

How does Spinoza explain and argue for his conception of conatus (striving)? What are the implications of this conception for Spinoza's ethical claims?

Introduction

Conatus is the linchpin of Spinoza's ethical system. This concept bridges Spinoza's metaphysics of substance, his definitions of the affects, and his ethics proper. In this paper, I argue that *conatus* addresses a core problem in the *Ethics*: how to have ethics in a world of absolute necessity. I begin this paper by explaining *conatus* as it relates to metaphysics. In the second section, I focus on *conatus* and the affects. In the third section, I turn to Spinoza's ethics proper and specifically his conception of good and evil. In the fourth section, I focus on the principle of moderation. In the fifth and final section, I conclude by showing how *conatus* relates to Spinoza's doctrine of necessity.

I. Metaphysics

First, the definition. *Conatus* is Spinoza's term for the striving of each thing to persevere in its being (IIIP6D; in the original Latin, "in suo esse perseverare conatur"). In the different sections of the *Ethics*, Spinoza approaches this same basic idea in multiple contexts. The first context is metaphysics, and specifically how *conatus* is related to God. For Spinoza, substance consists of one thing: God, *or* nature (*Deus, sive Natura*). A specific body or thought is just "a mode that in a certain and determinate way expresses God's essence" (IID1; see also IIP11C). When a mode strives to persist in its being it better expresses this essence. All reality is God and God is perfection. Therefore, reality is perfection. A mode's striving, *conatus*, is to come closer to reality and thereby come closer to God, which is to come closer to perfection. Let's take the example of an orange. The *conatus* of the orange is to become a better expression of an orange — to strive to continue being an orange, and thereby come closer to God and become a more perfect orange.

Finite modes merely express small parts of God's infinite power to be and to persevere in being. Thus, Spinoza writes, "singular things are modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way ... that is ... things that express, in a certain and determinate way, God's power, by which God is and acts" (IIIP6D). This proposition contains Spinoza's argument for *conatus*, which is as follows. One of God's basic attributes is to be and persist in being. This is because he "is eternal" (IP19) and his "existence and his essence are one and the same" (IP20). The essence of a finite mode is to come as close

as possible to God's perfect attributes of being and persisting in being. Thus, every mode's essence is *conatus*.

We can better understand this striving to be God, and therefore persist in being, by considering it under the aspect of God's particular attributes (which are infinite in number). The single substance called God can be considered in two attributes in particular: thought and extension. Thus, the human intellect can take two perspectives on substance: mind and body. Considered under the attribute of thought, *conatus* is the striving to enhance the mind's ability to have adequate ideas. Considered under the attribute of extension, *conatus* is the striving to increase a body's power to act. Unlike an orange or a dog, we humans are self-conscious beings. Thus, we are conscious of our *conatus*, too. In particular, our mind's consciousness of our *conatus* is our will (IIP9). Spinoza writes that when we understand *conatus* as "related to the mind and body together, it is called appetite" (IIP9S). Thus appetite (and desire, which is just "appetite together with consciousness of the appetite" [IIP9S]), is fundamentally an expression of *conatus* under the attributes of extension and thought. In fact, appetite "is nothing but the very essence of man, from whose nature there necessarily follow those things that promote his preservation" (IIP9S).

II. Affects

This appetite or desire is one of the three primary affects. The other two primary affects are also related to *conatus*. Joy is the "passion by which the mind passes to a greater perfection" (IIP11S). Sadness is the passage from a greater to a lesser perfection. To be in a greater state of perfection is to be closer to God, and therefore to have greater power to act (as the body) and more adequate ideas (as the mind). Our basic desire is to increase our joy and decrease our sadness. This is because we strive to persist in our being, which is to say that we partake in God. This claim is striking. We usually think that we want to be happy because of the feeling it provokes in us — for instance, through the endorphins sunshine releases in our brains. By contrast, for Spinoza the affect of joy is just the expression of our natural striving to persist in being because we are finite modes of God. Our desire for happiness is just our essence, which is part of God.

So far, I have only described Spinoza's account of *conatus* as it relates to metaphysics on the one hand and the affects on the other. We can understand his account better with a little analogy. Spinoza's idea is immediately attractive, at least to me. But *conatus* can also seem foreign, due to the geometric style, the centrality of God-language, and Spinoza's certainty in metaphysics. However, *conatus* is not so strange, all in all. It is a scientific fact

that creatures of all sorts are motivated by basic desires. It is a biological fact that these desires come down to a striving to keep living. A dog will look for food to eat because it is hungry. It does so because it wants to keep being a dog, which is to say that it wants to stay alive. A human is also motivated by hunger. We need food to stay alive and continue being humans. We might observe that being human involves more than being a dog: we want to socialize, we want to play, and we want to bask in the sun on a beautiful day, because we want to be happy (although, come to think of it, all those things can just as accurately be said about a dog, too). Many of us find joy in being with others; when we work together, we increase our power to act. Thus, our desire to be human, to have joy, and to increase our power to act are all different expressions of the same idea. Similarly, many of us also find joy in having better ideas and understanding things foreign to us. Thus, when we learn to speak a foreign language (for instance, our partner's mother tongue), we become more able to understand our interlocutors. We have more adequate ideas of what they mean and we are more able to act on these ideas. And (hopefully) this greater understanding leads to joy, too. Spinoza's idea of *conatus* builds on these observations about the different aspects of a basic drive to life and brings them together in a coherent metaphysical framework built from first principles.

III. Ethics

The section I have yet to address is ethics. Given the title of the work, we might think the *Ethics* gives rules for living a life according to some standard of the good. But Spinoza does not issue ethical injunctions (of the form "stop smoking" or "be kind to others"). This is because he disputes that anything might be either good or bad in and of itself. Thus, he writes: "it is clear that we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it" (IIP9S). There is no absolute good. What we judge "good" is what follows from *conatus*. We might nonetheless hold to provisional principles that *resemble* traditional ethical injunctions, but solely because they are examples of things that follow from *conatus*. We want to strive to persist in our being, and thus we stop smoking. We want to increase our power to act and we strive for joy, and thus we are kind to others. Certain acts are ethical because they follow from our essence, which is striving to persist in being (*conatus*), not because they follow transcendent notions of good and evil.

There is no good and evil in this sense, Spinoza claims. He gives the wonderful of example of music to illustrate the claim. He might be describing "Here Comes the Sun" when

he writes that “music is good for one who is melancholy, bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad to one who is deaf” (IVPref). Whether music is good or bad depends on who listens to it. So, by analogy “being kind,” too, is not good or bad in itself. This is because “good and evil ... indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, or notions we form because we compare things to one another” (IVPref). Rather, “being kind” is good in relation to others. We could call these claims good because they follow from *conatus*.¹

On the one hand, Spinoza denies that there is transcendent good and evil. On the other hand, he still wants to give a definition to these terms:

For because we desire to form an idea of man, as a model of human nature which we may look to, it will be useful to us to retain these same words with the meaning I have indicated. In what follows, therefore, I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature we set before ourselves. (IVPref)

Good can be provisionally defined as what helps us approach perfection. The claim advanced here is basically just another way of understanding *conatus*.² Thus, being kind or not smoking can be described as actions that achieve something good, ethical actions, because they align with our *conatus*. Even as Spinoza fundamentally departs from ethics based on transcendent values of good and evil, he sketches a clear route for what ethics means in a world where all is immanent.

IV. Moderation

Insofar as there is a general ethical principle in Spinoza, it is to moderate the passions by forming more adequate ideas of the affects and thereby enhancing our power to act. In the preface to Part IV, Spinoza writes boldly:

Man’s lack of power to moderate and restrain the affects I call bondage. For the man who is subject to affects is under the control, not of himself, but of fortune, in whose power he so greatly is that often, though he sees the better for himself, he is still forced to follow the worse. (IVPref)

¹ This reading of the good as what “promotes our *conatus* and, thus, our power,” is defended in Kisner, *Spinoza on Human Freedom*, 110.

² Thus, Matthew Kisner writes: “It follows that there are several interdeducible ways of reading Spinoza’s definition of the good as what is useful: useful for our *conatus*, our active desires and attaining the model of human nature.” *Ibid.*, 99.

The *Ethics* helps deliver man from this bondage. But this is not “good” *per se*. We moderate the affects because of *conatus*. We judge moderation of the affects *to be* good because “we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it” (IIP9S).

So, what does this ethical principle in fact consist in? Spinoza gives details in IIP56. He writes of immoderate desires that are ordinarily considered passions (and were traditionally cardinal sins): “gluttony, drunkenness, lust, greed, and ambition” (IIP56). What Spinoza leaves unsaid, but I think implies, is that these passions are bad. Spinoza cannot say that passions are intrinsically “bad” because that would contradict his earlier point about values not being absolute. Nonetheless, his vivid language (e.g., “bondage”) indicates that he does *think* they are bad. Other scholars also defend this interpretative claim. For instance, Steven Smith writes:

Despite his claim in the preface to part three to treat the passions as if they were simply points along a Cartesian grid, he cannot help but make what appear to be moral evaluations between them. ... Spinoza may warn against philosophy’s tendency to be merely edifying, but his philosophy cannot help but edify.³

The ethical principle of moderation reflects this edifying tendency that belies Spinoza’s stated aims. Nonetheless, this ethical principle can also be articulated only in terms of *conatus*.

Spinoza writes that we usually promote the opposites of passions: namely, moderation as opposed to gluttony, sobriety as opposed to drunkenness, and chastity as opposed to lust. For Spinoza, though, these are not in fact opposites. This is because they are not affects or passions, but rather “indicate the power of the mind, a power which moderates these affects” (IIP56). The power of the mind is part of our *conatus*. To moderate the affects, the key ethical act for Spinoza, is precisely to follow *conatus* where it leads. Therefore, to talk about “good” or “bad” affects only makes sense in the context of *conatus*. The reason Spinoza gives definitions of affects is because that increases our adequate ideas, which increases our power to act in moderating them, which leads to positive effects in the world and delivers us from “bondage.” But putting the explanation this way is like putting the cart before the horse. Spinoza would say that the reason he has this aim in mind in the first place is *conatus*. *Conatus* is the reason he increases our adequate ideas of affects, the reason he gives definitions, and the reason he writes the *Ethics* in the first place. Although his readers might think otherwise, in Spinoza’s view his philosophy is not edifying; it just is what it is because it follows necessarily from our essence, *conatus*.

³ Smith, *Spinoza’s Book of Life*, 110–11.

V. Necessity

Here we stumble upon a last piece of the puzzle: necessity. The basic reason Spinoza can't be said to be doing traditional ethics at all is because we do everything we do necessarily. Even God only does things necessarily, not "on account of an end" (IApp). How can we talk about ethics in a world where everything happens necessarily? Doesn't ethics usually involve some kind of choice? The answer to this puzzle is *conatus*. Say that an action is ethical because it strives for achieving something good. (Thus, we might say that superbly ethical actions like the sacrifice of a mother for her child or the selfless work of activists are ethical because they are done for a good cause.) But Spinoza says there is no absolute "good." Instead, "we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it" (IIIP9S).⁴ Thus striving for the good is just taking those actions that follow from our *conatus*. As Gilles Deleuze puts it: "To do all we can is our ethical task properly so called."⁵ This is how you can have ethics in a world of necessity. Ethical actions are necessary because they correspond to our essence.

The critic would level two objections to this argument that *conatus* provides a way out of the problem of ethics in a world of necessity. The first charge is that of circular reasoning. In a sense, isn't Spinoza re-defining "ethics" in such a way that it does not conflict with metaphysics? In other words, is Spinoza just side-stepping the conflict by defining ethics as that which follows necessarily from our essence, *conatus*? In my view, Spinoza is indeed defining away ethics as traditionally understood, i.e., as a free choice to take an action that leads to the good. But there is no space for this conception of ethics within Spinoza's metaphysical system. For Spinoza everything is necessarily as it is. God is not some father figure who demands obedience, imposing moral values and issuing ethical injunctions. He does not make plans or issue judgements. He just is. But ethics still matters because we are finite modes with inadequate ideas. We do not know what good or bad are. We ought to acquire more adequate ideas, because in so doing we increase our power to act and come closer to God by moving to a higher perfection. Indeed, it is not really the case that we *ought* to do so, for that would imply that we could do otherwise. Instead, we *will* do ethical things because that is the very essence of what we are, beings that strive to persist in their being. Spinoza is indeed re-defining ethics, but in a way that conforms to his overall system.

⁴ Furthermore, actions are not taken on account of *any* end; see the refutation of final causes in IApp, quoted above. However, to do justice to Spinoza's views on causality is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵ Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, 269.

The second objection the critic would level is more critical. By making ethics subordinate to *conatus*, do we not lose sight of our capacity to judge good — deeming certain actions ethical and others not? This is the charge of relativism. It is true that Spinoza refuses any absolute, transcendent notions of “good” or “evil”; these are not standards that exist apart from the world, which we might use to guide our actions. But that is not to say that they are arbitrary. Quite the opposite. Things are good in a very concrete sense, because they contribute to flourishing and increase our power to act. Spinoza is indeed refusing to say that a thing is in itself good or bad. But he doesn’t then jump to the opposite conclusion and say that things are good or bad only from somebody’s perspective. Instead, he says that a thing is good or bad *for somebody*. “Here Comes the Sun” is good or bad for an individual’s flourishing at a given moment, not good or bad for everybody, but it is still good or bad for a given person at a given moment. Still, a person might not realize what is good for them. Just because they don’t *like* “Here Comes the Sun” doesn’t mean that it is therefore not good for them; it is very possible, and even likely, to be mistaken about what is actually conducive to your own flourishing. Spinoza gives up absolute good and evil, but they are still substantial and grounded in reality because their truth-value has to do with both the object and the subject. For something to be good means for it to be good *for somebody* at some given time. The good is not defined arbitrarily.

Conclusion

Conatus is a strange thing, both weird and familiar. On the one hand, as I have shown, it seems like something we can recognize in the world around us, from the grass growing in the fields to the dogs and people frolicking in the meadows. On the other hand, it undergirds a system of metaphysics that is alien to us, a world of radical monism and pure necessity. *Conatus* is the linchpin for Spinoza’s ethical system because it makes it possible to have an ethical system in a world of absolute necessity. In particular, *conatus* makes it possible for Spinoza to outline an ethics of joy.⁶ In this ethics, those things that are good are those that enhance our minds’ and bodies’ capacities to think and to act, respectively. These are just the things that bring us joy. As Deleuze writes: “The sense of joy is revealed as the truly ethical sense.”⁷ For Spinoza, sad passions are ethically bad, because they make us weak of body and spirit. Instead of a conventional Christian morality of asceticism, repentance, and glorification

⁶ I borrow this formulation from Lord, *Spinoza’s Ethics*, 126.

⁷ Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, 272.

of suffering, Spinoza proposes an ethics where what is good is what brings us power and activity of mind and body. The reason we undertake ethical actions is not because they are good, but rather because of our essence, which is to be and strive to persevere in being. This is the kind of ethics that can exist in a world of necessity.

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