

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.

(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 so 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, "The 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, "When the Mind imagines those things that diminish or restrain the Body's power of acting, it strives, as far as it can, to recollect things 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

2. See, for example, *Cogita Metaphysica I*, chap. 6, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 134 (hereafter Curley). See also Letter 58.

3. In *Spinoza's Geometry of Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 109–110, 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: Oxford University Press, 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 (Paderborn: Mentis, 2011), and a special issue of *Logical Analysis and History of Philosophy*, 14 (2011), 40–50. Olli Koistinen and Martin Lin have made a similar point in discussion.

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

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

I. POWER OF ACTING, PERFECTION, AND REALITY

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

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

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

However, we also cannot deny that ideas differ among themselves, as the objects themselves do, and that one is more excellent [*praestantior*em: from *praesto*, to stand before] than the other, and contains more reality [*realitatis*], just as the object of the one is more excellent than the object of the other and contains more reality. And so to determine what is the difference between the human Mind and the others, and how it surpasses them, it is necessary for us, as we have said, to know the nature of its object, i.e., of the human Body. I cannot explain this here, nor is that necessary for the things I wish to demonstrate. Nevertheless, I say this in general, that in proportion as a Body is more capable than others of doing many things at once, or being acted on in many ways at once [*ad plura simul agendum, vel patiendum*], so its Mind is more capable than others of perceiving many things at once. And in proportion as the actions of a body depend more on itself alone, and as other bodies concur with it less in acting, so its mind is more capable of understanding distinctly. And from these [things] we can know the excellence of one mind over the others. (Curley, 458, trans. altered)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But the main thing to note is that when I say that someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite, I do not understand that he is changed from one essence, or form, to another. For example, a horse is destroyed as much if it is changed into a man as if it is changed into an insect. Rather, we conceive that his power of acting, insofar as it is understood through his nature, is increased or diminished. (Curley, 545–46)¹²

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

II. 3P12 AND 3P13

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

Let’s look at 3p12:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

18. The candle example comes from TdIE § 57.

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

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

that into a real thing and the external forces working on it—the candle and the flame, the tree and the disease, Seneca and the command of the Tyrant.

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

Let's turn to 3p13:

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

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

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

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

20. For Descartes's use of this factoring idea, see my *Between Two Worlds* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 275–76, and my review of Tad Schmaltz's *Descartes on Causation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*. Retrieved October 21, 2011, from <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/23497-descartes-on-causation/>. See also Spinoza's remarks on Adam's sin in Letter 19.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

23. It is, for example, one of the three main divisions of being that Aquinas notes at the beginning of *De Ente et Essentia*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

IV. ENDS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What does Spinoza want to say, then, about ends in the case of human acting? Let's begin with two passages from Part 4: "By the end for the sake of which we do something [*facimus*] I understand appetite" (4d7).

And in the Preface to Part 4 just mentioned:

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

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

I have often said before, they are conscious of their actions and appetites, but not aware of the causes by which they are determined to want something. (Curley, 544–45, my emphasis)

Spinoza's account of what we mean when we call something a final cause is consistent with the picture outlined earlier in this paper. Pattern or *ratio* of motion and rest that my body is, coherent collection of motive tendencies that I am, there is no end that is prior to those tendencies. Rather than beginning with some end for creatures like me—say, the *visio dei*—and then reading my powers and abilities as means to achieve that end, Spinoza begins from the motive tendencies and understands the ends, such as they are, to be an aspect of those tendencies. Roughly, I think Spinoza's idea is to think of my more prevalent motive tendencies as my “ends”—more exactly, my ends are where my more prevalent motive tendencies tend or lead. Such dominant tendencies will often be salient for me in the sense that I will be particularly conscious of them. They will count as my desires: Spinoza defines desire as “appetite [i.e., *conatus* ‘when it is related to the Mind and Body together’] together with consciousness [*conscientia*] of the appetite” (3p9s).

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

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

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

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

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

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

V. CONCLUSION

I’d like to make three points in conclusion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And:

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

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

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

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

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

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

24. As explained in the headnote, this paper grew out of a series of conversations with Paul Hoffman, and was given at the "Spinoza on Mind and Nature" conference in Turku, Finland, in May 2010. I am grateful to those present for their questions and comments, particularly Valtteri Viljanen. Calvin Normore provided useful feedback while I was writing the paper. Olli Koistinen and Michael Della Rocca provided me with helpful written comments. In addition to discussions with Paul, I am especially indebted to Joseph Almog for extensive conversation over the years.