

Spinoza on Virtue and Eternity

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1. Introduction

Despite the fact that the *Ethics* begins with ontological considerations of the most fundamental and difficult kind, it is clear that the work's aim is decidedly ethical: Spinoza wants to discern the nature of reality and human existence in order to show us how to lead a happy and fulfilling life. This kind of approach is, I believe, truly admirable in its scale and thoroughness; moreover, Spinoza is extremely open about the metaphysical underpinnings of the moral psychology and moral philosophy he presents in the three final parts of his masterpiece. This, in turn, gives the reader an exceptional possibility to evaluate the arguments on which the ethical claims are based. The system is also one that aims at maximal unity, for everything stated in the work, from the first definition to the final scholium, is meant to form a consistent and rigorous whole. Given this, it is no surprise that Spinoza's ambitious project creates rather unique interpretative pressures: quite often, a reading of a specific passage has unexpectedly far-reaching implications that may even put the overall cogency of the system on the line and forces the interpreter to take a stand on some of the knottiest issues pertaining to Spinoza's basic metaphysics. As we will see, this also holds with regard to his theory of virtue and its intrinsic link to a view on eternity, temporality, and their interrelationship.

It seems uncontroversial that, for Spinoza, all things and their operations are necessarily fixed, 'from eternity and to eternity' (1p17s), ultimately by God-or-Nature's essence:

From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect). (1p16)

Unsurprisingly, this key contention is cited in the demonstration of the proposition explicating the source and nature of things' existence and actions:

In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way. (1p29)¹

¹ See also 1p32c2.

Everything there is must have a cause or reason (see 1p11d2), and given the aforementioned passages it thus seems clear that there is an atemporal cause or reason for all things being what they are and the way they are, with certain ways of acting—ultimately, that cause is God’s nature or essence from which everything follows.² As we will see in greater detail, on this fundamental level, all existents are strictly on an equal footing.

However, the aforesaid does not mean that all the states we finite existents find ourselves in, and everything we do, is ethically on a par: we can be virtuous to differing degrees. Moreover and more strikingly, Spinoza says that our minds do become *more eternal* when we become more virtuous—a view *prima facie* at odds with the tenet that everything (including our non-virtuous passions) results from the unique eternal framework realized by God-or-Nature. It would thus seem to be a complete mystery how there could be differing degrees of eternality in a system in which everything is fixed from eternity; a mystery to which a solution must be offered, should Spinoza’s theory of virtue be consistent with his fundamental ontological tenets.

The goal of this essay is twofold. First, I will explicate the dynamic nature of Spinoza’s doctrine of virtue by discerning his reasons for defining virtuousness in terms of active power. Second, by taking this understanding of virtue as the point of departure, I will suggest a sense in which we can be said to be more or less eternal to the extent that we are virtuous and active. Spinoza’s specific brand of essentialism underpins both his doctrine of virtue and that of eternity, and reaching these goals requires discussing the two kinds of essences which hold a prominent place in the *Ethics*: the formal and the actual essences. This, in turn, allows us to throw some new light on the relationship between eternal and durational existence, the distinction between which forms the very backbone of Spinoza’s system.

2. Virtue as Power

In the beginning of Part 4 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza defines virtue as follows:

By virtue and power I understand the same thing, i.e. (by 3p7), virtue, insofar as it is related to man, is the very essence, or nature, of man, insofar as he has the power of bringing about certain things, which can be understood through the laws of his nature alone. (4D8)

The first thing to note here is that, unlike in most of his definitions, Spinoza builds a case by appealing to a previous proposition. And not just on any proposition but on 3p7, the famous thesis stating that striving (*conatus*) forms the actual essence of finite things. Moreover, since 3p7 is based on 3p6 which, in turn, is partly derived from

² For an explication of how to understand Spinoza’s doctrine of essences and what follows from them, see my ‘Spinoza’s Essentialist Model of Causation’, *Inquiry* 51 (2008) or *Spinoza’s Geometry of Power* [*Geometry of Power*] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), chs. 1–2.

material located in the opening part of the *Ethics*,³ it is clear that, for a definition, we find here an exceptionally heavy conceptual and argumentative machinery at work. This is already enough to show that any interpretation of Spinoza's theory of virtue cannot avoid taking a stand on how the very basics of Spinoza's theory of finite existents should be understood. Second, in making a strikingly rapid transition from a metaphysical doctrine to what we may regard as his ethics proper, Spinoza shows no fear of what has later become known as Hume's Guillotine: the principle that no normative claims can be derived from factual ones. Third, the definition does not just state that virtue, power, and essence all are in some sense identical but concludes with a noteworthy explication: we are dealing with the 'power of bringing about certain things, which can be understood through the laws of his [man's] nature alone'. Now given that Spinoza defines activity as being the adequate cause of an effect, in which case 'something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone' (3D2), he quite obviously takes it to follow directly from the *conatus* thesis that human beings as dynamic entities strive to exert their power in a way that results in actions, i.e., in effects that are completely of their own making. But how can this be? Here some notable interpretative challenges begin to emerge, especially if the *conatus* doctrine is read as one according to which each thing strives to preserve itself by maintaining its psychophysical existence. More than that seems to be involved here.

3p7 reads:

The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing.

Dem.: From the given essence of each thing some things necessarily follow (by 1p36), and things are able [to produce] nothing but what follows necessarily from their determinate nature [*nec res aliud possunt quam id quod ex determinata earum natura necessario sequitur*] (by 1p29). So the power of each thing, or the striving by which it (either alone or with others) does anything, or strives to do anything [*cujuscunque rei potentia sive conatus quo ipsa vel sola vel cum aliis quidquam agit vel agere conatur*—i.e. (by 3p6), the power, or striving, by which it strives to persevere in its being, is nothing but the given, or actual, essence of the thing itself, q.e.d.

The proof has a somewhat convoluted structure. If one focuses on the beginning of the demonstration, it is far from clear that Spinoza would be referring to actions in the strict sense when he talks about 'what follows necessarily from their [things'] determinate nature': after all, in 3D2 he also says 'that we are acted on when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause'. So it would seem that what follows from our 'determinate nature' are passions as well as actions. However, the latter part of the demonstration talks about acting and, more importantly, *striving* to act. This, together with what we have already seen Spinoza to

³ For my account of this derivation, see my 'On the Derivation and Meaning of the *Conatus* Doctrine' ['*Conatus* Doctrine'], in *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*, vol. iv, eds. Daniel Garber and Steven Nadler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008) or *Geometry of Power*, ch. 4.

derive from this proposition, strongly suggests that finite things strive to be as active as they can. The beginning of the demonstration simply reminds us that natures or essences are the centers of causal efficacy: things operate the way they do because from their essences certain effects follow. Given this, it is understandable that Spinoza thinks that our striving to ‘persevere in being’ occurs in virtue of our nature.

All this, however, only pushes the question one step back. So we are, in essence, causally efficacious entities; and our essential power is striving, at least in actuality (that is, in temporality). But why would that striving be striving *to act*? Is it not striving *to persevere in existence*, which could arguably take place even in a passive state—as the beginning of 3p7d would seem to allow (we would also then exist and be causally efficacious by being involved in producing passions)? But this would sever the link Spinoza relies on in launching his theory of virtue, the one between (striving) power and activity. Obviously, everything hinges on exactly what Spinoza takes himself to have proven in 3p6, ‘[e]ach thing, insofar as it is in itself [*quantum in se est*], strives to persevere in its being [*esse*]’ (translation modified). As I. Bernard Cohen observes, traditionally as well as in Spinoza’s time the phrase *quantum in se est* refers to what a thing does by its own nature;⁴ this is in keeping with the already discussed essentialist overtones of the subsequent proposition, but not particularly helpful for our present purposes. Evidently, we must try to understand what Spinoza means by persevering in one’s being. Unfortunately, the relevant sense of being is not readily acquirable from the demonstration of 3p6, which runs as follows:

For singular things are modes by which God’s attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way (by 1p25c), i.e. (by 1p34), things that express, in a certain and determinate way, God’s power, by which God is and acts. And no thing has anything in itself by which it can be destroyed, or which takes its existence [*existentiam*] away (by 3p4). On the contrary, it is opposed to everything which can take its existence away (by 3p5). Therefore, as far as it can, and it lies in itself, it strives to persevere in its being, q.e.d.

As is well known, this argument has been the topic of a lively controversy.⁵ I believe that its main idea can be summarized as follows: finite things are subjects that express God’s power by opposing contrary factors. The proof talks about *existence* whereas in the proposition itself Spinoza talks about *being*, and it is difficult to say why this shift occurs. I suggest that the latter term better captures what Spinoza considers the ‘life’

⁴ I. Bernard Cohen, “‘Quantum in se est’: Newton’s Concept of Inertia in Relation to Descartes and Lucretius,” *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 19 (1964): 147.

⁵ See especially Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics [Study]* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), ch. 10; Edwin Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method: A Reading of Spinoza’s Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), ch. 3; Daniel Garber, ‘Descartes and Spinoza on Persistence and Conatus,’ *Studia Spinozana* 10 (1994); Michael Della Rocca, ‘Spinoza’s Metaphysical Psychology,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Don Garrett, ‘Spinoza’s Conatus Argument’ [‘Conatus Argument’], *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes*, ed. Olli Koistinen and John Biro (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Martin Lin, ‘Spinoza’s Metaphysics of Desire: The Demonstration of IIP6,’ *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 86 (2004); Viljanen, ‘Conatus Doctrine.’

of a genuine finite thing to consist of: not merely instantiating a given essence but also realizing all those properties that follow from that essence to the extent the thing is in itself, operating unaffected by other things or 'external causes'.⁶ The proof of 3p6 is partly built on the claim that '[t]hings . . . cannot be in the same subject, insofar as one can destroy the other' (3p5), and it can be argued that by 'things' here Spinoza means those *properties* that follow from a particular *essence*, that is, properties that are caused by, and inhere in, a certain subject⁷—a subject of which they can also be predicated at least as unproblematically as finite things as modes can be predicated of God.⁸ All this implies that 3p6 is about things as subjects endowed with a particular essence/property structure which determines a specific way of being.

The above considerations concerning being and subjecthood have the following connection to agency: insofar as a thing succeeds in persevering in its (own kind of essence-derivable) being, it is active. In this strict sense, being is being active. Given all this, it follows that we strive to act, and do so in virtue of our essences, just as 3p7d claims.⁹ Thus the link between virtue and the power 'of bringing about certain things, which can be understood through the laws of [man's] nature alone' that Spinoza makes in 4D8 by invoking 3p7 is quite understandable, and his activity-centered ethical program gets off the ground.¹⁰ There is, if not teleology in a robust sense, at least essence-based directedness in things (to produce certain properties as effects) which allows us to make judgments about the goodness and badness of things.¹¹ I suspect that this lurks behind Spinoza's apparently carefree attitude toward the putative is/ought divide.

Without the basic causal thrust toward activity much of what Spinoza says later in the fourth part of the *Ethics* about the virtuous life would be left hanging in the air. Spinoza's ethical theory has dynamistic essentialism as its basis; but he quickly connects this to his rationalistic convictions, claiming especially in 4p20–p28 that our striving to act amounts to reasoning and understanding, or to forming clear and distinct ideas. 4p23 offers a relatively compact articulation of this connection:

A man cannot absolutely be said to act from virtue insofar as he is determined to do something because he has inadequate ideas, but only insofar as he is determined because he understands.

⁶ For a fuller account of this, see my *Geometry of Power*, chs. 4–5.

⁷ This understanding of 'subject' agrees, I think, with that presented by Garrett ('*Conatus* Argument', 142).

⁸ For discussion on predicating modes of substance, see Edwin Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: An Essay in Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), ch. 1; Charles Jarrett, 'The Concepts of Substance and Mode in Spinoza', *Philosophia* 7 (1977); Bennett, *Study*, ch. 4; John Carriero, 'On the Relationship between Mode and Substance in Spinoza's Metaphysics', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 33 (1995): 245–73; Yitzhak Melamed, 'Spinoza's Metaphysics of Substance: The Substance–Mode Relation as a Relation of Inherence and Predication' ['Substance–Mode'], *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 78 (2009); Valteri Viljanen, 'Spinoza's Ontology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*, ed. Olli Koistinen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁹ Of course, this does not yet tell us why the power we are essentially endowed with is precisely *striving*; I have argued elsewhere (see my '*Conatus* Doctrine' and *Geometry of Power*, ch. 4) that things' essential power has *conatus* character in the temporal realm of constant contest. See also Marshall's contribution in this volume.

¹⁰ On the importance of this, see also Marshall's contribution in this volume.

¹¹ I agree with what Michael Rosenthal states about action and goodness in his contribution to this volume.

Dem.: Insofar as a man is determined to act from the fact that he has inadequate ideas, he is acted on (by 3p1), i.e. (by 3D1 and 3D2), he does something which cannot be perceived through his essence alone, i.e. (by 4D8), which does not follow from his virtue. But insofar as he is determined to do something from the fact that he understands, he acts (by 3p1), i.e. (by 3D2), does something which is perceived through his essence alone, or (by 4D8) which follows adequately from his virtue, q.e.d.

Of course, this does not tell us *how* we are to reach a state in which we actively understand, or what is required to attain the good life; nor is giving an account of this my aim here.¹² I merely would like to point out that in connecting activity (that is, *causal adequacy*) to understanding (that is, to *epistemic adequacy*) Spinoza appears to be relying on the following line of thought: were an idea brought about by our mind alone—that is, actively by us—inadequate, this would mean that there would be an inadequate idea in God, which cannot be.¹³ In more general terms, as reality is completely intelligible, no part of it that comes to be realized through us alone can have anything epistemically tarnished in it. There is thus, for Spinoza, systematic grounds for linking dynamism with rationalism and for the intellectualist position according to which our power is best expressed in intellectual activities. The extent to which we succeed in this certainly varies; but the striving is always there. And insofar as we are able to exert our power actively, Spinoza considers us perfect: ‘[W]hen I say that someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite, . . . we conceive that his power of acting . . . is increased or diminished’ (4pref). Perfection comes in degrees, as does power, and since we strive to increase our activity, it follows that Spinoza’s dynamism amounts to ethical perfectionism: with all of our power, we strive to become as perfect as possible, and succeeding in this is good. As a consequence, Spinoza’s theory of virtue is one which comprises dynamism (we are intrinsically powerful entities with definite directedness), perfectionism (virtue equals unhindered realization of our essence), and intellectualism (what results from our activity is understanding). Despite the seeming egoism of the *conatus* principle and the antiteleological mechanistic overtones of Spinoza’s system, it is difficult to see what, if anything, there is left for the traditional eudaimonist to oppose.¹⁴

¹² For especially noteworthy recent accounts of issues pertaining to this, see Michael LeBuffe, *From Bondage to Freedom: Spinoza on Human Excellence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Matthew Kisner, *Spinoza on Human Freedom: Reason, Autonomy and the Good Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹³ This in a nutshell is the interpretative position that I argue for in detail in *Geometry of Power*, ch. 6.

¹⁴ One may still wonder, what is the point of writing an ethics, if everything happens with strict necessity? Perhaps the question can be answered along the following lines. Recall that, first, we are joy-seeking and perfection-increasing entities, and second, like everything (1p36), the *Ethics* too cannot fail to have effects. Thus, Spinoza could say that because the work reveals the true nature of our perfection and happiness, by

3. From Activity to Eternality

We are active, rational, and perfect to varying degrees, depending on the extent to which we operate freely in virtue of what is inmost to us, namely our causally powerful essence—this is the bedrock of Spinoza’s theory of virtue. But why is our essence what it is, thus setting what is good for us? And what determines the way in which its power comes to be exercised? In a grand ethical program such as Spinoza’s, these questions cannot be left unanswered. And, indeed, in a broad sense it is clear what the answer must be: we and our states, or affections, are what they are because the necessity of the divine nature determines them to be so.¹⁵ Recall: ‘In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way [*omnia ex necessitate divinae naturae determinata sunt ad certo modo existendum et operandum*]’ (1p29). Moreover, 1p16 states that in Spinoza’s ontology, finite things are properties that follow from God’s nature, and this is something revealed from the adequate eternal point of view:

We conceive things as actual in two ways: either insofar as we conceive them to exist in relation to a certain time and place, or *insofar as we conceive them to be contained in God and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature*. But the things we conceive in this second way as true, or real, we conceive under a species of eternity, and to that extent they involve the eternal and infinite essence of God (as we have shown in 2p45 and 2p45s). (5p29s, the first emphasis added)

It thus seems incontestable that, whatever the exact nature of the relationship between eternity and temporality may be, there is an atemporal cause or reason for things and their operations; moreover, knowledge of the way in which the nature of things comes to be produced amounts to the famous intuitive knowledge.¹⁶ This is Spinoza’s rationalistic response to the need for an ultimate world explanation.

These general observations call for elaboration. In 2p8 Spinoza discusses what he calls the *formal essences* of finite things, which ‘are contained in God’s attributes.’ The importance of this proposition is partly indicated by the fact that Spinoza refers to its corollary in 5p21, signaling the beginning of his treatment of mind’s eternity and blessedness; as Don Garrett has argued, the relevant sense of ‘essence’ at work in

reading it we can become determined to a better (more perfect, active, self-determined, and joyful) life. Indeed, Spinoza would seem to believe that to the extent that we understand the *Ethics*, we inevitably become happier than before.

¹⁵ Following Don Garrett (‘Spinoza’s Necessitarianism’, in *God and Nature: Spinoza’s Metaphysics*, ed. Yirmiyahu Yovel [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991]), Olli Koistinen (‘Spinoza’s Proof of Necessitarianism’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67 [2003]), and Charles Jarrett (‘Spinoza on Necessity’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics*, ed. Olli Koistinen [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press]), I regard Spinoza as a necessitarian.

¹⁶ Interestingly, there would thus seem to be an atemporal explanatory factor (or factors) both for the *essence* of a thing and the way in which it *operates*, but the intuitive knowledge concerns only the former. I will take up this issue again later in this section.

5p21–p22 is that of ‘formal essence.’¹⁷ The distinction is one between the *formal* and *actual* essence of things; the latter is, as we have seen, the same as the thing’s *conatus* (3p7), whereas the former obviously refers to something atemporal in character. In many of the places in which Spinoza mentions essences, he seems to mean precisely formal essences. This holds for the famous scholium introducing the three kinds of knowledge, even though the term ‘formal’ is a mere translator’s gloss:

In addition to these two kinds of knowledge, there is . . . another, third kind, which we shall call intuitive knowledge. And this kind of knowing proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the [NS: formal] essence of things. (2p40s2)

Moreover, when Spinoza discusses ‘the essence of the body under a species of eternity’ (5p23s), he relies on 1p25’s distinction between existence and essence, evidently referring by the latter to the formal essence of things.¹⁸ There is thus good reason to believe that the primary sense of the term ‘essence’ is that of ‘formal essence.’ I would describe the formal essences of finite things as atemporal individuating or constitutive features responsible for the identity of things; for instance, a triangle is generated when there are three intersecting lines that form a closed plane figure. Thus comes to be constituted the very core of what it is to be a triangle, and there is nothing temporal about this.¹⁹ Ultimately, finite things are, for Spinoza, *modifications* of God’s *attributes*, so that when for instance a triangle exists, this in fact means that extension is modified triangularly.²⁰ Moreover, these essential features of things follow from the divine nature (1p16, 2p40s2) and are revealed when things are cognized in the most adequate fashion, *sub specie aeternitatis* (see 5p31d).²¹ We might find it hard to believe that this is reachable for us human beings; but then again, one must bear in mind the contrast between what Nietzsche calls ‘our agitated ephemeral existence and the slow-breathing repose of metaphysical ages.’²² As Julian Young comments, in the latter ‘one was able to view

¹⁷ Don Garrett, ‘Spinoza on the Essence of the Human Body and the Part of the Mind that is Eternal [‘Essence’], in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics*, ed. Olli Koistinen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 285–6.

¹⁸ Garrett (‘Essence’, 286) convincingly defends this reading of 1p25.

¹⁹ An early non-geometrical example runs as follows:

[I]t belongs to the essence of a mountain to have a valley, or the essence of a mountain is that it has a valley. This is truly eternal and immutable, and must always be in the concept of a mountain, even if it does not exist, and never did. (KV I, 1, C 61/G I.15 21–6)

See also what Spinoza says (in *TIE* 69, *G* II.26; quoted later in this section) about an architect conceiving a building.

²⁰ In 1p11d2, Spinoza talks about the existence of a triangle in corporeal nature.

²¹ A proper discussion of these epistemological matters would take us too far afield. But I would nevertheless like to point out that the following tenets seem to underpin what Spinoza calls intuitive knowledge: (1) substance monism, (2) essentialist substance/(attribute)/mode ontology, (3) effects are known through their causes, and (4) through his attributes, God is the ultimate cause of finite things as modes. Given the centrality of these tenets, it is quite understandable that Spinoza describes the highest form of knowledge the way he does.

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), §22.

oneself from the perspective of eternity'.²³ This is in accordance with Marshall Berman's assessment of Nietzsche as a key figure of the second phase of modernity that started in the 1790s and gave rise to the modern public which

shares the feeling of living in a revolutionary age, an age that generates explosive upheavals in every dimension of personal, social and political life. At the same time, the nineteenth-century modern public can remember what it was like to live, materially and spiritually, in worlds that are not modern at all.²⁴

To be part of this age 'is to be part of the universe in which, as Marx said, "all that is solid melts into air"'.²⁵ And since we still belong to this era while Spinoza did not, we should be alive to the fact that what Spinoza says about conceiving things under the aspect of eternity is far from foreign to the general mode of experience of his days. Most importantly, here Spinoza could turn the tables and say that it is in fact us who are overly attached to the fleeting, temporal perspective.²⁶ It might just be that we are biased against all things eternal.

The formal essence forms our immutable intrinsic nature. But more than this pertains to us, for as finite parts of an infinite whole we become affected in many different ways. The already cited 1p29 also informs us that the way in which we 'operate' follows from the divine nature; in an early letter Spinoza contends that '[a]s to your further question as to whether things or the affections of things are also eternal truths, I say, most certainly' (letter 10, S 783). No affection of ours can escape having a proper ground—a conviction in tune with, and probably stemming from, Spinoza's abhorrence of brute facts. This ground, in turn, presumably lies in the way formal essences relate to each other,²⁷ which would also explain why affections are 'eternal truths'. Thus becomes constituted an atemporal grid of being outside of which there is nothing.

We are now in a position to properly frame the problem noted in the beginning. If there is something atemporal through which every existent comes to be, it seems that things cannot differ in their eternality. Is everything, then, just as eternal as everything

²³ Julian Young, *Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 255. Young's work brought the passage in *Human, All Too Human* to my attention.

²⁴ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity [Melts into Air]* (London: Verso, 2010), 17.

²⁵ Berman, *Melts into Air*, 15.

²⁶ I do not, however, want to claim that Spinoza considers temporal existence unreal in any way; duration is simply ontologically posterior and epistemologically inferior to eternal existence and viewing things from the viewpoint of eternity. Here my position should be compared to that of Andrew Youpa, who has recently defended the view that only eternal existence is real existence in the strict sense ('Spinoza's Theory of the Good', in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*, ed. Olli Koistinen [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009]), whereas durational existence is 'ontologically second-rate' and at most semi-real ('Spinoza on the Very Nature of Existence', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 35 [2011]: 329).

²⁷ In the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza makes a reference to 'the connection of all beings according to their essences' (KV IIpref, G I.51 28/C 95). In a way, the idea behind this is not too radical: the way in which a finite thing *x* determines a finite thing *y*—thereby giving rise to a certain affective state of *y*—depends on what *x* and *y* fundamentally are, and that is determined by the formal essence of *x* and *y*; cf. e.g. 2p13a1. See also my *Geometry of Power*, ch. 1.

else? Obviously, the answer must be *no*; Spinoza's discussion of the mind's eternity clearly presupposes that not everything is equally eternal:

He who has a Body capable of a great many things has a Mind whose greatest part is eternal. (5p39) Because human Bodies are capable of a great many things, there is no doubt but what they can be of such a nature that they are related to Minds which have a great knowledge of themselves and of God, and of which the greatest, or chief, part is eternal. So they hardly fear death. (5p39s)

Moreover, our eternity varies with our activity:

The more perfection each thing has, the more it acts and the less it is acted on; and conversely, the more it acts, the more perfect it is. (5p40)

From this it follows that the part of the Mind that remains, however great it is, is more perfect than the rest.

For the eternal part of the Mind (by 5p23 and 5p29) is the intellect, through which alone we are said to act (by 3p3). But what we have shown to perish is the imagination (by 5p21), through which alone we are said to be acted on (by 3p3 and the gen. DOE). So (by 5p40), the intellect, however extensive it is, is more perfect than the imagination, q.e.d. (5p40c, emphasis added)

These are the things I have decided to show concerning the Mind, insofar as it is considered without relation to the Body's existence. From them—and at the same time from 1p21 and other things—it is clear that *our Mind, insofar as it understands, is an eternal mode of thinking*, which is determined by another eternal mode of thinking, and this again by another, and so on, to infinity; so that together, they all constitute God's eternal and infinite intellect. (5p40s, emphasis added)

The claim that when we use our power actively to understand, we are eternal, is only to be expected. But because *everything* we do follows from the necessity of the divine nature, amounting to an eternal truth, it is difficult to see how there could be any degrees in eternity. To make matters worse, there is no passage that I know of in which Spinoza would address this issue with any directness. The solution thus cannot but remain somewhat conjectural and be based on an interpretation of how some of the main elements of Spinoza's system work together.

I would argue that we approach this problem as follows. If we can become more eternal during our lifetime, the key must be in the correct understanding of the relationship between the eternal realm (which is revealed when things are conceived *sub specie aeternitatis*) and the temporal realm (revealed, it can be said, *sub specie durationis*). Now what makes a thing what it is is its formal essence, and a thing's formal essence follows from the divine nature (here we can leave aside the question concerning the nature of this 'following'). Our actual essence is *conatus* to persevere in being, and we have seen that this means that we strive to bring about effects derivable from our definition alone. But even though the basic nature of this striving does not change, it is clear that in temporality our causal powers become variously determined; or as Spinoza explains, '[e]ven if each one is determined by another singular thing to exist in a certain way, still the force by which each one perseveres in existing follows from the eternal necessity of God's nature' (2p45s). Now all of these determinations,

affections, or operations have their ultimate basis in the divine nature—and, presumably, as I have suggested above, they follow from the ways in which formal essences relate to each other. But the affections we experience are temporal, existing in a specific time and place. Thus, even though the interdeterminations of formal essences cannot themselves be temporal, they must contain time-place specifications that assign specific times and locations to affections; I believe Spinoza refers to this when he says that duration ‘flows from eternal things’ (letter 12). Without this kind of grounding, facts about such things as passive human emotions would remain brute.²⁸ In Spinoza’s system, I cannot see what else than interdeterminations of formal essences could function as the proper ground for affections we finite existents undergo.

The aforesaid implies that as we strive to freely realize our formal essences, we become variously determined by other finite things or external causes, as dictated by the atemporal grid of being that also fixes the nature of temporal reality. Durational existence unfolds in a manner decreed from eternity.²⁹ But it seems that we are no closer to proposing a solution to the main problem—in what sense can we be said to become more or less eternal? To give an answer, let us begin by pointing out the distinction between (1) causing effects, or properties, that pertain to our formal essence alone and (2) causing effects as determined by other things. The former case equals activity, the latter passivity. Now I would like to suggest that the interdeterminations of formal essences certainly are objects of eternal truths,³⁰ but such that they concern what unfolds in temporality *alone*, that is, that all the ways in which formal essences determine each other constitute *exclusively* features that are objects of truths involving specifications of time and place. Duration, with all its spatio-temporal features, arises from the way in which the formal essences, themselves atemporal, are related to each other. If an eternal truth does not refer to time and place, it concerns the formal essence alone, or, what is the same, the thing as it is in itself (*in se*). The temporal path is based on a system of relations that follows from eternity; perhaps one could metaphorically say that duration is a crevasse in the high plain of eternal essences. The higher we climb up that crevasse, *the closer we get to a state that in no way involves anything temporal*. If this is right, successfully striving according to one’s formal essence equals the proper sense of being eternal; as we accomplish precisely that when we are active, activity makes us more eternal. In accordance with this, as we have seen Spinoza says that it is only to the extent that we understand—that is, are mentally active, or in ourselves, or

²⁸ Here I am largely following, and inspired by, Olli Koistinen’s ‘On the Consistency of Spinoza’s Modal Theory’ [‘Modal Theory’], *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 36 (1998): 71–5. The following passage is especially helpful (p. 72): ‘The proof of necessitarianism requires, then, that Spinoza has to show that all time-place specified sentences about finite modes express necessarily true ideas. Thus, Spinoza’s modal theory does not require that the existence of a particular storm is necessitated by the infinite features of God; but it requires that if a particular storm occurs in *P* at *t*, then the truth ‘this storm occurs in *P* at *t*’ is a necessary truth and follows from truths describing God’s infinite essence.’

²⁹ For an instructive account of the nature of this process, see Olli Koistinen, ‘Spinoza on Mind’ [‘Mind’], in *Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

³⁰ Koistinen holds that ‘all truths about finite modes have as their objects infinite modes and are made true by infinite modes’ (‘Modal Theory’, 73).

cause effects as dictated by our mind's formal essence alone—that we 'constitute God's eternal and infinite intellect' (5p40s). Doing geometry, seeing that nature is a whole formed by the absolutely infinite source of causal efficacy from which everything follows, or contemplating the way in which our mind is united to the body,³¹ count among activities that follow from our formal essences. In this kind of case, our mind operates according to what Spinoza calls the order of the intellect, and not according to the order of nature consisting of mutable finite things (5p10). To the extent that we succeed in this, our cognition involves, and our mind is constituted by, only entities that are not durational in character—which, I believe, is why Spinoza finds it apposite to claim that our eternity admits of degrees.³²

The part of the mind that is not destroyed with the enduring body (5p23) is thus the mind's formal essence, which, consistently enough, 'involves the essence of the body under a species of eternity' (5p23s). Evidently, durational existence—its beginning and cessation—has no effect whatsoever on the eternal formal essence of our mind and body. Thus it is understandable that so much of Spinoza's epistemology focuses on these immutable entities; most importantly, as we have seen, intuitive knowledge concerns the way in which (eternal) essences follow from their attributes (2p40s2), *not* the way in which those essences determine each other so that the temporal realm is formed. The early *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* elucidates these matters in a striking manner:

As for what constitutes the form of the true, it is certain that a true thought is distinguished from a false one not only by an extrinsic, but chiefly by an intrinsic denomination. For if some architect conceives a building in an orderly fashion, then although such a building never existed, and even never will exist, still the thought of it is true, and the thought is the same, whether the building exists or not. (*TIE* 69)

But note that by the series of causes and of real beings I do not here understand the series of singular, changeable things, but only the series of fixed and eternal things. For it would be impossible for human weakness to grasp the series of singular, changeable things, not only because there are innumerable many of them, but also because of the infinite circumstances in one and the same thing, any of which can be the cause of its existence or nonexistence. For their existence has no connection with their essence, or (as we have already said) is not an eternal truth. (*TIE* 100)

But there is also no need for us to understand their series. The essences of singular, changeable things are not to be drawn from their series, or order of existing, since it offers us nothing

³¹ See esp. *TIE* 22, 72, 91, 96.

³² This is in line with such notable recent accounts of our mind's eternity as those presented by Steven Nadler (*Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], esp. 121–2) and Daniel Garber ("A Free Man Thinks of Nothing Less Than of Death": Spinoza on the Eternity of the Mind, in *Early Modern Philosophy: Mind, Matter, and Metaphysics*, eds. Christia Mercer and Eileen O'Neill [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], esp. 108). Moreover, I believe that my reading is consistent with Don Garrett's important claim ('Essence', 300) that the object of our intellect is the formal essence of the body, which allows us to form a wide range of adequate ideas: the mathematical and philosophical activities I mentioned earlier in this section can all focus on, and reveal something fundamental about, the nature of our corporeal being as a modification of the attribute of extension.

but extrinsic denominations, relations, or at most, circumstances, all of which are far from the inmost essence of things. That essence is to be sought only from the fixed and eternal things, and at the same time from the laws inscribed in these things, as in their true codes, according to which all singular things come to be, and are ordered. (*TIE* 101.)

Moreover, Spinoza explains in the *Short Treatise*:

[W]e are not speaking here of a knowledge, Idea, etc., which knows the whole of Nature, the connection of all beings according to their essences, without knowing their particular existence, but only of the knowledge, Idea, etc., of particular things which continually come into existence. 6. This knowledge, Idea, etc., of each particular thing which comes to exist, is, we say, the soul of this particular thing. (*KV* IIpref, *GI*.51 32/C 95)

Of course, these passages leave considerable room for interpretation; but connecting them to what Spinoza says in the *Ethics*, it seems safe to say that from the divine nature there follows an eternal order of (formal) essences which has nothing to do with anything relational, or with 'external denominations.' The latter pertain to changeable temporal things, of which we cannot have adequate knowledge, whereas of the former we can form ideas that are true whether their objects exist in temporality or not. Even though we might understand, for instance, what it takes for a specific body to be formed out of (the attribute of) extension, it is considerably harder—to say the least—to grasp how specifications of time and place can follow from the divine essence. But follow they must. Thus, the above explicated distinction between eternal essences and what comes to be formed by their relations seems to be at work also when Spinoza considers the highest kind of cognition available to us.³³

To sum up, since eternal being as determined by our formal essence can be attained to a differing degree in our lives, there is a sense in which we can be said to become more or less eternal during our durational existence. From the way in which formal essences determine each other there follow such (for Spinoza, passive) features of ours as imagination and memory—mental entities that track the temporal changes our actual body undergoes. But to the extent that we are virtuous and active, what we do (in the mind's case, understand) can be conceived through our (formal) essence alone, and to that extent we are eternal. In this sense, greater virtue and activity amount to greater eternity.

4. Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to show that, and how, Spinoza's views on virtuousness and eternity form a consistent whole. But of course not all the problems involved in Spinoza's theory of eternity have thereby been solved or even touched upon. For instance, I have said nothing about the famous and puzzling claim that 'we feel and know by experience that we are eternal. For the mind feels those things that it

³³ See n. 16.

conceives in understanding no less than those it has in the memory' (5p23s).³⁴ Spinoza appears to think that the formal essence forms the very core of our being and that there is no principled reason for us not to have just as direct an access to that core as we have to our actual existence and bodies. Although we are constantly under passions, we always strive to be as active and virtuous as we can; to the extent that we succeed in this, our mind understands and our way of being matches that of an eternal formal essence, which determines the basic character of our desire. So why not feel it?³⁵

³⁴ For further discussion of Spinoza's remark in 5p23s that 'we feel and know by experience that we are eternal', see Sanem Soyarslan's contribution to this volume.

³⁵ I am especially grateful to Andrew Youpa for his insightful comments and questions. I would also like to thank the audiences at the universities of Dundee, Helsinki, Jyväskylä, and Turku for many helpful comments. Moreover, I would like to acknowledge that the work on this chapter has been financially supported by the Academy of Finland (project number 127410) and the Turku Institute for Advanced Studies.