THE REEMERGENCE OF SPINOZA'S *CONATUS* IN THE POLITICAL SPHERE

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I. Introduction

If any one position can be maintained as the central thesis of Benedictus de Spinoza's philosophy, it is his commitment to naturalism.[1] This position is foundational to Spinoza's system because through it he establishes his system of metaphysics, psychology, and ethics. In his *Ethics*, Spinoza derives a form of psychological egoism from his metaphysics of substance monism. Counter to Michael Della Rocca's understanding of Spinoza's psychology and ethics, I show how Spinoza's psychological egoism and rational egoism contribute to a community-oriented striving based on Spinoza's own claims found in his *Ethics*. Spinoza's formulation of egoism, derived from the laws of Nature, allows him to develop a coherent account of why individuals help one another in communities that is consistent with his naturalism.

II. Spinoza's *Conatus* and Egoism

In examining Spinoza's account of communities, we must first examine some of his relevant metaphysical positions pertaining to his views on human psychology. In what follows, I consider the relationship between the power of God and the essence of humans. For Spinoza, the single substance in which all things exist is identified as God *or* Nature (EIV Pref.). God's essence is described in two ways in Book I of the *Ethics*. One passage states, "God's existence and essence are one and the same" and later, "God's power [to act] is his essence itself"(EIP34). If the preceding two claims are united in a hypothetical syllogism, it yields the conclusion that God's existence is identical with his power, but the relation is better explained as expression: God's existence is characterized by the expression of his power in the essences of all things, both finite and infinite.[2]

The Infinite power of God is expressed as striving (*conatus*) in singular things

(*res singulars*). According to Spinoza, "each thing, insofar as it is in itself, strives to preserve its being" (EIIIP6). The striving that Spinoza describes in EIIIP6 also applies to the fundamental drive of human life, which has no external *telos* beyond its self-preservation. In the following proposition, Spinoza continues, "the power, *or* striving, [*potentia sive conatus*] by which it [*viz*., each singular thing or *res singulars*] strives to persevere in its being, is nothing but the given, or actual, essence of the thing itself"(EIIIP7 and EIIIP7D). Here one observes that the power of expression emanating from singular things is identical with the essence of each singular thing. In this way, each striving thing is an expression of God's infinite power to act.

Singular things include both complex beings such as humans and also relatively simple beings such as stones. For Spinoza, humans and stones do not differ in their essence, although humans are freer to shape the manner in which they continue to exist. In the following section, I examine the conditions that make human freedom (such as it is) possible.

III. Freedom within Necessitarian Causality

In order to illuminate this activity of striving (*conatus*) in singular things, we should note the difference between a singular thing considered in its essence and the set of things that flow from its essence, versus the total state of a singular thing. The total state of a singular thing may be, and in almost every case is, constituted by additional properties that are not caused by the essence of that singular thing alone. For example, a person might have scar tissue on his or her skin as a result of a growth spurt during adolescence. In such a case, the scar tissue comes about as a result of the essential striving of that person's effort to continue existing. But, if the scar tissue came about as the result of an injury from, say, broken glass, the scar tissue comes about as the result of the external factor rather than the essence of the individual in question.

For Spinoza, those things caused by the essence of the thing alone cannot interfere with its persisting in existence. Thus, only a thing that is influenced by forces greater than and outside of itself can be destroyed. Spinoza offers his definition of a free thing and, conversely, of one that is compelled:

> That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone. But a thing is called necessary, or rather compelled, which is determined by another to exist and to produce an effect in a certain and determinate manner. (E1D7)

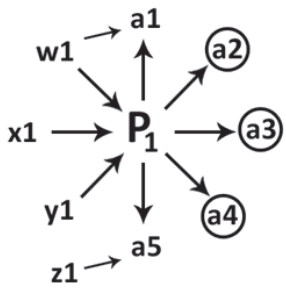
One implication of this definition is that complete freedom is impossible for humans in an arbitrary sense since the essence of human beings, eternal or actual, is ultimately dependent on God and cannot be or be conceived without God. Spinoza defines an adequate cause as one "whose effect can be clearly and distinctly perceived through it. But [a cause is] partial, *or* inadequate, if its effect cannot be understood through it alone" (E3D1). From this second definition, it becomes more apparent that only God can truly be said to be free since God is *causa sui* and is conceived through himself alone and he alone determines his activity by the laws of his nature. Spinoza's etio-

logical epistemology is dependent on recognizing God as the adequate cause of all things.

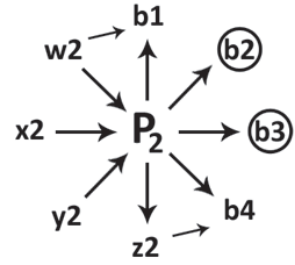
Humans, on the other hand, are rarely the adequate causes of their actions. In fact, the only time that a human approximates being the adequate cause of his or her own actions is when God is the *sole* cause of that person's actions—a condition that is never fully obtained.[3] The most common condition for humans is what Spinoza calls "bondage" which is a general state of being constrained to produce particular actions because of the external causes that act upon an individual. To use another example, we might imagine a person's freedom limited by being surrounded by broken glass and lacking adequate protection. In such a case the person is, at such a moment, constrained by forces outside of his or her control. However, Spinoza aptly focuses not simply on the external causes of a person's affective states, but on the affective states themselves.

Affective states impact individuals in a number of ways. In examining the causal influences on humans, it is necessary to distinguish between their quality, quantity, and degree. First, a person may be affected bodily by the direct actions of another object (e.g., a piece of broken glass) including emotional factors (e.g., the fear of being injured by the broken glass) without a direct presence of an external cause. Secondly, the number of causal factors determining a person to act will compel him or her more so with a greater number, or less so with fewer factors (e.g., a single piece of broken glass versus many shards of glass). Finally, individual factors vary by degree (e.g., the fear of broken glass versus the fear of an irritable tiger). Spinoza explains, "the greater the sadness, the greater is the part of the man's power of acting to which it is necessarily opposed" (E3P37D). Thus, if a particular affect is stronger by degree, it proportionally affects a person with a stronger influence.

Below I reproduce a diagram from Joel Friedman's essay in order to illustrate how causal factors affect a person's freedom for Spinoza (70). Although this model is helpful for visualizing my descriptions of Spinoza's theory of freedom, it is limited insofar as it does not account for degrees of power within a particular affect.



A relatively free person



A relatively constrained person

The circled actions in {a} and {b} are actions that the persons above may take as the adequate cause of those actions. P1 is the adequate cause of a2-4, and P2 can only be the adequate cause of b2 and b3. The diagram also illustrates a cause (z1) that is unrelated to a person's affects, but only the outcome of a particular action (a5).

Moving beyond the adequate and inadequate causes of a person's actions, we now

consider the role of the passions, which aids my analysis of the foundation of Spinoza's political theory in the following section. Consider that w_1 which influences P_1 can be seen as an emotional state influencing the outcome of a_1. For Spinoza, since the person in question does not cause w_1, it is a passion and as such is not an adequate idea (EIIID3). Further, assume that w_1 is specifically a passion that involves either hope, which Spinoza defines as "an inconstant joy, born of the idea of a future or past thing whose outcome we to some extent doubt" (EIII Def. Aff. XII) or fear, which is defined as "an inconstant sadness, born of a future or past thing whose outcome we to some extent doubt" (EIII Def. Aff. XIV). From these definitions, one sees that the inadequate idea has a causal effect on a person's action to the extent that the person is not the adequate cause of that act. Spinoza's definitions of hope and fear include references to the future, which involve beliefs in possible or contingent events. Since ideas containing possibility or contingency cannot be adequate ideas (EIID4 and EIIP44D2), a person is not fully free under the weight of such ideas.

Friedman rightly observes, '"adequate causation' is extensionally equivalent to 'having adequate ideas'" (71), so to be free a person must act on the basis of reason. Since one type of inadequate idea consists in thoughts containing possibility or contingency, a person seeking freedom must strive not to rely on such ideas. Thus, Spinoza's deterministic theory of freedom shows that a human's actions are determined by past and present causal factors, but not by a future goal. Spinoza's "wise man" relies only on adequate ideas, but it seems that even Spinoza's ideally active individual is not completely impervious to hope and fear.

IV. Spinoza's Explanation of Community-Oriented Striving

In Spinoza's system, humans are finite modes and are only free to act according to their nature, especially in the interest of self-preservation. Thinking and acting in the interest of one's continued existence leads a person to develop prudential concerns aiding his or her continual survival. Though, all humans are unable to meet some of their own prudential desires. Thus, out of such concerns, individuals must help one another. For the most part, Spinoza's analysis of the factors that draw individuals together in communities is intuitive. However, in consequence to his metaphysical doctrines, Spinoza is faced with a number of positions that stand in opposition to common sense explanations of human behavior.

Michael Della Rocca, in his essay "Spinoza's Metaphysical Psychology," develops two common sense descriptions of behavior that he calls "future directed striving" (FDS) and "other directed striving" (ODS) which he maintains are necessary for Spinoza to hold in order to offer a coherent, naturalistic account of why humans help one another and form communities. His main criticisms of Spinoza's psychology come from his judgment that Spinoza fails to advance such positions in a way that is consistent with naturalism.

Della Rocca formulates two observations about Spinoza that are relevant to my analysis. First, in response to Spinoza's failure to develop an account of FDS, he claims that Spinoza holds to a "primacy of the immediate," which amounts to the claim that "the immediate outcomes of an action play a more direct role in the explanation of a

desire to perform that action" (233) than consequences that are not immediate. Secondly, he also observes what he calls the "primacy of the self" in response to Spinoza's failure to develop ODS. Here, Della Rocca observes that benefits to oneself "play a more direct role in the explanation of one's desire to perform that action" (233) than for another person's benefit. Despite finding these positions in Spinoza, Della Rocca claims "there is no logical connection between the primacy of the immediate and the primacy of the self" (233). While such a connection is not present in Della Rocca's understanding of Spinoza's psychology, finding a link between human motivation and human communities is essential to understanding Spinoza's naturalistic ethics.

In order to illustrate why he thinks that Spinoza denies FDS, Della Rocca compares a stone's *conatus* with that of a person. He judges that Spinoza would in fact deny that the *conatus* of a stone and person differ (226) in order to maintain Spinoza's rigorous goal of dealing with human nature in the same way as "a question of lines, planes, and bodies" (EIII Pref.). Della Rocca formulates FDS as follows:

> (FDS) It is possible for an object x to strive to do G immediately (at t_1), not because doing G would increase x's power of acting at t_1 or offset a decrease in that power at t_1; but because such an action would increase x's power of acting at t_2 or offset a decrease in that power at t_2. (225)

Della Rocca claims that prudential desires oriented toward a future time are a species of FDS (225). He observes that Spinoza does not view humans as essentially different from stones on account of their ability to think; rather, Spinoza holds that stones and humans are both essentially disposed toward preserving their existence in the same sense (226). At this point, Della Rocca goes no further in his consideration of the essences of stones and humans.

While Della Rocca is correct in that humans and stones do not engage in FDS, Spinoza does affirm that the human being is essentially social.[4] Additionally, Spinoza makes no objection to Aristotle's definition of humans as essentially social beings (EIVP35S).[5] Like Aristotle, Spinoza finds a close connection between ethics and politics. They agree that the highest good for the individual person is the good of the state, since humans necessarily require the presence and help of other humans to exist and persist in existence.

While Spinoza does not endorse FDS, he is able to account for the same behavior that FDS seeks to explain according to his own system. It is conceivable for a person to act in a way similar to FDS in response to a passion. The closest concept in Spinoza's system to FDS is his understanding of hope. So, if a person *hopes* that by taking a pill at t_1 that he or she will receive the benefit of pain relief at t_2, it is not necessarily the case that taking the pill will relieve pain at t_2, owing to factors beyond the intention of the person taking the pill. However, what is not in question is that it is possible for a person to hold such a belief in Spinoza's framework. Such a belief is still not an adequate idea.

Nonetheless, Spinoza can account for the desire to take a pill to ward off future pain in terms of adequate ideas. He claims, "To every action which we are determined from an affect which is a passion, we can be determined by reason, without that affect"

(EIVP59). From this line of thought, it is conceivable for a person to take the pill at t_1 in the interest of warding off pain at t_2 because that person possess adequate ideas that exert affective qualities producing a desire to act in the interest of future needs. First, one must know that one will experience pain because the present state of affairs will necessarily bring about pain. Secondly, one must know that the pill has the ability to relieve pain and will do so necessarily. Such knowledge of what is necessarily the case motivates the person to a stronger degree than "toward a thing we imagine as possible or contingent" (EIVP11).

Spinoza's stipulation that an adequate idea is necessary for a person to act without passion relies on his psychological premise that when "the mind conceives things from the dictate of reason, it is affected equally, whether the idea is of a future or past thing, or of a present one" (EIVP62). In this way, a rational understanding of a situation in the future grants a person an affect from adequate knowledge influencing them presently. A person obviously need not be aware of these adequate ideas in taking the pill to relieve pain. But, such ideas are necessary, according to Spinoza, for a person to act from reason to take the pill. An adequate idea concerning this medication might well result in confidence, a "joy born of the idea of a future or past thing concerning which the cause of doubting has been removed" (EIII Def. Aff. 14).

Despite the tedious epistemic requirements for a person to have adequate ideas in relation to taking the pill, the implications of having adequate ideas for prudential desires in a community are further reaching. For Spinoza, the passions of hope and fear, as motivators for social cohesion, are unstable and can quickly become violent. It follows then that a political state founded on hope and fear is necessarily violent and does not promote true freedom. Thus, with more at stake in the case of a community's peace, this same process of sublimating the "primacy of the immediate" into the effort to preserve a community is necessary. While Della Rocca rejects the primacy of the immediate, I argue in what follows that this psychological principle assists Spinoza's account for how individuals act in the future interest of communities.

Outside the confines of Spinoza's metaphysics, FDS is methodologically naturalistic;[6] that is, we observe humans engaging in FDS. However, for Spinoza to remain consistent with his naturalism and his rationalistic deductive method, he must deny FDS and retain his affirmation of the "primacy of the immediate" as a psychological principle. The "primacy of the immediate" need not be eliminated from a reconstruction of Spinoza's thought, but rather must be understood as oriented toward a different object of desire in the context of a community. When an individual has been joined to a community, the highest good for that individual is no longer his or her self-preservation, but the maintenance of the community, and himself or herself secondarily. The sublimation of self-referential desires into community-oriented desires is dealt with in the remainder of this section.

Della Rocca proposes that helping others is contrary to Spinoza's psychological egoism (derived from EIIIP6) in that "such a desire would threaten Spinoza's naturalism" (231). Della Rocca formulates, in Spinozistic terms, what "other directed striving" amounts to:

> (ODS) It is possible for an object x to strive to do F, not because such an action would increase x's power of acting or offset a decrease in x's power of acting, but because such an action would increase another individual's (y's) power of acting or offset a decrease in y's power of acting. (231)

Della Rocca objects to Spinoza's account of helping others because ODS seems to be a capability of human beings alone which would make humans "a dominion within a dominion"(EIII Pref.). At this point, Della Rocca rightly points out that Spinoza denies any purely altruistic desire by implication when he states, "No one strives to preserve his being for the sake of anything else" (EIVP25).

To illustrate two aspects to Spinoza's general denial of ODS, Della Rocca first asks us to consider Spinoza's definition of pity "which we can define as sadness which has arisen from the injury to another" (EIIIP22Schol.). If a person is motivated to help another from pity, then that person is acting not just to relieve the suffering of the other person, but primarily to reduce the sadness that has arisen in that person because of the awareness he or she has of the other person's suffering (owing to the "primacy of the immediate"). Secondly, Della Rocca points out that a person might have the desire to instill in others a love for reason and teach them how to live in accordance with reason.[7] But, this educational striving, as with the person who helps others out of pity, is performed primarily to reduce the sadness that others cause the agent if he or she does not effectively teach others to live according to the guidance of reason. Della Rocca rightly judges both of these cases of helping others are "ultimately beneficial to that individual" (233).

The problem of *how* to integrate egoistic psychological dispositions into a social context remains. Hope and fear must be kept at bay to protect the community from violence. Altruism is a common-sense description of behavior that is often posited as a major factor in maintaining social cohesion. The basic criterion for altruism is that a person acts without regard for his or her interests, but solely for the benefit of another.[8] In Spinoza's account, actions benefiting others are performed because acting for another's benefit increases one's own power to act. As noted above, Spinoza denies the general definition of altruism in EIVP25. However, if when Spinoza states "no one" (*nemo*), we may interpret him as equivalently referring to no *singular thing*, it then becomes clear that, according to his definition of a singular thing, it is possible for an individual human to strive for the perseverance of a community of individuals.[9]

Two of Spinoza's commitments help us resolve the threat ODS poses to his naturalism. First, his definition of a singular thing, and secondly, his claim that human beings must seek to preserve their existence by means of communities. "Singular thing" as defined in EIID7 is interchangeable with "mode," since it is impossible that a singular thing be an attribute or a substance. If a mode (community) consisting of many things (persons) mutually gives rise to one effect (social harmony), then the striving for that effect is the essence of that communal body (EIID7).

Humans and human communities are necessarily finite and limited in power, so the drive to preserve one's being must resonate with the drives of others to do the same. Since all individuals exist in finitude, the striving (*conatus*) of any individual for his or her own survival is limited. Spinoza's view of the psychological activity of striving

seems antithetical to helping others, but when considered in this way, it appears that an individual's striving is futile without involving others at least as mediate ends for self-preservation. Spinoza, in fact, explicitly describes a collective striving of multiple individuals directed toward a single effect:

> Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that all should so agree in all things that the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, one mind and one body; that all should strive together, as far as they can,[10] to preserve their being; and that all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all. (EIVP18Schol.)

Spinoza maintains that the communal striving, like an individual's striving, follows from the whole order of nature. Thus by implication, the endeavor to preserve communities is necessary for humans in the same sense that "God must be called the cause of all things in the same sense in which he is called the cause of himself" (EIP25Schol.). The activity of *conatus* in individuals is the expression of God's power in them, but for individuals, the expression of power is impeded by the influence of affects such as hope and fear. While Spinoza maintains that the essential nature of individuals causes them to act out of self-interest, he also maintains that egoistic striving necessarily involves operations that benefit a human community.

Let us suppose that the individuals "x" and "y" from Della Rocca's formulation of ODS must by the nature of their being exist in some basic community (C). Since each human being cannot live independently, both x and y must inhere[11] in C. Individuals x and y depend on the existence of C in order to preserve their own being. The striving of each to maintain and strengthen C constitutes their common nature and the common effect that allows them to be part of the same singular thing C. So, rather than x striving to do F because such an action would increase another individual's (y's) power of acting, x will strive to do F because when doing F helps y, then C is benefited. Consequently, when C is strengthened, so is x.

Person y is only being helped as a mediate end when x strives to do F. So, x is not acting out of the "primacy of the immediate" since x is not doing F to help y; x is doing F because doing F helps C. But insofar as doing F ultimately increases x's power to act and persevere in x's being, doing F is always performed out of x's "primacy of the self" (the benefits to x have a more direct role in explaining x's behavior to do F). So, as an alternative to ODS, I propose we look at what I will call community-oriented striving (COS):

> (COS) It is possible for a person x to strive to do F, not because an action would directly increase y's power of acting, but because such an action would increase x's ability to preserve itself insofar as it is a part of community C. Person y also benefits from action F, in that by doing F, x increases the ability of C to endure. When x does F, y also benefits since y is a part of C. Furthermore both x and y have a common nature insofar as x and y both belong to community C and both x and y strive to preserve C.

COS is a form of rational egoism, the view that it is most rational and prudent to preserve one's being, which satisfies Spinoza's requirement that "Since reason demands nothing contrary to Nature, it demands that everyone love himself, seek his own advantage […] that everyone should strive to preserve his own being as far as he can" (EIVP18Schol.). For humans, a part of striving to preserve one's being always includes more than oneself.

V. Conclusion

Spinoza's eschewal of common sense explanations of beneficial behavior in the case of pity, as well as FDS and ODS, indicates not only a thorough commitment to his metaphysical system and the psychological principles derived from it but also a commitment to understanding human nature though a rigorously naturalistic method. While Della Rocca's analysis of Spinoza's psychology is thought-provoking, a thoroughgoing critique of it would be better served by discharging Spinoza's metaphysical assumptions rather than their consequences. Moreover, Spinoza's ethical thought produces valuable conclusions regardless of any objections one might have to his philosophy.

The congruency between Spinoza's psychology and his normative theory teaches his reader that hate,[12] when reciprocated, increases hate that damages and reduces the freedom of both parties by damaging the community. A useful example to illustrate Spinoza's psychological egoism is the activity of helping others as a response to pity. If a person acts to alleviate pain in another because of the pain the other person arouses in him, then he or she is acting out of sadness, or even hate, toward the pitied person because of the suffering that the pitied person causes him.

Because of the negative affective states aroused by directly giving aid to another due to one's pity, Spinoza cannot advocate pity as a positive moral emotion. Helping others out of pity multiplies suffering. Spinoza appeals to the fact that "to bring aid to everyone in need far surpasses the powers and advantage of a private person […]. So the care of the poor falls upon society as a whole, and concerns only the general advantage" (EIV App. XVII). Just as COS is directed at the community, the community in turn must act generously to further the general advantage by helping those who do not have all they need. The primacy of the immediate can only be sublimated into a rational primacy of the self if the individuals in the community recognize themselves as parts of the community.

Self-determination is not only in keeping with Spinoza's psychological understanding of *conatus*, but also maintains the project of making individuals active and truly free. Spinoza is surely not helping anyone become free if he commands his readers that they must do such a thing and in such a way. Acting morally, ultimately, arises from the conative nature of a person's being. Emotions such as pity, hope, and fear disrupt the peace and harmony of the mind and are disruptive of interactions with others, since these emotions prevent individuals from inhering in themselves and inhering in their communities.

Notes

1. This commitment seems most evident from the following: "…nothing happens in Nature which can be attributed to any defect in it, for Nature is always the same, and its virtue and power of acting are everywhere one and the same, that is, the laws and rules of nature, according to which all things happen, and change from one form to another, are always and everywhere the same. So the way of understanding the nature of anything, of whatever kind, must also be the same, namely, through the universal laws and rules of Nature." Benedictus De Spinoza, EIII Pref.
2. Or, as EIP34D states, "God's power, by which he and all things are and act, is his essence."
3. This is certainly the case when considering the knowledge reason grants. However, I do not consider the freedom that the intellectual love of God (*amor Dei intellectualis*) grants in this present work.
4. "…[It] follows that we can never bring it about that we require nothing outside ourselves to preserve our being, nor that we live without having dealings with things outside us" (EIVP18S).
5. cf. Aristotle's *Politics* 1253a.
6. cf. Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality* 3-6 for a discussion of the different senses of what is meant by "naturalism."
7. "…[W]e necessarily strive to bring it about that men live according to the guidance of reason" (EIVP37).
8. Edward O. Wilson employs an especially strong definition of altruism: "self-destructive behavior performed for the benefit of others" 578.
9. "By singular things I understand things that are finite and have a determinate existence. And if a number of individuals so concur in one action that together they are the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent one singular thing" (EIID7).
10. The Latin, "*quantum possunt*" that Curley renders "as far as they can" can be alternatively rendered "as far as it is according to their power." Curley's word choice is similar to how he renders "*quantum in se est*" as "as far as it can by its own power."
11. cf. Garrett, "Spinoza's *Conatus* Argument"
12. "Hate is a sadness, accompanied by the idea of an external cause" (EIII Def. Aff. VII).

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