existendo*] for a longer time (Curley, 546).

3
4 Things pass to a greater perfection when they increase their power of acting,
5 when they become stronger or develop a wider repertoire of activities (especially
6 the sort of activities that Spinoza singles out in 2p13s). Perhaps things that have
7 more perfection, as a general rule, tend to have a longer duration than things that
8 have less perfection. Even if this turns out to be the case, this text suggests that the
9 ability to remain around for a longer time does not lie at the heart of the notion of
10 perfection or power of acting. Consider, for example, Archimedes. His conatus,
11 power of acting, gave him a focus that made him oblivious to certain salient
12 external threats. I think it is pretty clear that Spinoza would hold that nonetheless
13 he had, on balance, more perfection (a greater power of acting) than a less intel-
14 lectually gifted being who was more adept at dealing with soldiers.

15 16 II. 3P12 AND 3P13

17
18 Now, what do 3p12 and 3p13 tell us about how Spinoza is thinking of the conatuses
19 of complex corporeal systems, such as human bodies, and their minds (which,
20 according to Spinoza, are human bodies existing “objectively,” that is, as an idea, in
21 God’s cognition)? Do the propositions indicate, for example, that things have some
22 general tendency to improve their lot?¹⁶ If so, how does this cohere (or fail to
23 cohere) with Spinoza’s mechanistic outlook?

24 Let’s look at 3p12:

25
26 3p12: The Mind, as far as it can, strives to imagine those things that increase
27 or aid the Body’s power of acting (*Corporis agendi potentiam*).

28 Dem.: So long as the human Body is affected with a mode that involves the
29 nature of an external body, the human Mind will regard the same body as
30 present (by 2p17) and consequently (by 2p7) so long as the human Mind
31 regards some external body as present, i.e. (by 2p17s), imagines it, the human
32 Body is affected with a mode that involves the nature of the external body.

33
34 16. Something Spinoza says in 3p9s might encourage this impression:

35 When this striving is related only to the Mind, it is called Will; but when it is related to
36 the Mind and Body together, it is called Appetite. This Appetite, therefore, is nothing but the
37 very essence of man, from whose nature necessarily follow those things that promote his
38 preservation.

39 Spinoza is making a general point here about things and what they do. It is not special to
40 human beings. It holds of any individual, and so, in particular, of any corporeal system. Things that
41 promote our preservation follow from our nature, in the same sense that things that promote a
42 rock’s preservation follow from its nature, a hurricane’s preservation from its nature, an amoeba’s
43 preservation from its nature, or a tree’s preservation from its nature. In particular, I don’t
44 think Spinoza is licensing an inference of the form “if X promotes my preservation, then I do X,”
45 any more than “if X promotes the hurricane’s preservation, then the hurricane does X.” Things
46 strive to preserve their being, but only as far as they can. For what seems to be a different point of
47 view, see Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s “Ethics”* (••: Hackett, 1984), 245.

1 Hence, so long as the Mind imagines those things that increase or aid our
2 body's power of acting, the Body is affected with modes that increase or aid
3 its power of acting (see Post. 1), and consequently (by p11) the Mind's power
4 of thinking is increased or aided. Therefore (by p6 and p9), the Mind, as far
5 as it can, strives to imagine those things, q.e.d.
6

7 Spinoza's argument, as I understand it, is based on two ideas.¹⁷ First, if
8 something increases the body's power of acting, the corresponding idea (under
9 parallelism) of that something increases the mind's power of acting. Second, things
10 have tendency to hang on to—it belongs to their conatus to conserve—those
11 effects that increase their power of acting.

12 Let's try to work out what Spinoza has in view in the demonstration. When
13 some external thing E leaves its mark on our body—a sort of dent on my brain that
14 “involves the nature of E”—there is an idea of E in the mind (this is what it is for
15 the mind to imagine E, according to Spinoza), and *vice versa*, when I imagine E, my
16 body is affected with a mode, a dent in my brain, that involves the nature of E.
17 Suppose the dent in question has increased the body's power of acting, then (by
18 3p11) the idea that goes with the dent, that is, the mind's imagining of E, increases
19 the mind's power of acting. The mind will tend to *keep* this idea that has increased
20 its power of acting, that is, it will belong to the mind's conatus to imagine E, that is,
21 the mind “as far as it can, strives to imagine” E.

22 Notice that Spinoza is making a relatively limited claim. He is not discussing
23 in his proposition how the mind prospectively searches for and hits upon strategies
24 to assist the body's power of acting, or the scopes and limits of such activity. It is not
25 that Spinoza is unaware of such sophisticated behaviors or unable to provide an
26 account of how such behaviors might arise; I'll try to sketch an account of these
27 phenomena on his behalf below. It is just that he is not giving an account of such
28 things in 3p12. He has something much lower level, much more primitive, in view
29 in 3p12. He's concerned here with how we *react* to things that affect us positively,
30 and so increase our power of acting. And what he is saying is that our mind has a
31 tendency to imagine things (our mind *hangs on to* ideas of things) whose marks on
32 the body increase the body's power of thinking.

33 There is a general assumption at work in Spinoza's reasoning: things have a
34 general tendency to hang on to effects (the dent, the idea of E) that have bumped up
35 their power of acting (that have moved them to a greater perfection). This assump-
36 tion coheres well enough with the underlying rationale for the conatus doctrine. For
37 example, Spinoza begins his account of conatus with the thesis “No thing can be
38 destroyed except through an external cause.” But for a thing in possession of some
39 mode that increases its power of acting, to lose that mode would be a loss in its
40 perfection and, to that extent, a failure to persevere in its being. It would be a sort of
41 destruction of some of its being. A thing will do what it can to hang on to such a mode.
42 Perhaps there is not much it can do to hang on to such modes (perhaps the brain
43

44 17. The interpretation presented here is close to one offered by Olli Koistinen in “Teleology
45 in Spinoza” (unpublished). Michael Della Rocca offers a different treatment in Section 2 of
46 Chapter 4 of *Spinoza* (••: Routledge, 2008).

1 tissue is too hard for the dent to take hold, or too fluid, so that the dent is easily
2 destroyed by external causes). But a thing will, as far as it can, strive to retain such
3 modes.

4 Let's try to picture this in somewhat more detail. At the level of very simple
5 systems, let's suppose (perhaps fancifully) that the power of acting is connected
6 with motion, so that the more motion you have, the greater your power of acting.
7 Then Spinoza's thought might be that a simple thing has a tendency to hang on to
8 a motive impression given to it (and the mind of such a thing would strive to imagine
9 the impression). That is, having had its power of acting increased, preserving in its
10 being does not mean that it returns to its previous level or power of acting, but that
11 it holds on to its new level. (Moreover, if something gets in its way that would
12 restrain its power of acting, then it does what it can to move the thing out of its way.
13 But this is to get ahead of ourselves: this is the topic of 3p13, which we will consider
14 shortly.) These activities, we might suppose, are aspects of its basic tendency to
15 persevere in being. More complex things have more complex powers of acting,
16 which can be increased in a variety of ways. Perhaps a hurricane's power of acting
17 is increased by hot air. If so, what 3p12 predicts is that when a hurricane comes
18 across some hot air, it will do what it can to incorporate the hot air into its being, and
19 when it comes across some cold air, which would diminish it, it will do what it can to
20 resist the cold air. A tree's power of activity might be increased when light has been
21 acting on it; it will strive to make these effects its own—strive to keep them.

22 Now, why should this be so? Spinoza does not have a lot to say about this—he
23 seems to take it as pretty foundational. The proposition that says that things are
24 destroyed only through external causes, 3p4, is based on the idea of essence, the
25 idea of what it is to be a real thing. In addition, 3p6 reminds us further that real
26 things are finite and determinate expressions of God's attributes and God's power.
27 I find it natural to think of the conatus doctrine as implicitly spelling out a quasi-
28 formal condition on what it is to be a (finite) real thing, that is, what it is to have a
29 coherent essence (or nature): for example, within extension, in order to have a
30 (finite) corporeal real thing, a corporeal system (or perhaps real "subject," in the
31 sense of 3p5), the system—be it a solar system or a hurricane or a tree or a human
32 body—must have a certain integrity, an integrity that Spinoza understands in terms
33 of a coordinated pattern of motions. According to Spinoza, a crucial characteristic
34 of such a system is that it "persevere in being," so that where one thinks something
35 that looks like a self-destructive system—a burning candle,¹⁸ or a diseased tree, or
36 someone committing suicide¹⁹—it is metaphysically correct to factor that into a real
37

38 18. The candle example comes from TdEI § 57.

39 19. To the extent that Spinoza faces a special problem about suicide—and this is a delicate and
40 interesting question—I think it would come from his rejection of a traditional conception of the will.

41 A traditional treatment of suicide would see suicide as arising, not from the individual's base
42 nature, but from the individual's use of her will. Even here, there is something that needs to be
43 explained, for, on a prominent conception of the will, "the will does not tend towards evil except in
44 so far as it is presented to it by the intellect under some aspect of goodness" (this is Descartes's
45 statement of a very common position at 1:366; 3:56). Since being and good are convertible, this is to
46 say that the will intrinsically tends toward being. So, on this conception, the problem that suicide
47 presents is explaining the good that the person who commits suicide aims at, and, to the extent that
48 nonbeing resulted, how a faculty that is fundamentally aimed at being, wound up taking a course

1 thing and the external forces working on it—the candle and the flame, the tree and
2 the disease, Seneca and the command of the Tyrant.

3 Spinoza's factoring point is not particularly novel or controversial. For
4 example, evil was traditionally viewed as a species of nonbeing, and it was thought
5 that sin could be factored into a being or reality component (to which God had to
6 lend his concurring causal support) and an absence of being or reality component
7 (for which creaturely limitations were ultimately responsible).²⁰ More to the point, [3]
8 the appetites of things were traditionally taken to tend toward good or being
9 (recall that good, in the tradition, is supposed to be convertible with being). Now,
10 while Spinoza has his own distinctive position on good and evil, he embraces the
11 traditional idea that a thing and its appetites do not tend toward nonbeing. Since
12 Spinoza does not draw the same sort of distinction between a thing and its appe-
13 tites that the tradition draws—for him, a thing is its motive tendencies (we'll come
14 back to this later)—the way he records the traditional idea is that a thing (its actual
15 essence) or, what is for him the same thing, its appetites (its conatus), does not
16 intrinsically tend toward nonbeing. Given this traditional outlook, where there is
17 destruction, there must be elements external to the essence of the thing being
18 destroyed that are responsible for the destruction. Be that as it may, I find it
19 natural, for my part, to think of this as a quasi-formal condition on being a real
20 thing. Spinoza, for his part, seems to think of it somewhat more substantively, as a
21 basic ontological characteristic of reality. The difference (if there is a difference)
22 won't matter for our purposes.

23 Let's turn to 3p13:

24
25 3p13: When the Mind imagines those things that diminish or restrain the
26 Body's power of acting, it strives, as far as it can, to recollect things that
27 exclude their existence.

28 Dem.: So long as the Mind imagines anything of this kind, the power both of
29 Mind and Body is diminished or restrained (as we have demonstrated in

30
31 that resulted in nonbeing. (The "to the extent that" is particularly important in view of the fact that
32 many—including, it seems, Spinoza—subscribe to some form of immorality.) For an early treatment
33 of suicide in this context, see Book Three of Augustine's *De Libero Arbitrio* (••, ••, ••). [11]

34 Spinoza's task is arguably more complicated, in part because he rejects an absolute faculty of
35 the will, and so cannot use the will to insulate, as it were, a thing's activities and decisions from its
36 underlying base nature (for Spinoza, the will is derived from the constellation of a thing's motive
37 tendencies, the thing's conatus, 3p9s; see also 2p48s). Still, I believe he has the resources to provide
38 an account of suicide that is consistent with his systematic constraints. For example, in some cases of
39 suicide, perhaps what happens is that certain subsystems bring about an instability that eventually
40 overpowers the rest of the system. As this happens, the destabilizing subsystem becomes alien, like
41 a cancerous tumor. Of course, this is meant as a sketch of one case; other cases may be more difficult
42 to work out within Spinoza's system. In any case, it is important to have an idea of what the problem
43 looks like from his point of view, and how his problem intersects with the more traditional one.
44 (I am grateful to Brian Hutler for unpublished writing and conversation surrounding the topic of
45 rationalist theories of suicide.)

46 20. For Descartes's use of this factoring idea, see my *Between Two Worlds* (Princeton: ••,
47 2009), 275–76, and my review of Tad Schmaltz's *Descartes on Causation* (Oxford: ••, 2008) in *Notre*
48 *Dame Philosophical Reviews*. Retrieved ••, from [http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/23497-descartes-on-](http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/23497-descartes-on-causation/)
49 [causation/](http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/23497-descartes-on-causation/). See also Spinoza's remarks on Adam's sin in Letter 19. [12]

1 p12); nevertheless, the Mind will continue to imagine this thing until it
2 imagines something else that excludes the thing's present existence (by
3 2p17), i.e. (as we have just shown), the power both of Mind and of Body is
4 diminished or restrained until the Mind imagines something else that
5 excludes the existence of this thing; so the Mind (by p9), as far as it can, will
6 strive to imagine or recollect that other thing, q.e.d.
7

8 Spinoza is not forthcoming with details, but here's what I think he has in
9 mind. Let's say that E leaves a dent on my body that involves the nature of E, which
10 dent diminishes or restrains its power of acting. As before, there is an idea of the
11 dent in mind, which idea counts as my imagining E. It belongs to the conatus of my
12 body, so far as it can, to remove the restraining dent; similarly, it belongs to the
13 conatus of my mind, so far as it can, to remove the idea, that is, to stop "imagining"
14 E. But how does it do this? It will, as far as it can, imagine or recollect other things
15 that "exclude" the dent's present existence. So, for example, a tree is suffering from
16 a fungus. The tree body, so far as it can, resists and expels the fungus, perhaps
17 through increased sap flow; this activity shows up in the tree's mind as the tree's
18 mind imagining or recollecting things, such as increased sap flow, that exclude the
19 fungus's present existence.

20 Like 3p12, 3p13 concerns how a thing *reacts* to effects that impinge on its
21 power of acting. As such, it also seems to me continuous with the conatus doctrine
22 enunciated in 3p4 through 3p9. Not only do things (to the extent that they can)
23 embrace power-of-acting enhancing effects, they also resist (to the extent that they
24 can) power-of-acting diminishing effects. It would be odd to have the one (the
25 embracing) without the other (the resisting). Both behaviors are expressions of
26 essence or conatus: being is doing or acting, and doing or acting involves embracing
27 what assists the acting and resisting what blocks the doing or acting. Of course, the
28 resources or strategies available to a thing for embracing or resisting vary greatly
29 from real individual to real individual. Rocks and hurricanes have very limited
30 abilities, squid somewhat more, cats still more, and human beings rather impressive
31 ones. But, all the same, the doings, embracings, and resistings are all expressions of
32 the same thing, namely a conatus to persevere in being.

33 One detail that might give us pause here is 3p13c, where Spinoza claims,
34 "[f]rom this it follows that the Mind avoids [*aversatur*] imagining those things that
35 diminish or restrain its or the Body's power." "Avoids" can sound less reactive and
36 more anticipatory here—as if, by some sort of magic, things have a tendency to stay
37 away from trouble. But 3p13c is treated as an immediate corollary of 3p13—no
38 further argument is offered—which makes us think that the avoidance in question
39 is like one positive magnet avoiding another positive magnet. The Latin term
40 *aversatur*—which literally means "turn away from"—encourages this sort of reactive
41 picture.

42 So it seems to that 3p12 and 3p13 (as well as 3p13c) are compatible with a
43 broadly mechanistic outlook. Indeed, the picture Spinoza draws seems to be now
44 familiar, at least in broad outline. Complex structures that we find in the natural
45 world have ways of maintaining themselves. This seems part of what it is to be a
46 structure (Spinoza would say "have an essence") rather than a mishmash. 3p12 and

1 3p13 seem to concern, I've been emphasizing, something fairly primitive. One
2 might wonder how Spinoza would extend what I am calling his mechanistic
3 outlook to more complex behaviors, as when an animal anticipates some danger or
4 when a human being builds a house: these activities do not seem to be reactive in
5 the same way that the embracing, resisting, and avoiding of effects that impact a
6 thing's power of acting are.

7 I gather that anticipating works roughly in the following way, for Spinoza.
8 When two things external things happen together—the master's hand goes up, E1,
9 say, and is followed by a beating, E2—the dents D1 and D2 become linked in a
10 certain way in the dog's body. The D2 dent diminished the dog's power of acting.
11 Because of the tight connection between D1 and D2 (or between the imagining E1
12 and imagining E2),²¹ the occurrence of E1 suffices for E2 resistance. In other words,
13 anticipation is a reaction to the animal's history via connections stored in memory.

14 Spinoza does not say a lot about house building, but I think he would read
15 this activity mechanistically as well. For example. over the course of a typical
16 human being's history, she has been dented by lots of houses, some of which have
17 resulted in an uptick in her power of acting, by providing her with comfort and
18 shelter. In the right circumstances—let's say, when there's an absence of shelter
19 and materials are available, and when she has developed, through dents her elders
20 have left on her over time, relevant competences—she engages (indeed, fairly
21 predictably, one supposes) in house building activity. What happens in her case is
22 very complex, but, for Spinoza, not in principle different from (and happens in the
23 same mechanical way as) a spider's weaving its web or a bird's constructing its nest.
24 The activity is part of her conatus, part of a complex of persevering-in-being motive
25 tendencies. It is, on the other hand, purely mechanistic—as mechanistic as the
26 bird's or the spider's.²²

27 Nowadays, philosophers sometimes think that situations where the past
28 success of a structure helps to explain future occurrences of that structure (a
29 favorable trait, a spider web, the emergence within a human culture of building
30 techniques) can be “explained teleologically.” Societies in which good building
31 techniques emerge tend to flourish, which keeps those techniques around, and
32 so on. It is important, to avoid anachronism, to recognize that this conception of
33 teleology was not around in Spinoza's time. (Indeed, the word “teleology” is an
34 eighteenth-century invention.) More to the point, Spinoza is interested in real
35 causes as opposed to what might be explanatorily illuminating. I think he might
36 well agree that certain temporally extended structures in the plenum develop over
37 time in a way that exhibits interesting structural features—perhaps this happens
38 in the case of biological species, where favorable heritable traits become more
39

40 21. See 2p18 and, for example, 3p14 and 3p50. One thing that is important for the point I am
41 making is that Spinoza *needs* such mechanisms. He cannot take power-of-acting increasing and
42 protecting abilities as basic, as requiring no other explanation than that it belongs to a thing's
43 conatus to increase its power of acting. One needs to spell out what a thing can and cannot do—the
44 “so far as it can”—that affects its power of acting. In the case of body, this is given mechanistically.
45 (See concluding paragraph of this paper.)

46 22. The treatment of this topic here and below is indebted to conversation with Joseph Almog
47 and to some notes of his. I'm not sure he would approve of all the details of my account.

1 frequent in a population. We might want to mark the temporally extended structures that hang together in this interesting way by labeling them “teleological.”

2 But notice, to begin with, that the distinctive course of development would be
3 the result of the underlying conatuses (motive tendencies) of the relevant actors.
4 The progenitors are doing what they are doing (and genes are doing what they are
5 doing), and things work out, for deep systematic reasons, so that, over time, favorable
6 heritable traits become more frequent in a population. Increasing the relative
7 frequency of favorable heritable traits does not belong to the conatus of the
8 progenitors or the genes. It is not a part of their persevering in their being.

9 What if we switch our point of view from the gene or the progenitor to the
10 species itself? That is, suppose we treat the species as a whole as a single, temporally
11 extended individual (Spinoza’s accounts of individuals seem open-ended enough
12 to countenance such individuals). Is it a part of *that* individual’s conatus that the
13 relative frequency of favorable heritable traits increases over time?

14 I think the answer might well be yes. After all, it is natural to think of this
15 tendency as one of the mechanisms by which the species perseveres in its being.
16 But notice, the species has this mechanism only because it is grounded in the very
17 complicated pattern of motion (*ratio* of motion and rest) that is the essence of the
18 species—the complex motive tendencies that constitute the species’ conatus.

19 There is a point that we need to be careful about here. Although species
20 behave in this way, that is, so that the relative frequency of their favorable traits
21 increases over time, this is *not* to say that the species *acts for the end* of increasing
22 the relative frequency of favorable traits. Perhaps one way of putting this is that the
23 species does not increase the relative frequency of the favorable traits *because* they
24 are favorable; that’s just how things work out, the species being the way it is,
25 progenitors being the way they are, and genes being the way they are. “Just how
26 things work out” may in one sense be too weak. Unless a thing had some stabiliz-
27 ing, solidifying mechanisms, there would be no thing, no essence. But still it is part
28 of what it is to *be* a species to act in this way.

29 In particular, we should not, Spinoza holds, try to factor this favorable-trait-
30 frequency-increasing tendency into two items, a “power” to increase the relative
31 frequency of favorable traits and its “perfection” or “completion” (the result of the
32 power’s exercise or activation), where “completion” is the thing “for the sake of
33 which” the power “acts.” There’s really only one thing here—the constant swirl of
34 the motive tendencies. This, I think, is a main idea behind reduction of ends to
35 appetites, such as in 4d4: “By the end for the sake of which we do something I
36 understand appetite.” It implicitly replaces an Aristotelian conception of ends, acts,
37 and powers with a new-science conception of motive tendencies.

40 III. TWO-TIERED VERSUS ONE-LEVEL ACCOUNTS OF THINGS 41 AND THEIR POWERS

42
43 The point about power and activity just noted reflects a fundamental difference
44 between Spinoza’s thought and Aristotelian thought. Recall that in Aristotelian
45 philosophy, there is a fundamental distinction between potentiality and actuality

1 that runs throughout being.²³ This surfaces in different ways. In the case of things,
2 there is first actuality, the basic collection of powers that make a thing the thing that
3 it is, and there is second actuality, the result of the exercise of those powers, which
4 completes or perfects the thing. In the case of power, there is the power (say, vision)
5 and its exercise (seeing). Existence or being goes with the first stage—I came into
6 existence when the basic vital powers did. The end goes with the second stage—
7 I reach my final end (say, the *visio dei*) when I exercise my powers in the highest
8 possible way (say, when my highest power, understanding, understands as fully and
9 as well as possible). The story of my existence is a struggle to get from the first stage
10 (existence) to the second stage (blessedness).

11 Notice that it is hard to recover such a distinction for a plenum being, like a
12 hurricane. That is, it is hard to factor a hurricane into potentiality and actuality to
13 locate a distinction between possessing a power and exercising that power. A
14 hurricane is not something that is somehow distinct from the relevant motive
15 tendencies or appetites; it is not, for example, some separable subject or seat of
16 those tendencies. Similarly, on a picture of an individual as a complex pattern of
17 motions, it is difficult to see how to separate the “powers” from their “exercise.” The
18 powers are *always* being *fully* exercised: it is just a question of how the motive
19 tendencies will be manifested in various circumstances.

20 In this connection, 3p7, in which Spinoza identifies conatus with “actual
21 essence,” seems particularly significant: “The striving by which each thing strives to
22 persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of a thing.” As a pattern of
23 motion, a corporeal system *is* its motive tendencies. Perhaps if we were to draw a
24 real distinction between the essence and the striving, then we might think of the
25 striving as *being for* the essence. We might think of the essence implicitly specifying
26 what it is that the subsequent striving is to achieve, for example a beatified human
27 being. Conversely, if we think that essence is fundamentally the same as the
28 striving, it is harder to see the striving as being for the essence. In this case, it is not
29 as if the essence has interests apart from the striving for the striving to secure.

30 This idea seems to me to be related to a point Spinoza makes in the Preface
31 to Part 4. There, he links the idea that God exists and acts “by the same necessity”
32 to the idea that God does not act for an end:

33
34 For we have shown in the Appendix of Part I, that Nature does nothing on
35 account of any end. That eternal and infinite being we call God, or Nature,
36 acts from the same necessity from which he exists. For we have shown (1p16)
37 that the necessity of nature from which he acts is the same as that from which
38 he exists. The reason, therefore, or cause, why God, or Nature, acts, and the
39 reason why he exists are one and the same. As he exists for the sake of no end
40 [*nullius finis causa*], so he acts for the sake of no end [*nullius . . . finis causa*].
41 Rather, as he has no principle/beginning [*principium*] or end [*finem*] of
42 existing, so he also has none of acting (Curley, 544).

43
44 ¹³ 23. It is, for example, one of the three main divisions of being that Aquinas notes at the
45 beginning of “*De Ente et Essentia*” (••• ••• •••).

1 One might think that Spinoza's point is that since God acts necessarily,
2 he cannot act for an end. I don't think that is right, however; in the tradition, most
3 things that were thought to act for ends were thought to do so necessarily. Rather,
4 I think that the point Spinoza is making here is closely related to the one we just
5 considered about the hurricane's relation to its motive tendencies. A hurricane *is*
6 its motive tendencies, is its *acting*, not a collection of powers, the successful "exer-
7 cise" of which brings the hurricane to its "end." Since the acting is the hurricane, the
8 acting is not something distinct from the hurricane, which, when successful, "per-
9 fects" it; the acting is not for the sake of an end (the hurricane's perfection).

10 The point that Spinoza is making about God in the passage is that in God's
11 case, *existing* and acting have the same ground. I think that the reason or ground
12 in question is God's *essence*: for Spinoza, to be God (the "reason" or "cause") is to
13 exist as God does and to act as God does. God is not separate enough from the
14 acting for the acting to be *for* God (or for God's "ends"): the acting *is* God. That is
15 why Spinoza thinks it makes no more sense to think of God's acting as being for the
16 sake of an end than to think of God's existing as being for the sake of an end.

17 In *Metaphysical Thoughts*, Spinoza argues that the failure to appreciate that
18 a thing *is* its conatus encourages traditional philosophers to think of being as a
19 metaphysical (or transcendental) good that all things are striving for. That is, if we
20 distinguish between a thing and its acting, it becomes possible, perhaps even natural,
21 to think of the acting as in service of the thing and its being, as when we view a rock
22 as "using" its cohesion to resist being dissolved and going out of existence. And this
23 way of thinking encourages, Spinoza thinks, the erroneous thought that being or
24 existing is a sort of metaphysical or transcendental good that all things strive for.

25 For Spinoza, none of this makes sense. Let's work out what he finds problem-
26 atic in the case of a hurricane. It is a *ratio* of motion and rest, a pattern of
27 motion in the plenum, a coherent collection of motive tendencies, a conatus. It
28 would be a mistake, Spinoza argues, to think that there is anything more than what
29 we would call a conceptual distinction between the hurricane and those motive
30 tendencies—to posit some real difference between those tendencies and the hur-
31 ricane "itself." And if we make this mistake, Spinoza thinks, we will be tempted to
32 think of the tendencies as somehow *there for* the preservation of the hurricane
33 rather than those tendencies simply *being* the hurricane. From there, we will be led
34 to think that all things continue to exist because they all have appetite for being,
35 and that being is a metaphysical (transcendental) good.

36 Conversely, once we realize that there is no distinction between a thing
37 and its motive tendencies (or appetites), we will think that hurricanes continue to
38 be unless impeded simply because their motive tendencies continue to be unless
39 impeded (it is part of what it is *to be* a motive tendency to continue unless
40 impeded). To the question, then, why does the hurricane have a tendency to
41 persevere in being?, the appropriate answer is that this is just what a hurricane
42 *is*—a coherent motive tendency to persevere in being—and not that being is a good
43 the hurricane is equipped to *pursue*. Here's how Spinoza puts this line of thought:

44
45 However, those who eagerly seek some Metaphysical good, needing no
46 qualification, labor under a false prejudice, for they confuse a distinction of

1 reason with a real or modal distinction. They distinguish between the thing
2 itself and the striving that is in each thing to preserve its being, although they
3 do not know what they understand by striving. For though the thing and its
4 striving to preserve its being are distinguished by reason, or rather verbally
5 (which deceives these people very greatly), they are not in any way really
6 distinct (Curley, 314).

7
8 What seems behind the view that Spinoza finds objectionable is the two-
9 tiered (Aristotelian) conception of an individual that we canvassed earlier. At a
10 prior level is the thing itself, which serves as a sort of substratum for the striving; at
11 the posterior level there is the striving, which is viewed as in the service of the
12 subject or substratum. If we recognize that there is only a “verbal” distinction
13 between the thing and the striving, we won’t be tempted to see the striving as being
14 for the being of the subject, a subject, which, after all, the striving *is*. (Compare: the
15 increase in relative frequency of favorable heritable traits is not something that the
16 species *does for* itself; it is (part of) what a species *is*.)

17 Spinoza works these ideas out using as his example the case of motion itself:
18 “Motion has a force of preserving in its state; this force is really nothing other than
19 the motion itself—that is, the nature of motion itself.” Once we recognize this, we
20 will realize that a motion continues so long as it is unimpeded just because this is
21 what motion is (that is, this is “the nature of motion itself”). The motion *is* the
22 “force” of persevering in the same state. We won’t think that the conatus is more
23 than “verbally distinct” from the motion, aimed at the motion’s welfare. (Spinoza
24 goes on to argue that if we do, we will be led into a vicious regress. If we think that
25 the motion has a distinct conatus aimed at its being, the conatus itself will have a
26 distinct conatus aimed at the being of the first conatus, and so on.)

27 28 IV. ENDS

29
30 Spinoza adds an interesting remark at the end of this argument: “But the reason
31 why some distinguish the thing’s striving from the thing itself is that they find in
32 themselves a longing to preserve themselves, and they imagine such a [longing] in
33 each thing” (Curley, 314). Spinoza’s suggestion seems to be that I draw a distinc-
34 tion between myself and the longing (appetite) to preserve myself, as if there was
35 more than a “verbal distinction” between me and my conatus (or longing), and
36 then I project such a longing (along with the distinction) onto the motion or the
37 hurricane, too.

38 One might understand Spinoza to be saying here that the distinction between
39 me and my longing to preserve myself is well grounded, and the mistake is simply
40 the projecting of the distinction onto other things. I don’t think this is Spinoza’s
41 position; it is hard to see what would license the distinction in the one case but not
42 the other. Rather, I believe Spinoza’s position is that in fact in such a case my
43 understanding of *my own* position is confused. That is, I should not view my
44 “longing to preserve” myself as something distinct from myself: it is simply an
45 aspect of my conatus, which conatus according to Spinoza is my actual essence.
46 My partial and incomplete cognition of my conatus may lead me to pull it out from

1 the rest of me and (mis)interpret it as something that I *have* that enables me to
2 continue to exist, rather than a confused and partial cognition of the motive
3 tendencies that I *am*. This abstraction is no less erroneous in my case than it is in
4 the hurricane's or rock's case.

5 For example, when I ask myself, "Why am I longing for existence?," I may
6 respond, "Because existence is a good for me and appears so, and my will, of course,
7 is drawn toward that which appears good for me." For Spinoza, this answer is
8 backward. If I *am* my motive tendencies, the relation between the apparent good-
9 ness of what I long for and the longing runs in the other direction: "We neither
10 strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good;
11 on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want
12 it, and desire it" (3p9s). That is, our judgments about what is good are based on our
13 motive tendencies, our strivings—because, again, for Spinoza, we *are* those motive
14 tendencies and strivings—and not that our strivings are based on judgments about
15 what appears good for me, which requires that there be an independent "me" that
16 the longings advance.

17 I want to use this admittedly difficult idea to try to explicate Spinoza's
18 attitude toward ends and human action. Sometimes, it is felt that Spinoza makes an
19 exception for human action and sees human activity as end-structured in a way that
20 motive activity or hurricane activity is not. An important text here is the immediate
21 continuation of the passage from Part 4 considered earlier:

22
23 What is *called* a final cause is nothing but a human appetite insofar as it is
24 considered as a principle, or primary cause, of some thing (Curley, 544, my
25 emphasis).

26
27 I take the "called" here—along with the "say" about to come in "we *say* that
28 habitation was the final cause of this or that house"—to be an indication that
29 Spinoza regards the notion of an end as superficial, as something that does not
30 answer to the deep structure of reality. Attributions of ends are like attributions of
31 contingency. Both are based in an incomplete view of our situation and easily lead
32 to misunderstanding.

33 What does Spinoza want to say, then, about ends in the case of human acting?
34 Let's begin with two passages from Part 4: "By the end for the sake of which we do
35 something [*facimus*] I understand appetite."

36 And in the Preface to Part 4 just mentioned:

37
38 What is *called* a final cause is *nothing but* a human appetite insofar as it is
39 considered as a principle, or primary cause, of some thing.

40 For example, when we *say* that habitation was the final cause of this or that
41 house, surely we understand *nothing but* that a man, because he imagined the
42 conveniences of domestic life, had an appetite to build a house. So habitation,
43 insofar as it is considered as final cause, is nothing more than this singular
44 appetite. It is *really* an efficient cause, which is considered as a first cause,
45 because men are commonly ignorant of the causes of their appetites. For as

1 I have often said before, they are conscious of their actions and appetites, but
2 not aware of the causes by which they are determined to want something
3 (Curley, 544–5, my emphasis).
4

5 Spinoza’s account of what we mean when we call something a final cause is
6 consistent with the picture outlined earlier in this paper. Pattern or *ratio* of
7 motion and rest that my body is, coherent collection of motive tendencies that I
8 am, there is no end that is prior to those tendencies. Rather than beginning with
9 some end for creatures like me—say, the *visio dei*—and then reading my powers
10 and abilities as means to achieve that end, Spinoza begins from the motive
11 tendencies and understands the ends, such as they are, to be an aspect of those
12 tendencies. Roughly, I think Spinoza’s idea is to think of my more prevalent
13 motive tendencies as my “ends”—more exactly, my ends are where my more
14 prevalent motive tendencies tend or lead. Such dominant tendencies will often be
15 salient for me in the sense that I will be particularly conscious of them. They will
16 count as my desires: Spinoza defines desire as “appetite [i.e., *conatus* ‘when it is
17 related to the Mind and Body together’] together with consciousness [*conscientia*]
18 of the appetite.”

19 These dominant tendencies do not exist on their own apart from, hovering
20 above, as they were, the collection of motive tendencies that make up me. Rather,
21 they are dominant strands within that collection. They dominate in the way that at
22 some times in a spider’s life, web building prevails in her activities—that’s where
23 her attention is focused, how her time and energy is spent—while at other times,
24 mating and reproduction prevail.

25 So what do we mean when we say habitation was the final cause of the
26 house? Well, a human being sometimes goes through periods where house building
27 dominates her activity. In some ways, the story is a lot like the spider’s web-
28 weaving; in other ways, not. Human house building, for example, seems learned,
29 both by the individual during her life and by the species over the course of its
30 existence, whereas web building is not. When house building makes up a prevalent
31 strand through the course of motive tendencies constituting some human being,
32 that human being is especially aware of that appetite. Usually, she is not aware of
33 how this dominant strand running through her motive tendencies is related to the
34 rest of the extremely complex structure of tendencies. In particular, she usually
35 does not have much of an idea about how this desire got to be there (and its
36 relation to rest of her motive tendencies). She cuts it off from the rest of the
37 complex package, and treats it as a freestanding, as a sort of uncaused, cause, that
38 is, she considers the desire as a “first cause.” And in this setting of limited infor-
39 mation, she easily makes the mistake warned against in 3p9s. When she asks
40 herself, how did this desire for house building get there?—instead of asking how
41 this dominant strand emerged in the collection of tendencies—she may think to
42 herself, it must be the good of shelter that put this desire in me, that is, I have the
43 desire because shelter appears good to me, so that it is the end of shelter that has
44 set me in motion.

45 I would take Spinoza’s well-known comment in the Appendix to Part 1 in a
46 similar spirit:

1 I shall, however, add this: this doctrine concerning the end turns nature
2 completely upside down. For what is really a cause, it considers as an effect,
3 and conversely. What is by nature prior, it makes posterior. And finally, what
4 is supreme and most perfect, it makes imperfect (Curley, 442).

5
6 This passage is specifically about the final causes, ends in nature, but I believe
7 the point that Spinoza is making here applies to final causality in general. The
8 underlying thought is that the efficient causes are not in any sense there “for” the
9 ends: if the effect, E, of an efficient cause, C, were the end of the cause, then (1) E
10 would account for C, and so be its cause; (2) E would be prior to C; and (3) E would
11 complete and perfect C. Some commentators have suggested that these remarks
12 apply only to ends in nature and wouldn’t apply to the ends of human activities.
13 I disagree: human beings are complex systems whose efficient causality in the
14 fullness of time, under the right conditions, expresses itself, *inter alia*, in domicile-
15 building activity, somewhat as wasps are (to be sure, less) complex systems whose
16 efficient causality expresses itself in the fullness of time, in their characteristic
17 nest-building activity. From Spinoza’s point of view, to slot an end into this causal
18 nexus, as a “first cause” or “a principal or primary cause of a thing,” is to turn things
19 “completely upside down.” Many people think this sort of thing. Impressed by a
20 particularly salient appetite whose origin they don’t know, they abstract it from the
21 causal flow and treat it apart from the causal nexus, as a freestanding “first cause”;
22 thus, a final cause “is really an efficient cause, which is considered as a first cause,
23 because men are commonly ignorant of the causes of their appetites.”

24 There is, then, nothing in Spinoza’s universe that plays the role of a tradi-
25 tional (Aristotelian) final cause or end, either at the level of nature or at the level
26 of human action. That is implied, I think, in the point noticed earlier about how
27 Spinoza expresses himself: “What is *called* a final cause is nothing but a human
28 appetite [. . .]” and “when we *say* that habituation was the final cause of this or
29 that house, surely we understand [. . .].” He’s not telling us what final causes *are*
30 (because there isn’t anything in his universe that plays the role that ends or final
31 causes were traditionally supposed to play) because final causes aren’t really *there*.

32 33 V. CONCLUSION

34
35 I’d like to make three points in conclusion.

36 First, although Spinoza has a robust notion of moving to a greater or lesser
37 perfection, or increase or decrease of power of acting, he develops this notion in a
38 way that does not commit him to ends or final causes. A thing just is a coherent
39 collection of motive tendencies—it is not defined in terms of some perfection that
40 its activities ought to reach (if all goes well). For that reason, Spinoza is especially
41 adamant about rejecting the traditional notion of a privation, which involves the
42 idea that a thing lacks some reality that it ought to have. A thing—a coherent
43 collection of motive tendencies—is what it is. There is no particular level of reality
44 it ought to reach. To think otherwise is to reintroduce the Aristotelian two-tiered
45 picture of a thing, as the thing itself and its powers, instead of the one-level picture.

1 Second, it's a bad idea to try to put Spinoza's remarks about final causality in
2 the context of contemporary discussions of teleological explanation. Spinoza's
3 treatment of final causality is both historically important and philosophically chal-
4 lenging, but it concerns topics like the nature of a motive tendency and a thing's
5 relation to its motive tendencies. In contrast, teleological explanation concerns, for
6 example, the sort of developmental tendencies that run through a group (e.g. an
7 increase in the relative frequency of favorable inheritable traits). I see no reason to
8 think that Spinoza would object to the idea that patterns of motion and rest differ
9 from one another in this interesting way. Living beings replicate in this way, but
10 inanimate things, for example crystals, don't. He might think that this fact tells us
11 something interesting about a species, now taken as individual, with its own dis-
12 tinctive *ratio* of motion and rest. But this tells us nothing about ends.

13 Third, Spinoza, I think, is first and foremost trying to develop a picture of
14 activity that coheres with plenum mechanics. In plenum mechanics, some patterns
15 of motion and rest have more perfection than other patterns, some corporeal
16 systems have a greater power of acting than other corporeal systems. Further, it is
17 part of what I've been thinking of, as a general coherence condition on such
18 systems, that a system will, as far as it can, welcome effects that increase its power
19 of acting, and will, as far as it can, resist effects that restrain its power of acting. This
20 seems to be a condition on being a real thing, on having a coherent essence.

21 But, all the same, things don't, on Spinoza's telling, welcome power-
22 increasing effects *because* they are power-increasing; they just do—it's simply part
23 of being a real thing. And, things don't, on Spinoza's telling, resist power-inhibiting
24 effects *because* they are power-inhibiting; they just do. In other words, they behave
25 in ways that their nature makes available to them that supports their power of
26 acting without having the end of supporting their power of acting.

27 Now—to return to some issues raised near the beginning of this talk con-
28 cerning 3p12 and 3p13—perhaps Spinoza is hoping for too much from the idea of
29 essence or what it takes to be a real thing. For example, natural selection provides
30 a *mechanism* by which a species' power of acting becomes increased over time
31 through an increase in relative frequency in favorable treats. Spinoza, by way of
32 contrast, does not say anything about the mechanism involved in my body's
33 hanging on to dents, which results in an uptick in its power, and resisting dents,
34 which results in downtick in its power of acting, seemingly taking this fact for
35 granted.

36 Well, Spinoza may be cheating here. But if he is, he is cheating in the way that
37 all good systematic metaphysicians cheat sooner or later. He knows, on the one
38 hand, that everything in nature happens through the same laws, laws that involve
39 only motive tendencies and not ends. He observes, on the other hand, that many
40 things develop in the course of their existence in ways that (within limits) increase
41 their power of acting, and that we welcome and resist upticks and downticks in our
42 power of acting. He reconciles these two things by assuming, in effect, that mecha-
43 nisms will be found that show how corporeal systems do this (make perspicuous
44 the limits of their doing so—filling out, in effect, the “so far as it can” clause). Here,
45 Spinoza's attitude is that there is more to corporeal nature than we understand. In
46 3p2s, he writes:

1 And of course, no one has yet determined what the Body can do, i.e.,
2 experience has not yet taught anyone what the Body can do from the laws of
3 nature alone, and insofar as nature is only considered to be corporeal, and
4 what the body can do only if it is determined by the Mind. For no one has yet
5 come to know the structure of the Body, so accurately that he could explain
6 all its functions—not to mention that many things are observed in the lower
7 Animals that far surpass human ingenuity, and that sleepwalkers do a great
8 many things in their sleep that they would not dare to awake. This shows well
9 enough that the Body itself, simply from the laws of its own nature, can do
10 many things which its Mind wonders at (Curley, 495).

11
12 And:

13
14 They will say, of course, that it cannot happen that the causes of buildings, of
15 paintings, and of things of this kind, which are made only by human skill,
16 should be able to be deduced from the laws of nature alone, insofar as it is
17 considered to be only corporeal; nor would the human Body be able to build
18 a temple, if it were not determined and guided by the Mind.

19
20 But I have already shown that they do not know what the Body can do, or
21 what can be deduced from the consideration of its nature alone, and that they
22 know from experience that a great many things happen from the laws of
23 nature along which they never would have believed could happen without
24 the direction of a Mind—such as the things sleepwalkers do in their sleep,
25 which they wonder at while they are awake.

26
27 I add here the very structure of the human Body, which, in the ingenuity of
28 its construction, far surpasses anything made by human skill—not to mention
29 that I have shown above, that infinitely many things follow from nature,
30 under whatever attribute it may be considered (Curley, 496).

31
32 Spinoza's quiet confidence about what can be accomplished by body insofar
33 as it is considered as merely corporeal or what can be deduced from the laws of
34 nature alone turns out to have been well placed. Today, we have a somewhat better
35 picture of how complex structures such as the human body arise through the laws
36 of nature, and a somewhat better picture of how biological organisms, by more or
37 less mechanical means, hold on to what has increased their power of acting and
38 resist what constrains their power of acting.

39 Perhaps one way of putting the matter is this. No finite being increases its
40 power of acting without measure; such a thing would not have coherent essence or
41 nature. For Spinoza, this constraint is registered by the "*quantum in se est*" in his
42 statement of the conatus principle: "Each thing, as far as it can [*quantum in se est*]
43 by its own power, strives to persevere in its being" (3p6). In extended systems, the
44 "as far as it can" is to be spelled out in terms of a body's nature as a *ratio* or pattern
45 of motion, and rest within the plenum. In this way, whatever tendency a physical
46 system has to persevere in its being, and whatever concomitant tendencies it has to

1 hold on to what increases its power of acting and to resist what checks its power of
2 acting, is constrained by the base conception of a physical thing as fundamentally
3 a pattern of motion and rest. In this paper, I have tried to offer an account of 3p12
4 and 3p13 in particular, and of Spinoza's thinking about the relation of the activity
5 of things to their perfection and power of acting more generally, that is consistent
6 with this naturalistic commitment.²⁴

7

8 24. As explained in the headnote, this paper grew out of a series of conversations with Paul
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