

## CRITICAL REALISM IN THE PERSONAL DOMAIN

### Spinoza and Explanatory Critique of the Emotions

by

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*Abstract.* Within critical realist circles, the development of knowledge in the natural and social domains has thus far been much stronger by comparison with its respective development within the personal domain. What I want to explore here is how knowledge can be positively used to have emancipatory effects at the level of the individual. The way in which we are able to achieve this is by coming to have what Spinoza calls more adequate ideas of ourselves, other beings, and our place in nature through strengthening the explanatory power and minimizing the fallibility of the knowledge we use in our judgements and progressive articulations of personal situations by making use of explanatory critique and cause-object matching techniques. This article explains what an explanatory critique actually is and does before turning to explain why it interests us in relation to Spinoza's thought and then how it is specifically useful in connection with emotional revision and control.

*Key words:* emancipation; emotions; explanatory critique; self-transformation

#### *Introduction*

As Andrew Collier has noted,<sup>2</sup> critical realism has primarily been focused on developing scientific forms of knowledge, in both the natural and social worlds, whilst paying less attention to the epistemology of personal life and its ontological foundations. He further adds that, traditionally, such questions have largely been the domain of areas of thought which have often been considered to have an ambiguous relation to realism, with perhaps the most obvious example

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<sup>2</sup> Collier 1994, 260.

being existential phenomenology. Since then, although Collier's call has been heeded by Margaret Archer<sup>3</sup> and, most recently, by Christian Smith,<sup>4</sup> giving critical realism a firmer foot in the personal domain, there remains room to explore the emancipatory potential of critical realism within this area.

For, indeed, one of the most attractive elements of critical realism is its focus on the emancipatory potential of knowledge that clearly identifies with the Marxist position that emphasizes that 'philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the thing however is to change it'.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, consistent with critical realism's emancipatory ideal, which is for scientific knowledge to inform the removal of constraints frustrating our needs (i.e. false beliefs and/or oppressive structures), thereby increasing our level of self-determination, what I want to explore here is how such knowledge can be used positively to have emancipatory effects at the level of, and be made more accessible to, the individual.

It can be shown that Baruch Spinoza is well placed to extend critical realism's emancipatory project by illuminating the personal dimension of explanatory critique. Moreover, these ideas show not only how explanatory critique can function in relation to everyday experience, but also that explanatory critique in *any* domain has profound personal effects in the sense that we gain greater control of our world in general through understanding it. A case in practice illustrates how Spinoza's insights and techniques enable us to actively confront some of the emotional challenges that we encounter in life on a daily basis. What also emerges from this as our investigations progress is the acute unfolding of explanatory critique itself as a liberating emotional drama.<sup>6</sup>

To achieve this, we need to take a close look at Spinoza's *Ethics*.<sup>7</sup> This not only tries to improve our self-understanding by demonstrating and connecting a range of metaphysical and epistemological doctrines, for these are developed to undergird its ultimate aim of providing a moral psychology that teaches us the 'right way of living'; but also, for Spinoza, this entails improving our character, which in itself presupposes coming to have truer ideas about life. To live rationally is to learn about science, which provides our path to salvation by coming into the possession of a better understanding of our emotions and how they connect us to the world, transforming ourselves in the process.

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<sup>3</sup> Archer 2000, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Smith 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Marx 1982, 72.

<sup>6</sup> My thanks go to Stephen Norrie for his useful comments on these matters.

<sup>7</sup> Spinoza 1996. References from the *Ethics* will be cited in the following way: e.g., E3 prop 15s means *Ethics*, Part 3, Proposition 15, Scholium.

First, however, it is necessary to explain what an explanatory critique is and does before examining the nature of our bodies as open systems to understand the relevance of Spinoza's distinction between adequate and inadequate ideas. We will then consider how substituting adequate for inadequate ideas can make explanatory critique work at the level of the body and perception before explaining how this is specifically useful in connection with emotional revision and control.

### *Explanatory Critique*

As Collier succinctly construes it, an 'explanatory critique is an explanation of something which criticizes it, not *in addition to*, but *by explaining it*'.<sup>8</sup> More precisely, its aim is to challenge the false (or inadequate, misleading, etc.) ideas and beliefs inherent in some perceived reality that we take for granted. It does this by questioning and exposing the causal relations and functions of that perceived reality which underpin and maintain those false beliefs. The paradigm case referred to in the critical realist literature<sup>9</sup> is exemplified in Karl Marx's critique of ideology through which he undermines the common perception of the wage as the price of labour within the social and economic system of capitalism that is necessary to sustain it.<sup>10</sup>

The deceptive nature of the wage emerges from the apparent purchase of a certain quantity of labour by the capitalist from the worker, when in fact what is being bought is actually labour-power (ability to work) over a certain period of time. This mode of exploitation is hidden by the fact that the exchange value (the wage) is paid to a worker only after a quantifiable period of time together with a pay slip detailing a given quantity of work in terms of time or piece rates determined by quantity produced. *Prima facie*, there appears to be an equal exchange: the worker is being paid for a given quantity of labour. Suspicion is aroused when it is questioned how it is possible for a system of production based on wage-labour to yield a profit if exchange is based on equivalence. As it transpires, this possibility arises because it is the worker's labour-power being paid for at its value (the cost of subsistence), which must then be less than the value of the product of labour itself (what is actually produced). Hence, the value of the labour-power sold is only equivalent to a portion of the product of labour, the part known as 'necessary labour', leaving the 'surplus labour' that produces the capitalist's

<sup>8</sup> Collier 1999, 35, original emphasis.

<sup>9</sup> Bhaskar 1986, 197–9; Collier 1994, 172–3.

<sup>10</sup> See Friedrich Engels's introduction to *Wage Labour and Capital* (Engels 1999).

profit. Thus, ultimately, an unequal exchange is disguised as an equal one, and the neoclassical mantra ‘a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work’ is exposed for what it really is.

Having seen how explanatory critique works with social objects, we will now look at how similar principles can equally be applied to the thinking body, which per se has the inherent capacity to change or, in cases of bodily perception at least, annul the assent of certain tenets of our inner thought structures.

### *Body and Perception*

Consonant with Marx, Spinoza was also a thinker concerned with the possibility of human emancipation embodied in the central idea that drove the Enlightenment (to borrow a saying of Jesus<sup>11</sup> and put a secular gloss on it): ‘You shall know the truth and it shall set you free’. Marx’s scientific approach sought to remove constraints on our freedom by revealing the ‘false consciousness’ engendered by the conditioning of our social and economic circumstances, with the intent of changing society. By contrast, Spinoza’s account of freedom and scientific knowledge seeks the salvation of humankind from the perspectivism inherent in everyday life that results from being a part of nature. This is achieved through the cultivation of reason to illuminate its workings with the intention of changing ourselves. Even so, to understand how operations of reason can make explanatory critique work at the level of body and perception, it is necessary to examine the nature of our bodies as open systems to understand the relevance of Spinoza’s distinctions between adequate and inadequate ideas. Thus, he begins with the question, ‘What does it mean to be a part of nature?’, and closely follows up this concern with the further question, ‘How is this connected with the explanation of error?’

For Spinoza, nature is a self-contained and self-moving system meaning that as parts or modifications of it, we are necessarily caught up within its motions of causes and effects. Thus, as individual modes, we are constantly acting on other modes and also being acted on by them at the same time. What this effectively means is that contra the Humean understanding of individuals as separately existing units, bodies can never be entirely insulated from their environment, rendering the very notion of another self-contained closed system within the entirety of being a false one. It then follows that, as

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<sup>11</sup> John 8:32, John 8:32. Although this expression is attributed to Jesus, its intended meaning also succinctly encapsulates and parallels the spirit of the Enlightenment – both had the intention of freeing the world from ignorance and error, even though, of course, they differed through their means.

'individual' modes, we are open systems without clearly defined boundaries. Thus, each individual body is causally connected with material nature and cannot avoid continuous transactions with other bodies. Moreover, this has the implication that, because the mind as the idea of the body reflects these interactive confluences of our bodies with others, we consequently erroneously perceive things in what Spinoza calls a 'random' or 'confused' manner.<sup>12</sup>

Our self-awareness or imagination (which consists of subjective experience including sensory perception) is then literally cast as an arbitrary and confused succession of ideas reflecting our successive bodily modifications (changes) impinged on by external bodies. Thus our imagination is held to inadequately represent external bodies as well as our own because it is incapable of perceiving either of their true natures transparently and is moreover ignorant of what causes it to be this way. Hence, when we perceive an external object, we do not see the thing in itself because it can only be seen through the 'rose tinted lenses' of our body which then necessarily distorts it. In contrast to the common sense or Cartesian view of judgement, which considers the intellect to be a separate faculty that presents representational ideas to the will for its assent, for Spinoza our perceptions of things and our judgements are both necessarily integrated into the process of ideation itself (the very act of representing something is by definition to affirm it) given that it reflects awareness of successive bodily modifications. Consequently, as Yirmiyahu Yovel further observes, 'the mind also automatically asserts these ideas to be the true expressions of external objects, which of course they are not'.<sup>13</sup> They are, as Spinoza characteristically puts it, like 'conclusions without premises'.<sup>14</sup> As such, our

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<sup>12</sup> As Genevieve Lloyd insightfully illustrates, Spinoza's 'ideas' have important connections with and differences from Aristotle's concept of form – the intelligible principle of a thing – whose difference comes out in his treatment of the mind as 'idea' of the body. 'For Aristotle the soul ... is the "form" of the body. It is what we know in knowing the body. But it is not a mental object, set over against the body. It makes the body the living thing it is ... Spinozistic minds, like other "ideas", are expressions of reality under the "attribute" of thought. And the same reality is expressed under another attribute – matter or extension – as finite bodies. Each attribute is a way in which the same reality becomes intelligible ... Spinoza's "ideas" differ from Aristotelian "forms" in being essentially mental items, rather than ways in which matter is constituted or determined. But the mind's status in relation to these mental contents is not what we might expect from familiarity with other seventeenth-century versions of "ideas". The individual mind – rather than being the repository of private mental contents, set over against an outer world – becomes itself an idea with the human body as its object. The mind's awareness is not directed at some mental item from which it infers the existence of body as something external' (Lloyd 1996, 6–7). See note 34, below, for details on how Spinoza's metaphysical monism differs from Roy Bhaskar's synchronic emergent powers materialism.

<sup>13</sup> Yovel 2002, 159.

<sup>14</sup> E2 prop 28dem.

subjective view of the world is a partial and fragmented one that uncritically perceives reality from what Spinoza calls ‘the common order of nature’ (what critical realists call the empirical domain) which is to be contrasted with ‘the order and connection of things’ (what critical realists call the real domain) that ‘actually structures the world, and hence the purely subjective, associative nexus of ideas it generates is to be distinguished from the “order and connection of ideas”, i.e., the system of all true ideas about the universe’.<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, Spinoza was not entirely pessimistic with regards to these psychological habits of human nature. This optimism can be seen to emerge when careful consideration of the above reveals that there is nothing absolute about error, which he confirms in E2 prop 33 (since every event, including erroneous judgements, corresponds to an independent reality that has an explanation).<sup>16</sup> That is, taken in itself, imagination is a naturally occur-ring bodily process, meaning that when falsity occurs it is because the partial and fragmentary ideas that we perceive result from their being incorrectly matched to their true objects or causes.<sup>17</sup> As such, it is an optimism tempered with the inherent realism that once we understand how the causal workings of nature deceive us, we will also realize why the distorted perspective that imagination provides us is no mere illusion that can simply be substituted for some alternative form of reality – for it remains true of its objects when it is adequately understood in the context of its wider causes. That is, our knowledge of causes at the level of imagination is necessarily incomplete. The realities of distortion entailed within sensory perception are clearly illustrated by Spinoza when he gives the following exegesis of how we perceive the sun:

[W]hen we look at the sun, we imagine it as about two hundred feet away from us, an error which does not consist simply in this imagining, but in the fact that while we imagine it this way, we are ignorant of its true distance and of the cause of this imagining. For even if we later come to know that it is more than six hundred diameters of the earth away from us, we nevertheless imagine it as near. For we imagine the sun so near not because we do not know its true distance, but because an affection of our body involves the essence of the sun insofar as our body is affected by the sun.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Yovel 2002, 159.

<sup>16</sup> See note 52, below.

<sup>17</sup> In E2 prop 41 Spinoza indicates that imagination is the cause of falsity, not that it is entirely or necessarily false. For instance, while our knowledge of things based on sense-perception is inherently flawed, this is not to say we cannot make certain affirmations that do accurately correspond to facts regarding an existing object or event in the world, although sense-perception per se is insufficient to determine whether such affirmations are true. See Parkinson 1974, 35.

<sup>18</sup> E2 prop 35s.

Genevieve Lloyd provides a good overview of the key issues that warrant our attention here when she asserts that cognitive error is to be overcome 'not by avoiding imaginings but by knowing their inadequacy. We begin to understand what error is ... by recognizing that our imaginations, considered in themselves, contain no error. The mind errs, not in imagining, but only in lacking an idea which excludes the existence of those things which it imagines to be present to it'.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the role of reason is to correct our pre-reflective ideas and reassign them to their correct objects by revealing what causes their ignorance.

#### *Adequacy and Explanation*

Still, it remains to be seen how inadequate ideas are to be replaced with ideas that more adequately represent the entities they are ideas of. For given that knowledge based on sense-perception is necessarily distorted through bodily modification, how is it possible for us to have a clear understanding of anything? To explain this we need to outline what according to Spinoza epistemologically allows us to distinguish adequate ideas from inadequate ideas and how their genesis is constituted. It was previously noted that in imagination we confusedly accept the appearances of our perceptual judgements at face value according to the 'common order of nature' because these ideas are delivered to us, not as they actually are according to 'the order and connection of things', but in terms of how they are reflected by our bodily modifications impinged on by external bodies. Therefore, inadequate ideas passively come to us in an unsystematic order, leaving us to infer confused causal connections between appearances because they involve external causes – that is, they come to us fortuitously because they are not effects directly caused by us.

By contrast, we come into possession of adequate ideas when the mind begins to act by understanding and explaining why things appear to us the way they do in the context of a wider system by providing reasons that draw causal connections between them. The successive changes in our ideas now flow logically and directly from one another and are furthermore determined internally. Thus there are two crucial distinctions to be aware of here: where the causal origin of our ideas resides in addition to how the ideas we have are ordered and follow on from one another. While inadequate ideas are products of thinking that is externally caused, randomly ordered and perspectival, adequate ideas represent thinking that is self-generated, system-

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<sup>19</sup> Lloyd 1996, 66.

atically ordered and transparent. The uncritical nature of imagination simply accepts appearances presented to it at face value (i.e. the subjective experience of simply believing that wages are payment for labour, since all we see is a payslip after a certain period of time has passed, telling us ‘how much work we have done’), but when the illuminating power of reason intervenes by insisting that ‘if I understand the basic principles behind this, then this is how things must really be, even if they do not look that way’ (i.e. Marx’s critique of the wage-form), the very nature of our thought process undergoes a fundamental transition. External determination then becomes internal and conclusions are now arrived at complete with premises.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, the question remains, where do we get these premises from in order to generate adequate cognition?

Subjective experience via the senses provides the starting point of knowledge for Spinoza, but this only provides us with limited access to the outside world. Nonetheless, it is through this inherent self-awareness of bodily activity itself that our capacity to reason emerges. For in our continuous transactions with other bodies, our bodily modifications reflected as conscious experience necessarily encounter certain properties that are present and common to all things and uniform patterns of behaviour which must always be reflected to the mind transparently. This follows because spatio-temporal object sequences and relations of cause and effect within the empirical realm of appearances are inconceivable without them. Consequently, they are not susceptible to the partiality and perspectivism that constitutes our awareness of things considered in isolation (since they are only one particular aspect of a wider causal system), and are the source of adequate knowledge. These are

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<sup>20</sup> Christian Smith writes that ‘humans ... enjoy the capacity to be the *efficient causes of their own actions and interactions*. People are not simply passive objects upon which other objects act. Humans are able to cause their own acts. People can mobilize their representational beliefs, memories, interests, desires, emotions, values, moral commitments, and identities to decide with a significant degree of free will on certain courses of action and then to put them into motion. People’s actions, in other words, can often be understood as significantly, though not completely, caused by the people who are acting’ (Smith 2010, 48, original emphasis). Here it can be seen that Spinoza’s concept of internal determination (acting) that merges the intellect and the will adds to our understanding of what it really means to be self-caused by providing a clearer and more robust criterion through which we can properly be said to be the efficient cause of our decisions and therefore by extension our actions. For while many ‘desires are, of course, merely passionate products of the imagination, with little or no involvement of reason ... it is also possible for an adequate idea, produced by reason, to constitute a desire. If, for example, one determines by reason that one’s own advantage lies in the pursuit of knowledge, or in the institution of a well-ordered state, or in association with individuals like oneself, then the idea that constitutes this understanding will itself be a desire for the thing so conceived ... It will not merely direct or stimulate a desire; it will *be* such a desire’ (Garrett 1996, 296, original emphasis).



what Spinoza calls 'common notions',<sup>21</sup> and these principles represent the inherent underlying features or basic concepts of scientific knowledge that are universal across the whole of nature. These are taken to be properties pertaining to spatial identity, general principles governing the movement of things in space and fundamental logical principles.

Initially, we are only implicitly aware of this knowledge due to the nature of our random encounters with things. However, given the nature and complexity of our design as open systems, we retain traces of those transactions and experiences with other bodies and in the act of consciously reflecting upon the ideas we have accumulated and stored we can conceptually refine and grasp what is common to them by closely examining 'a number of things at once, to understand their agreements, differences, and oppositions'.<sup>22</sup> That is, through rational manipulation we can systematically organize our experiences and draw out what is common to them. This allows us to achieve an adequate identity between our thoughts and the objects of our thoughts from which we can infer, not only their logical connections, but also other deductive relations that necessarily follow from them. Nonetheless, this initial embedding of reasoning is not simply a passive registration of environmental events but an interactive and practical one.

Archer,<sup>23</sup> drawing on and quoting Jean Piaget,<sup>24</sup> outlines how a child's development of the concept of object permanence (existential intransitivity) is concomitant with acceptance of the world's laws and logic:

Through the visual and auditory tracking of objects, through manipulative activities like reaching and grasping and throwing/dropping, to the point where she seeks for hidden objects, the child gradually shows in action that she attributes permanence to objects which are conceived of as possessing autonomy and independence from her own subjective state. Physical groping to find objects, under things like the coverlet, are involved in learning the fact of object displacement, that is that they remain the same object but may have been transferred from A to B, and then concealed. 'Such gropings in fact sufficiently demonstrate the necessity of active experience in order to build up sequential perceptions; that is for the child to understand that the object constitutes an independent body in motion which is capable of multiple displacements.'

This outlines how a child's ability to construct a spatio-temporal network complete with a system of relations of cause to effect and their own place within it develops from the recurrent features of their sensorimotor patterns

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<sup>21</sup> E2 prop 38.

<sup>22</sup> E2 prop 29s.

<sup>23</sup> Archer 2000, 147.

<sup>24</sup> Piaget 1955, 93.

– common notions. Thus, the emergence of abstract reason is facilitated by the coordination of sensory experiences with practical action.

Our ability to develop our reasoning capacities further is then dependent upon subsequently engaging in increasingly more difficult tasks, and it is through becoming further acquainted with logic and other scientific disciplines in the discursive order of reality that we are able to become fully self-conscious and explain to ourselves the inadequacy of our knowledge from the senses by understanding what things have in common. For Spinoza also states that there are more specific common notions, what he refers to as ‘adequate ideas of the properties of things’,<sup>25</sup> and the more ‘the body has many things in common with other bodies’ then the more ‘the mind is ... capable of perceiving many things adequately’.<sup>26</sup>

These are properties that relate to the general principles and mechanisms of sciences concerned with finite systems of complex objects within nature, such as biology or psychology. All adequate ideas necessarily involve understanding what things have in common, for as Spinoza goes on to note, ‘the foundations of reason are notions ... which explain those things which are common to all, and which ... do not explain the essence of any singular thing’.<sup>27</sup> Hence, these mechanisms and principles are not, in Collier’s terms, objects or events of a ‘spatially locatable’ kind, for they are implicit within the natures of things and immanently operate as ‘tendencies of certain natural kinds’ wherever ‘those natural kinds are instantiated’.<sup>28</sup> As such, they are the real powers and underlying causes of the particular objects falling within their domain. These common notions enable us to describe what constitutes the external causes of situations and events and open up the possibility of their explanation. They do so in the respect that knowledge of mechanisms and principles can be assimilated together to form explanatory frameworks which can then be applied to particulars in order to apprehend them. Thus, when a technician works out what is wrong with my washing machine, this is reasoning by employing frameworks generated through common notions.

### *Correcting Error*

We now have at our disposal common notions in the form of mechanisms and explanatory principles to use as the appropriate scientific tools with which to

<sup>25</sup> E2 prop 39; prop 40s2.

<sup>26</sup> E2 prop 39c.

<sup>27</sup> E2 prop 44c2.

<sup>28</sup> Collier 1994, 109. From a critical realist perspective, the conflation of adequate ideas and mechanisms would seem to commit the epistemic fallacy, but see note 52, below.

subsume and apprehend things. Thus, in the case of sensory perception, as we saw previously, our confused and perspectival ideas occur because the mind, as the idea of the body, automatically reflects our interactive confluences with external bodies without adequately expressing the causes of those interactive confluences. In addition, this leads them to be incorrectly matched to their true objects or causes in the respect that they purportedly express something else instead, i.e. an imaginary visual idea that distortedly reflects its intended external object. Moreover, it is because these ideas are expressed automatically that we are unable to simply correct or manipulate them at will. This situation arises because the human mind is integrated within nature itself, meaning that our judgements cannot be contrasted with natural processes. Hence, they are to be understood as phenomena governed by the same principles that govern all other things. The consequences that follow from this are that the exclusion of false beliefs can only be achieved by means of the causal work of reasoning processes that are able to remove their contradictions and misconceptions by explaining them. This annuls the assent of the false belief in the process by affirming a true one that correctly locates the former within 'the order and connection of things', which in the case of sensory perception is the interactive confluence of the body's sensory apparatus with an external body.

It can then be seen that correctly explaining an inadequate idea by its true causes involves breaking that idea down into its basic components and then connecting those components to their relevant causal mechanisms and principles within the framework of an adequately conceived causal system. Thus, with reference to Spinoza's example of the sensory appearance of the sun, once we are aware of the nature of the optical properties of our body, astronomy, and how light works, we will know and can scientifically explain how they interact to produce the distorted visual appearances that we characteristically perceive. That is, we will understand our perception of the sun as a small yellow ball that looks to be around two hundred feet away from us to be the result of a large celestial body that emits electromagnetic radiation from a far away distance, which is then detected by an eye that imparts signals to the brain, which then translates these signals to produce the sensory perceptions which coincide with our visual ideas of the sun. Thus, once we have a basic understanding of how something works in principle, this in itself is an adequate idea and one that is sufficiently empowered to acknowledge and correct a false idea. Moreover, the adequacy or completeness of our ideas is always a matter of degree. Hence, it follows that the more adequate or complete the explanatory framework is, the greater its explanatory power and enlightening effects for the individual concerned.

*Transforming Emotions*

Why do emotions matter, and why are Spinoza's views pertaining to them worth considering? Spinoza, like the Buddhists and the Stoics, considers the emotions to be the main impediment to human freedom.<sup>29</sup> This is not because of their shoving power per se,<sup>30</sup> but because they reflect our connections to objects of concern that lie beyond our control, thereby placing us at the mercy of external forces. Unlike the Buddhists and Stoics, however, his solution is not to extinguish them, but to transform them, since the joys we experience from engaging with the world are the source of energy for our personal strength. While elsewhere in the critical realist literature Archer<sup>31</sup> offers a transvaluation approach as a means towards transforming our emotions based on reconstituting our self-identity, the aspect of Spinoza I want to illuminate here is concerned with changing our emotions by revealing the nature of the optical illusions that permeate and cloud our consciousness.<sup>32</sup>

To elaborate, our initial task will be to outline briefly the cognitive nature of our emotions.<sup>33</sup> It is the fact that our emotional responses are partly constituted and subtly shaped by the ways in which we formulate them that necessarily renders them subject to progressive articulation, thus opening the door for real emotional elaboration and revision to occur. This may be affirmed on the basis that, because our ideas are real, and under Spinoza's double aspect theory, the relation between mind and body is a parallel and correlative one, any change in our ideas will necessarily coincide with a concomitant bodily change.<sup>34</sup> For

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<sup>29</sup> While, of course, one can convincingly make the case that that particular 'award' belongs to capitalism, one can also argue that it is only through emotions that capitalism, or anything else for that matter, can oppress us at all.

<sup>30</sup> Nussbaum 2001, 502.

<sup>31</sup> Archer 2000, chapter 7.

<sup>32</sup> Collier (1999) also provides a realist account of emotions that makes use of Spinoza. Nonetheless, although his account contains a partial element directed towards promoting personal autonomy, his main focus is on revising our emotions through discovering the ontological value of other beings with a view towards developing a non-anthropocentric ethics.

<sup>33</sup> For other Spinozist accounts of emotions see Debrabander 2007; Delahunty 1985; Della Rocca 2008; Lloyd 1996; Neu 1977; Nussbaum 2001; Rorty 2001.

<sup>34</sup> This is in contradistinction to synchronic emergent powers materialism, which holds that mind is emergent from matter and interacts with it either through downwards causation (see Bhaskar 2008, 111–17; Smith 2010, 40–42) or by irreducible reasons causing events in the world (see Bhaskar 1998, chapter 3). For Spinoza, however, there is only one reality or 'stuff', substance, whose essence is expressed through the two attributes of thought and extension, therefore logically speaking there cannot be any interaction between mental and physical events. For an argument, however, demonstrating that for practical purposes the consequences of this are equivalent to interactionism, see Collier 1999, 38–39.

instance, Charles Taylor<sup>35</sup> (whom Archer's<sup>36</sup> transvaluation account draws upon) describes how there are often times when we feel an inchoate emotion such as guilt over remarks made to others, but are unable to fully articulate the significance of our actions. However, if we engage in further reflection and examine the situation more closely our sense of guilt may dissipate if we come to realize that there was nothing in our remarks to justify causing offence; it may intensify if we become fully aware of how insensitive our remarks really were; or it might be reduced if we consider that to have done otherwise would be tantamount to compromising our ideals.

By recognizing that emotions are dependent on interpretations that emerge from a sense or awareness of our situation, a critical and reflexive examination of self and circumstances facilitates the possibility of exploring and offering a potentially deeper and more penetrating understanding, which in the process can fundamentally transform the emotion concerned. This provides us with the sufficient grounding we need to take the further and more decisive step of learning how to enhance our autonomy by considering how we as selves can learn to increase our understanding and with it what Spinoza calls our power of acting (our personal 'strength').

For as Susan Wolf<sup>37</sup> argues, the ability to revise ourselves successfully not only requires the ability to transform ourselves as evaluation tells us, but also the means to evaluate ourselves and our situations sensibly and accurately. Nonetheless, what does it really mean to evaluate ourselves sensibly and accurately?<sup>38</sup> We are able to achieve this by coming to have more adequate ideas of ourselves, other beings, and our place in nature through strengthening the explanatory power and minimizing the fallibility of the knowledge we use in our judgements and progressive articulations of personal situations by making use of explanatory critique and cause-object matching techniques.

Such principles are developed in Part 5 of *The Ethics*, where the mind's power is held to contain remedies for the affects. Just as our bodily perceptions can be the subject matter of explanatory critique, so can our emotions, for they too are also judgements. However, emotions differ from bodily perceptions in the respect that, while assent to the latter's distortions can only be annulled, the character of the former can be fundamentally altered through the transformative power of understanding.

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<sup>35</sup> Taylor 1985, 63–64.

<sup>36</sup> Archer 2000.

<sup>37</sup> Wolf 2002, 159.

<sup>38</sup> For Archer (2000, 232–41), it is through reflexively testing the worth of what we care about in light of our other commitments and with what we feel we can live with emotionally in terms of costs to the self.

The reason for this is that with sensory perception we can only annul the assent to false ideas presented to us once we are able to acknowledge and explain them, since our understanding of them as necessarily emergent from interactive confluences between our bodies and external objects does not in and of itself causally change them as sensory perceptions. By contrast, with emotions the situation is different, principally because their causal structure is specifically dependent upon how we perceive and evaluate situations that are intrinsically connected with the conatus<sup>39</sup> (thoughts that affirm an increase or decrease in our power of action), and in cases such as these, it follows through Spinoza's psycho-physicalism that any change in our ideas will necessarily coincide with a concomitant physical change. Therefore, insofar as we can change these causal thoughts there is at least something we can potentially do about them – although we must bear in mind that Spinoza's optimism with regards to the affects is also tempered with an inherent realism, this time in the respect that when considered in the grand scheme of things, our power over our emotions is inherently limited given that we are 'infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes'.<sup>40</sup>

Nonetheless, the means we do have at our disposal to transform ourselves and enhance our autonomy, as we have already mentioned, can be strengthened significantly by using a method through which we can improve our self-articulations and with it our power of acting by coming into the possession of more adequate ideas. This is confirmed by Spinoza himself when he writes: '*There is no affection of the body of which we cannot form a clear and distinct concept*',<sup>41</sup> and supported further when he indicates that 'each of us has – in part, at least, if not absolutely – the power to understand himself and his affects, and consequently, the power to bring it about that he is less acted on by them'.<sup>42</sup> For it follows that, as with other objects of potential understanding, the basic principles of explanatory critique work just the same for emotions: it is through employing frameworks generated by common notions that we can correctly explain an inadequate idea (or in this case a passive

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<sup>39</sup> The conatus is defined by Spinoza in E3 prop 7 as the 'striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being' which 'is nothing but the actual essence of the thing'. He then goes on to assert in E3 prop 9s that when 'this striving is ... related to the mind and body together, it is called appetite', which is therefore 'nothing but the very essence of man', and furthermore that between 'appetite and desire there is no difference' so '*desire* can be defined as *Appetite together with consciousness of the appetite*'. Consequently if, as Spinoza claims, desire is the essence of the thing, the conatus for our intents and purposes may be held to be synonymous with our sense of self-identity emergent from our unique structure of personal concerns (original emphasis).

<sup>40</sup> E4 app.

<sup>41</sup> E5 prop 4, original emphasis.

<sup>42</sup> E5 prop 4s.

emotion since they are also confused and perspectival ideas) by breaking it down into its basic components and then connecting those components to their relevant causal mechanisms and principles within the framework of an adequately conceived causal system. That this is furthermore confirmed by Spinoza can be seen when he asserts that: *'If we separate emotions, or affects, from the thought of an external cause, and join them to other thoughts, then the love, or hate, toward the external cause is destroyed, as are the vacillations of mind arising from these affects'*.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, we should start by noting to ourselves that an emotion occurs when we perceive a change (or potential change) in our situation or our attention is drawn to the salient well-being or vulnerability of a concern. Hence, emotions emerge as a result of our perceiving some objects or events either to enhance the projects that matter to us or to diminish them (they are, as Archer<sup>44</sup> characteristically calls them, 'commentaries upon our concerns'). The strength of an emotion per se represents an evaluation of the object of concern and its respective place among the structure of concerns that forms the conatus of the given individual, given that 'the force of each affect is defined by the power of the external cause compared with our own'.<sup>45</sup> Spinoza also notes that it follows from this

that sickness of the mind and misfortunes take their origin especially from too much love toward a thing which is liable to many variations and which we can never fully possess. For no one is disturbed or anxious concerning anything unless he loves it, nor do wrongs, suspicions arise, and enmities arise except from love for a thing which no one can really fully possess.<sup>46</sup>

In telling us that the hold an emotion exerts over us is directly proportional to how important an object is to us, Spinoza is insinuating that in order to preserve and enhance our strength we will inevitably make strenuous efforts to maintain control over that which is deemed important to us. For given that our own power of acting is always incomplete, we cannot but be needy beings who must necessarily draw power from external causes as well as be inherently vulnerable to them. For those objects judged to be of most value to us, a dispositional desire or concern emerges out of a palpable awareness of our distinct need for them, and any passion that further results from this desire being aided or restrained has a greater impact on our power of acting the greater our need is to possess the object in question. The way to free ourselves from the power and strength of troublesome emotions that emerge

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<sup>43</sup> E5 prop 2, original emphasis.

<sup>44</sup> Archer 2000, 195.

<sup>45</sup> E5 prop 20s.

<sup>46</sup> E5 prop 20s.

from the significance of these emotive events, then, is to change the ways in which we evaluate them.<sup>47</sup> In order to enhance our chances of success, this is to be done not simply by elaborating finer terms for them in a reflexive re-articulation in the manner consistent with Taylor<sup>48</sup> – but more specifically by broadening our cognitive understanding of them in such a way that we are able to change our evaluations by altering our beliefs as to the nature of their causes and furthermore by questioning the role they play in our lives. For, as Spinoza distinctly points out, insofar as the mind undergoes things it is necessarily passive, but insofar as it has adequate ideas it is necessarily active.<sup>49</sup>

It is because passive emotions as judgements affirm of their bodily modifications a transition to a greater or lesser perfection, together with the ‘idea of an external cause’, that the mind is determined externally ‘to think of this rather than that’, as Spinoza puts it.<sup>50</sup> Thus, just as with sensory perception, in making such affirmations the mind as the idea of the body is merely reflecting the interactive confluences of our bodies together with others, meaning that passive emotions are also confused and perspectival ideas that once again happen to be ignorant of what causes them to be this way. Hence, when we consider that, as confused ideas, our emotions necessarily involve an external object (the ‘idea of an external cause’), the tendency for them as judgements is to be fixated on one object in particular as the cause of our transition to a greater or lesser perfection and also the significance of this with regards to our specific relation to it.

This carries even more prominence when our inherently perspectival emotions not only narrow their focus down to one particular object as their cause, but moreover when that cause is imagined to be ‘free’. For as Spinoza goes on to inform us: ‘*The greatest affect of all, other things equal, is one toward a thing we imagine simply, and neither as necessary, nor as possible, nor as contingent*’.<sup>51</sup> The most pertinent culprit responsible for this way of thinking that Spinoza wants to draw our attention to is our very own dearly held conception of the will. This is made clear in the ensuing demonstration when he refers us back to the same proposition that contained his exegesis of how we perceive the sun, in which he also states: ‘men are deceived in that they think themselves free [i.e., they think that, of their own free will, they can either do a thing

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<sup>47</sup> Archer’s (2000, chapter 7) account of emotions focuses on changing how we evaluate events via reflexively monitoring the self and revising and reordering one’s concerns through inner conversation in light of the commentaries we receive, thereby creating a new ‘sounding board’ for our emotional ‘imports’.

<sup>48</sup> Taylor 1985, 63–4.

<sup>49</sup> E3 prop 1.

<sup>50</sup> E3 gen.def.aff.

<sup>51</sup> E5 prop 5, original emphasis.



or forbear doing it], an opinion which consists only in this, that they are conscious of the causes of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined'.<sup>52</sup> The consequences of these claims can be seen to be particularly important in the respect that the emotional object is often taken to be either one's self or another person. Thus, many of the most intense emotional experiences that we suffer have a tendency to arise from partial ideas that narrowly focus on their objects being 'free' causes, particularly with reference to ourselves and others.<sup>53</sup> This frequently occurs in cases when we inadequately perceive emotional scenarios such as those whereby event B that benefits or hinders us is perceived to follow directly from the actions of A, with A then being typically attributed as B's sole, sufficient and originating cause that 'could and/or should have been otherwise'.

Such scenarios can clearly be seen in emotions belonging to the social order of reality such as anger, guilt and pride.<sup>54</sup> If we consider anger first, this

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<sup>52</sup> E2 prop 35s. It is worth mentioning here that Spinoza's ambitious commitment to the principle of sufficient reason (the premise that every fact or event has an explanation – henceforth PSR) commits him to a different model of determinism from the ubiquity model (every event has a real cause) postulated by Bhaskar (2008, 70–71). Spinoza holds that reality is ultimately grounded in intelligibility and causation is identified with explanation, and furthermore that such 'explanations are – in principle – graspable *by us*' (Della Rocca 2008, 2, original emphasis), meaning that his model is a variant of intelligibility determinism (every event has a cause intelligible to humanity). Hence, even though, as Francis Haserot points out, '[e]pistemology is not primary; it is deduced from ontology. Part II of the *Ethics* is unintelligible without Part I' and that 'the order of nature is ever present to be discovered whether it is so discovered at any historical moment or not' (Haserot 1950, 474–5), in critical realist terms, this still leaves Spinoza exposed to the epistemic fallacy (which in addition to its entailing necessitarianism, is seemingly what prevents a sympathetic Bhaskar from fully committing to the PSR). Nonetheless, this in itself does not invalidate the PSR, since its possibility remains open, and moreover, recent arguments claiming we have good reason to accept the PSR have also begun to surface. For a recent argument defending a strong version of the PSR that embraces necessitarianism see Della Rocca 2010, and for a defence of a weaker version minus necessitarianism, see Pruss 2006.

<sup>53</sup> Here Spinoza appears to anticipate certain elements of what is known as the fundamental attribution error – the tendency to over-emphasize personal characteristics and under-emphasize situational factors when providing causal explanations for behaviour. While the actor/observer asymmetry states that we are more likely to make such attributions when judging the actions of others by comparison with ourselves due to differences in where our attention tends to be focused when making these respective judgements (of which Spinoza has nothing explicit to say), there are times when the reverse is more likely to be the case. Spinoza attributes this reverse and other biased judgements to the desire-based self-serving bias (E3 prop 25) that strategically operates to preserve our sense of self-worth by making internal attributions for our successes and external attributions for our failures – and vice versa with regards to the successes and failures of others. I am grateful to Doug Porpora for pointing me in this direction.

<sup>54</sup> The explanations that supplement the following definitions of anger and guilt draw on Neal Grossman 2003, 134–5.

is an emotion triggered by a perception that we have been ‘wronged’ or violated in some sense. Therefore, in blaming another as the cause of lowering our power of action, it is a case of hatred combined with the belief that the object concerned could and/or should have done otherwise that produces the desire to retaliate and correct the situation. Cases of guilt occur when we perceive ourselves to have committed (or to have failed to commit our-selves to) an act that violates a personal norm. Thus, in these instances, we blame ourselves as the cause of lowering our power of action which in itself constitutes a sadness combined with the belief that we ourselves could and/ or should have done otherwise. With respect to pride, this is an emotion that arises from positively evaluating an object or event and vicariously identifying ourselves with the success of that object or event. As such, we praise ourselves as the cause of enhancing our power of action which in effect amounts to (excessive) love of one’s self combined with the belief that the object or event could have been otherwise.

### *Explanatory Critique of the Emotions*

Nonetheless, consistent with our earlier observations, such patterns of thinking are inherently problematic in the respect that any object considered in isolation can per se only be one aspect of a wider causal system. Hence, at most it can only be a partial cause in the wider scheme of things. From this it follows the first step towards moderating a troublesome emotion is to recognize that it is a judgement that necessarily relies on a cognitive element in order to describe its object, which has a tendency to be flawed because of its inherently perspectival nature. If we come to recognize this, we can define what such a judgement in principle entails and then begin to reflect on and discern what other causes are involved. This allows us to break the emotion down into component parts, which not only enables us to moderate its intensity by geometrically redistributing that energy amongst those component parts, but also allows us to potentially connect and understand them as causes by placing them within an adequately conceived causal system. This will also enhance our power by helping us to dispel the other illusion we persistently fall under – that an object can be free from determining causes. The first element of this strategy is entailed within E5 prop 9 where Spinoza asserts: *‘If an affect is related to more and different causes which the mind considers together with the affect itself, it is less harmful, we are less acted on by it, and we are affected less toward each cause, than is the case with another, equally great affect, which is only related to one cause, or to fewer causes’* (original emphasis). The second element of this strategy follows from E5 prop 6 where Spinoza adds: *‘Insofar as the mind*

*understands all things as necessary, it has a greater power over the affects, or is less acted on by them*' (original emphasis).

As we have already seen, reason has the inherent power of being able to discern and understand the causal connections between things and, as Martha Nussbaum explains, when an emotion is presented to us in this causally described way, it will appear to us with a new clarity and no longer simply overwhelm us. For in

seeing its causes and its effects, [we] will begin to have the idea that [we] can manage and control it. And the very activity of understanding, with its exhilaration born of the sense of secure control, itself assists control: for it diminishes the urgent sense of need for a completion that only another [object] can supply.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, if for instance we find ourselves being angry with someone because they criticize us or take pleasure in our misfortune, this is not merely a product of the other's behaviour or traits; for as emergent properties, emotions arise from an interactive conflation between their actions and behaviour and our deeply held personal and social values. In such cases, we may typically experience thoughts such as, 'I can't stand him', 'He thinks he is so much better than anyone else', 'How could he do such a thing to me?' and/or 'I hope he gets his comeuppance'. We may then come to recognize that our emotional judgements are partial by virtue of their narrowly focusing on a particular cause and begin to reflect on things and question them with thoughts such as, 'Hang on, what is really going on here?', 'Why do I feel anger towards this person?' and/or 'What does it *really* mean to be angry with someone?' Once we begin thinking this way we can move beyond the subjective domain of experience and try to identify the real underlying causes of our emotional responses. By recognizing that we feel we have been 'wronged' and slighted in some sense we are in a position to causally define it as a case of blaming another as the cause of lowering our power of action by thinking that that person could and/or should have done otherwise, and that it is this that produces our negative and ill-intentioned thoughts.

Hence, we need to break the emotion as a process down into component parts and understand them by locating them within a causal system. When others criticize us or take pleasure in our misfortune, they are passive in the sense that they (irrationally) need to feel a sense of superiority at the expense of others in order to enhance their own self-worth. Moreover, when it comes to preserving our own self-worth, in the event that our power of action is lowered, our striving to preserve our strength then conditions us to project and displace blame onto others. Thus, while this too may

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<sup>55</sup> Nussbaum 2001, 508.

be a passive response, its function is to protect and restore us from our weakened condition. Nonetheless, such emotions can only arise in the first place because of our tendencies to identify with powerful social and cultural conditioning that (falsely) encourages us to believe that our self-worth is achievement-orientated (i.e. reputation, appearance, popularity, career, and/or wealth).

Hence, it is only because we have come to (falsely) identify with these norms that they become internalized as beliefs which subsequently render our sense of self-worth susceptible to emotionality in terms of the perceived success or failure of these identifications and how others evaluate our performances in connection with the roles associated with them. That is, underlying structural mechanisms are created and embedded within the conatus which implicitly condition us by operating in the form of evaluative frameworks that tendentially predispose us towards certain emotional and behavioural responses when relevant emotional cues are perceived. Once we become aware of this, we gain some insight into how the chains of causes that have contributed to the other character's passivity in slighting us (and our own in being offended) are actually much more widely dispersed. Hence, the real underlying cause of our anger in this case is the social and cultural conditioning, and not the apparent misuse of free will.

We might also go on to make further causal connections in a historical sense by noting other mechanisms that have contributed interactively to the chain of events that led to the slight against us. For, as Edwin Curley recognizes, if we feel anger towards X, but then come to recognize this harmful behaviour towards us as caused by Y, which in turn we might recognize as being caused by Z, and so on; then we will be less aggrieved with X than before (although in the interim at least it will increase our aggravation towards Y and so on).<sup>56</sup> Such insights help us to be mindful that we are all open systems formed by an infinite variety of elements that contribute to making us the complex and constantly changing entities we are, who have been historically conditioned by multiple layers of previous interactions. If we do, we will increasingly come to see ourselves and others as 'mediating transmitters', to use Amelie Rorty's phrase, as opposed to 'closed and bounded entities'.<sup>57</sup> The more we come to realize the inevitability of an event, how all behaviour is causally necessitated and how an event or mode of behaviour is not the singular cause of our anger, but more correctly only one cause of it within an infinitely extended chain of causal links, then it becomes increasingly more difficult to hold the offender in question fully accountable for their actions, which in the process

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<sup>56</sup> Curley 1988, 134.

<sup>57</sup> Rorty 2001, 298.

will necessarily change how we evaluate and react towards them.<sup>58</sup> Once we have taken all these factors into consideration, in minor cases we might be able to replace anger with pity (or, perhaps better still, compassion, since pity emphasizes inferiority), while in more serious cases perhaps the best we can do might only be to reduce or restrain it.

It can be seen, then, that in coming to understand that which lies beyond our control, we begin to wrestle back a sense of control over our emotions. Jerome Neu provides a neat summary of the mechanics of this therapeutic process when he explains how Spinoza

is suggesting a revision of belief about the operation of causes, so that the object of anger will be seen just as an element of a necessary structure – a change which would inevitably alter the character of the emotion. And the intellectual activity, the search for and consideration of broader causes, is itself a pleasure and so alleviating.<sup>59</sup>

Nevertheless, it is important to accentuate here that this therapeutic power of understanding can *only* be successful insofar as active thinking is itself an inherently joyful process. For it is the very joys themselves produced by the act of understanding that have the power to transform the character of the emotion concerned. Nonetheless, insofar as we are dealing with a stubborn affect, there are times, as we have already seen, when the joys we produce can only moderate its intensity or divert its energy so that it is a less harmful affect – for according to Spinoza's geometrically based structural model of the affects its complete removal requires another opposed and stronger affect.<sup>60</sup> However, as Neu goes on to add, the correction of the understanding is per se sufficient for starting this process.<sup>61</sup> For as Spinoza also argues: *'Affects arising from or aroused by reason are, if we take account of time, more powerful than*

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<sup>58</sup> Turning the tables here slightly with a view towards potential accountability for our own actions, 'suppose one had done a great harm by accident, through no fault of one's own' (Collier 1999, 55). As 'imperfectly rational' beings (none of us can be fully rational), what is the right response here? Two ways of looking at this situation are as follows: One is that, in a sense, we bear partial responsibility, since as the offending agent we still constitute a causal link in the chain of events. Hence, in recognition of being the 'cause' we should adopt backwards-looking emotions such as remorse and regret in addition to sadness. The other is that in terms of causal attribution, if our behaviour did not result from a free decision, then one cannot properly be said to be the efficient cause of the 'misdeed' in question. Therefore, technically no responsibility can be ascribed, meaning that no backwards-looking emotion is appropriate, although sadness may be, given that it shows concern for the well-being of others. Collier opts for the first view, whereas I am inclined to agree with the second, even though in practice it may be difficult to maintain.

<sup>59</sup> Neu 1977, 85.

<sup>60</sup> E4 props 7 and 14.

<sup>61</sup> Neu 1977, 97.

*those related to singular things we regard as absent*.<sup>62</sup> What Spinoza is saying here is that, while an active emotion may be less intense than a passive one, it will possess greater endurance and permanency on the basis that active emotions are necessarily derived from common notions which must always be regarded as present since there is nothing that can exclude their existence – that is, once we come into the possession of knowledge of certain basic principles, they are here to stay with us. ‘So such an affect will always remain the same, and hence (by A1), the affects which are contrary to it and are not encouraged by their external causes will have to accommodate themselves to it more and more, until they are no longer contrary to it’.<sup>63</sup> R. J. Delahunty explains this more lucidly in the following terms: ‘the passions will gradually be forced to accommodate themselves to these steadier and more permanent feelings’ for ‘unless the external cause of a passive emotion be actually present, the emotion will tend to fade’.<sup>64</sup> Thus, it follows from these observations that the truths and knowledge produced by reason are operations of joy and desire.<sup>65</sup> For when the mind begins to act by understanding and explaining things, this in itself is a necessarily joyful process given that the inherent striving of the mind is now unimpeded.

Explanatory critique of the affects not only has its uses in terms of moderating or revising our affects after they have occurred, for it also has another practical use in terms of helping to prevent them from arising in the future, or at least helping to control them when they do, in addition to guiding what appropriate courses of action we should take in the event of encountering certain circumstances. In habitually engaging in self-reflexive thought and trying to understand ourselves and the world around us, Spinoza advises:

The best thing, then, that we can do, so long as we do not have perfect knowledge of our affects, is to conceive a correct principle of living, *or*, sure maxims of life, to commit them to memory, and to apply them constantly to the particular cases frequently encountered in life. In this way our imagination will be extensively affected by them, and we shall always have them ready.<sup>66</sup>

In recognizing how external events lie beyond our control and that it is this perceived loss of control that upsets us, we can then go on and question, given the effects that this has on us, whether the role this plays in our lives is really worth it? For instance, coming back to our earlier example, is it really in anyone’s interests to become consumed with anger? While anger *per se* has impor-

<sup>62</sup> E5 prop 7, original emphasis.

<sup>63</sup> E5 prop 7dem.

<sup>64</sup> Delahunty 1985, 252.

<sup>65</sup> Lloyd 1996, 86.

<sup>66</sup> E5 prop 10s.

tant psychological and social benefits in the respect it signals problems, it is also easy for it to become highly problematic. This occurs not only in the sense that, when it develops a certain level of intensity it becomes a self-destructive emotion that can lead to hatred which in itself endlessly breeds further hatred – for if we continually uphold our implicit and unrealistic belief in a just world where everyone ‘gets what they deserve’ (or ‘should get what they deserve’) in life it will repeatedly express itself whenever these ‘correct’ ways are violated, even though life often appears unintelligible without them.<sup>67</sup> There can never be a case of simply ‘choosing’ not to let something bother us through a sheer act of will as we are often told to do<sup>68</sup> – for it is only a sense of control obtained through understanding the causal nature of things that enables us to achieve a greater sense of acceptance and contentedness.

When it comes to attributing moral responsibility, inherent within Spinoza’s metaphysical and psychological system is the principle of what Don Garrett,<sup>69</sup> drawing on Wolf,<sup>70</sup> calls ‘asymmetrical freedom’. This is based on the notion that while, if we are thinking adequately we can freely do good, it is not possible for us to freely commit any wrongs – for any such motivation can only be explained by reference to external causes. Therefore, when someone does commit a wrong, their causal agency is limited and they are merely irrationally striving to persevere in their being (for no one in an adequate frame of mind could do any wrong).<sup>71</sup> The moral consequences that follow from this are that from the standpoint of reason we shall be inclined to love those who freely do good, while withholding our hatred towards those who do evil. This by no means suggests that we should never move to protect ourselves, but rather that any actions we do undertake will not be guided by resentment or desires for retribution.<sup>72</sup>

### *Conclusion*

These ideas demonstrate that knowledge can be applied in a practical sense in order to have a meaningful impact at the personal level by explaining the

<sup>67</sup> Lerner 1980.

<sup>68</sup> Watts usefully puts such efforts in perspective: ‘To try to control the mind forcefully is like trying to flatten out waves with a board, and can only result in more and more disturbance’ (1975, 118).

<sup>69</sup> Garrett 1996, 301.

<sup>70</sup> Wolf 1980.

<sup>71</sup> It is, however, important to remind ourselves of the earlier point informing us that the adequacy or completeness of our ideas is always a matter of degree. For it then follows that the same principle applies to our freedom and therefore also our moral responsibility.

<sup>72</sup> Collier’s (1999, 18) ‘cognitive paradigm of morality’ makes a similar point.

deep underlying nature of our emotional responses, what they tell us about our place in the world, and what we can do about them. Put more elegantly, what Spinoza is presenting is an intellectual and practical manual to life in the sense that he is saying: These are the situations you regularly find yourself in and the tendencies you engage in; here is an intransitive explanation of what is going on; these are the basic principles on which those situations rest and this explanatory information will per se alter your behavioural tendencies because of that further information. By elucidating the personal dimensions of explanatory critique, Spinoza's ideas erode the commonly (mis)perceived distinction between science and everyday experience, and in the process successfully extend the emancipatory boundaries of critical realism.

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