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Spinoza on Teleology, Action, and Explanatory Overdetermination

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ABSTRACT

I argue that Spinoza rejects teleological explanations wholesale. This is because of three of his distinctive theses: his naturalism, according to which all things are governed by the same laws; his account of action, according to which we are active to the extent that we have adequate ideas; and his account of adequate causation, according to which a thing can have only one adequate cause.

1 | Introduction

In his influential work *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, Jonathan Bennett launched a broadside against teleological interpretations of Spinoza, calling Spinoza's rejection of final causes "a famous fact" (Bennett 1984, 213).[1] His brash declaration aside, this remains a contested issue. Some commentators (such as Lin 2006, 2019, Chapter 6; Garrett 2002b; Hoffman 2011; Steinberg 2011; arguably Della Rocca 2008, Chapter 2) have argued that, in fact, Spinoza does allow for teleological explanations. Others (such as Carriero 2004, 2018, 251ff; Hübner 2018, §2; Melamed 2020; perhaps Schliesser 2018, 176 [though maybe this is arguable]) contend that Spinoza rejects teleology wholesale.

My contention in this paper is as follows: Spinoza rejects teleological explanations in the attribute of Extension, and he rejects them in Thought as well. The thesis by itself is not new, but I will give a wholly novel argument for it. Specifically, I will argue that a rejection of teleology follows from three of Spinoza's distinctive and central doctrines: his naturalism, according to which everything is governed by the same laws and principles; his account of action, according to which we are active to the extent that we have adequate ideas; and his account of adequate causation, according to which a thing can have only one adequate cause.

Two points of order before going on. First, a crucial part of my argument appeals to Spinoza's so-called naturalism. There are various positions called "naturalism" kicking around today. There is ontological naturalism, which says (roughly) that what exists is only what the natural sciences say exists. There is also methodological naturalism, which says (roughly) that the methods the natural sciences use to learn about the world are the only ones that will teach us substantive truths. And there is a substantial scholarly question as to whether Spinoza is a naturalist at all, and if so, what kind.[2] I do not want to get too hanged up on words, so while going forward I will refer to Spinoza's avowal that "everything in the world plays by the same rules" (Della Rocca 2008, 5) as his naturalism, I should not be taken to imply that he would accept any contemporary form of naturalism. If you do not like the word, substitute something else instead.

Second, throughout this paper, I will often use "teleological" and "final-causal" interchangeably. This is, in a sense, sloppy of me. One may characterize a teleological explanations as an answer to a "why" question that contains "in order to" or "for the sake of" or "for the purpose of" or some similar locution. A final-causal explanation can be understood as supplying this sort of answer against a particular metaphysical background. To conflate the two, one might grumble, is to confound species with genus. While I do not dispute the distinction that the

grumbler presupposes, I think this "sloppiness" is warranted. I will be discussing final-causal explanations insofar as they are a type of teleological explanation. The particular metaphysical background against which they are positioned is important, from a historical standpoint, but not terribly relevant to my discussion. I will keep the vocabulary of final-causal explanations mostly because Spinoza does so, but I will not import the Scholastic metaphysics that they strictly speaking presuppose (much as he does not).

2 | The Main Argument

In this section, I offer my main argument. It proceeds from premises Spinoza probably accepted, along with arguments accepted by proponents of teleological interpretations of Spinoza, to the conclusion that Spinoza rejects or ought to reject teleological explanations.

Here is the argument:

(P1) If there are no instances of teleology in an attribute, then there are no "correct" teleological explanations in that attribute.

(P2) There are no instances of teleology in Extension.

(P3) There are teleological explanations in Extension iff there are teleological explanations in Thought.

So: (C1) There are no "correct" teleological explanations in Extension. (from P1, P2)

So: (C2) There are no "correct" teleological explanations in Thought. (from P3, C1)

A "correct" teleological explanation in the sense I intend captures the worldly causal trajectory of the thing being explained. This trajectory must make reference to a goal or endpoint of the causal process being described, and this reference must be *essential*: Any rephrasing that loses the teleology also loses its hold on the worldly goings-on. Further, given Spinoza's substance-mode ontology, the thing being explained and the endpoint to be brought about must be either substances or modes.

On to the premises. (P1) is accepted by proponents of the teleological interpretation of Spinoza. Don Garrett, perhaps the strongest proponent of such an interpretation, writes that "[n]o proposed teleological explanation, no matter how appealing or compelling, can be correct unless it cites an actual example of teleology" (Garrett 2002b, 310). Garrett takes teleology to consist in "the phenomenon of states of affairs having etiologies that implicate, in an explanatory way, likely or presumptive consequences of those states of affairs" (Garrett 2002b, 310). On this view, no teleology means no teleological explanations. As the formulation of (Pp1) makes clear, I follow Garrett in this characterization.

(P3) follows from Spinoza's doctrine of parallelism. This is expressed most succinctly in EIIp7—"the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things"—and more fully in EIIp7s: "whether we conceive nature under the attribute of Extension, or under the attribute of Thought, or under any other attribute, we shall find one and the same order, *or*[3] one and the same connection of causes, i.e., that the same things follow one another." This implies that the causal history of some mode of Extension is "isomorphic" to the causal history of the mode of Thought which represents it. This is because, again according to EIIp7s, "a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways."[4] So if the explanation of a particular mode of Thought makes essential reference to some endpoint or goal, so must the explanation of the corresponding mode of Extension.

Please note that I do not need any particular interpretation of the kind of identity that modes of extension bear to modes of thought. Nor do I need any particular interpretation of what "expression" means. These are fraught issues, and I do not have the space to address them. Instead, all I need for the purposes of this paper is a view that makes the following conditional come out true: If (i) modes τ_1/τ_2 of Thought represent modes ϵ_1/ϵ_2 of Extension, (ii) τ_1 causes τ_2, and (iii) ϵ_1 causes ϵ_2, then τ_2 has a causal explanation of a particular type *iff* ϵ_2 does as well. This is not a thesis about what "expression" or "one and the same" mean—instead, it is a thesis about what "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things" means. And it is a thesis that, I believe, most or all major interpretations of parallelism accept.[5,6]

(P2), the crucial premise, may be defended by a sub-argument:

(P2.1) If some extended modes have no "correct" teleological explanation, then there are no instances of teleology in extension.

(P2.2) Some extended modes have no "correct" teleological explanation.

So: (P2) There are no instances of teleology in Extension. (from P2.1, P2.2)

(P2.1) may be surprising, but the interpretive consensus seems to be that Spinoza would accept it. It is a statement of his naturalism, the thesis that all things in the natural order (that is, all things *tout court*) are governed by the same principles. As Martin Lin puts it, "either all natural creatures are governed by teleological principles or none of them are" (Lin 2019, 148). This principle is fairly well-supported by the text, particularly EIIIpref, where Spinoza writes the following:

> [N]ature is always the same, i.e., 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, viz., through the universal laws and rules of nature. (C.I.492/G.II.138)

In order to reject (P2), then, one must argue that that all extended things work according to teleological principles. I will consider two such objecting theses. The first is that Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine is essentially teleological. The second is that the very notion of having a tendency is.

3 | The Objection From Striving and *Conatus*

In this section, I will offer an argument for the conclusion that the *conatus* doctrine is *not* teleological. Here is the beginning of the argument:

1. The conatus principle applies to everything cross-attribute.
2. Everything in Extension exhibits conatus. (from 1)
3. The conatus of each thing is an example of natural teleology.
4. Everything in Extension exhibits natural teleology. (from 1–3)
5. Some things in Extension do not exhibit natural teleology.
6. Contradiction. (from 4, 5)

Which premise do we reject? I propose: (3). (1) is an expression of EIIIp6, which says that "each thing" strives to persevere in its being. In EIIIp9, Spinoza writes:

> Both insofar as the Mind has clear and distinct ideas, and insofar as it has confused ideas, it strives, for an indefinite duration, to persevere in its being and it is conscious of this striving it has.

This suggests that the doctrine applies to all things in Thought. And in EIIIp9s, Spinoza writes that "when [this striving] is related to the Mind and Body together, it is called Appetite" (C.I.500/G.II.148). This confirms that the striving is related to modes of Extension as well as modes of Thought. Add EIIIp6, and (2) follows right away.

The crucial premise, then, is (5). To see whether Spinoza endorsed this premise, we should look at the texts. Specifically, we should look at EIVpref. The relevant (lengthy) passage is:

> For we have shown in the Appendix of Part I, that Nature does nothing on account of an end. That eternal and infinite being we call God, or Nature, acts from the same necessity from which he exists. For we have shown (IP16) that the necessity of nature from which he acts is the same as that from which he exists. The reason, therefore, or cause, why God, *or* Nature, acts, and the reason why he exists, are one and the same. As he exists for the sake of no end, he also acts for the sake of no end. Rather, as he has no principle or end of existing, so he also has none of acting. What is called a final cause is nothing but a human appetite insofar as it is considered as a principle, *or* primary cause [*causa primaria*], of some thing.
>
> For example, when we say that habitation was the final cause of this or that house, surely we understand nothing but that a man, because he imagined the conveniences of domestic life, had an appetite to build a house. So habitation, insofar as it is considered as a final cause, is nothing more than this singular appetite. It is really an efficient cause, which is considered as a first cause, because men are commonly ignorant of the causes of their appetites. For as I have often said before, they are conscious of their actions and appetites, but not aware of the causes by which they are determined to want something. (C.I.544-5/G.II.206-7)

What Spinoza says here is that what we think is a final cause is really just a human appetite insofar as it is the source of existence of something. What does he mean by "appetite"? I propose we read this passage in light of EIIIp9s. There, recall, appetite is defined as the *conatus* of a thing insofar as it is related to the mind and the body of that thing.

So Spinoza holds something like the following:

FC x is the final cause of y *means*[7] x is a human striving related to both mind and body that is the source of existence of y.

On my reading, this is not an equivalence but a revisionary definition. The left-hand side is being defined in terms of the concepts on the right-hand side. When regimenting ordinary speech, we should do so by replacing final-causal-talk with striving-talk.

This reading is supported by the words "we understand [*intelligemus*]" in Spinoza's house example. Is he saying: "surely this is what we all already mean when we say this"? I think not. He seems to mean this in the technical, definitional sense. So when Spinoza says "when we say habitation was the final causes of this or that house, surely we understand that ...," I read him as giving a revisionary definition of final cause—revisionary, because he says that a final cause is "nothing more than" a singular appetite and that "it is really" an efficient cause.

Let us apply this analysis to the example that Spinoza gives. According to (FC), habitation is the final cause of a house *iff* habitation is a human striving related to both mind and body that is the source of existence of the house. It is also clear from the text that he thinks this habitation, and hence this appetite, is nothing but an efficient cause considered in a particular way.

Consider what this implies. If Spinoza really did think that the *conatus* of individual things is teleological, then it makes little sense for him to reduce an overtly teleological explanation (the final causal one) to another overtly teleological one (the *conatus*-based one). Additionally, the text seems clearly to say that human *conatus* (both psychological and physical) reduces to a particular sort of efficient cause (a human appetite). It seems probable, on the basis of these considerations, that Spinoza does not think that the human *conatus* is teleological. If it were, we would not expect him to say that in some instances it is just an efficient cause.

This position is consistent with, for example, Don Garrett's intricate reconstruction of Spinoza's *conatus* argument in Garrett (2002a). There, what makes the reading of the *conatus* doctrine teleological

is that it "license[s] inferences from the self-preserving tendency of an action to the likelihood of its being performed" (Garrett 2002a, 133). Jonathan Bennett's claim, which Garrett disputes, is that Spinoza equivocates between two senses of saying that each thing "strives to persevere in its being":

(NT) If a thing strives (as far as it can by its own power) to perform an action, then that action preserves or tends to preserve the thing it its being.

(T) If an action preserves or tends to preserve a thing, then that thing strives (as far as it can by its own power) to perform that action.

Bennett alleges that Spinoza's argument really demonstrates (NT), but Spinoza nonetheless treats it as if it demonstrates (T). Garrett's reconstruction takes it that Spinoza is arguing for a conclusion that does indeed warrant teleological inferences.[8]

So far, nothing I have said precludes Spinoza from making this sort of inference. But, to quote Garrett, there is genuine teleology in the world exactly when the correct *explanation* of some state of affairs implicates "likely or presumptive consequence of that state of affairs" (Garrett 2002a, 310). And that is a much stronger claim than what we would get if the above sort of inferences were merely *warranted*.

A classic example from Salmon (1990) illustrates this. Suppose a barometer's dial drops, and a storm later results. We would be quite warranted in making an inference from the dial's drop to the later occurrence of a storm. But this successful inference quite clearly does not entail that the drop in the barometer's dial *explains* the later storm. That would be a clear paralogism.

Now, since Garrett's rendering of the *conatus* argument is meant to vindicate Spinoza's later uses of the principle, all he *needs* to show is that the conclusion Spinoza reaches licenses those uses (Garrett 2002a, 148). But, as the above example shows, being justified in making an inference from one state of affairs to another is quite a different thing from the first state of affairs being explanatorily implicated in the second. Hence, while I hold that Garrett is mistaken about Spinoza thinking there is genuine teleology in the world, I also maintain, quite happily, that nothing I have said here invalidates his reconstruction of the *conatus* argument of EIIIp6.

This does not get us to the conclusion that there is no teleology at all. It only gets us to the conclusion that the *conatus* of some things—in this case, the man building the house—is not teleological. But this is sufficient to get us to the conclusion that striving is not teleological *in all cases*. And that suffices to show (P2.2).

3.1 | Objections and Replies

3.1.1 | Objection

"There are numerous places (documented by e.g. Garrett (2002b, 312–313)) where Spinoza either employs teleological explanations or else seems to say that human beings act for ends. We should take Spinoza's texts seriously, so we should take this language as evidence that he endorses teleological explanations."

3.1.2 | Reply

Spinoza does sometimes talk this way. But I deny that that is invincible evidence that he endorses teleology. Since the evidence that Garrett cites as evidence that Spinoza directly and explicitly employs teleological explanations comes exclusively from the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, for the purposes of this paper, I will restrict my claims to what Spinoza endorses in *Ethics*.

The two passages Garrett cites as evidence for Spinoza thinking that human beings act for ends are both from the appendix to part 1. There, Spinoza *also* writes that "all final causes [*omnes causas finales*] are nothing but human fictions" (C.I.442/G.II.80) and that it is "manifest" that "this doctrine concerning the end" makes causes into effects and effects into causes (C.I.442/G.II.80). One can interpret these passages away. But so too can Garrett's textual evidence be interpreted away.

So the textual evidence for Garrett's view is mixed at best. Since the textual evidence in EIapp is (I claim) at least about equipollent for and against, I do not think the matter should be settled on textual grounds alone. We should also look for systematic reasons in favor of or against teleological readings.

3.1.3 | Objection

"You argue that appetites are efficient causes. But unless you can show that they can't *also* be ends, your argument is incomplete. Perhaps Spinoza does want efficient causes to be ends as well."

3.1.4 | Reply

Let us return to EIVpref. There, Spinoza says that the cause of the man's building the house is his appetite. He has also, by this point, said that the appetite is an efficient cause. But Spinoza also writes, in EIVd7, that "[b]y the end for the sake of which we do something I understand appetite."

But this is not just an equivalence. Spinoza is not just saying "x is an end *iff* x is an appetite." What he is doing, I contend, is saying that what we take to be ends are in point of fact *nothing but* appetites. Recall EIVpref:

> [H]abitation, insofar as it is considered as a final cause [*quatenus ut finalis causa consideratur*], is nothing more than [*nihil est praeter*] this singular appetite. It is really an efficient cause [*qui revera causa est efficiens*], which is considered as a first cause [*quae ut prima consideratur*], because men are commonly ignorant of the causes of their appetites. (G.II.207/C.I.544)

What do we learn from this passage? Consider the chain of reasoning that connects habitation qua end, appetite, and efficient cause. What Spinoza says is that (i) habitation is sometimes considered as a final cause, that (ii) it is in fact nothing more than, nothing over and above, an appetite, and that (iii) this appetite is an efficient cause. So, putting (i)–(iii) together, we get that what we consider final causes are nothing over and above efficient causes.

Now, if in this passage Spinoza were allowing for the possibility that appetites are both efficient causes and final causes or ends, this is one of the worst ways conceivable to express that sentiment. It borders on perverse esotericism. The most reasonable reading of the passage from EIVpref, I think, is that final causes are nothing over and above efficient causes. Given that Spinoza here says things we consider as final causes are nothing but appetites, and in EIVd7 (as we saw above) says that ends-for-the-sake-of-which are to be understood as appetites, he seems to apply this nothing-but-ism to ends wholesale, not just to Scholastic or Peripatetic final causation.

The conclusion I draw here is that Spinoza clearly means that what we call final causes and ends are nothing more than efficient causes (else why say "nothing more than"?) and that the latter are *not* final causes in any sense other than the nominal (else why consistently say "considered as" rather than "is"?).

3.1.5 | Objection

"EIVpref explicitly says that the imaginative idea representing some future home explains why someone has an appetite that causes him to build a house. This implies (as suggested by Manning 2002, 183) that human action is indeed teleological. The representational content of a future state in fact is causally efficacious on the man who builds the house. Thus, there is teleology in human action."

3.1.6 | Reply

I deny the implication. Concede that Spinoza does think representational content is causally efficacious, contra Bennett.[9] What we then get is not teleology in the sense we deployed at the beginning of this paper. The representational content of the idea might well be causally efficacious, but that content, and indeed its associated idea, is itself neither the endpoint of the causal process to be explained nor its presumptive consequence. Instead, it is the mode that gets the whole process rolling. It *represents* the presumptive endpoint, rather than constituting it. So even if this proposal picks out an important feature of Spinoza's overall system, that feature is not teleological.

3.1.7 | Objection

"You haven't yet shown that there is no teleology in Spinoza. All you've done is argued that one particular bit of his system isn't teleological."

3.1.8 | Reply

That is true, but it is also irrelevant. All I intended to argue here was that Spinoza thinks some things in Extension do not exhibit teleology. That is enough to get us to reject (3).

3.1.9 | Objection

"Maybe Spinoza means to *reduce* one teleological notion to another, more adequate one. So, in offering his reduction, he isn't eliminating teleology, but instead making it more respectable."

3.1.10 | Reply

Spinoza sometimes does this. In the TTP, for example, he does this with the idea of God's will. But I do not think he is doing that here. Recall what we saw him say above: "[H]abitation, insofar as it is considered as a final cause, is nothing more than this singular appetite. It is really an efficient cause, which is considered as a first cause, because men are commonly ignorant of the causes of their appetites" (C.I.544/G.II.207). The reduction here, if indeed reduction there be, is to an *efficient cause*.

3.1.11 | Objection

"But that doesn't show that this kind of reduction isn't happening. It's entirely possible Spinoza wants to teleologize, or is implicitly committed to teleologizing, efficient causation. Maybe these aren't ends, sure, but they might still be teleological."

3.1.12 | Reply

Just so. This leads us to the next section.

4 | The Argument From Inertial Motion

4.1 | Paul Hoffman's Argument

Paul Hoffman (2011, 2009), following John Carriero (2004), thinks that, to understand Spinoza's views concerning final causes, we must understand his Scholastic philosophical forebears. Both he and Carriero situate Spinoza's view against that of Aquinas. One point Hoffman brings out is that, for Aquinas, efficient causation presupposes final causation. Hoffman writes:

> ...Aquinas' argument amounts to this. In order to do one thing rather than another, an agent has to tend to something. What it tends to has the nature of an end. Therefore, efficient causation presupposes final causation. (Hoffman 2011, 42)

He goes on to argue that inertial motion counts as tending towards an end under this broad definition. Insofar as objects have a "natural tendency" to remain in the same state when not

interfered with, they count as tending towards an end. The key premise, for Hoffman's Aquinas, is that "to tend to x is to have x for an end" (Hoffman 2011, 42).

Hoffman then reasonably concludes that Spinoza's system does incorporate teleology. The *conatus* principle, that "each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in being" (EIIp6/C.I.498/G.II.145), clearly presents things as *tending* towards something. Hoffman's point is not that Spinoza consciously endorsed teleology. Rather, it is that there is in fact teleology in Spinoza's system whether he intended it or not.

We can restate the argument Hoffman attributes to Aquinas like so:

(1) In order to do one thing rather than another, an agent has to tend to something.

(2) What it tends to has the nature of an end

So: (3) Efficient causation presupposes final causation

According to Hoffman, anyone committed to inertial motion is committed to end-directed behavior (Hoffman 2011, 42–43). Elsewhere, he offers a subtly different but related reading of Aquinas, which leads to the same conclusion (Hoffman 2009, 297). This should (one might think) be especially congenial to Spinoza, who writes in EIp28 that

> [e]very singular thing, *or* any thing which is finite and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence; and again, this cause also can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another, which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and so on, to infinity.

So if Hoffman's Aquinas is right, and being determined to a particular end is sufficient for having an end (this is what (2) affirms as well), then Spinoza should be committed, maybe unintentionally, to final-causal explanations being legitimate.

4.2 | Inertial Motion is Not Teleological for Spinoza

I claim that Hoffman's argument here fails. To see why, we will have to go into detail about Spinoza's account of action and adequate causation. First, let us rephrase the argument in a way that should preserve all its relevant features:

(1′) If α does ϕ instead of ψ, then α must tend towards ϕ.

(2′) If α tends towards ϕ, then ϕ has the nature of an end.

So: (3′) If α does ϕ instead of ψ, ϕ has the nature of an end.

Now, let me introduce (unargued for) a principle I take to implied by (2′):

(P) If α tends to ϕ, then α has ϕ as an end.

Hoffman seems to accept (P). He writes, for instance, that "to be determined to a determinate direction is to have that direction as an end" (Hoffman 2009, 300), and that "if Aquinas is right, to tend to move in a given direction is to have motion in that direction as an end" (Hoffman 2009, 300). Here is another principle that Hoffman (and Aquinas) would probably accept:

(A) If α acts to bring about ϕ, then α has ϕ as an end.

According to Aquinas, acting to bring about ϕ is a sufficient condition for having ϕ as an end. He writes that "every agent, whether natural or voluntary, intends an end" (*De principiis naturae* 18). The natural reading of this passage is that, if something acts, then it intends something (else). And since he also thinks that "that which is intended by the agent [*ab operante*]... is called an end" (*De principiis naturae* 18), one then gets (A) just by transitivity of the conditional.

(A) should also be accepted by anyone who also accepts the argument Hoffman attributes to Aquinas. Suppose that α acts to bring about ϕ. Then if α does ϕ instead of ψ—which it does, since it acts to bring about ϕ—it must tend towards ϕ rather than ψ. And since the argument is supposed to establish (P), it follows that if α acts to bring about ϕ, then α has ϕ as an end.

Unfortunately for Hoffman's argument, Spinoza has problems with (P) and (A). Let me explain why.

4.3 | Problems With (A)

First, let us see what (A) would mean in Spinoza's system. Let's look at what he says about action in *Ethics*:

> I say we act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, i.e. (by D1), when something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone. On the other hand, I say that we are acted upon when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause. (EIIId2)

Here, for Spinoza, being (fully) active means being the sole cause of our doings. We can parse this as:

(Act) α acts to produce ϕ *iff* α is the adequate cause of ϕ.

What is it to be an adequate cause? Spinoza tells us at EIIId1: "I call the cause adequate whose effect can be clearly and distinctly perceived through it." Other parts of *Ethics* link having clear and distinct perceptions to being the causal source of our ideas. In EIIp29s Spinoza writes that "so often as [the mind] is disposed internally...then it regards things clearly and distinctly" (C.I.471/G.II.114). Further, perceiving clearly and distinctly entails perceiving adequately (according to EIIp38c).

Elsewhere, Spinoza suggests that to the extent we have more adequate ideas, we are more active. Hence, to that extent, we are

the cause of our doings. In the demonstration of EVp17 (which states that God is without passions), he writes:

> All ideas, insofar as they are related to God, are true (by IIP32), i.e. (by IID4), adequate. And so (by Gen. Def. Aff.), God is without passions.

The more adequate ideas a thing has, the fewer passions it has - that is, the more active it is. So to be an adequate cause of our doings is for them to be clearly and distinctly conceived through us, and this goes along with having more adequate ideas.

Let us use this better to understand (Act) and (A). First, let us substitute like terms in to (Act) to get

(Act′) α acts to produce ϕ *iff* ϕ can be clearly and distinctly perceived through α.

Now using (Act$_I$), we can get

(A′) If ϕ can be clearly and distinctly perceived through α alone, then α has ϕ as an end.

My contention here is that, for Spinoza, the consequent is false when the antecedent is true. There are two lines of argument available. First, if I can show that Spinoza rejects the compatibility of these two claims in *one* case, I will have shown that he rejects the conditional. So, all I need for that route is a single counterexample.

Second, even though I am arguing that there are no teleological explanations in Extension, I can do so by arguing against teleological claims in Thought. This is because of parallelism. If I can show that a particular mode of Thought does not have a teleological explanation, the corresponding mode of Extension will not either.

Let us take the first line of argument first. In a sense, Spinoza has already established (A$_I$) is false in EIapp: God is perfectly active and yet has no ends. We could stop there and declare that Spinoza rejects (A$_I$). But let us suppose God does not count as a counterexample. We can do this by restricting α to finite things.

But this would not help. Let us first consider what it is for some human agent to have ϕ as an end. If ϕ is already actual, then there is no need for striving towards it. Consider Spinoza's words concerning God in EIapp (C.I.442/G.II.80): "[I]f God acts for the sake of an end, he necessarily wants something which he lacks." Given this, it seems a conceptual impossibility for Spinoza to aim at ϕ if ϕ is already actualized.

EIVpref strongly suggests that in order to aim at end, we must do so using the imagination. It speaks of a man having an appetite "because he *imagined* [emphasis mine] the conveniences of domestic life." But this is just a suggestion. It does not amount to a cogent, systematic reason *why* this is so for Spinoza. Indeed, there seem to be counterexamples to this principle in the text of the *Ethics*. Take for instance EIp8s2, where he considers "how we can have true ideas of modifications which do not exist." If these are true ideas, then by EIIp41, they cannot be ideas of the imagination.

So, it seems like we are stuck. Even though ends are currently non-existent, aiming at them does not automatically mean doing so with the imagination. But I claim this is merely a deceptive appearance, not a true problem.

To see why, let us look at EIIIp18. In its demonstration, Spinoza claims that "[s]o long as a man is affected by an image of a thing, he will regard the thing as present, even if it does not exist...he *imagines* [emphasis mine] it as past or future only insofar as its image is joined to the image of a past or future time." This suggests that to regard ϕ as non-actual in the sense of being something to be brought about in the future, ϕ must be joined with the image of a past or future time. And to have ϕ as an end, we must think of ϕ as something to be achieved. Combine these two, and we seem to get that, since in order to have ϕ as an end we must think of it as joined to a future time, to have ϕ as an end means we must imagine ϕ.

Now, we have enough pieces in place to get the argument going:

(1) α acts to bring about ϕ (premise).

(2) α has ϕ as an end (premise).

So: (3) The idea of ϕ that α has must involve a future time (from (2)).

So: (4) The idea of ϕ that α has must be imaginative (from (3)).

So: (5) The idea of ϕ that α has must be inadequate (from (4), def of imagination and adequate idea).

So: (6) ϕ may be clearly and distinctly understood through α (from (1), def of action).

(7) If (6), then ϕ may be clearly and distinctly understood through α by α (premise).

So: (8) ϕ may be clearly and distinctly understood through α by α (from (6) and (7)).

So: (9) Contradiction (from (5) and (8)).

This argument is valid. If either (1) or (2) is denied, then I have succeeded in showing that, for Spinoza, acting (in Spinoza's sense) to achieve ϕ is incompatible with having ϕ as an end. The route for the defender of Hoffman's reading is therefore to deny (7). To do so requires that they say there is at least one case in which ϕ may be clearly and distinctly understood through α but which *cannot* be so understood *by* α.

But this is problematical. In EVp4, Spinoza writes that "there is no affection of the Body of which we cannot form a clear and distinct concept." Such affections would, by EIId3, include both actions and passions. We act, according to EIIId2, when something outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone. Hence, we can form adequate ideas of such affects.

Now, if we can form adequate ideas of those affects, then it follows that we can form adequate ideas of whatever follows from them. This is a result of EIIp40, which tells us that "whatever ideas follow in the Mind from ideas that are adequate in the mind are also adequate." Hence, if we act to produce something—or, equivalently, if it can be clearly and distinctly understood through our nature alone—we can clearly and distinctly

understand that thing through our nature alone. This is enough to establish (7). So, to deny (7), the defender of Hoffman's reading would have to deny one of the Spinozistic assumptions from which it follows. I do not think this is a route to be taken lightly.

4.4 | Problems With (P)

So much for (A). Now, I need to justify my claim that Spinoza would have trouble with (P)—which, to refresh our memory, was

(P) If α tends to ϕ, then α has ϕ as an end.

There are at least two counterexamples to this principle in Spinoza's system. First, we have God, who tends towards certain things rather than others out of the necessity of his nature. From EIp16, we learn that infinitely many things follow from the divine nature, in infinitely many modes. It seems unproblematic (though hold that thought) to say that, for Spinoza, God tends towards these things rather than others. But, as we have seen above, and as is pretty much uncontested by Spinoza's interpreters, God has no ends. So here, we have an example where the antecedent of (P) is verified and the consequent falsified.

Another counterexample comes from our analysis of EIVpref. I take myself to have given good reasons to think that Spinoza sometimes wants to say that, although we think we act for ends, in fact, according to the truth of things, we do not. These are cases that are related to our striving to persevere in being. If we are striving to persevere in being by means of house-building, then it certainly seems fair to say that we tend towards house-building. But in this case, Spinoza wants to deny that habitation is the final cause of the house. In this case, nothing over and above efficient causation is going on.

This is also implied by EIVd7: "By the end for the sake of which we do something I understand appetite." Here, again, Spinoza seems to want to say that we can tend towards something (by having an appetite, in his technical sense, for it) without having it as an end in the sense relevant here. We only think of it as an end because we are "commonly ignorant of the causes of [our] appetites" (EIVpref). This is our second counterexample.

Because of these considerations, it does not seem that an analysis of tendency can rescue the proponent of Hoffman's interpretation here.

4.5 | Objections and Replies

4.5.1 | Objection

"What about an analysis of 'end', instead? Is there some stripped-down notion of end that can help us here? Here's one candidate:

(E) α has ϕ as an end iff α is determined to produce ϕ rather than ψ_1, ψ_2,...

Substituting this into (P) gets us:

(P′) If α tends towards ϕ, then α is determined to produce ϕ rather than ψ_1, ψ_2,..."

4.5.2 | Reply

This analysis is problematical. First, since God is determined to produce certain things rather than others, this analysis counts him as having ends as well. And Spinoza explicitly denies this. Second, this would count all instances of our striving to persevere in being as end-directed, since we tend to persevere in being rather than not. We have seen above that, in the case of EIVpref at least, Spinoza wants to deny that this striving is end-directed. If we adopt the reading proposed in (E), we are committed to positions that Spinoza explicitly wants to deny. I conclude, then, that the reduction or rephrasing proposed in (E) is implausible as a reading of Spinoza.

4.5.3 | Objection

"Maybe we can aim at present things. Suppose I presently have the virtue of courage, and I wish to continue to be courageous. Isn't the state of affairs that I intend already actual? And if so, mightn't it constitute an end?"

4.5.4 | Reply

It is possible that the state of affairs we aim at includes some part which actually exists—for example, if I am courageous, my possession of courage. But this objection gets something wrong about the object of my intention. My end is not to possess that thing just at the present moment, but to possess it *going forward*. Each thing, insofar as it is in itself, strives to *persevere* in being, after all. So, the real target of my intention is something ongoing, not purely actual. So, it seems like something must be non-actual to be an end, at least to some extent.

4.5.5 | Objection

"Is it unproblematical to claim that God (or we, for that matter) tend towards something when that thing follows from our nature?"

4.5.6 | Reply

I think so. Certainly, the proponent of Hoffman's reading would want to say that we tend towards what we strive for. And we strive to persevere in being as a consequence of our nature.

4.5.7 | Objection

"What about what Garrett (2002b, 318) calls a 'saving efficient-cause account' of human teleological explanation? On this account, we 'locate the cause of human action in the

present representation of a future effect' (Garrett 2002b, 318), and then claim that such a representation can have causal efficacy. Maybe, on an account like the one we considered in a prior objection (§3.4.5), we can have the adequate cause of human action be the representational content of some imaginative human idea."

4.5.8 | Reply

Recall that even if we concede the causal efficacy of representational content, this does not get us teleology in the sense we are considering in this paper (see §2.1.6).

But there is another problem. If we have a present representation of a future thing, we cannot act (in Spinoza's sense) to bring it about, since to do so would be to have an inadequate idea. So, to the extent that we are active rather than passive, and have adequate rather than inadequate ideas, we do not act for ends.

For some human actions to be teleological and some not would be for there to be "correct" teleological explanations of *some* things and not of others. But teleology, for Spinoza, is an all-or-nothing affair. Hence, since some of our actions are not teleological, none of them are. Having adequate ideas *at all* precludes us from understanding ourselves and our actions teleologically.[10]

4.5.9 | Objection

"You've been treating activity as being a binary notion: Either you're active or you're not. But there's evidence (e.g. EIIIp1c) that Spinoza thinks activity comes in degrees. Important commentators (e.g., Garrett 2002a) certainly take this to be the case. So α can have ϕ as an end if α is not completely active."

4.5.10 | Reply

Point taken. However, if I can show that α's being the adequate cause of (and hence being perfectly active in producing) ϕ precludes α's having ϕ as an end, then that will be enough for my purposes. If we have adequate ideas, then our mind acts (see EIIIp1). And if one's mind acts to produce something, it is that thing's adequate cause.

Now, parallelism entails that if some mode τ_1 of Thought acts to produce some mode τ_2 of Thought, then the mode ϵ_1 of Extension which τ_1 represents acts to produce some other mode of Extension ϵ_2, which τ_2 represents. So if ϵ_1 is the adequate cause of ϵ_2, and if being the adequate cause of something precludes having that thing as an end, then ϵ_2's existence (or production) is not explained teleologically. And since either *everything* in Extension is explained teleologically or *nothing* is, this implies that nothing is.

So, showing that α's being the adequate cause of ϕ precludes α's having ϕ as an end suffices to show (P2). In other words, for my argument to go forward, I need to argue that Spinoza rejects causal over-determination.

5 | Spinoza Rejects Causal-Overdetermination

In the discussion of adequate causation above, I argued that *x* is the adequate cause of *y* if *y* can be understood through *x*'s nature alone. We can make an argument that goes from this definition to the conclusion that a certain kind of over-determination is impossible: A thing cannot have more than one adequate cause. Here it is:

(1) If I have cognition of an effect E, then I have cognition of E's cause (EIa4)

So: (2) If I do not have cognition of the cause of E, I do not have cognition of E (from (1))[11]

(3) C_1 and C_2 adequately cause E. (Premise, for reductio)

(4) I have cognition of effect E. (Premise)
- (4.a) I have cognition of effect E through C_1 and do not have cognition of C_2 (Premise, assumed without loss of generality)
- So: (4.b) I do not have cognition of C_2 (from (4.a))
- So: (4.c) I do not have cognition of effect E (from (2), (4.b))
- So: (4.d) Contradiction (from (3), (4.c))

So: (5) If I have cognition of effect E, I have cognition of effect E through C_1 and C_2, and not one of them alone (from (4.a)-(4.d))

So: (6) I do not have cognition of effect E through either C_1 or C_2 alone (from (4), (5))

So: (7) C_1 and C_2 are not the adequate causes of effect E (from (6), EIIId1)

So: (8) Contradiction (from (3), (7))

This argument shows a disjunction: Either a thing can have more than one adequate cause, or else we cannot know effects through their causes. However, Spinoza appears to think that we can indeed know at least some effects through their causes (see, for instance, the definition of the third kind of cognition in EIIp40s). So, if the argument is successful, Spinoza would reject a view of adequate causation that allows for this kind of explanatory overdetermination.

One thing that teleological readings of Spinoza such as the ones we have considered above often assume (and indeed must assume) is that each thing has both a teleological and a mechanical explanation. In resisting Bennett's argument that representational properties are not causally efficacious for Spinoza, Garrett writes of "[t]he universality of mechanism within the physical or extended realm" (Garrett 2002b, 318). He also does not think that the first step in Bennett's argument—that "[t]he causally efficacious properties of things under the attribute of extension are all intrinsic geometrical and dynamic properties"—is worth attacking. This is almost a textbook description of mechanism. If this is true, then everything in Extension has a mechanistic explanation.

Readings that hold that tendencies or *conatus* are teleological also entail that every singular thing in Extension has a teleological explanation as well. Since, on these views, the *conatus* of singular things is teleological, everything that is

explained by reference to a singular thing's striving is explained teleologically. It thus seems very much like this version of Spinoza is committed to a view on which there are complementary and *complete* explanations of goings-on in Extension which veraciously involve both teleology and mechanism.

This is in tension with what Spinoza has to say about adequate causes. If a thing is adequately caused mechanistically, then it cannot adequately be caused teleologically, and vice versa. Hence, either teleological and mechanistic explanations are complementary but incomplete without each other, or else one of them has to go. I humbly submit that teleological explanations should get the ax.

5.1 | Objections and Replies

5.1.1 | Objection

"Maybe teleological and mechanistic explanations are complementary but severally incomplete. See, for example, Garrett (2002b, 325): 'For Spinoza, understanding individual things and their behavior through their own essences is thus partly a teleological enterprise, but a teleological enterprise perfectly compatible with the mechanistic nature of extension.' Hence, teleological explanations are excluded only if they're taken to be complete."

5.1.2 | Reply

It is not clear that this interpretation stands up to textual scrutiny. Consider the following passage in EIIIp2s (G.II.144):

> All these things, indeed, show clearly that both the decision of the Mind and the appetite and the determination of the Body by nature exist together–or rather are one and the same thing, which we call a decision when it is considered under, and explained through, the attribute of Thought, and which we call a determination when it is considered under the attribute of Extension and deduced [*deducitur*] from the laws of motion and rest.

Here, the appetite of a thing, when considered under Extension, is said to be deducible from the laws of motion and rest. What else is this, but to be completely mechanically explicable? This suggests that goings-on in Extension are completely mechanically explicable. If that is so, then given what Spinoza has to say about adequate causation, teleological explanations are barred outright.

5.1.3 | Objection

"Maybe final causation is some sort of emergent phenomenon, one that's grounded in mechanistic efficient causation, but not reducible to it. This could leave room for adequate causation on one level but not on another."

5.1.4 | Reply

Given the arguments above, I do not think this can work. Once a thing has one adequate cause, it *cannot* have another, no matter what explanatory level we are on. Moreover, this response seems ad hoc, as I cannot think of any textual or systematic basis to think Spinoza holds such a doctrine, or to think that we have good reason to attribute it to him.

5.1.5 | Objection

"Wait, you're just asserting that (1) is equivalent to, or a gloss on, EIa4. But this is done without argument. It's also implausible, given that (1) doesn't mention 'involvement' at all."

5.1.6 | Reply

If that is what I was doing, you would be right. But I do not claim this. Instead, what I think is that (1) follows from EIa4. This axiom contains two separate claims: that the cognition [*cognitio*] of an effect *depends* on cognition [*cognitione*] of its cause and that the cognition of an effect *involves* cognition of its cause. The question of what this "involvement" is has taxed Spinoza scholars for decades, but luckily, at least for the purposes of (1), I do not have to address this question. All I need is the dependency claim. Given that cognition of an effect depends on cognition of its cause, cognition of its cause is a necessary condition for the cognition of that effect. This is expressed by the conditional in (1). Hence, I take (1) to follow from EIa4, not to be equivalent to it.

5.1.7 | Objection

"I'm not convinced you don't need to take a stand on the 'involvement' question raised by EIa4. This is because of (4.a) (and subsequent steps (5) and (6)), which speaks of having cognition of an effect through its cause. Isn't this just 'involvement' by another name?"

5.1.8 | Reply

If I were grounding (4.a) in EIa4, and saying that this having cognition through causes is related to or reducible to the cognition of an effect involving cognition of its cause, you would be right. But I am not doing that. Instead, (4.a) (and subsequent steps (5) and (6)) only require the truth of (and the concepts which occur in) EIIId1, which stipulates that adequate causes are those through which one can clearly and distinctly perceive their causes. This is exactly what and all I mean by having cognition of an effect through its (adequate) cause, starting with (4.a).

5.1.9 | Objection

"In §4.1.4, you assume that adequate causal explanations may be mechanical. But this may be problematic, since all such mechanical explanations will involve negation due to their finitude

(see EIp8s). How can any such explanation be adequate, given that it involves negation?"

5.1.10 | Reply

While it is not clear how this works exactly, it seems Spinoza is indeed committed to the position that finite things can themselves be adequate causes of certain effects. EIVp61dem, for example, speaks of desires which arise from reason as things "that are conceived adequately through man's essence alone" (C.I.581/G.II.256). Given the definition of adequate causes in EIIId1 as those which allow their effects to be clearly and distinctly perceived through them, and Spinoza's identification of adequate ideas and clear and distinct perception in passages such as EIIp36, if a desire of reason may be adequately conceived through man's essence, then man's essence is the adequate causes of those desires. But, of course, man's essence is finite and, on that account (because of EIp8s), involves some degree of negation. I therefore conclude that Spinoza thinks that adequate causes can involve negation to some degree (viz., to the degree that they are finite). As a result, the fact that some effect's cause involves negation to some extent does not preclude its being an adequate cause. While it is true that Spinoza thinks we are quite ignorant of the way nature works in many cases, one does not have to know how nature in fact works in every case to know that it does not work in specific ways.

6 | Concluding Remarks

To wrap things up, let us contrast Spinoza with Leibniz. The latter held that there are two explanatory orders in nature, those of final and of efficient causality. Sometimes, he refers to these as "the kingdom of efficient causes and the kingdom of final causes" (Leibniz 2016, 21). In *A Specimen of Dynamics* (1695), Leibniz claims the following:

> In general, we must hold that everything in the world can be explained in two ways: through the *kingdom of power*, that is, through *efficient causes*, and through the *kingdom of wisdom*, that is, through *final causes*... these two kingdoms everywhere interpenetrate each other without confusing or disturbing their laws, so that the greatest obtains in the kingdom of power at the same time as the best in the kingdom of wisdom. (AG 126/GM VI 243)

Elsewhere, he connects this to his monadological metaphysics. Perceptions in a particular monad arise from one another according to final-causal laws, whereas "changes in bodies" and physical phenomena in general happen according to efficient-causal laws. These two lawful orders are supposed to exhibit a "perfect harmony" with one another, a harmony "preestablished from the first" (AG 207-8/G VI 598-9). Elsewhere, in *Monadology* (1714), he writes that

> [s]ouls act according to the laws of final causes, through appetitions, ends, and means. Bodies act according to the laws of efficient causes or of motions. And these two kingdoms, that of efficient causes and that of final causes, are in harmony with each other. (AG 223/G VI 620)

There appear to be two positions on display here, which might illustrate an evolution in Leibniz's thought. The first, exhibited in the *Specimen*, holds that all natural events have two sorts of *explanations*: final- and efficient-causal. The second, exhibited in *Monadology*, holds that nature has two sets of *laws*, each of which governs distinct realms in nature.[12]

On the reading offered in this essay, Spinoza would have a problem with each of these positions. On the first, he would take issue with the apparent overdetermination. Because of his doctrine of adequate causation, he would reject the idea that we can explain an event *adequately* in two ways. On the second, he would see this doctrine of the two realms as a violation of his naturalism. If there are two sets of laws for two different types of things, parts of nature are singled out as *imperium in imperio*—and this is unacceptable.

Endnotes

[1] All English quotations of Spinoza are from Spinoza (1985) and Spinoza (2016) unless otherwise specified. All Latin quotations are from Spinoza (1925) unless otherwise specified. I cite passages from *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* as [section in TdIE]. I cite passages from the *Ethics* as E[part][preface/proposition/definition][scholium]. I cite passages from the *Theological-Political Treatise* as TTP.[chapter].[paragraph]. I cite passages from the rest of Spinoza's work as C.[Curley volume number].[page] / G.[volume of Spinoza (1925)].[page in Spinoza (1925)]. All English quotations from Leibniz are from Leibniz (1989) unless otherwise specified. I cite passages from Leibniz as AG.[page number in Leibniz 1989)]/G.[volume in Leibniz 1965)].[page in Leibniz 1965)]. All English quotations from *De principiis naturae* are from Aquinas (2006) and are cited as *De principiis naturae* [article number].

[2] For the former, see Douglas (2015); for the latter, see Harrop (2022).

[3] As is standard practice, I render the Latin conjunctions "*sive*" and "*seu*" as an italicized "or" when the context makes clear that these are used to express an equivalence between two concepts or locutions. Thus, here, the use of "*or*" indicates an equivalence between the concepts expressed by the locutions "one and the same order" and "one and the same connection of causes".

[4] See Bledin and Melamed (2020, 5) for a precise formalization of this and other conceptual machinery of the *Ethics*.

[5] See, for instance, Lin (2019, 84–85); Melamed (2018, 97); arguably Jacquet (2021, 299–300); Gueroult (1974, 519); the first sort of parallelism in Melamed (2013, Chapter 5); Hübner (2015); Garrett (2018a, 2018b, 246); Bennett (1984, §31); and so on.

[6] One might wonder what is supposed to ground parallelism, not in terms of what reason Spinoza has to believe it (this is established in EIIp7), but in terms of the order of nature. In other words, what is it about the nature of God that which makes it the case that parallelism obtains? According to one major interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy (championed most notably by Michael Della Rocca in works like Della Rocca 2008), it is driven by a strong version of the principle of sufficient reason (PSR) according to which every single fact has an explanation. Hence, the parallel structure of the attributes requires a worldly explanation.

One should note that this is a contentious reading of Spinoza's metaphysical commitments. While Della Rocca's interpretation has been

influential, it does not enjoy the status of conventional wisdom among Spinoza scholars (some prominent examples of people who deny this strong reading are Garber 2015, Lin 2019, 166–168, and Melamed 2013, Chapter 3). I am inclined to agree with these latter commentators, largely on the ground that there is no actual evidence in the text for the strong PSR which Della Rocca attributes to Spinoza. The PSR we find Spinoza actually stating and employing, in *Ethics* and elsewhere, regards only existence facts: "there must be, for each existing thing, a certain cause on account of which it exists" (EIp8s2/C.I.415/G.II.50). Consequently, requiring a worldly explanation for parallelism goes beyond the explicit commitments Spinoza takes. While one could mount a defense for Della Rocca's interpretation, I do not think one ought to treat it as the authoritative or controlling one.

[7] Or maybe "should be taken to mean."

[8] I assume Garrett to be referencing §53 of Bennett (1984) when saying that Bennett calls these inferences "teleological."

[9] See Bennett (1984, §51.5).

[10] Far from the third kind of knowledge requiring an integration of mechanistic and teleological ways of understanding singular things, as Garrett claims (Garrett 2002b, 324–325).

[11] Note that (2) is the contrapositive of (1). Since the contrapositive of a conditional is logically equivalent to the original conditional, no further argument to derive (2) from (1) is needed.

[12] See McDonough (2008) for a much more thorough study of what he calls the "two realms" doctrine, and see Jorati (2015, 2020) for more thorough studies of Leibniz's account of teleology. See McDonough (2022) for a recent and excellent survey of the role of teleology and related concepts (such as optimality principles) in Leibniz's physics and philosophy.

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