

Perseverance, Power, and Eternity: Purely Positive Essence and Spinoza's Naturalism

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Abstract: By offering a new analysis of Spinoza's doctrine that each thing not only strives to persist, but also strives to increase its power of acting, this paper aims to show that Spinoza's conception of the essence of a thing is purely positive. A coherent essence can contain no negation. The paper then argues, on this basis, that Spinoza's definitions of substance and mode at the beginning of Part 1 of the *Ethics* reveal that the essence of a mode contains a negation, in a way that the essence of substance does not. This insight is then deployed to support, in an unexpected fashion, the interpretation of Spinoza's modes as not real. The paper closes with some new illumination of Spinoza's third kind of knowledge and of his views on the eternity of the mind.

Key words: Essence, Eternity, Perseverance, Positive, Power

The alignment of affirmation, essence, and the absence of negation is evident very early in Spinoza's *Ethics*. In explicating his definition of God, Spinoza says "if something is absolutely infinite, whatever expresses essence and involves no negation pertains to its essence" (1def6expl).¹ Here Spinoza makes clear that the essence of God contains no negation or is—as I shall put it—purely positive. My aim in this paper is to show how the purely positive character of essence is a feature not only of God's essence but also, in some way, of the essences of things in general. Because negationlessness characterizes the essences of things in general, including those of God and of human beings, the absence of negation in essences is a manifestation of—perhaps the most fundamental manifestation of—Spinoza's naturalism which, in general terms, I understand to be the view that everything, as it were, plays by the same rules.

I will begin by drawing on some of my earlier work on Spinoza's conatus doctrine and on the way in which Spinoza's notion of essence as purely positive, together with the principle of sufficient reason (PSR), generates Spinoza's famous claim that each thing strives to persevere in existence. I will then deploy this conception of essence again—and do so again with the assistance of the PSR—to show in a new way how Spinoza argues that each thing not only strives to persevere, but also strives to increase its power of acting. This thesis about increase in power has puzzled commentators as much as the general thesis about striving to persist, and I will try to show that the conception of essence as purely positive is the key to the solution of both puzzles. I will then argue that appreciating the roles that Spinoza's conception of essence as purely

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1 "quod...absolutè infinitum est, ad ejus essentiam pertinet, quicquid essentiam exprimit, & negationem nullam involvit." Unless otherwise noted, all references to works of Spinoza will be to the *Ethics*. I use a more or less standard method of referring to passages from this work.

positive plays in Spinoza's conatus doctrine offers us a wholly new way into and a wholly new way of defending a reading of Spinoza according to which modes—things that are dependent on God—don't really exist. This surprising path to the thesis of the non-reality of modes also provides us with new insights into Spinoza's third kind of knowledge and his notorious doctrine of the eternity of the mind, a doctrine that might seem at odds with a naturalistic conception of the world.

I. Striving for Perseverance

Let's begin then with the universal striving for self-preservation and let me give a streamlined version of an interpretation I have offered elsewhere. The doctrine is expressed in 3p6:

Each thing, insofar as it is in itself, strives to persevere in its being (*Unaquaeque res, quantum in se est, in suo esse perseverare conatur*).

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Here Spinoza seems to say—in good naturalistic fashion—that nothing can seek or tend towards its own destruction. Before we turn to the obvious potential counterexamples, I would like to clarify two aspects of the crucial term “strives” (*conatur*). First, the term is not an inherently psychological term. For Spinoza, things insofar as they are extended strive to persist in existence as well as things insofar as they are mental. Rocks and tables can be said to strive as well as dogs and human beings. Spinoza is, as many would argue, a panpsychist: for him, each thing is animate to some degree (2p13s), and each body is one and the same thing as an idea or mode of thought (2p7s). Thus a striving table is an animate things that strives. But the fact that a table strives does not, for Spinoza, by itself presuppose that it has mentality. Spinoza's attribution of striving to all things is, in this respect, independent of the considerations that lead to his panpsychism. In using “striving” in this general, attribute-neutral way, Spinoza is following in the footsteps of Descartes who also attributes striving (or, as Descartes often says, tending) to bodies insofar as they are bodies (*Principles* III 56). This striving is a naturalistic element in Spinoza's system, not something that applies only to active mental things.

The second aspect of Spinoza's notion of striving also derives from Descartes. I believe that Spinoza has a stripped-down, merely conditional notion of striving which can be summarized in this way: A thing strives to do what it will do unless prevented by external causes. Descartes employs such a stripped down account of striving in his account of bodily motion in the *Principles*. Spinoza captures this notion of striving perfectly when in his *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy* he summarizes and represents Descartes' views (see 2p17 of that work). Further, Spinoza clearly invokes the Cartesian notion of striving—but without using this term—earlier in the *Ethics* in his account of the motion of the simplest bodies: such a body,

if moving, will continue to move “until it is determined by another body to rest” (2lemma3c).

Thus, for Spinoza, striving is a function of what the thing on its own, independently of external causes will do. It is this “on its own” feature of striving that Spinoza calls attention to with the phrase “insofar as it is in itself”—“*quantùm in se est*” which appears in 3p6. The notion of “*in se*” is, of course, a term familiar from the definitions in Part I where substance is defined (in part) as that which is in itself (and where, as I’ll emphasize later, modes are defined as in another). One aspect of the meaning of being “in itself” is that a thing that in itself (*in se*) is independent of external causes.² Something in itself is not caused or acted on by other things. (Thus, the substance is cause of itself, for Spinoza.) And so the phrase “*quantùm in se est*” indicates that we are focusing on the extent to which a thing is independent of external causes; we are considering the thing by, as it were, bracketing any external causes and seeing what follows. So, in saying that a thing *quantùm in se est* strives to persevere, Spinoza emphasizes that, bracketing external causes and considering just the thing itself, we can conclude only that the thing continues to exist.

But when we are considering the thing *quantùm in se est* and independently of external causes, what exactly is it we are focusing on? With the term “*quantùm in se est*” and the notion of striving, Spinoza is not only directing us to consider this thing as it is independent of external causes, but he is directing us to focus on *x*’s essence alone. To consider *x quantùm in se est*, is for Spinoza, to focus on *x*’s essence alone and to see what follows from the essence alone.

This emphasis on essence in this context is most apparent in 3p4 which is the crucial claim supporting 3p6. 3p4 states somewhat cryptically:

No thing can be destroyed except through an external cause [*Nulla res, nisi à causâ externâ, potest destrui*]

The connection between 3p4 and essence is obvious from 3p4d:

This proposition is evident through itself. For the definition of any thing affirms, and does not deny, the thing’s essence, or it posits the thing’s essence, and does not take it away. 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.

Spinoza exhorts us in 3p4d to “attend only to the thing itself.” The previous sentence of 3p4d makes clear that to attend to a thing itself is to attend to the *essence* of a thing, what is affirmed by the definition of a thing. (Spinoza accepts the traditional view that the definition of a thing states

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2 For helpful discussions of the in-relation in Spinoza, see Carriero 1995 and Melamed 2018.

its essence.)³ Thus Spinoza's point in 3p4d is that if we focus on the essence of a thing (and not on things external to the essence, including external causes), then we should not be able to find anything that can destroy the thing. On the basis of this claim in 3p4d, Spinoza then brings in his stripped-down notion of striving to conclude in 3p6 that each thing *quantum in se est* strives to persist.

3p4's focus on essence is also, I believe, at work in 3p5 where he says, "Things are of a contrary nature, that is, cannot be in the same subject insofar as one can destroy the other." His point is that the essence or nature of a thing cannot contain within it something contrary to the thing, something that can destroy it.

In effect, Spinoza appeals here to the PSR:⁴ if, insofar as a thing's essence alone is concerned, the thing goes out of existence, there would be no way to explain this fact of destruction. Given Spinoza's view that the definition of a thing merely affirms that thing's existence, the self-destruction of a thing—its going out of existence because of its nature alone—can only be a brute fact. Nothing in the essence could explain the thing's non-existence.

This focus on essence in 3p4 and 3p6 can help us to avert what might otherwise seem to be obvious counterexamples to Spinoza's claim that each thing strives to persevere. Thus, to take one potential counterexample, consider a burning candle. This poor object certainly seems to be something that, if left to itself, will bring about its own destruction. But, for Spinoza, insofar as it is in itself, i.e. just focusing on the essence of the thing and, in particular, bracketing external causes, the candle's non-existence or destruction does not follow. To explain the destruction of the candle, one needs to appeal to the fact—which is beyond the essence of the candle—that the candle was *lit*.

Similarly, a suicidal person can—in a way—be said to destroy himself. But for Spinoza the destruction doesn't follow "from the necessity of his own nature"—i.e. from his essence—but rather from external causes that compel him to act, that—literally or figuratively—force his hand (4p20s).

In a similar way, we can handle the example of a time bomb, a ticking device that apparently of its own accord eventually destroys itself (along with other things). The Spinozistic point here is that the bomb has to be *set*, and the setting of the bomb doesn't follow from the essence of the bomb alone. The bomb's hand has to be forced, as it were.

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3 See *Cogitata Metaphysica* I 2 (G I 239); *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, section 95, 1p8s2: "The true definition of each thing neither involves nor expresses anything except the nature of the thing defined", Letter 9: "A definition is concerned solely with the essences of things or their affections" (G IV 43).

4 Spinoza expresses a version of the PSR in 1p11d2: "For each thing there must be assigned a cause or reason both for its existence and for its nonexistence." See also 1ax2 and Lin 2018.

These essence-focused responses to the obvious potential counterexamples may be helpful, but they don't by themselves give us insight into the reasons for Spinoza's claim that a thing's essence by itself cannot lead to its destruction, for we are still inclined to ask: why can't there be a thing whose essence dictates that it goes out of existence at a specific moment, that it endures only for exactly 15 minutes or 15 years or whatever. Why can't there be—to invoke an example I've used elsewhere—an essential time bomb which is like a regular time bomb in that it goes out of existence at a specific time, but is unlike a regular time bomb in that the essential time bomb doesn't need to be set by something external to the time bomb's essence. Unless Spinoza can give us a reason to rule out the essential time bomb, his claim in 3p4 (and 3p6) that the essence of a thing by itself cannot lead to its destruction would be without justification. So what can Spinoza do to rule out the essential time bomb?

One might be tempted to make a simple appeal to the PSR: Let's say that the essence of the time bomb dictates that it goes out of existence after 15 minutes. The worry based on the PSR is this: why should 15 minutes be built into the thing's essence instead of 5 minutes or 25 minutes? Any particular number of minutes seems arbitrary and perhaps a brute fact.

I think that this appeal to the PSR is on the right track, but it is not subtle enough. For the opponent of Spinoza could come right back and say: the fact that, because of its essence, a thing exists only for 15 minutes is not a fact in need of explanation. When we reach the essence of a thing, the explanatory buck stops—we reach something that is not in need of, not apt for (as Dasgupta puts it)⁵ explanation. I have worries about treating the essence of a thing as a place where the demand for an explanation is no longer apt, but I don't want to press that worry here. Instead, I want to appeal to the PSR in a different way to show what, for Spinoza, would be wrong with the very notion of an essential time bomb. For consider: can a thing have an essence which by itself dictates that the thing goes out of existence after exactly 15 minutes? For this to be possible it would have to be impossible for there to be an external sustainer that extends the thing's existence beyond the 15 minutes. That there could be such an external sustainer is suggested by Spinoza's view that for each finite thing, there is always a more powerful finite thing:

There is no singular thing in nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger. Whatever one is given, there is another more powerful by which the first can be destroyed. (4ax)

Thus, if finite thing *x* is tending towards its own destruction, then there can be another, more powerful finite thing which, as it were, countermands

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5 Dasgupta 2016.

this tendency of x and makes it the case that, contrary to x 's own tendency, it exists beyond its 15 minutes of fame.

Although Spinoza does not argue for the axiom of part IV, one can see it as grounded in the PSR: Each finite thing has a certain limited degree of power (1p36). For a thing with a certain degree of power, it seems that there is no bar to there being a finite thing with a greater degree of power. The lack of such a more powerful thing would seem, for Spinoza, to be a brute fact. Thus, a presupposition of this purported counterexample—namely that a thing bent on its own destruction is, for a time, impervious to any other finite thing—is one that would be rejected by Spinoza on rationalist grounds.⁶ Thus, the notion that a specific period of endurance is built into the essence of a thing is incoherent for Spinoza. And he indicates as much in 3p8:

The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being involves no finite time, but an indefinite time.

What I have argued here, in effect, is that the source of this incoherence in the notion of an essential time bomb or a definite period of striving is Spinoza's rejection of brute facts, his PSR which dictates that there can always be something more powerful than a given thing.

This account of the striving to persist in terms of essence can help us understand the basis for Spinoza's claim in 2lemma3c that a moving body continues to move unless external objects interfere and that, similarly a body at rest continues to be at rest absent external interference. Although Spinoza doesn't use the term "strive" in this stretch of Part 2, it's clear that—given his understanding of what a thing strives to do as what it will do unless prevented by external causes—a moving body strives to keep moving, etc. (Spinoza does use the term "strive" when he expresses Descartes' similar views on the continuance of motion. See Spinoza's, *The Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* 2p17, 3def3). Further, not only can we see the continuance of motion as a kind of striving, we can also see it as a manifestation of the striving to persist, to persevere in existence. This might seem wrong because whether or not a body keeps moving may not seem necessary for its continued existence. However, it's important to recognize that Spinoza's claim about the tendency of moving bodies to keep moving and the tendency of bodies at rest to stay at rest explicitly concerns only *corpora simplicissima*—the simplest bodies. There is much unclarity as to what exactly the simplest bodies are in Spinoza, but he does say one helpful thing about them: they "are distinguished from one another only by motion and rest, speed and slowness" (comment after

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6 Similarly, because there are always more powerful things, a thing's essence by itself cannot dictate that it lasts for as long as 15 minutes: there can always be something that destroys it before any specific time limit.

2a2”). This suggests that such a body—if it is moving—is individuated by this motion and thus if it were to stop moving it would cease to exist. Thus, in this case—unlike the case of more complex bodies, perhaps—its striving to keep in motion is literally a striving to persist: if the essence of such a body were to dictate that it stop moving, then the essence would lead to the thing’s destruction and this would be incompatible with 3p4 and the doctrine of the striving to persevere in general.

Spinoza’s ban on self-destruction, his rejection of the essential time bomb and his insistence that the striving of a thing—what it does *quantum in se est*—involves no finite time are all manifestations of what I have called Spinoza’s conception of essence as purely positive: the destruction of a thing—its coming *not* to exist—cannot be built into the essence of a thing; the essence cannot dictate that the thing’s existence goes this far and no further. Such limitations, such negations built into the essence of a thing would, as we have seen, be brute facts, violations of the PSR, and on this basis Spinoza comes to insist that the essence of things be purely positive, that it contains no negation. Thus, for Spinoza, the essence of things in general—like the essence of substance or God—is purely positive.

II. Increase in Power of Acting

Spinoza draws a curious consequence from 3p6 in 3p12:

The mind, as far as it can [*quantum potest*] strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the body’s power of acting.

As the demonstration and the context make clear, Spinoza has in mind specifically the striving of the human mind, the human mind’s striving to increase its power of acting. (There would be a corresponding claim about the body’s striving to increase its power of acting). Striving to imagine an increase in the body’s power of acting is, for Spinoza, the mind’s striving to increase in its own power of acting.

Here, I will argue, we have an initially quite implausible claim that can be seen to be a reflection of Spinoza’s conception of essence as purely positive and a reflection ultimately of the PSR.

To explain how all this is so, we need to elucidate what Spinoza means by “power of acting” (*agendi potentia*) and by the increase in this power. And to elucidate the notion of power of acting, we need to present Spinoza’s notion of adequate cause. Spinoza says “I call that cause adequate whose effect can be clearly and distinctly perceived through it. But I call it partial or inadequate if its effect cannot be understood through it alone” (3def1). Because, for Spinoza, to perceive an effect through its cause is to explain it,⁷ we can say that for Spinoza an adequate cause is a complete or sufficient explanation of it.

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7 See 2p7s and Della Rocca 1996, p. 3.

The notion of adequate causation is crucial to Spinoza's notion of acting:

I say that we act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, i.e. (by 3def1), when something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly distinctly understood through it alone. On the other hand, I say that we are acted on when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause (3def2).

This definition indicates that something acts or is active to the extent to which it is an adequate cause of some effect. Correspondingly, something is acted on or is passive to the extent to which it is only a partial cause of some effect.⁸

Activity and passivity, so defined, are matters of degree. Consider, e.g., a stone that, at t_1 , is held in a moving sling. The stone's motion at t_2 is a function of its motion at t_1 together with the motion of the sling at t_1 . Let us say that at t_2 the sling drops away and so it no longer plays a role in determining the stone's motion. The motion of the stone at t_3 will then be solely a function of the stone's motion at t_2 (on the assumption that at t_2 no other object interferes with the stone's motion). In this case, we can say that initially (at t_1) the stone's motion is determined to a large extent by something apart from the stone (viz. the sling). However, because at t_1 , the sling is no longer determining the stone's motion, the stone itself becomes more nearly the complete cause or explanation of the stone's motion. To this extent, the stone is more active at t_2 than at t_1 .

Of course, there is a sense in which the stone at t_2 is not completely active. Although the stone's state at t_2 may suffice for its being in another state of motion at t_3 , that state at t_2 is due in part to external causes that were operative before t_2 . Thus, the explanation of the stone's motion at t_3 will, at some stage, have to appeal to outside causes. However, this undeniable passivity in the stone does not alter the fact that at t_2 the stone is less subject to outside forces and relatively more independent than it was previously.

Given this account of degrees of activity, we can characterize an increase in power of acting in the following way: An object comes to have a greater power of acting to the extent to which it comes to be able to be active to a greater degree with regard to a certain effect. In other words, something's power of acting increases to the extent to which it becomes less dependent on external things in the production of some effect. A decrease in power of acting can be defined in a corresponding fashion, and of course destruction or death can be seen as a decrease in the power of acting of a thing to zero.⁹

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8 It appears from this definition that changes of which one is not even a partial cause are ones with regard to which one is neither active nor passive.

9 For Spinoza, the notions of increase and decrease in power of acting are equivalent to the notions of

Return now to 3p12: “The mind, as far as it can [*quantum potest*] strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the body’s power of acting,” In the background of this claim is Spinoza’s statement in 3p11 that “The idea of anything that increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our body’s power of acting, increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our mind’s power of acting.” 3p11 in turn follows from Spinoza’s parallelism between ideas and things that is most famously expressed in 2p7: “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.” In this light, we can see that in asserting in 3p12 that “The mind, as far as it can, strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the body’s power of acting,” Spinoza’s point is that the mind strives to imagine an increase in its power of acting, i.e. the mind strives to be less dependent on external causes in the production of some effect.

Three questions arise here: (1) Is this thesis restricted to the human mind or is it a general truth about the striving to increase in power of acting, a claim that would apply to rocks and chairs as well as to human beings? (2) A question subsidiary to the first is this: if the striving for increase in power is specific to the human case, then how is Spinoza able to avoid the threat to naturalism that would arise from the claim that only some things strive to increase in power? Isn’t such a claim an instance of different things playing by different rules and wouldn’t that conflict with Spinoza’s naturalism? (3) The final question raised by 3p12 is this: does this claim follow, as Spinoza indicates in 3p12, from 3p6, from the universal striving for self-preservation?

In previous work, I answered these questions in tandem, but in a way that may not have done justice to the conception of essence as purely positive. Here is the old answer in outline:¹⁰ Only human beings and similarly complex entities strive to increase in power; less complex entities such as rocks and tables don’t. Human beings strive for increase in power because—in light of their complexity—they can anticipate future events and, in particular, future decreases in their well-being or power of acting. Because such anticipation of decline in power is itself painful, a being that is capable of anticipation will do all it can to avert this future decline in power of acting, to neutralize these threats to its well-being and ultimately to its existence. To best be able to avert these declines which are, of course, potentially many and various, the individual who can anticipate will see the need to amass as much power as it can. And so, on this reading, it is ultimately because of the universal striving for self-preservation in 3p6 that a relatively complex being capable of anticipation will not only strive to persevere but will also strive to increase its power.

increase and decrease in perfection. See 3da3ex and 4preface.

10 Della Rocca 2008, p. 172.

This account is fine as far as it goes, and it offers answers to the three questions I raised about 3p12, but, again, I don't think that it goes far enough. This is in part because—although the claim in 3p12 seems to be just about the human mind—there is nothing about the notions appealed to in the demonstration of 3p12 that would preclude the application of this demonstration to things in general. Further, there is an indication in the *Short Treatise* at least that Spinoza sees his thesis about increase in power as completely general: “each thing in itself has a striving to preserve itself in its state, and bring itself to a better one” (*Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being* I 5; G I 40).¹¹ So there is good reason to try to see 3p12 as having general import.

I believe that we can see 3p12 in this general way and also see it as following from 3p6 if we focus, as before, on what follows from the essence of a thing considered on its own. This focus is evident in the summarizing claim in 3p12d that “the mind, as far as it can [*quantum potest*] strives to imagine” certain things. The use of this locution—like the use of “*quantum in se est*”—suggests a focus on the essence of a thing. Spinoza's point then is that, to the extent that external things don't interfere, the essence of a thing always leads to an increase in the power of that thing. Thus, although there may be “lazy” objects that don't increase in power of acting, their laziness is due in part to the external forces which drag them down or force their hand, just as – as we saw – there may be apparently self-destructive individuals but this destructiveness is always in part due to external things and not fully explained by the essence of the thing in question.

But what reason does or would Spinoza have to regard such a claim as true? Why, in other words, can't there be—like the essential time bomb—an essentially lazy object whose essence dictates that it does not increase in power?

Earlier we saw that—properly understood—3p6 derives from the PSR: given the PSR, it must be the case that each thing, as far as its essence alone is concerned, strives to persist. If the essence of a thing—by itself—leads to a thing's destruction, then one would have to deny that there could be a more powerful external thing, powerful enough to sustain the thing in question. To deny that there could be such an external sustainer would be, as we saw, an arbitrary limitation and so would be precluded by the PSR. Thus, it is because of the PSR that the destruction of a thing can never follow simply from the thing's nature.

Similarly, I now want to argue, a thing's failure to increase in power of acting can never follow from the nature of that thing alone. For consider: if a thing fails to increase in power of acting, then what is holding it back? What is preventing it from such increase? Given a minimal application of

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¹¹ See also *Short Treatise* II 7, G I 68: “everything we do must tend toward advancement and improvement.”

the PSR, there must be an explanation for this failure to increase in power of acting. Keep in mind here that we are considering the thing *quantum in se est*, insofar as it is independent of external causes, insofar as its essence alone is concerned. The explanation of a thing's failure *quantum in se est* to increase in power of acting cannot be external things, things outside of *x*'s nature. Can the explanation for the failure to increase be the thing's nature itself? It is hard to see how. If this nature could prevent an increase in power, then why could it not also cause a decrease in power? Causing a decrease in power is not different in kind from causing a failure to increase—both are ways of causing the power of acting to be below a certain level. But if the nature of a thing could cause it to decrease in power, then what could prevent the nature of a thing from causing a decrease to zero power of acting, i.e. what could prevent the nature of a thing from, on its own, destroying the thing? There would be no principled way to draw the line here between causing a failure to increase in power of acting, on the one hand, and causing a decrease in power of acting and destroying a thing, on the other. And so, the PSR which rejects unprincipled lines dictates that there is no such line to be drawn. If this is the case, then as long as we allow that a thing's nature can, on its own, cause a failure to increase, then a thing's nature can cause that thing's destruction. But, as we have already seen, a thing's nature—by the PSR—cannot cause its own destruction. For the same reason—i.e. because of the PSR again—a thing's nature cannot cause a failure to increase. Thus, just as a thing *quantum in se est* must strive to persist, so too a thing *quantum in se est* must strive to increase in power.

In this light, we can see that Spinoza is committed to an analogue of 3p8, one that concerns increase in power of acting. As we saw, in 3p8 Spinoza says that “The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being involves no finite time, but an indefinite time.” I would say that similarly and for the same reasons the striving by which each thing strives to increase its power of acting involves no finite, determinate increase, but indefinite increase.

Notice that this account of increase offered here is fully general. It applies to *any* object whatsoever. Thus, this interpretation does a better job than my previous interpretation of respect the generality of the notions that Spinoza uses in articulating his thesis about increase.

Spinoza's ban on essentially lazy objects—like his ban on self-destruction—is a manifestation of his conception of essence as purely positive. The failure of a thing to increase in power—its *not* being above a certain level of power—cannot be built into the thing's nature: the nature or essence of a thing cannot dictate that its power extends this far and *no* further. As before, such negation, such limitation built into the nature of a thing, would be a brute fact, a violation of the PSR, and would also thus conflict with Spinoza's conception of essence as purely positive. Thus, we can see another manifestation of Spinoza's naturalism: not only does

each thing strive to persist, but also each thing strives to increase its power of acting.

Before turning to how the notion of essence as purely positive should affect our understanding of the definitions of substance and mode, I want to consider two potential problems that my interpretation of the doctrine of increase may generate.

First, the notion of striving to increase in power—understood as a general phenomenon grounded in the PSR and Spinoza's conception of essence as purely positive—may seem to be in conflict with Spinoza's account of the tendency of the simplest bodies to continue in their state of motion and rest. If these bodies are, by their nature (*quantum in se est*) striving for more power of acting, then shouldn't moving bodies—by their nature—strive not just to keep moving but to move faster, to accelerate? Yet Spinoza never says any such thing about the tendency to keep moving. This might seem to cast doubt on my understanding of Spinoza's account of the striving to increase in power as a general phenomenon.¹² In response, I point out, first, that it's not clear why increase in motion should in general go along with increase in power. I point out, second, that it is important to recall that Spinoza's claims about the continuance of the state of motion (or rest) are made for the simplest bodies which are, in effect, individuated by their motion or rest, bodies whose motion or rest is, as it were, essential to them. In this case, it is not possible for the simplest bodies to increase in power if increase in power means altering (increasing) their degree of motion. However, it may be that even the simplest bodies can increase in power if such increase can be understood as something other than mere acceleration.

The second remaining worry I want to discuss concerns why increase in power is to be preferred to decrease. As I have stressed, each thing, for Spinoza, strives to increase indefinitely because any finite, determinate failure to increase which is dictated by the thing's nature would be a brute fact. Thus, Spinoza sees indefinite increase as built into a thing's nature. I can see then that there are rationalist reasons for preferring indefinite increase over definite increase as built into a thing's nature. And I can see how there is good reason to prefer indefinite increase to definite decrease in power. But what reason is there to prefer indefinite increase to indefinite decrease in power? That is, why isn't it the case that a thing's nature dictates that—if left to itself—it will decrease in power indefinitely? Of course, a thing's nature cannot dictate that its power of acting go down to zero—that would be to allow for self-destruction. But why can't indefinite decrease be built into a thing's nature instead of indefinite increase?

Spinoza does not take up this problem directly, but—in light of his general inclination towards purely positive essence—we can see how he

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¹² I am indebted to Zachary Effman here.

would answer this challenge. The problem with indefinite decrease is that if a thing's nature could dictate that it keeps going down in power, then there doesn't seem to be any reason why a thing's essence could not take the thing all the way down to zero, down a path of self-destruction. But, as we've seen, Spinoza rules out the tendency to go to zero power of acting on the ground that such a tendency would be a brute fact. So, I think that an indefinite tendency to decrease is problematic because there is no principled way to distinguish it from a tendency to go down to zero power of acting which is certainly illegitimate in Spinoza's eyes.

But, if we argue in this way, can't we make a parallel argument in the reverse direction? Thus, if indefinite increase is built into the nature of a thing, why not an increase all the way to infinite power, an increase all the way to substance or God? Would a thing's inherent tendency to have infinite power of acting be problematic in the way that Spinoza sees as problematic a thing's inherent tendency to decrease in power and decrease down to zero? I think that, for Spinoza, the answer to this question is "no": it is not problematic for a thing to tend not only to increase in power, but also to have infinite power, to be God. Indeed, I think Spinoza embraces the view not only that each thing strives to be God, but that each thing is God. We'll begin to see how this is so in the remaining section of the paper by reading what Spinoza says about essence in his conatus doctrine back into his basic ontology of substance and mode as it appears in the opening definitions of Part I of the *Ethics*. This reading-back seems entirely natural and appropriate in light of the fact—noted earlier—that a crucial notion in the conatus doctrine is the notion of being in itself (*in se*) which is a notion also prominently at work in the definitions of substance and mode in Part I. Just as we've found the concept of essence in the conatus doctrine to be purely positive, so too we would expect the concept of essence at work in these early definitions to be purely positive. But here a surprise may lurk.

III. Purely Positive Essence and Modes

Let's turn to the definition of substance first, keeping in mind that, for Spinoza, as is traditional, the definition of a thing states its essence. So what insight does the definition of substance provide concerning the essence of substance? A substance is—according to this definition—in itself and conceived through itself.

As we saw at the beginning, *in se* can be seen in terms of independence of external causes. Although this characterization with its mention of external, outside causes might seem to import something negative into the definition (or essence) of substance, this negative element appears after a "not": the apparent negation is itself negated. The substance in *not* dependent on outside causes, on causes that are *not* itself. The multiple negation is explicit in the case of being conceived through itself, for Spinoza offers a helpful gloss on this notion: "that

whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed” (1def3). Here again, we have a negative element, an “other,” appearing after a “not.” The idea of substance does *not* depend on the concept of something *e/se*. Here again, the purely positive character of essence is preserved. So far, so good.

But when we turn to the definition of mode, matters look quite different. The definition reads:

By mode I understand the affections of substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived. (1def5)

Here, as in the definition of substance, there is mention of another, but notice that in this case the term “other” does not appear after a “not.” The negation remains un-negated. The other thing through which modes are conceived is, of course, the substance itself (though it’s worth pointing out that Spinoza is also happy to speak of modes as conceived through other modes, e.g. 1ax4, 2p16, etc.). So, unlike substance, a mode—by its very nature—is limited in its being, and this limit built into the nature of a mode is the other that a mode, as it were, bumps up against the other that is mentioned in the definition. This mention of an other is not cushioned by or insulated by another negative term.

Given this limitation—its being dependent on and not the other—it seems that the being of a mode goes *this* far and no further. The mode, as such and by its nature, is limited by the thing that is unrestrictedly in itself. And so the mode is in itself only to some degree. Thus, Spinoza speaks in 3p6 of its striving “*quantùm in se est.*” The being of a mode is defined, determined by, the substance.

Earlier, in connection with the conatus doctrine, we saw that, for Spinoza, the essence of a thing—with regard to the perseverance of the thing or the increase in its power—would go only so far, but no further if it brought with it an uncushioned, uninsulated, unnegated negation, a definite limit. In that case, as we saw, there would be something problematic, unintelligible, a brute fact. And, for that reason, we saw that, in his conatus doctrine, Spinoza denies that the persistence or increase in power of a thing is limited in this way; he denies that there is in this context an uncushioned negation.

But now with the uncushioned negation in the very definition of a mode, this definition of a mode, its essence, turns out not to be purely positive after all. And, just as there *would be* a problematic brute fact in the case of definite limits to perseverance or increase, so too there *is* a problematic brute fact or brute facts, something unintelligible, in the case of the actual uncushioned negation in the essence of a mode.

To explain what these brute facts are would be a large undertaking which I cannot carry out here.¹³ The basic idea is that the other in the

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13 See Della Rocca 2019.

definition of modes involves a notion of numericality—of one thing and one thing being *two*. And I believe that Spinoza regards conceiving of things numerically as unintelligible because such conceiving brings with it brute facts: there is nothing in virtue of which a thought of an object as one or as one among many can intelligibly be said to be *of* a particular object. Here we can see that the underlying difficulty—a reliance on brute facts—is behind the difficulty both with conceiving of something in terms of an other as well as with essential limits on perseverance or on increase in power.

The upshot of all this seems not to be good: it seems that in his conatus doctrine, Spinoza operates—for good, rationalist reasons—with a conception of essence as purely positive. But when we look back at Spinoza's basic definitions and at his fundamental ontology, it turns out that—by Spinoza's own standards—the essence of a mode is not purely positive and so the essence of modes seems to bring with it the brute facts and unintelligibility that Spinoza seems to have avoided when he spoke of the essence of modes in his conatus doctrine.

What I believe that the concept of essence as purely positive—to which Spinoza is wedded—shows is that, by Spinoza's own lights, there is something incoherent in what it is to be a mode. This concept shows that modes—as such—do not really exist, for the existence of modes—as such—would involve a brute fact.

Now you *could* take this upshot instead as evidence that my reading of the conatus doctrine is wrong, or that I've gone wrong in the application of this doctrine in order to show that the nature of modes is incoherent by Spinoza's own lights. You could do that. But that's obviously not the path that I want to take. Instead I take the conatus doctrine and the concept of essence at work there (as purely positive) as giving new, indirect support to an interpretation which I (and perhaps some others) have—in a kind of Hegelian or even Eleatic spirit—recently been advocating, viz. the interpretation of modes as unintelligible and not existing. Following in the tradition of Hegel and Harold H. Joachim and others, I have offered evidence for this kind of reading in Letter 12, 1p15s, and other fun passages (such as Spinoza's claims about number in Letter 50 and in his talk of the free man).¹⁴ What I'm now arguing is that we see—perhaps unexpectedly—new evidence for such a reading coming from Spinoza's conatus doctrine and the way in which it is underpinned by Spinoza's commitment to the PSR.

I should say that even with this new, perhaps unexpected evidence for a Hegelian or Eleatic interpretation of Spinozistic modes, I do not deny that some passages may point in the direction of a commitment on Spinoza's part to the reality of distinct modes. I'm aware of that. What I aim for in this paper is a new way of showing that the Hegelian strand

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14 Another suggestive passage which I have not cited previously is the following: "God alone has being, and all other things have no being, but are modes" (*Short Treatise* II 5 (G I 64)). I am indebted to Josefine Klingspor here.

is one strand of thought at work in Spinoza's system. I don't deny that there may be other, perhaps incompatible strands. But I do think that at least some of the passages adduced in support of the non-Hegelian interpretation are not as definitive as some of the supporters of the non-Hegelian interpretation have suggested. We can begin to see how this is so by exploring what kind of account we can offer of Spinoza's third kind of knowledge and of his doctrine of the eternity of the mind in light of the insights I have offered so far.

IV. The Third Kind of Knowledge

I have argued that the notion of a mode is somehow incoherent in that the very essence of a mode involves limitations—otherness—in a way that is incompatible with Spinoza's commitment to the PSR. However, it is crucial that the idea of a mode— incoherent though it may be—does involve or does have at its heart some positive content. What is this positive content?

Recall that a mode is conceived through another—through God. So the concept of a mode is the concept of the mode as dependent, explained by, God. Again, because otherness is problematic, for Spinoza, the aspect of the idea of a mode that involves dependence on another is illegitimate. But there is another aspect of the content of this idea (or purported idea) of a mode: God. Recall that the idea of a mode is the idea of something dependent on God, so the idea of this mode already involves—as an aspect, perhaps—the idea of God. Spinoza famously says that the idea (or knowledge) of the effect depends upon and *involves* the idea of the cause (1ax4, my emphasis). God is, of course, the cause of the mode, so the idea of the mode involves the idea of God. And even if this idea of the mode is somehow incoherent, this idea involves the idea of God, again perhaps as an aspect. And the idea of God is, of course, completely coherent, for Spinoza. As we saw, the essence of God is purely positive. So, the positive content in the purported idea of a mode just is the content “God.” That is, whatever is positive in the alleged idea of a mode just is the idea of God. And the same point would apply—in naturalist fashion—to the purported idea of any “other” mode: the positive content of any idea of any mode is the same, viz. the idea of God.

This understanding of the positive content of the idea of a mode sheds light on Spinoza's third kind of knowledge. This kind of knowledge—*intuitus*—is the adequate idea of the essence of a particular thing. The fact that—according to Spinoza—there are adequate ideas of the essences of particular things has been invoked as evidence against a Hegelian (Eleatic) interpretation of Spinoza.¹⁵ After all, if there are different ideas of different essences, and these ideas are adequate—and, hence, true—then there must really be different essences and hence different things that have those essences. However, if the positive content of such allegedly different

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15 See in particular Melamed 2013.

ideas is the same—viz. the content “God”—then it is no longer clear that Spinoza’s commitment to there being cases of the third kind of knowledge provides evidence against the view that the notion of modes is somehow incoherent and that modes don’t exist as modes. Instead the doctrine of the third kind of knowledge may be completely compatible with—and may indeed support—this view that modes don’t exist as modes. The intuition that is had in intuitive knowledge of any thing may be simply the intuitive knowledge of God.¹⁶

V. Eternity

Finally, we can apply these insights about the third kind of knowledge—insights which are, in turn derived from the interpretation of Spinoza’s conception of essence as purely positive—to the vexed topic of the eternity of the mind in Spinoza. I can’t hope to deal with all the puzzles emerging from this most confusing doctrine, but we are, I believe, in a position to make some progress. Thus, for Spinoza, a part of the mind remains—or may remain—after the destruction of the body (5p23). This part of the mind is eternal, and it is the idea of the (eternal) essence of the body. Just as the essence of this body is eternal, so too the idea of this essence which is in the mind is eternal.

Again, there are tons of difficulties engendered by this view, but Spinoza seems to be committed to something like it. What I want to focus on here is a potential problem that this commitment to the eternity of the mind poses for my interpretation of Spinoza’s modes as incoherent because their essence is not purely positive.

If, as I am arguing, the essence of modes is incoherent, then how can a part of the mind—its essence—remain after the destruction of the body? I think that the thing to do here is to focus again on the positive aspect of the idea of the essence of the body. If something remains of my mind, then this something must be positive (and not negative) and this positive something in the mind—in the idea of the body—can only be the idea of God. So, some part or, perhaps, aspect of my mind does remain after the death of my body, but this part or aspect is just the idea of God that the idea that is my mind involves. And this idea of God is what remains after the destruction of any other mode. I *do* survive death, but I survive death, we might say, as God: all there really is to me is God.

Additional support for this reading of the eternity of the mind comes from at least two passages.

First, consider 2p44c2: “It is of the nature of reason to perceive things under a certain aspect of eternity.”¹⁷ In the demonstration of this corollary, Spinoza says: “this necessity of things is the very necessity of God’s

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16 For extremely helpful discussions about intuitive knowledge, I am indebted to Kristin Primus. Her position with regard to the third kind of knowledge is insightfully presented in Primus 2017.

17 “*De naturâ Rationis est res quâdam aeternitatis specie percipere.*”

eternal nature.”¹⁸ More generally, it seems that Spinoza is committed to the view that the necessity of a given mode is the necessity of God’s nature; the necessity of me just is God’s necessity, etc. Given the association in Spinoza between existence and necessity,¹⁹ Spinoza is saying that the existence of the modes—of even a particular mode—just is the existence of God. And that is basically what I have been saying throughout this section and previous one: the positive content of the idea of a mode just is the content “God.”

Another suggestive passage is 5p36: “The mind’s intellectual love of God is the very love of God by which God loves himself, not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he can be explained by the human mind’s essence, considered under an aspect of eternity.” Spinoza seems to be saying here that the love that I have for God—to the extent that it’s real or considered positively or without limitations—is just God’s love of himself. I’m making the more general point that my existence—to the extent that it’s real—just is God’s existence. In both cases, a feature that might seem to be proper to me—*my* love of God, *my* existence—turns out when considered positively to be really a feature of God. The specific claim Spinoza makes about intellectual love in 5p36 is an indication that Spinoza is committed to—and perhaps sees himself as committed to—the general thesis that I am advancing in this section and the previous one.

Finally, let’s return to striving, the notion that has, in many ways, guided my inquiry in this paper. Earlier we were led to the possibility that, for Spinoza, modes in general not only strive to persevere in their being, but also strive to have infinite power, to be God. We can now see how this is indeed the case for Spinoza: since the being of a mode really is just the being of God, in striving to be, modes are really striving to be God. Indeed, modes not only strive to be God, but also—because the positive content of the ideas of modes just is the idea of God—the modes are God. The modes exist, but not as modes. Instead, the modes exist as God. This result is, perhaps, the ultimate expression of naturalism: all things play by the same rules in virtue of the fact that modes and substance alike exist simply as God or Nature.²⁰

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18 *“haec rerum necessitas est ipsa Dei aeternae naturae necessitas.”*

19 See, e.g., 1def8: “By eternity I understand existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing.”

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