University of Groningen

Whose Freedom? The Idea of Appropriation in Spinoza's Compatibilism

Lenz, Martin

Published in:
Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung

DOI:
[10.3196/004433017821835605](https://doi.org/10.3196/004433017821835605)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2017

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Lenz, M. (2017). Whose Freedom? The Idea of Appropriation in Spinoza's Compatibilism. *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung*, 71(3), 343-357. <https://doi.org/10.3196/004433017821835605>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Martin Lenz, Groningen

Whose Freedom? The Idea of Appropriation in Spinoza's Compatibilism¹

Spinoza's notion of freedom confronts us with a paradoxical idea: on the one hand, freedom requires us to act with rational insight into the causally determined order of the natural world. On the other hand, grasping this order seems to leave us with the insight that there is nothing that could be justly termed a human person. As I see it, the key to resolving this tension is to be sought within a special reading of Spinoza's theory of the striving for self-preservation (*conatus*): I shall argue that Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine entails an *appropriation thesis*: according to Spinoza's account, we ought to re-describe our personal histories in terms of a gradual *appropriation* of the natural order and take supposedly external causes as our *own reasons* for action. The present paper tries to set out this solution and its difficulties against the background of the contemporary debate on freedom.

Spinoza's *Ethics* aims at suggesting a rational route to freedom. A successful journey on this route essentially depends on gaining an adequate perspective on the self and its relation to the natural order. Accordingly, freedom is possible to the extent that we achieve an adequate description of ourselves within nature and our personal history. For the causal chain of events in our personal history is part of the natural order. In other words: freedom and a correct grasp of nature and personal history are interdependent. As is well-known, however, Spinoza's notion of freedom confronts us with a paradoxical idea: on the one hand, freedom requires us to act with rational insight into the causally determined order of the natural world; on the other hand, grasping this order seems to leave us with the insight that there is nothing that could be justly termed a human person. On the face of it, a description of the natural geometrical

¹ Preliminary versions of this paper have been presented at workshops in Berlin, Halle, Ghent and Groningen. I am very grateful to all participants for the inspiring discussions at these events. I owe very special thanks to Michael Hampe, Jens Maaßen, John Marenbon, Dominik Perler, Ursula Renz, Andrea Sangiacomo, Eric Schliesser, Stephan Schmid and Markus Wild for helpful comments and conversations.

and kinematic properties is not compatible with the biographical features that we deem relevant.

How are we to deal with this tension in Spinoza's account of freedom? – With notable exceptions, Spinoza's discussion of freedom received surprisingly little scholarly attention. While I generally agree with Matthew Kisner's nuanced interpretation of freedom as self-determination, I do not focus on the question of autonomy, which might be said to emphasise a somewhat Kantian concern.² Rather, I think it will be rewarding to address this issue from the angle of the *conatus* doctrine and provide alternative interpretation.

On my reading, the key element of Spinoza's account is to be sought within his theory of the striving for self-preservation (*conatus*). I shall argue that Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine entails an *appropriation thesis*: The *conatus* doctrine, I submit, suggests that we ought to re-describe our personal histories in terms of a gradual *appropriation* of the natural order: humans striving for freedom have to harmonize their biographical selves with 'natural history' and begin to take supposedly external causes as their *own reasons* for action.

However, accepting this interpretation will bring out a problem that often goes unnoticed but is inherent in the *conatus* doctrine.³ *Whose* personal history is being told or re-described and whose self is it that strives for freedom? Is it the 'personal self' cherishing his or her biographically contingent habits and preferences? Or is it the 'conative self' overcoming these habits by means of rational re-description? The more we free ourselves in Spinoza's sense, the less we seem to be able to cling to our conventional ascriptions which permitted the perspective on our personal history in the first place. What, then, is the subject of a history whose narration requires us to overcome any personal perspective? In what follows I will try to set out the appropriation thesis and conclude by pointing out a persistent problem underlying Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine.

² See Kisner 2011 for a recent book-length treatment and a good overview of the literature. While Kisner provides an intriguing discussion of freedom with regard to autonomy, Carriero 2014 offers an equally fruitful investigation of freedom with regard to wrongdoing and merit.

³ This is by no means the only difficulty the *conatus* doctrine presents us with. Moreover, it is very helpful to see that this doctrine is indeed a later development in Spinoza. See on this and for further literature Sangiacomo 2016, 144–168. See for an extensive interpretation of the doctrine Viljanen 2011.

1. Spinoza's naturalism and three premises

The natural desires of humans have a bad reputation. Accordingly, the route to human freedom was often seen as a way of overcoming one's natural desires and of redirecting one's striving towards higher ends. On this view, our crucial capacity is to lead our lives in accordance with moral conventions and to resist our natural desires.

Spinoza radically rejects this line of thought.⁴ He conceives of man as *part* of an inherently determined nature. Not overcoming nature, but gaining insight into nature is what turns us into free humans. For, on Spinoza's view, our essence resides in our natural self-preservation drive, our *conatus*. Spinoza's naturalization of ethics and the related emphasis on the problem of freedom make him an interesting figure in contemporary debates on the compatibility of freedom and determinism.⁵

Spinoza's view of humans not as autonomous beings in a conventional culture but as part of nature was repeatedly met with the suspicion whether he is an early advocate of the idea of the 'disappearing subject'.⁶ If we are but parts of a causally determined chain of events, how can we consistently conceive of ourselves as human beings, let alone free beings?

This question prompted two opposed lines of interpretation regarding Spinoza's account of freedom. While some commentators accuse him of inconsistency, others think that he hints at a congruent view of a community of free *persons*.⁷ By contrast, I wish to balance his metaphysical and ethical claims and argue that Spinoza holds a consistent naturalist position but decidedly rejects any notion of *personal* freedom.⁸ Setting

⁴ The rejection of transcendent ends and norms is a general feature in Spinoza's philosophy; see, for instance, Spinoza, *Ethica* I app. References to the *Ethica* (in *Opera* II, ed. Gebhardt 1925) are indicated in the standard way: Roman numerals correspond to parts; abbreviations (often along with Arabic numerals) specify appendix (= app), corollary (= c), definition (= def), demonstration (= d), proposition (= p), and scholium (= s). Translations are taken, sometimes with slight modifications, from Curley 1994 (= Curley).

⁵ The contemporary upswing in the debates on naturalism already stimulated renewed interest, for instance, in Spinoza's identity theory of mental and physical events (see Pauen 2011) as well as in Spinoza's theory of emotions (see Davidson 1999).

⁶ See Renz 2011 for a succinct refutation of this assumption.

⁷ See Hampe 2011, esp. p. 254 and 259, who presents a fairly charitable reading. By contrast, see Bennett 1984, 324–328, on the supposed 'incoherence' of Spinoza's account.

⁸ Spinoza rarely uses the term 'persona'. However, some crucial criteria of personhood can be extracted from his famous story about the Spanish poet, who is said to have

off from his metaphysical basis, I think, he does indeed develop a congruent notion of human freedom. Yet, as I will show, it is pointless to attribute to him a notion of free *persons*.

Accordingly, I would like to confine my presentation to the following four steps: after a brief introduction to Spinoza's fundamental premises my *second* step will be to remind you of his refutation of free will. Thirdly, I shall explain how Spinoza conceives of freedom as *self-determination*. Fourthly, I like to suggest an interpretation as to how we can make sense of self-determination in the light of his premises, namely by taking it as a way of *appropriation*. Finally, we will face the question whether this notion of freedom contradicts our common self-conception as persons.

Let's begin by looking at three premises of Spinoza's naturalist determinism. At first sight, it seems that there is nothing that can play the role of a free human subject. For, firstly, Spinoza holds a version of *necessitarianism*: that is, everything that happens could not happen otherwise than it actually does.⁹

Secondly, there is Spinoza's *substance monism* according to which there is just one subsisting thing, namely God. This somewhat strange thesis loses some of its initial oddity if we bear in mind that, for Spinoza, God is not a transcendent creator apart from the world, but nature itself. Men, stones, water, trees and what have you are not autonomous substances but parts, states or *modes* of this single substance.¹⁰

This thesis nicely links in with his *holism*. Our physical and our parallel mental states are embedded within a net of causal or conceptual relations.¹¹ This means, amongst other things, that the content of our

lost his identity by loss of memory (*Ethica* IV p 39 s). Spinoza's account, then, bears some resemblance to the Lockean approach in that it is not substantiality but memory that plays a crucial role in establishing human personal identity. See Thiel 1998, 878–880.

⁹ See Spinoza, *Ethica* I p 29 and p 33. Necessitarianism is of course a much stronger tenet than mere determinism. The difference can be illustrated with regard to the question of God's freedom of choice. On a determinist account, God chooses and fixes the course of the universe (the optimal course, for instance); on a necessitarian account, God's plan is determined in such a manner that there are no other possible worlds. See Perler 2011 and Della Rocca 2008, 69–78, for defences of a necessitarian reading.

¹⁰ See Spinoza, *Ethica* I p 14–15. Cf. Della Rocca 2008, 46–69, for a thorough exposition of Spinoza's theory of substance and modes.

¹¹ See Spinoza, *Ethica* II p 11 c. Cf. Della Rocca 1996 and Brandom 2002, 34–40, on Spinoza's holism.

mental states is adequately determinable only in relation to other mental states. Now, since *we* are only *part* of the whole net, as it were, our cognitions are just as partial and thus (mostly) inadequate. Only from a divine perspective would we be able to access the whole net of causal and conceptual relations.

2. The illusion of free will

With these premises in place we are now in a position to approach Spinoza's definition of freedom; it runs as follows:

That thing is called 'free' which exists solely by the necessity of its own nature, and is determined to act by itself alone ...¹²

An immediate consequence of Spinoza's substance monism is that freedom can fully be attributed only to God, since God alone is determined to exist and to act by his own nature. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that Spinoza has often been taken to task for claiming that humans are unfree, since they are parts of the one substance and *dependent* on *external* causes.¹³ Additionally, Spinoza's necessitarianism entails a denial of *free will* in any form. Not even God can be taken to will freely, since otherwise he could not be said to be *determined* to exist and to act by the *necessity* of his nature.

But why then do humans erroneously attribute free will to themselves? Spinoza can explain this in recourse to his holism. Grasping but parts of the whole, human judgements are like 'conclusions without premises'.¹⁴ Thus, humans often come to decisions without recognizing the determinants of these decisions. Instead of taking into account the determinants of their actions, humans are prone to think that their reason for action is nothing but their *conscious* drive or their own intention. According to Spinoza this is a fallacy due to the habit of putting our intentions and purposes in the place of unknown determinants. The mistake is to infer the *absence* of determinants from the *ignorance* of determinants; as if there was a gap in the causal chain – ready to squeeze in an idle inten-

¹² Spinoza, *Ethica* I def 7 (Curley, 86).

¹³ See, for instance, Seidl 1994.

¹⁴ Spinoza, *Ethica* II p 28 d (Curley, 135).

tion of ours. But in fact our intentions are not independent of other, if unknown determinants; Spinoza puts this point as follows:

It will be sufficient here if I take as a foundation what everyone must acknowledge: that all men are born ignorant of the causes of things, and that they all want to see their own advantage, and are conscious of this appetite. From these [assumptions] it follows, *first*, that men think themselves free, because they are conscious of their volitions and appetite, and do not think, even in their dreams, of the causes by which they are disposed to wanting and willing, because they are ignorant of [those causes]. It follows, *second*, that men act always on account of an end, namely on account of their advantage, which they want. Hence they seek to know only the final causes of what has been done, and when they have heard them, they are satisfied, because they have no reason to doubt further. But if they cannot hear them from another, nothing remains for them but to turn toward themselves, and reflect on the ends by which they are usually determined to do such things ...¹⁵

Spinoza's system, then, renders free will and necessary determination incompatible notions, which is why one might be inclined to deem Spinoza an incompatibilist.¹⁶ But although Spinoza reduces the talk of free *will* to a mere illusion of perspective, he is by no means an incompatibilist. Even if the will is not free, we can clearly talk of freedom in Spinoza – as is evident from his definition. In contrast to many contemporary authors, however, for him there is no *problem* of compatibility. His point is rather to define the notion of freedom *by means of* the notion of necessity. To be free just is to be *determined* to exist and to act by the *necessity* of one's nature. So far, so good – but now we face the question of what it means for *humans* to be free.

3. Freedom as rational self-determination

According to Spinoza's *Ethics*, only God – the sole substance – can *exist* by the necessity of his own nature. With regard to human freedom, then, it seems we should confine ourselves to action and concentrate on the following question. How can an overall dependent being act *freely*? – The

¹⁵ See Spinoza, *Ethica* I app. (Curley, 110); cf. *Ethica* II p 35 s and II p 48–49.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Pereboom 2007, 85–125.

stunningly simple answer is: *by depending on itself*. Freedom should not be confused with freedom of will; rather it ought to be sought in self-determination. This goes hand-in-hand with the definition, according to which we call that being 'free', whose action is *determined by itself alone*.

The opposite of freedom is not necessity but coercion through other things or people. One is coerced, not through determination as such, but through *external* determination. Accordingly, humans can be free insofar as they are self-determined rather than externally determined. This opposition offers a crucial element of a compatibilist notion of freedom in that it helps us to understand freedom in opposition to two central notions that every theory of freedom ought to address: mere chance and compulsion. Free actions should neither be confused with purely accidental events, nor should they be seen as coerced. Taking freedom as self-determination helps to keep in check both extremes.¹⁷ Neither do we have to suppose accidental gaps in the causal chain, nor do we have to identify all determination with coercion; rather, we need to distinguish between two kinds of determination: namely between self-determination and external determination.

But what does 'self-determination' mean? According to Spinoza, self-determination means determination through the self-preservation drive, the so-called *conatus*. Insofar as humans are determined by their *conatus*, they are determined by their own nature or essence to persist in their existence and to increase their power.¹⁸ Spinoza repeats this point succinctly in his *Political Treatise*:

The more free we conceive a man to be, the more we are compelled to assume that he necessarily must preserve himself ... This is what everyone will easily concede who does not confuse freedom with chance.¹⁹

As this passage makes clear, human freedom is not an all-or-nothing affair but a gradual matter; it rises and falls with increase or decrease of power of persistence. Taking freedom as a gradual notion ranging between the complete self-determination of God and the degrees of human bondage, the original definition cited above can be taken as a maximal standard that is consistent with quantifying different degrees of freedom

¹⁷ See for a compatibilist 'minimal conception' of freedom Pauen 2003.

¹⁸ See Spinoza, *Ethica* III p 7. Cf. Kisner 2011, 18–23, who offers a similar reading.

¹⁹ See Spinoza, *Tractatus politicus*, II § 7, in: *The Political Works* 1958.

in beings that are merely part of God. Although the original definition of freedom sets out the complete freedom of God whose existence and actions are taken to be determined solely by his essence, Spinoza clearly allows for a gradual reading with regard to the extent of human self-determination through their *conatus*, i. e. their essence.²⁰ Tying freedom to the dynamics of the *conatus* also softens the distinction between existence and action. Of course, unlike God whose existence is determined solely by his essence,²¹ our essence does not account for our existence. But inasmuch as we successfully striving to persist, we also contribute to some degree to our existence.

The theory of the *conatus*, then, clearly is the essential component of Spinoza's notion of freedom, since it is the *conatus* that offers a criterion to distinguish between self-determination and coercion or internal and external determination. To keep things simple you can think of your *conatus* as some sort of internal programme that first of all maintains your vital proportions and functions. It makes sure that you breathe, digest and generally remain healthy; it starts to fight, if these functions are disturbed or threatened.²²

Crucial for an appreciation of the *conatus* with regard to the matter at hand is the fact that the *conatus* is a striving that we become mainly aware of, whenever we, as parts of nature, are exposed to alien or external determinants.²³ A disease, for instance, makes us aware of this striving as a kind of volition: we *want* to get well. On this view, everything that runs counter to this volition is an external determinant; or – taking into account our partial perspective – everything that *could* run counter to this volition. This is why the *conatus* is not only about preservation but also about prevention or increasing our power. You put on a warm jumper to stay in good health. Someone who steals your clothes, while you are having a swim in the sea, acts against this volition and makes you realise that you are not free.

Now, what complicates matters is that you do not actually know yourself, your physiological and psychological mechanisms, all that well. That

²⁰ Although Kisner 2011, concedes a 'degree freedom' (32) in Spinoza, he still speaks of 'different senses' of freedom (34).

²¹ See Spinoza, *Ethica* I def 1, where he famously introduces God as *causa sui*.

²² See Cook 2011 for a concise exposition of the *conatus* doctrine and its role in different sections of the *Ethics*.

²³ I will not go into the intricate debate on consciousness here. See Marshall 2013 for a thorough discussion.

is, you do not always have the proper means to preserve yourself *successfully*. According to Spinoza, this is the case, since we often have no *conceptual* grasp of ourselves and the relations we depend on. Instead of grasping these relations conceptually, we grasp them by means of *association* and this in an inadequate manner.²⁴ In such cases we are not guided by reason but by emotions and conventional moral judgements that we have become familiar with. When I, after having had my swim, stumble out of the sea and cannot find my clothes, it does not help my preservation to fume at the thief, to feel embarrassed or even fear. And although – given this bit of my biography – the fear that this might happen to me again is perfectly comprehensible, the fear bears no *conceptual* relation to the theft; it is only by means of *association*, in my personal experience, that the two are connected. Yet, out of this fear I might even end up avoiding swimming in the sea and thus begin to block my own path, as it were: I fall prey to my associations and emotions, guided by conventional generalizations which have no footing in conceptual relations. There simply is no conceptual relation between the sea and the theft.

In comparison to other external determinants, this kind of bondage or coercion is of the worst kind, since in such cases we make no use of our capacity to be guided by reason and instead surrender to the same kind of self-deceptions that delude us into thinking that our will might be free. This is why, according to Spinoza, the key to freedom rather lies in our being guided by reason and our adequate conceptual grasp of the relations we are part of.²⁵

In effect this means that we have to change our *perspective*. We must leave behind our conventional and affective attitudes, and gradually transform them into what one could call a *holistic attitude*, namely by viewing ourselves as a determined part of nature. If we are aware of what

²⁴ As Perler 2008 convincingly points out in recourse to *Ethica* I def 3, Spinoza distinguishes between a psychological and a conceptual view of ideas: (1) taken as mental acts ideas follow the causal-psychological order in accordance with association and convention; (2) taken with regard to their content they follow the conceptual order in accordance to the proper inferences. While the two orders coincide in God's mind, ideas in human minds are mostly inadequate in that the associative successions do not match the conceptual order. – The sophisticated relations between the psychology and semantics of ideas are lucidly developed in Renz 2010, esp. p. 215–259.

²⁵ Spinoza develops a detailed account of the relations and intricacies between reason, imagination and affects throughout parts III to V of the *Ethica*. See especially the passages dealing with the idea of the 'free man' from *Ethica* IV p 66 s onwards. A succinct exposition is offered by Garrett 1996.

drives us, let's say a great appetite, we normally attribute to ourselves the free decision to eat or not to eat. Accordingly, we judge ourselves to be immoderate, ascetic or what have you. By contrast, if we begin to see ourselves as part of a whole, we will recognise that there are reasons for this appetite. To act self-determinedly would thus mean not to act out of an affect we suffer, but to act out of rational insight into the reasons that determine us. In this sense Spinoza maintains that 'every action to which we are determined from an affect ..., we can be equally determined by reason, without that passion.'²⁶

4. Self-determination through *appropriation* of reasons

To be guided by reason means, then, to act out of the insight into the reasons that determine me. But what does this tell us, if anything? Do I not just recognize *that* I am determined? 'Insight into one's determining reasons' – this might have the enlightening ring of disillusionment, but insight into determination as such cannot be *self*-determination. Since self-determination cannot simply be tantamount to appreciating the reasons for certain events. Self-determination, if it deserves that name, should have something to do with *me* and should concern *my reasons* and thus *internal reasons*.

As Spinoza points out, in order to promote my freedom the reasons in question should arise or derive from my internal self-preservation drive, my *conatus*; it cannot be just any old reason. Otherwise I would be inclined to grasp and affirm *any* kind of determination, including determinants leading to my own death.²⁷ Clearly, such a take on self-determination would not be that attractive and would entail – among other things – *motivational* problems. So what should be so intriguing about insight into determination?²⁸

On my view, the crucial point is this: it is obviously insufficient to grasp the reasons guiding my actions; rather the actions and emotions resulting from these reasons have to *be actually self-preserving*. But given

²⁶ See Spinoza, *Ethica* IV p 59 (Curley, 231).

²⁷ Spinoza addresses such problems himself in various places; see for instance *Ethica* IV p 72 s.

²⁸ Perler 2011, 76–77, takes a Humean line and argues that the motivational problem is not sufficiently dealt with.

that I can truly adopt a *holistic attitude* and manage to grasp what it is that determines me, I should equally grasp what actually benefits *my* self-preservation. The motivational question, then, does not pose a principal problem.

Admittedly, at first glance, the holistic attitude might bring along some discouraging insights. Since I am necessarily just *part* of the whole nature, there are always certain determinants that are not self-preserving for me. That is, some determinants are principally external to my *conatus* such as, say, thieves or vicious dogs on a runner's track.²⁹

Yet having said that, it is impossible for *all* determinants to be external to my *conatus*; since, so long as I exist, I seem to preserve myself *successfully* to a sufficient degree – even if, or I'd rather say, exactly because I *interact* with other things and people.³⁰ Now, this means that many determinants that, viewed from the conventional attitude governed by association, I take to be external determinants turn out to be *internal* determinants when viewed from the holistic perspective. Since the holistic attitude turns originally external determinants that I suffer from, into *internal* determinants, which thus become *my* reasons for action. This is what I would like to call the 'appropriation of reasons'.³¹

²⁹ See Spinoza, *Ethica* IV p 4 (Curley, 202).

³⁰ The fact that self-preservation requires interaction is part of the reason why, *pace* Bennett and Della Rocca for instance, Spinoza's conception does rather entail a social than an egoistic view. See Spinoza, *Ethica* IV p 18 s (Curley, 209–210): 'Again from II Post 4 it follows that we can never bring it about that require nothing outside ourselves to preserve our being, nor that we live without having dealings with things outside us ... Of these, we can think of none more excellent than those which agree entirely with our nature. For if, for example, two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one. ... From this it follows that men who are governed by reason ... want nothing for themselves which they do not desire for other men.' See on this issue also Nadler 2014.

³¹ I consider the appropriation thesis as the upshot of what lies behind Spinoza's therapeutic recommendations. See for instance Spinoza, *Ethica* V p 10 d (Curley, 251): 'But it should be noted that in ordering our thoughts and images, we must always ... attend to those things which are good in each thing so that in this way we are always determined to acting from an affect of joy.' This draws on the idea that we can substitute passive affects with active affects of reason. As we have already seen in *Ethica* IV p 59 (Curley, 231), Spinoza thinks that, in principle, we can replace action-guiding passions with active affects (= guidance by reason) such that we can do the same thing out of fear or out of insight.

On my reading, then, Spinoza's holism entails an *appropriation thesis*. Let's illustrate this with a simple example. An easy one is the proverbial bitter medicine: I might have a personal preference for sweets and detest bitter drinks. On my conventional attitude, then, swallowing bitter medicine appears as something *external* and detestable. Yet, once I recognise its beneficial effect on my preservation, it will become *my* internal reason for action. Rational liberation, then, not only means insight into the inevitable, but also *appropriation of reasons*. The medicine is not forced onto me; rather the act of swallowing literally *follows* from my *conatus*, an act I happily appreciate as an increase of my power.

Now you might object whether it is not enough to successfully preserve myself – why do I additionally have to realise this? Is it not sufficient to blindly preserve myself and surrender to my fate? – Although this line of objection might seem obvious, it underestimates an extremely important issue: in the case of blind or undiscerning self-preservation, the majority of determinants that *essentially* agree with my *conatus* would appear to me as if they were *external*. That is, I would suffer from these determinants rather than appreciate them – and so they would not increase but decrease my power: the medicine would not appear healthy but primarily bitter. From an undiscerning perspective, the fact that this bitter stuff might be healthy after all, would appear to be a rather *accidental* feature. It is only the *insight* into *successful* self-preservation that allows for the *appropriation* of apparently external reasons as my internal reasons. In other words, the subject of this freedom does not disappear, but rather has to *discover* her- or himself, by gradually recognising more and more determinants as their very own reasons.

Conclusion: who strives?

As I hope to have shown, Spinoza does not only attack the conventional attribution of free will, but also develops a positive notion of freedom as self-determination. Granting his (admittedly tricky) premises, the disillusionment can be taken as a step towards the use of our rational *capacities*. Funnily enough, it is the insight into determination that allows for a gradual differentiation of internal self-determination and external coercion. Yet, on my reading, this notion of self-determination or autonomy has to be spelled out in terms of appropriation. Taken as a process of gradual appropriation, the route to freedom is one on which

a human being begins to coincide more and more with her *conatus*. In other words: our personal self – that is the person conceiving of herself within an apparently contingent biography – gradually approaches the ideal of the ‘free man’.

But this notion of freedom comes at a price. And I can only hint at its amount now. While I do not think that this notion of freedom entails the loss of individuality, I disagree with those who think that Spinoza envisages a trans-conventional community of free *persons*. That is, I think that it does entail the loss of our personal status and history. For the said appropriation raises the following question: *whose* self is it that is being preserved? Is it the *personal self* that values its habits or is it the *conatus self* that overcomes these habits? The more we liberate ourselves – in Spinoza’s sense – the less we can cling to our conventional attributions and descriptions, since the personal self with its personal preferences is the incarnation of deception guided by convention.

One might be inclined to spell out this problem in recourse to Harry Frankfurt’s conception of freedom: we are free inasmuch as our first-order volitions coincide with our second-order volitions. Then the question is: whose second order volitions are we talking about? The volitions of the personal self or of a perhaps yet to be appropriated *conatus*-self?³²

If one switches between the attitudinal extremes – that is between the personal stance and the stance of the free being – this question ceaselessly reappears. Who or what does actually strive for self-preservation: my conative self, eager to swallow the healing medicine, or my personal self, suffering and detesting the bitter taste and thus eager to diminish its impact?

At the end of the day, it seems pointless to play off the conative self against the personal self, since ‘nature’ with a capital ‘N’ and the *conatus* cannot be grasped independently of our descriptive practice. But then again, Spinoza never claimed that we can gain complete freedom in this life. Rather we ought to begin to see that we should not strive for freedom beyond nature but as part of nature.

³² See Frankfurt 1971.

Bibliography

- Bennett, Jonathan 1984: *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, Indianapolis.
- Brandom, Robert 2001: *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, Cambridge/Mass.
- Carriero, John 2014: The Ethics in Spinoza's *Ethics*, in: Kisner and Youpa (eds), *Essays on Spinoza's Ethical Theory*, Oxford.
- Cook, Thomas 2011: *Conatus*: A Pivotal Doctrine at the Center of the *Ethics*, in: M. Hampe, U. Renz and R. Schnepf (eds), *Spinoza's Ethics: A Collective Commentary*, Leiden, 149–166.
- Davidson, Donald 1999: Spinoza's Causal Theory of the Affects, in: Yirmiyahov Yovel (ed.), *Desire and Affect: Spinoza as Psychologist*, New York, 95–111.
- Della Rocca, Michael 1996: *Representation and the Mind-Body Problem in Spinoza*, Oxford.
- 2008: *Spinoza*, London.
- Frankfurt, Harry 1971: Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person, in: *Journal of Philosophy* 68, 5–20.
- Garrett, Don 1996: Spinoza's Ethical Theory, in: D. Garrett (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, Cambridge, 267–314.
- Hampe, Michael 2011: The Life of Free Persons Guided by Reason, in: M. Hampe, U. Renz and R. Schnepf (eds), *Spinoza's Ethics: A Collective Commentary*, Leiden, 247–261.
- Kisner, Matthew 2011: *Spinoza on Human Freedom: Reason, Autonomy and the Good Life*, Cambridge.
- Marshall, Eugene 2013: *The Spiritual Automaton: Spinoza's Science of the Mind*, Oxford.
- Nadler, Steven 2014: The Lives of Others: Spinoza on Benevolence as a Virtue, in: Kisner and Youpa (eds), *Essays on Spinoza's Ethical Theory*, Oxford.
- Pauen, Michael 2003: Self-Determination and Free Will: Conceptual and Empirical Issues, in: F. Schmalhofer, R. Young, G. Katz (eds), *Proceedings of EuroCogSci '03*, Mahwah, New Jersey, 259–264.
- 2011: Spinoza and the Theory of Identity, in: M. Hampe, U. Renz and R. Schnepf (eds), *Spinoza's Ethics: A Collective Commentary*, Leiden, 81–98.
- Pereboom, Derek 2007: Hard Incompatibilism, in: J. M. Fisher, R. Kane, D. Pereboom, M. Vargas, *Four Views on Free Will*, Oxford, 85–125.
- Perler, Dominik 2008: Begriffliche und psychologische Ordnung bei Spinoza, in: *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 90, 188–215.
- 2011: The Problem of Necessitarianism, in: M. Hampe, U. Renz and R. Schnepf (eds), *Spinoza's Ethics: A Collective Commentary*, Leiden, 57–77.
- Renz, Ursula 2011: The Definition of the Human Mind and the Numerical

- Difference between Subjects, in: M. Hampe, U. Renz and R. Schnepf (eds), *Spinoza's Ethics: A Collective Commentary*, Leiden, 99–118.
- 2010: *Die Erklärbarkeit von Erfahrung: Realismus und Subjektivität in Spinozas Theorie des menschlichen Geistes*, Frankfurt/Main.
- Sangiaco, Andrea 2016: Before the Conatus Doctrine: Spinoza's Correspondence with Willem van Blijenbergh, in: *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 98/2, 144–168.
- Seidl, Horst 1994: Zu Freiheit und Notwendigkeit bei Spinoza, in: E. Balibar, H. Seidel, M. Walther (eds), *Freiheit und Notwendigkeit: Ethische und politische Aspekte bei Spinoza und in der Geschichte des Spinozismus*, Würzburg, 31–39.
- Spinoza 1925: *Ethica*, in: *Opera* II, ed. by Carl Gebhardt, Heidelberg.
- 1994: *Ethics*, in: *A Spinoza Reader*, ed. and transl. by E. Curley, Princeton, New Jersey.
  - 1958: *The Political Works*, ed. by A. G. Wernham, Oxford, 1958.
- Thiel, Udo 1998: Personal Identity, in: D. Garber and M. Ayers (eds), *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* I, Cambridge, 878–880.
- Viljanen, Valtteri 2011: *Spinoza's Geometry of Power*, Cambridge.