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Spinoza's Conatus: Considerations of Teleology

Spinoza's *Ethics*¹ seems to have two main goals: understanding the metaphysical nature of the world, including ourselves in it, and how to live in accordance with that metaphysical picture of ourselves in the world. If Spinoza's project has been successful at least insofar as he has constructed an internally consistent system, nevermind whether it's even plausibly true or appealing, then *how* to live in accordance with that metaphysical picture must be something that itself fits naturally into that metaphysical system. There is a motley plethora of issues one can take up in order to determine whether Spinoza has accomplished that much, one of which is the focus of this essay, teleology with respect to finite things, especially human beings, i.e., whether they *act for the sake of some end*.² There are many questions that can be asked about such a topic, and so there is, for the scope of the current essay, only one of which I am concerned: Does the metaphysical system that Spinoza constructs allow for, require, or preclude teleology in finite beings? The crucial part of Spinoza's metaphysical system with regards to this issue is the doctrine of the *conatus*; thus, determining just what that doctrine is, is a significant part of this project. After wading through and assessing the theories of a few significant scholars, J. Bennett, E. Curley, D. Garrett, I will argue that Spinoza's metaphysics *precludes* teleology in finite beings. The consequences of such a conclusion on the second half of the *Ethics*, while begging to be considered, will not be discussed, for such is another project all in itself.

¹ Spinoza, Benedict de. *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, translated and edited by Edwin Curley, Princeton: Princeton UP. 1994.

² Teleology with respect to the whole of Nature, that is, whether or not there is a final cause, some end, for the sake of which the whole of Nature moves towards, is widely agreed by scholars to have been rejected by Spinoza. Teleological explanation with respect to human thought and behavior is not clearly rejected, not even clearly referred to, but whether or not Spinoza's system requires it, and whether or not he was aware of that and explicitly or implicitly expressed his views on it, is a crucial point for his entire project. But the way in which it is crucial shall depend entirely on how one interprets what Spinoza's system is.

I. Bennett's Argument Against Teleology in Spinoza

J. Bennett³ argues that Spinoza is committed to rejecting all teleological explanation, even though such a rejection directly contradicts the *conatus* and the latter portion of the *Ethics*. He claims that 3P4 means, “no organism can possibly destroy itself,” which we are entitled to understand as meaning, “If x does f, then the doing of f does not destroy x.”⁴ He then notes that there are two ways to interpret 3P5: (1) two individual *things* that can destroy each other cannot be parts in the same whole, such as an organism, or (2) two *properties* that can destroy or cancel each other cannot be simultaneously instantiated by a single individual.⁵ Bennett argues that neither interpretation can support what Spinoza further claims in 3P6D, for the most 3P5 can establish is that two things or properties are contrary to each other and thus, cannot coexist. But 3P6D requires the stronger claim that such contrary things or properties are opposed to and exert force against each other.⁶ Because Bennett interprets “*conatus*” as “trying,”⁷ and so claims that 3P6 means that things *try* to continue existing, he concludes from 3P5 & 6, “This has to mean that each thing acts against threats, which goes far beyond 3p5’s assertion that, if one item threatens another, then they are incapable of a kind of coexistence.”⁸

Bennett continues on to infer the *conatus* doctrine itself: since what a person does, does not destroy him, then if he does x, it must preserve and help him.⁹ But, he claims, under his interpretation, 3P9S expresses the converse, and thereby, teleological conditional, that is, if doing x would preserve and help a person, then he does x. Finally, because Bennett interprets

³ Bennett, Jonathan. 1983. “Teleology and Spinoza’s Conatus,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 8: 143-160.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

“*conatus*” as “trying,” he is convinced that the word has a teleological meaning built into it, and that this must mean that Spinoza “has been covertly thinking of it as teleological right from the outset.”¹⁰ With this in mind, along with the idea that 3P5 & 6 together mean that things are acting against threats to their existence, he infers that 3P6D must mean, “For any f, if the doing of f would tend to keep y safe from x [where x can destroy y], then y will do f.”¹¹ In addition, Bennett takes Spinoza’s phrase in 3P6 “as far as it can” to be clearly teleological in meaning,¹² and thus, supportive of his rendition of 3P6D. However, since 3P7 seems to be trying to establish that the *conatus* is not teleological, for which reason Bennett refers to it as a “disclaimer,”¹³ it appears to contradict what he argues thus far as a clearly teleological doctrine. “Granted, the basic *causal* story concerns the organism’s intrinsic nature or ‘essence,’ but that is not the whole *explanatory* story; for Spinoza has also said that the organism will ‘try as far as it can to preserve itself,’ and nothing can save this from meaning something teleological.”¹⁴

Bennett has, unfortunately, entirely mischaracterized Spinoza’s metaphysical system, and the sole source of his error is a failure to understand the notion and role of a crucial part of the demonstration of 3P4 and how it carries through the entire argument for the *conatus*: “the definition of a thing affirms, and does not deny, a thing’s essence. So while we attend only to the thing itself, and not to external causes, we shall not be able to find anything in it which can destroy it.” The point is that there is nothing *essential* to a thing that could destroy it, for its essence is an actualization of its definition. A definition affirms what a thing is, but it never describes what it is not, nor includes what negates and destroys the thing. Thus, attending only

¹⁰ Bennett, p. 154.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

to the thing *itself* is to attend only to its essence, i.e., its definition, the affirmation of what it is, which cannot contain anything that could destroy it. Furthermore, without the crucial role of the essence of a thing, Bennett fails to understand what it means for a thing to *do* something, to *act*. Spinoza defines action (3D2) as what follows as an adequate cause (3D1) from our nature, i.e., our essence. Since an essence cannot contain a destructive element, then anything following from a thing's essence, *qua* adequate cause, is an action that cannot destroy the thing. Bennett's superficial understanding is only barely correct, so long as we take "doing" in his quote above to be action in the way that Spinoza defines it. But given his misguided interpretation of 3P4, it would seem that he does not understand "doing" in this way, and thus, does not understand Spinoza's metaphysics of action.

In his rendition of 3P5 and how it follows from 3P4, Bennett fails to understand how the *essences* of two vehemently contrary things are the reason for their destructive power against each other. Given that the actions of a thing follow of necessity from the thing's essence, *qua* affirmation of its definition, its actions will also be a kind of affirmation of its essence. When two things with such vehemently contrary essences are in the presence of one another, and each is actively expressing affirmations of their essences, conflict is inevitable. One might think that perhaps one lies dormant while the other is active, and in this way, they can coexist without destroying each other. But such dormancy is not possible within Spinoza's system (1P36), and thus, they will inevitably act in opposition to one other. But this does not at all go beyond what 3P5 states in addition to other propositions regarding the essence and action of things.

Bennett's claim that Spinoza asserts one conditional in 3P6 while asserting its converse, teleological conditional in 3P9S is simply mistaken: Spinoza is not making a teleological statement in 3P9S, but merely restating what genuine action is with the added explication that an

action in that sense will necessarily contribute to the preservation of that thing. Such a positive contribution is less of a *condition* for the action, or even a *consequence* of the action, but rather, because of the metaphysical system Spinoza has set up, it is *definitional* to the action.

And finally, I find that E. Curley offers a very good explanation as to why Bennett's interpretation of "*conatus*" as "trying" is incorrect:

Conatus does normally suggest "trying," "making an effort," terms which in turn suggest that the thing trying has some conception of a goal it wants to achieve. But *conatus* also has a technical use in Cartesian physics—in the phrase *conatus ad motum*—to refer to the tendency bodies have to persist in a state either of rest or of uniform motion in a straight line. In that usage, it does not imply any thought on the part of the thing "striving" (see [Descartes'] *Principles* III, 56), and hence does not imply a goal the thing literally *wants* to achieve. This is just the way bodies will in fact act unless they are restrained by an external cause. Spinoza's usage is influenced by that Cartesian usage. As I read IIP6, it states a principle which applies to *any* thing whatever.¹⁵

Force an ordinary meaning of "*conatus*" onto Spinoza when he was without a doubt influenced by Descartes who used the term in a technical manner to mean something different is an intellectual injustice to Spinoza. Furthermore, it is clear that Spinoza does intend the *conatus* to literally apply to all things whatever. Thus, to take *conatus* to mean "trying" would imply that all things have intentions and goals in mind, which is certainly not what Spinoza argues in any way. And if he did, then we should take the latter three books of the *Ethics* to apply to everything! But surely, this is absurd. Ultimately, Bennett's arguments are inherently flawed.

II. Curley's Argument for a Teleological Interpretation of the Conatus

Curley addresses¹⁶ another argument of Bennett's in order to argue for the likelihood that Spinoza was not committed to a rejection of all final causes in general. Bennett argues that

¹⁵ Curley, Edwin. 1988. *Behind the Geometrical Method: A Reading of Spinoza's Ethics*, Princeton: Princeton UP. p. 107.

¹⁶ Curley, Edwin. 1990. "On Bennett's Spinoza: The Issue of Teleology," *Spinoza: Issues and Directions: The Proceedings of the Chicago Spinoza Conference*, Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers: 39-52.

Spinoza flat out rejects all teleology and final causes in the Appendix of Part I.¹⁷ Curley's response involves pointing out that the context in which Spinoza declares that "all final causes are nothing but human fictions" is one in which he is only discussing the whole of Nature, and as such, the final causes Spinoza has in mind to reject are only those that people would ascribe to the whole order of Nature, to give reason and purpose to it. For he points out, "[t]he immediately preceding clause, after all, proclaims that Spinoza's object is to show that *Nature* has no end set before it."¹⁸ He points out that when Spinoza is giving the reason for the false beliefs people have about the final causes in nature, Spinoza states "that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end." Further, Spinoza declares "that men act always on account of an end, namely, on account of their advantage, which they want." It would appear that if we take Spinoza's words seriously, we have good reason to think that he is supporting the notion of teleology in human action.

Bennett considers¹⁹ this sort of criticism against his view, and offers two dismissive possibilities: (1) Spinoza's theoretical commitments would allow us to understand that his language does not express for him what it would if he did not have those theoretical commitments, or (2) that he wrote this Appendix prior to rejecting all human teleology, in addition to divine teleology, but failed to go back and correct the text. The latter is simply ad hoc, and seemingly implausible given that it would require Spinoza to have been careless, which flies in the face of the meticulous method in which the entire book is written. The former has some plausibility, but I am not convinced that it is entirely right, although, I am willing to consider that it might very well be part of the story.

¹⁷ Bennett, p. 143-147.

¹⁸ Curley (1990), p. 40.

¹⁹ Bennett, Jonathan. 1984. *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co. §51.1

While I certainly have no knockdown argument to support my claims, I think there are some very plausible reasons to consider why Spinoza might have written such things. I admit that all of this is quite speculative. First, in writing the *Ethics*, he had a goal in mind, the achievement of which required that his book be read by certain people. It would seem that he should have every reason to keep his reader reading early on, rather than repulse him before Spinoza even had the chance to get into the meat of his theory. For that reason, he would face two consequences in the Appendix, it being so early in the entire work: first, he must speak a language common enough to the reader that the reader shall both understand him well enough and want to continue reading; second, he could not appeal to any theoretical commitments to explain away statements that seem to contradict his theory as he later develops it, for he had not yet discussed his theory, let alone tried to convince his reader that it is true. He certainly does seem to hint at his later explicated theory, which a first-time reader of the *Ethics* might only gloss over, having no reason to see into it the expression of that theory. For he says:

...that all men are born ignorant of the causes of things, and that they all want to seek their own advantage, and are conscious of this appetite. From these [assumptions] it follows, *first*, that men think themselves free, because they are conscious of their volitions and their appetite, and do not think, even in their dreams, of the causes by which they are disposed to wanting and willing, because they are ignorant of [those causes]. It follows, *second*, that men always act on account of an end, namely, on account of their advantage, which they want.

There are three crucial aspects to this passage that I think leave it ambiguous and vague enough to consider plausible the reasons above for Spinoza's use of common, everyday teleological language. First, he claims that people are "disposed" to their wants, desires, and what they think they willingly choose, but that such dispositions are the result of causes of which they are unaware. That such aspects of a person are caused does not by itself imply a non-teleological reading, but it leaves it open, which is the only point I am arguing. Second, Spinoza makes a

point of emphasizing what follows first, the illusion of freedom of action, and *then* what follows after, that they act on account of an end. This might suggest there is something more to understanding the latter, and that it has something to do with the former. Again, my point is that it is sufficiently vague so that we cannot really draw any solid conclusions just from what he states in this passage. Third, Spinoza in fact does eventually give theoretical, non-standard meanings to phrases such as “appetite” and acting “for the sake of some end,” such that what he states above is in line with his theory even though it is obscured. Thus, I do not find it convincing to rely on passages such as the one above in order to show that Spinoza wholeheartedly embraces teleological explanation for the behavior of finite things.

Curley argues against the claim that a teleological explanation of behavior requires that the thing represent to itself some goal it desires and how to achieve that goal, and that such a representation is what motivates it to act towards that goal. He claims that this may be what a teleological explanation *now* requires, but it was not so in the 17th century.²⁰ The *conatus*, he argues, is teleological insofar as, if doing x will allow a thing to persevere in its existence, then it will do x, but the thing need not have any conception of the fact that x will maintain its existence. It is only a product of sufficiently complex creatures whose complexity results in self-awareness that some creatures can and do represent the antecedent fact that doing x will maintain their existence, but only because it just so happens that they are aware of their activities and inherent desires of which they are disposed.²¹

I have two responses to this argument. If something acts *for* the sake of some end of which it is not aware, and not even aware that it is acting for the sake of that end, and perhaps could *not* be aware in either of these ways, then that which drives it is external in the sense of

²⁰ Curley (1990), p. 44.

²¹ Curley (1988), p. 108.

what we *normally* take as goal-directed action, which are reasons of which we are aware. But it may be internal to the thing itself insofar as it is internal to its essence, in the Spinozistic sense, to which it may have no access, or fail to be aware of; and in that sense, it is still external in the previous way. In other words, even if the reason is internal to its essence, i.e., is some aspect of its essence, if it is not aware of the reason and does not take it to be a reason at all, then it is not the reason *for* the thing to act as it does, but a reason *that* the thing acts as it does. A reason *for* would provide the actor with an internal motivation; a reason *that* it acts provides an explanation that need not take into account any mental life it has. Clearly, Curley is arguing for the latter. Since this type of reason would have to be something internal to its essence, for otherwise it would not, by definition, produce action, then we can ask from where such a reason comes, or why it is internal to the essence at all. In Spinoza's system, God is the efficient cause of the essence of each thing; thus, any part of the essence of a thing must have been put there by God, including a teleological part if there is one. It seems to me that if this is the case, then teleology begins in God, which Spinoza seems to have rejected. Furthermore, it seems that this non-cognitive notion of teleology in the 17th century would have been understood to make sense only because of first and final causes, that such were sufficient to establish teleology without awareness. It would seem that cognitive, or thoughtful teleology arose precisely because of the rejection of first and final causes. For where else might the teleological aspect come from? If it exists without awareness, without cognitive representation, then it must arise out of nature itself. But how could that be?

My second argument against Curley's non-cognitive teleology is briefly given here, but shall be fleshed out at the end. Within the metaphysical confines of Spinoza's system, to say that a thing acts *for* the sake of some end is to say that such action is the effect of appetite (4D7).

Appetite is defined, by 3P9S, as the striving of both the mind and body together to persevere in existence. Additionally, Spinoza refers to appetite as “the very essence of man.” Since striving is present within the essence of all things, we can infer that the appetite of any singular thing is its very essence. And further, since the essence of a thing is the active, expressive affirmation of the definition of the thing, then such also is its appetite, and so also the very striving to persevere. In other words, the striving to exist is identical with the active essence affirming itself, which follows of necessity from the essence according to Spinoza’s principle that everything that exists is determined to produce some effect (1P26-29 & 36). The effect that follows of necessity from the essence itself is the affirmation of itself, the striving to continue existing. It is in this interpretation that we ought to understand what Spinoza means in 3P9S: “This appetite, therefore, is nothing but the very essence of man, from whose nature there necessarily follow those things that promote his preservation. And so man is determined to do those things.”

Additionally, Curley also makes the point of saying that he cannot understand Spinoza’s phrase in 3P6 “as far as it can” without some teleological explanation behind it.²² However, this phrase is specific only to Curley’s interpretation, as will be shown in section IV below, where a different interpretation is offered as superior in both consistency with Spinoza’s theory and, arguably, expressing what he meant with regards to the *conatus*. The use of the word “can”, in ordinary linguistic usage, does conversationally imply the notion of trying, specifically, with some degree of success. With this in mind, the phrase certainly does imply a teleological reading so long as trying is always intentional, which I think we normally take it to be. However, this runs contrary to the very interpretation of the *conatus* that Curley himself argues for, namely, a

²² Curley (1988), p. 164, n. 25.

non-intentional, non-cognitive, mechanistic tendency that specifically does not involve the notion of trying. Recall that Curley criticizes Bennett for interpreting “*conatus*” as “trying.” I find the theory presented in section IV below to be a convincing analysis of what it really means for a thing to strive to persevere “as far as it can,” or on the preferred interpretation, “insofar as it is in itself.” I defer to the reader to that section for an adequate response to Curley’s concern.

III. Garrett’s Arguments for a Teleological Interpretation of the Conatus

D. Garrett defines, “a teleological explanation is one that explains a state of affairs by indicating a likely or presumptive consequence (causal, logical, conventional) of it that is implicated in the state’s origin or etiology.”²³ According to this definition and his understanding of the *conatus*, he argues that the striving of the *conatus* involves a teleological selection process for that which benefits a thing insofar as it contributes to its preservation. Like Curley, Garrett notes that the *conatus* applies to all singular things, animate and inanimate alike, and thus, such a notion of striving and teleology must necessarily apply to inanimate objects as much as animate ones. In other words, striving, and teleology, must not require conscious effort.²⁴ What teleology must require, argues Garrett, is “that something be *selected from alternatives* in a way that essentially involves some kind of *goodness or fitness of its likely or presumptive consequences* relative to those of other alternatives.”²⁵ The causal power of a singular thing to produce an effect is a function of its essence and current state in conjunction with the objects in its surrounding environment and the relative power they possess in affecting the singular thing as determined both by their individual essences and current states in conjunction with the rest of the objects in the environment. Relative to the environment as a whole, because it is composed of a

²³ Garrett, Don. 1999. “Teleology in Spinoza and Early Modern Rationalism,” in *New Essays on The Rationalists*, edited by Rocco J. Gennaro & Charles Huenemann, New York: Oxford UP: 310-335.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

variety of objects, each with its own causal power of affecting the singular thing, there is a set of available possibilities for action that the singular thing might effectively produce. Consequently, relative to the causal power of the singular thing itself together with the objects in its environment, there is a set of possible outcomes for those available possible actions. As such, argues Garrett, because the *conatus* drives a thing toward its own self-preservation, one may appeal to a teleological explanation of greatest benefit for why a particular action was selected over all the other available possibilities, given the total state of affairs.²⁶ This implies that we may conclude that the striving force of the singular thing steers the selection process to choose the action of which the outcome will provide the greatest benefit for the singular thing.

However, this is strikingly contradictory to the metaphysical picture Spinoza has created by way of 1P26-29, which clearly establishes that all of what exists and all of what follows from what exists, i.e., the effects produced by existing things, are causally determined in such a way as to rule out the notion of available possibilities. And Spinoza needs such a feature of his system for at least two distinct reasons. First, Spinoza's metaphysical system is, in principle, maximally epistemologically accessible; that is, it is inherently intelligible in the sense guaranteed by 1A1-4. In other words, *in principle*, knowledge of the whole causal order is possible precisely because causal relations are necessary, and thus, so long as one has complete knowledge of a thing, one is guaranteed to obtain knowledge of that from which it was an effect that followed, as well as that which will follow.²⁷ If causal relations were only probabilistically high, this could not guarantee knowledge. Second, his parallelism requires absolute causal necessity: the causal order of extension and that of thought must perfectly correlate to each other—however the

²⁶ Garrett (1999), p. 316.

²⁷ Cf. Koistinen, Olli. 2002. "Causation in Spinoza." *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes*, edited by John I. Biro & Olli I. Koistinen, Oxford: OUP: 60-72.

details of that may turn out to be—without any interaction between the two orders, since they are of different attributes. The only way to guarantee that the two orders turn out correlating to each other is by establishing that there is only one possible causal order of things, for only then shall it be guaranteed that the order of extension and the order of thought correlate to each other without interaction. There is a third reason Spinoza would argue for absolute causal necessity, namely, that since everything that is and happens follows from the nature and essence of God, if that order might have been otherwise, then it must have been because the essence of God were otherwise. But the essence of God, if he is perfect, cannot be otherwise, as Spinoza argues in 1P16-17SI&II.

The most striking feature of Garrett's theory, however, is that his definition of a teleological explanation guarantees that any causal explanation is teleological. He has built into the definition of teleology what is necessary for causation, viz., that there are intrinsic features of the cause that in conjunction account for the existence or presence of the effect such that, these intrinsic features taken together implicate the effect. In other words, the effect is predictable²⁸ given knowledge of the antecedent conjunction of intrinsic features of the cause. It would seem that Garrett's notion of teleology is philosophically toothless, since it seems to subsume all kinds of explanation, and fails to provide the distinctive feature of teleological explanation, that something occurs *for the sake of* some end.

IV. Garrett's Theory of Inherence

Bennett and M. Della Rocca argue²⁹ that Spinoza commits several erroneous equivocations throughout the argument leading up to the doctrine of the *conatus*. In response,

²⁸ To what degree the effect will be predictable given the cause will depend on the specific metaphysics of causation that one adopts.

²⁹ Bennett (1984), p. 231-246. Della Rocca, Michael. 1996. "Spinoza's metaphysical psychology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, edited by Don Garrett, New York: Cambridge UP: 194-206.

Garrett offers³⁰ a theory of inherence that he takes Spinoza to be committed to, his motivation being to provide a defense of the validity of Spinoza's arguments. He argues in favor of a teleological interpretation of the *conatus*, and uses his theory of inherence as support. I will agree with and adopt his theory of inherence; however, I will argue that it does not establish teleology in the way Garrett thinks it does, and it can be used to argue against teleology.

The critical theoretical component required for untangling Spinoza's argument for the *conatus* is the notion of *being in*, which must be distinguished from being *predicated of*. In 3P6, we find the curious phrase *quantum in se est*, which is translated by Curley as, "as far as it can by its own power;" Garrett prefers a more literal translation as, "insofar as it is in itself."³¹ That something could be *in itself* is significant, but clearly hidden on Curley's translation, for Garrett points out that it refers back to the beginning of Part I: 1D3, "By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself;" 1D5, "By mode I understand...that which is in another through which it is also conceived;" 1A1, "Whatever is, is either in itself or in another."

Garrett argues that we should understand the connections between some of these definitions and axioms in order to see what Spinoza's theory of inherence is. He first links inherence with conceiving to get what he calls the Inherence Implies Conception Doctrine: "If y is *in* x, then y is conceived through x. (From the use of 1D3, 1D5, and 1A1 in 1P4D.)"³² He next links conceiving with causation to get his Conception Implies Causation Doctrine: "If y is conceived through x, then y is cause by x. (From 1A4.)"³³ Finally, these two taken together

³⁰ Garrett, Don. 2002. "Spinoza's *Conatus* Argument," *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes*, edited by Olli I. Koistinen & John I. Biro, Oxford: OUP: 127-158.

³¹ Garrett (2002), p. 134. This translation is provided by R. H. M. Elwes, W. H. White & A. H. Stirling, and S. Shirley. I think that, ultimately, these translations turn out to be equivalent so long as we understand Spinoza's metaphysical theory correctly. Curley may disagree(?).

³² Garrett (2002), p. 136.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

imply the Inherence Implies Causation Doctrine: “If y is in x, then y is caused by x.”³⁴ A further doctrine he notes of importance for Spinoza is the Action as Adequate Causation Doctrine: “A thing acts insofar as it is the adequate cause of an effect. (From 3D3.)”³⁵

Garrett notes that a problem arises for this theory of inherence: the *conatus* clearly refers to any and all things, but so far as Spinoza has defined it, the only thing that it is *in itself* is substance, of which there is only one, and that is Nature, or God; thus, the *conatus* so interpreted could not apply or account for finite, singular modes, all of the things with which we are familiar and of which Spinoza does say are in fact driven by the *conatus*. The solution that Garrett provides for this problem is that inherence comes in degrees, and as such, finite modes are understood to be “finite approximations of substance—finite approximations that therefore exemplify his theory of inherence to various degrees...For in fact, it is common for Spinoza to hold that finite things can have, in *varying degrees*, characteristics that only an infinite substance possesses *absolutely*.”³⁶ One obvious feature that Spinoza several times speaks of as admitting of degrees in finite things, but is present in the highest degree in Nature is perfection. If a finite thing can be *in itself* only to some degree, then by the Inherence Implies Causation Doctrine, a finite thing can be the cause of itself to some degree. Garrett explains that, finite things “can be causes of themselves only to the extent that they exert power to cause their own *continuation* in existence.”³⁷ The power of a thing to cause its own continuation in existence is just the *conatus*, and as I will demonstrate below in the last section, there is a sense in which we can understand how that power does indeed follow of necessity from the thing itself, and so can be understood to be *in* the thing itself, while being a feature of it that necessarily requires an external cause.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

³⁶ Garrett (2002), p. 139.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

Lastly, I stated at the end of section II that this theory of inherence would answer to Curley's concern regarding the phrase in 3P6 that he translates as, "as far as it can by its own power," which he takes to imply a teleological feature. The way in which Garrett's theory answer's Curley's concern is not that it shows his interpretation of the phrase to be incorrect, but rather that he fails to understand in this particular proposition the connection between a thing's power of action and its nature or essence. In the following section, I make clear this connection, and its role in the larger picture of Spinoza's metaphysical system, thereby demonstrating how it is that Curley's and Garrett's preferred interpretations actually amount to expressing the same meaning. Furthermore, the argument of the following section will reveal that Garrett's theory of inherence does not by itself support a teleological interpretation of the *conatus*.

V. Non-Teleological Conatus in Spinoza

I believe we can find within Spinoza's text an argument that the *conatus* is entirely non-teleological. The argument is scattered throughout the *Ethics*, making it unfortunately obscure, and so my project here involves bringing these scattered pieces together in order to make sense of what I believe is Spinoza's perspective on the issue. Part of the obscurity and difficulty of this argument is a result of Spinoza's non-standard meanings of various words and phrases that are freely used in ordinary language use; it is a task all in itself to keep in mind these non-standard and, arguably, counterintuitive meanings while reading through the text. But once we can read through those words and phrases and understand them only as Spinoza defines and explicates them throughout the text, resisting reading them as we would normally understand them, then we can grasp his perspective and see, I will argue, that the *conatus* is a non-teleological striving.

The essence of a thing is constituted by "what the intellect perceives" of it (1D4), or we can say, what one understands a thing to be. In the second part of 1P8S2, Spinoza explains that

the definition of a thing “neither involves nor expresses anything except the nature of the thing defined.” Through 2D2 and the demonstration of 2P49, we can understand that the essence of a thing is an affirmation of its definition. This notion of affirmation is a metaphysical phenomenon that may be not intuitive, but I cannot clarify it any more than to say that it is simply a thing’s being what it is. In the third and fourth parts of 1P8S2, Spinoza argues that the existence of every existing thing must be explained by something that accounts for its existence. In other words, existence is never arbitrary or unexplainable. That which explains the existence of any one thing will either be in the definition of that thing, or something external to it (Cf. 1P33S1). From this, Spinoza concludes in 1P20 that Nature, or God, is the only thing whose definition accounts for and explains its existence; thus, by 1D1, Nature is self-caused. Further, by 1A7, since Nature is the only thing whose essence involves existence, everything else requires something external as the cause for its existence.

But Spinoza’s understanding of existence is not identical to ours. For him, existence comes in degrees, for he associates and identifies existence with being, reality, and perfection (1P9, 1P16D, 2D6). The latter three concepts are directly related to the number of properties that follow necessarily from the essence of a thing, such that, the more properties it has on account of its essence, the greater its degree of reality and perfection (1P16D). This, in turn, is directly related to the excursion in physics and dynamics that Spinoza makes in Part 2. Just prior to this discussion, he states that what distinguishes the human body and mind from the bodies and minds of other things is that the former contain more reality than the latter; and in proportion to that degree of reality, the body and mind bear a capability for acting on and being acted upon by others. From the discussion of the physics and dynamics of bodies in conjunction with the subsequent Postulates of the human body, the degree to which the human body and mind are

capable of acting involves the complexity that results from the number of properties that follow necessarily from the essence of the human being. Since the number of properties following from the essence of a thing defines the degree of reality, existence and perfection that a thing has, the capability of the human body and mind for action is directly correlated and identified with their perfection. And this aligns perfectly with Spinoza's later discussions in Parts 3-5 of the *Ethics* regarding human action and its relation to perfection.

But not everything that a thing does is an action, for Spinoza defines action in 2D2 strictly in relation to a thing's essence, or nature: "we act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, that is (by D1), when something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone." In this way, we can understand that action is a kind of expression of the essence, or more precisely, the degree of perfection and reality of the essence, which must also be understood in terms of its degree of existence.

Since Spinoza argues that some effect follows from every existing thing (1P36), then necessarily, some action will follow from the essence of a thing; or in other words, there will necessarily be some way in which the essence actively expresses and affirms itself. And here we begin to enter into and see the significance of the argument leading up to the doctrine of the *conatus*. At 3P4 and in its demonstration, Spinoza claims that it is evident that no thing can destroy itself, since its essence involves only the affirmation of its definition, not what negates it. This has already been explained above and textually supported; so even though Spinoza does not cite any earlier propositions in support of 3P4, it is nonetheless evident as a consequence of the metaphysics he has constructed at the very beginning. 3P4 states nothing above and beyond what it means for the essence of a thing to be the affirmation of its definition: since it is not a

negation, the expression of the essence, i.e., whatever follows from it alone, cannot be destructive to the essence, and thus, to the thing itself. It is for this reason that any behavior that satisfies the definition of an action cannot be destructive to the actor. Any behavior that is not an action may or may not have a negative contribution to the thing; but all such behaviors are the result of the conjunction of the essence of the thing and external things.³⁸

To backtrack just a bit, if everything (other than Nature) must be caused to exist, then a thing's beginning to exist is, properly speaking, the effect of some cause. Additionally, existence is not an all or nothing affair, since it comes in degrees, measured by a thing's degree of perfection or capability for action. With these two aspects of the nature of existence in mind, it is a small inferential step towards a conception of existence strikingly akin to that of motion, i.e., as an activity in a thing imbued into it by the power of an external thing, and continuing as it is, or fluctuating, or otherwise being altered, according to how the thing is affected by external things. Such a conception of the nature of existence would align perfectly well with Curley's historical point regarding how we ought to interpret the word "*conatus*", specifically, that we should understand its usage by Descartes in regards to mechanics, that we cannot ignore that Spinoza was influenced by Descartes, and so we ought not interpret "*conatus*" as "trying," but something closer to having a tendency. From this, and all that has been said above, the notion of *conatus* may be understood as a tendency that follows necessarily from the existence of the essence of a thing, and that this tendency is an action or activity in the sense that it is an active expression and affirmation of the essence insofar as it exists. But since the nature of existence is

³⁸ It is crucial to understand that the ways in which external things may be involved in the behaviors of a thing can be rather indirect. The external things need not be present and directly acting upon the thing, for the various experiences in which a thing is acted upon by external things affect it in such a way that leaves lasting, lingering impressions and effects on the thing, thus changing it in various ways. However, the essence of the thing remains intact through such accidental changes, for clearly, if the essence of a thing were altered in any way, it would no longer be *that* thing anymore, but something different. In that sense, one could say that the original thing has been destroyed.

tied directly to the power and capability for action that follows of necessity from an essence, this tendency is an active “motion” towards further action. Since that further action follows of necessity from the essence of the thing, and so cannot bear any destructive element towards it, it will, of necessity, contribute to the continued existence of the thing. It is in this way that everything that exists strives to continue existing.

Furthermore, we can understand that the phrase in 3P6 that Curley translates as, “as far as it can by its own power,” and Garrett translates as, “insofar as it is in itself,” actually have the same meaning, so long as the terms are understood in the right way according to Spinoza’s metaphysics. The capability a thing has in its power to act, expressed by Curley’s translation, is identical in meaning for Spinoza to the essence of a thing considered by itself, and that which follows of necessity from it, as expressed by Garrett’s preferred translation.

The sense in which the *conatus* so understood is non-teleological is that, first, it is a tendency, similar to that of motion, imparted into a thing via an external thing’s causing it to exist. Second, what follows of necessity from the existence of the essence of the thing through this tendency contributes to the continued existence and perseverance of the thing only because that which follows from the essence alone can only involve what actively affirms the definition and existence of the thing, and never what can negate it and take its existence away, either in full or in part, i.e., diminish its existence. Therefore, the *conatus* is not a striving towards what contributes to continued existence *because* it benefits the thing insofar as it contributes to its continuation; rather, so long as the *conatus* flows from the essence alone, that towards which it strives cannot *but* contribute to the continuation of the thing. In other words, the *conatus* is not a striving towards certain actions *for the sake of* preserving existence, under the ordinary meaning of “for the sake of;” instead, the necessity from which it follows from the existing essence of the

thing will necessarily lead it to actions that preserve and continue its existence. Thus far, only the essence alone has been considered, without any influence and affections from external things, for the *conatus* is a tendency that flows from the essence itself. Once the influences and affections from external things are considered, the metaphysical picture of the state of a thing, and its power to act, grows rapidly complex. But that complexity is not what Spinoza has in mind when he lays out the doctrine of the *conatus*, for there he is concerned with laying out the most basic metaphysical foundation for the nature of existing things.

In light of what I have argued above as what I believe is Spinoza's perspective of this issue, I want to consider again something he states in the Appendix to Part 1: "...men act always on account of some end, namely, on account of their advantage, which they want." First, all behaviors that satisfy Spinoza's definition of action will, as explicated above, necessarily be advantageous and beneficial to the thing with regards to contributing to its existence and power for further action. Second, one thing *accounts for* another so long as it, in some way, explains that other. Given what I have demonstrated above, there is a sense in which some action's being beneficial and advantageous explains why a thing performs the action, but the explanation is a rather different kind of explanation than a teleological one. It is not that the *reason* by which the thing does it is because it is beneficial, but rather, that it is beneficial reveals how it is the case that the thing was brought to act in such a way, namely, from the necessity of what follows from its essence. Thus, as stated at the opening of this section, we have to understand Spinoza's words in light of the non-standard meanings he gives them. Third, to want or desire something is merely, Spinoza declares in 3P9S, to be aware of the appetite, which is defined as the *conatus* of both the body and mind together, and so follows necessarily from one's essence.³⁹

³⁹ Cf. Curley (1988), p. 108.

While considerations of the consequences on the latter parts of the *Ethics* requires another project in and of itself, I would like to suggest the direction in which such a project might be taken. One seemingly obvious issue is that of goal-directed behavior and action, which seem rather pervasive in human life. I think we can conclude that goal-directed action is still possible, but only as understood in a different manner, namely according to the non-standard meanings of common language that are required to make sense of Spinoza's metaphysical system. To take something as a goal, or to desire an end towards which one acts, is to be aware of the active expression of one's essence through the appetite or striving and one's power of action. In other words, it is an awareness of what follows necessarily from one's own essence via its power to act, which is its striving and appetite. That towards which we act in this way, the end we take as a goal, is only a goal *for us* insofar as our awareness *that* we strive towards it *is* the desire for it. It is not that we make a further judgment beyond the awareness that we strive towards it, and then desire it; rather, the awareness of our striving just *is* the desire, and the notion that a judgment is involved prior to desire is mistaken. A judgment that what is desired is good is really a rationalization to oneself of one's desire, as Spinoza concludes in 3P9S. However, so long as the appetite or striving flows entirely from the essence, i.e., when the essence is the adequate cause of the behavior that follows, which is only then defined as action, that towards which the striving leads a person will, therefore, be something beneficial to him. As such, his judgment of its goodness, insofar as what is useful and beneficial to him (4D1), will not be incorrect, but it will not be the reason that he does it.