

Spinoza on Conatus and Suicide

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Abstract: Benedict de Spinoza has fashioned his philosophy in such a way that its foundations are tightly knitted with each other, with definitions, propositions, scholium, and corollary to support each arguments across his *Ethics*. It was found in the third part of his book that the essence of man (and things in general) is *conatus* or the endeavour of such to self-preservation (E3, P6-7). With this in mind, how does it come to be under the notion of suicide? This paper discusses *conatus*, suicide, and the possibility of such self-destruction under the light of Spinoza's doctrine by first defining the concept of each, discussing thoroughly the notion of suicide through both religious and non-religious interpretations, and combining these two concepts to prove that, according to the rational philosopher, suicide is nothing but an external force that overpowers the endeavour of one's will to self-preserve.

Keywords: Conatus, Ethics, Suicide,

I. Introduction

A mathematical and scientific enthusiast, Benedict de Spinoza is one of the philosophers that thrived during modernity. He was inspired by the father of modernity, Rene Descartes, and was, too, concerned with the idea of certainty. Spinoza claimed that the only means to guarantee knowledge is through the pursuit of what is certain. He approached this with certainty as its integral foundation, in contrast to Descartes' method of doubting everything. To this masterpiece, I refer to Spinoza's *Ethics*. It was written with such *geometrical* precision that his propositions stand firm with its axioms and definitions.¹ Within this work of his, he elucidated not only metaphysical concepts but also rational conducts and man's nature of being moral and emotional². With these regards, Spinoza remarks that our happiness is not from our entrapment on our passions nor sentimental things that of value to us; it does not lie under the comfort of superstitions deemed as religion;

it lies on man's life of reason. Hence, his book is entitled *Ethics*³. Such a book is divided into 5 parts: Part I is of God or Nature, Part II is of the Human Being, Part III is of Knowledge or the Human Mind, Part IV is of Passions and Actions, and Part V is of Virtue and Happiness. In observing the chapters, one can already reason that his whole philosophy is grounded on the notion of God or Nature; and in understanding man, his capacity for knowledge, passions, and actions, one is finally qualified to understand and pursue happiness. Such a beauty it is, then, to understand one's self before one achieves an ethical life.

Of course, the statement above entails that one cannot achieve happiness without first understanding what they are. And to this, Spinoza expressed in the third part of his *Ethics* what things essentially are; it goes as so:

P6 *Each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavours to persist in its own being.*

P7 *The conatus with which each thing endeavours to persist in its own being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing.*⁴

The term *conatus* was used to define the inherent persistence of things for their self-preservation. This was originally used by Aristotle on the matters of biology- with organisms seeming to have more *conatus* than that of an inanimate object and hence identifying the organism as an individual⁵- and was also used by the Stoics and their notion of impulse. Other than Spinoza, Thomas Hobbes also used this term with the same purpose and definition.⁶

With this in mind, a question appears; if all things strive to preserve one's self, what would be the case for those who strives for self-destruction or suicide? Does it somehow emit a sense of self-preservation, or does Spinoza consider no such thing? With Benedict de Spinoza as a reliable rationalist, I will address this matter. I begin by first establishing definitions and concerns regarding the two terms separately. Consequently, I will converge the two concepts, and attempt to answer these questions through the eyes of Spinoza through his propositions. Finally, I will give a verdict and answer as to whether suicide is of no matter with regards to *conatus* or it is an exception to Spinoza's strong-grounded philosophy.

II. Presuppositions

a. *Conatus*

Descartes used an analogy of wax to explain the essential unity of a thing or that underlying identity to which things are composed of. He asserted that it could be "broken up, melted, transformed in respect of every one of its properties except those which pertained to matter as such."⁷ Alas, he came into the conclusion that its individuality does not compare to its being constituted by such parts.

Attesting to this, Spinoza claims that there are specific modifications to a substance that does not undergo the changes as that of Descartes' wax. There is an *essential defiance* to such changes. As Roger Scruton puts it, "Things resist damage, fracture and so on, or perhaps, if injured, they restore themselves out of their own inherent principle of existence."⁸ This is *conatus*.

As was stated on the introduction, the 6th proposition of Part III introduced the notion of things having an effort or endeavour for self-preservation and self-maintenance. There were distinctions made on the matters of *conatus* (P9, Schol).⁹ It is categorized in two: human and non-human *conatus*.¹⁰ On human *conatus* (also known as *appetitus*), it can either be from the mental (or will) and bodily appetite. It is considered "mental" if it is wilfully endured by the individual; and it is considered "bodily" if it is a body's reaction to endure.¹¹ Under man's mental striving for preservation, it can be endeavoured with consciousness (or Desire)¹² or without it.

Given the fact from the proposition 7 that it is essential for man to endeavour for self-preservation, it follows that to destroy itself is to altercate the composition to which one *is*.¹³ Martineau adds to this and says that *conatus* is nature's way to avoid those that harm itself and attract those that can aid itself depending on its ability to maintain itself.¹⁴ It is noteworthy, then, to say that *conatus* must remain within itself throughout its being.¹⁵

b. *Suicide*

The definition of *suicide* can be seen on dictionaries and encyclopaedias; to which all have a common denominator: one decides to end one's self. There is a variety of instances in which one can consider to do so. For one, there is a suicide that is against one's will. If one falls

into a situation wherein one is to choose either immense torture or suicide, and one chooses the latter, that is unwilling suicide. Another type of suicide would be one that is done for a greater good. For example, if a soldier would be held captive by the opposing force and force him to expose his representing country's secrets and has committed suicide in protection of his country, the suicide would be done by the greater good. With such a common denominator it begets vagueness and space for error. Other than that, to even define something can corrupt the very nature of the thing and could lead to sophistry. Alas, such is to be defined in an accurate and systematic way, to which Craig Paterson did. He declared criteria through his criticisms of it. First, there are too many acts that encompass "the intentional killing of self" and so, it is deemed to be vague. Second, there must still be an assessment as to whether or not the person intended to self-kill through omission. Finally, one must still consider the morally acceptable definition of it, despite the Roman Catholics' tradition. To these criteria, he has nullified the definitions (of suicide) of Oxford, Émile Durkheim, Richard Brandt, and Tom Beauchamp. Through criticizing them, he then concluded that suicide is "*an act or omission whose proximate effect results in the person's own bodily death, voluntarily and knowingly undertaken, with the intended objective (whether as an end in itself or as a means to some further end) that one's bodily life be so terminated.*"¹⁶

Notwithstanding the idea that there was an exclusion of the Roman Catholic in defining the term suicide, we must, still, expose their perspective of it to attain a fuller understanding of such. The general notion of life, ultimately based from biblical revelation, is that man is not the ultimate guardian of it for he is only the bearer of it.¹⁷ For St Augustine, each suicide is considered as murder. It cannot be viewed under the light of Christian fortitude for it lacks

the guiding and strengthening aspect of man amidst adversity. One might say that there are snippets in the Old Testament to which emits suicidal episodes of people.¹⁸ To this, Augustine holds that these were only mentioned in the testament for the purpose of being *judged*.¹⁹ Suicide is to be condemned, and to even attempt this, one will be guilty of the gravest sin. Regardless of the person's reason to kill oneself due to one's suffering, it does not validate that you can. One will only condemn oneself in an eternal suffering. As he concludes, "*...there is no better life waiting for suicides.*"²⁰ For St Thomas Aquinas, following the footsteps of Aristotle, suicide opposes the natural disposition of one to conserve oneself and to endeavour on life. He emphasized that such an act *directly* attacks those who love one and attacks, too, the community. He also states that if one commits this, one will sin against God himself.²¹ Like Augustine, Aquinas also rejects sentimental motives in doing so such as (1) life as sorrowful, and (2) guilt suicide. He reasons that bad means do not lead to good ends. In addition to such comparison, Aquinas says that killing one's self would be choosing the worst evil since "death is the last and greatest evil one can suffer." To address the problem of suicide in Catholic tradition, they have established a variety of laws²² to demonstrate how sinful and wrong suicide is.

In response to these regards on suicide as being immoral and sinful, there are said to have ethical arguments that support suicide. Such is said by Annemarie Pieper. She justifies that indeed one has no right to kill one's self but it is not necessarily right to hinder one from actually doing it, for to do so would trample on one's freedom. It is not obliged but it is *permitted*. She began by stating that in the view of ethics, there exists moral codes which oblige and prohibits suicide. To consider the truth of both of this, then is *to restrict human freedom*- one cannot oblige

everyone to kill themselves in a specific event nor can it be absolutely prohibited because to do so would signify that one must to keep on living. Pieper then argues that the ultimate human good is not life, but freedom. To this, she says:

“It is not the fact that man is alive that makes him human, for from a purely natural, biological point of view, plants and animals are also alive; indeed every organic being exists. Life is necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for being human. What is sufficient for man to exist as man i.e., in accord with his human dignity, is freedom. Only as a free living being is man completely human.²³”

This as an ultimate truth would then insinuate that it cannot be restricted, nor can it be obliged. It is only an option, since, according, too, to Immanuel Kant, there is no law that restricts freedom, and so, it cannot be obliged either. To him, this kind of act²⁴ is to be termed as *morally indifferent*. To commit such an act is, according to Pieper, not to exceed the boundaries of morality, rather it stops at the final moral frontier²⁵. In claiming that suicide is of a permissible act, she says there are two consequences to this: (1) to those who disdain to this act, one must avoid vindicating that such suicides are to be morally condemned. There can be no judge to this since it is only a permissible act, and not a right; (2) to those that advocate this act, one must not justify it to regulation and institutionalization. It is only an option, hence it cannot be made a right nor a propaganda of it.

III. *Conatus* and Suicide

The notion of suicide in the realm of Spinoza's *ethical* philosophy has been discussed by the contemporary such as Jonathan Bennett, Allan Donagan, and Wallace Matson, and has been criticized by Steven Barbone and Lee Rice. Their main concern on this notion lies under

Spinoza's 4th proposition in the 3rd part of his book. It states:

P4 *No thing can be destroyed except by an external cause.*

Proof *This proposition is self-evident, for the definition of anything affirms, and does not negate, the thing's essence. That is, it posits. And does not annul, the thing's essence. So as long as we are attending only to the thing itself, and not to external causes, we can find nothing in it which can destroy us.*²⁶

In utilizing the term *conatus*- that which endeavours a thing to persist in its preservation- and suicide- the act or omission to which the immediate effect is the person's death under given intentions- we see a contradiction. The act of harming one's self to such ends is opposed to one's essence of self-preservation. How can suicide be from an external cause if it is willed by the person himself unto himself? Spinoza argues against this thought by justifying the legitimacy of P4 through his P20Schol. He claims there that no one can reject anything that is helpful for his self-preservation such as food nor can his nature endeavour him to kill himself- it can only come from an external factor. A man can kill himself when another forces the hand to slit himself, or a man can obey to a tyrant's orders in opening one's veins to avoid choosing the greater evil,²⁷ or a man can imagine something rooted from external factors that conditioned him to do what is in contrary to his essence of self-preservation. The underlying point is a thing *cannot* be the cause of its destruction for to do so would be in contrary to one's essence to self-preserve.²⁸

In the eyes of Spinoza's critics, the doctrine *conatus* is still faulty. For one, Jonathan Bennett argues that when Seneca was forced to kill himself, the compulsion did not come from the command of the tyrant, but from the choice

and desire he himself made. He argues that Nero did not physically coerce with Seneca in placing his armoured hands to his veins, it was Seneca's own doing. Testifying against this, Steven Barbone and Lee Rice implied that indeed Seneca was the one that utilized a weapon to slit himself, but it is because there was not any better choice than doing so. He was forced to kill himself. The inevitability of the happenstance Seneca was situated in pre-established his destruction, built under external conditions he cannot control. What he can control is his choosing of how to die, and he preferred dying in the least pain possible whilst maintaining his honour; in contrary to his other option of becoming a victim and dealing with excruciating pain that will scorch his dignity.²⁹ Acknowledging the argument Bennett made with regards to accusing Seneca on having this desire to slit himself because he willingly did so, they replied that such a death is merely an accidental and a necessary consequence from his actions. He did not will his own destruction; he is simply the instrument of it. This suicide is of an omission, with the intent to avoid taking the lesser evil. Barbone and Rice also mentions that, on the case of those having disorders such as depression that is deemed from within a person, it is to be regarded as an external factor that *affects* a person.³⁰ Conceding to Spinoza's *conatus* that is said to be the essence of man, one cannot ultimately endeavour to self-destruct, and to this regard on disorders, is but a *force* to which one succumbs unto. The same also applies to diseases such as cancers, tumours, and whatnot. It is not a part of the person's essence; it is an external factor³¹.

Bennett still argues the implication that Spinoza may have overlooked a detail to which man can endeavour to self-destruct. In response to what has been said, he argues that Spinoza's propositions are implying that the person who once was to the person who attempts, if not

succeeds, to self-destruct are of different persons because they have now endeavoured to kill themselves. He testifies that Spinoza may be implying that towards the event to which one has chosen to kill one's self, they have changed essences. He goes on as so:

“Spinoza must be claiming that there is no real suicide here because before killing himself the person became someone else: before his suicide Hemingway became a different individual Hemingway*, and he did the killing! This story collapses when we ask who the victim was. If Hemingway* killed himself, then we are back with a self-killing and no identity changes to help us. And Hemingway* can't have killed Hemingway, since they were never in existence at the same time.³²”

But to this, the 4th proposition still ensues. Barbone and Rice contend that Bennett has interpreted such a proposition wrong. They argue that there may indeed be tendencies within a person to self-destruct, but it is not essentially in that person; it is from external circumstances that forced the person to the point of taking one's own life. To the Hemingway/Hemingway* problem, they answer that *neither killed either*. It was still the external force that pushed one to kill oneself, regardless of their personality.³³

Alan Donogan is another that critiqued both Spinoza and Bennett regarding such topics. He approached to this concept of external causes and suicide rather differently than Bennett and focused on the “external circumstances” to which a cause *must* be genuine³⁴. He somehow unacknowledged Spinoza's second definition in the third part of *Ethics*, stating that we are only actively participating in an internal or external event when we are the *adequate* cause of it; on the contrary, we are passively participating to those to which we are only of a *partial cause* of such event.³⁵ To this definition, it supplies us with the idea that in the case of suicide, we are

only passively participating in the event due to the succumbing force of that to which contradicts one's essence. It is of an *inadequate* causality. Donogan also discussed suicide as a result of a multiple personality disorder, in reply to Bennett. On matters of the Hemingway/Hemingway* dilemma, Hemingway would *not* be present when Hemingway* wills his own destruction. The idea here is that the individual was killed (Hemingway), but not the one that willed such killing (Hemingway*). This argument was grounded on the psychologist B. F. Skinner who mentioned that through operant behaviour, we are educated to destroy people when we destroy things, though we cannot replace the other-destruction to the self-destruction; to do so would be viewing the self as the *other*. This is the integral principle of multiple personality disorder. Henceforth, it was established that what circumstance to which a person is to engage in self-destruction is indeed of an *inadequate* cause- meaning, our participation to such an event is merely passive, contradicting Donogan's argument regarding such- and the destruction willed by a person with multiple personality disorder is resulted by the destruction of that which preceded the "personality" of the one that willed it, not the destruction of the one who wills it. The second dilemma implies that it is still of an external force that drive one to destroy the *other* individual.

In addition to the two thinkers, Wallace Matson utilized the analogy of the sun to criticize Spinoza's notion on external causes for destruction. He proceeds as so:

"The sun will perish, and it is possible, indeed highly probable, that it will perish by burning itself out, by depleting its nuclear and then its gravitational energy. These processes can in no way be deemed 'external' or 'not pertaining to the sun's essence', unless by sheer stipulation,

which would empty the principle of all content. And the sun is surely a thing with an essence and a definition if anything is."³⁶

With this statement, it has the power to debunk Spinoza's fourth proposition and can destroy its arguments on *conatus* entirely. In analysis of Matson's argument, Barbone and Rice made evident the main point of such argument; and that is, the equating of *existence* and *essence*. These were already claimed in the very first part of *Ethics* (E1 Def1, P24) that existence is temporal, and essence is eternal.³⁷ With its essence as *burning*, it follows that there is nothing within its being that counteracts its nature. The existence of the sun is to be deemed only as an accident that is in no way part of its essential nature.³⁸

In concluding what has been mentioned, Seneca, Hemingway*, and the sun cannot self-destruct. Each, on their own situation somehow suffers, causing them to change, and resulting to the outside force swallowing them.³⁹ On Seneca's case, the external instances has driven him to be the instrument of his own annihilation; and on the case of Hemingway/Hemingway*, whichever who suffered the consequences was done so because that individual was overpowered by the preceding force that ensued him. Henceforth, for Spinoza, one cannot commit suicide, nor even attempt it, because it is only due to the external forces that overcame one's endeavour to self-preserve.

With regards to the previous argument of Annemarie Pieper on the matters of suicide as permitted, I would like to justify that, under the philosophy of Spinoza, it is to be regarded as still true. The idea that it is permitted insinuates begets the presupposition that it is under an authority such as morality and law, and Spinoza is silent about this mere technicality. Though it is as such, one cannot possibly openly choose the option of committing suicide for, indeed, to

will it would make a contradiction with one's essential construct- to one's *conatus*. Furthermore, in defending Pieper's argument, Spinoza's 4th proposition remains intact. If one does rectify its being an option and chose it for one's self, it must be from reasons external to one as was mentioned on the previous paragraphs regarding the possible causes of suicide- that it may be a force within or without one's self that overpowered one's endeavour to self-preserve for it still remains outside one's essence. The reasons one may have to self-destruct is always from the external.

IV. Conclusion

Indeed, Spinoza was a rationalist deemed to have built a philosophy on such strong foundations; to which any one can attempt and later on fail to deny him. His concept of *conatus* has proven to be consistent throughout this paper. For it not only strengthened itself amidst the convincing critiques of various thinkers to him and on the subject matter, but it also ensured that it is consistent enough to disregard the idea of self-destruction.

¹ Considering such a notion that he has built his ethical philosophy on firm grounds, it follows that the propositions he testified are rooted on these, insinuating the strength of such, and can be deemed as somewhat technical to even attempt to question; for to ask for clarifications of it is to descend back to where such propositions came from. For example, his first proposition states as follows: *A Substance is prior in nature to its affections* (modifications).

This is grounded on the presupposed definitions he made before making such proposition; and to this, such is established on Definition 3 (*Substance is that which exists in itself and conceived through itself*) and Definition 5 (*Mode is the modification of a substance* [properties or accidents]). In combining the two definitions, one can beget the first proposition; and so, it cannot be stated as otherwise. This manner to which one arrived to such proposition is imminent throughout his work, and his propositions have been deemed useful by other thinkers all over generations

whether it is for critiques or simple justification of arguments.

² Roger Scruton, *A Short History of Modern Philosophy: from Descartes to Wittgenstein*. (London: Routledge, 1995). pp. 50-51.

³ Steven Nadler "Baruch Spinoza" *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (Fall 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL= <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spinoza/>; Internet; accessed 11 December 2015.

⁴ Benedictus de Spinoza & Michael Morgan. *The Essential Spinoza: Ethics and Related Writings*. Samuel Shirley (trans.), (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2006). p66.

⁵ Scruton, *op cit*.

⁶ Spinoza & Morgan, *op cit*.

⁷ Scruton, *op cit*. 56.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ Spinoza & Morgan, *op cit*. 67.

¹⁰ For, indeed, even plants and animals can strive to persist

¹¹ An example of this would be the body's natural way of regenerating when it has been scathed or wounded. Another would be such's pull to the surface of the water once one has been diving through it for too long, losing oxygen to breathe.

¹² Appetite was said to have no difference between Desire; only that desire is accompanied with consciousness. R. J. Delahunty. *Spinoza*. (London; New York; Routledge, 1985). pp 221-222.

¹³ *Ibid*. 222.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ This is grounded on Proposition 8: *The conatus with which each single thing endeavours to persist in its own being does not involve finite time, but indefinite time*.

Spinoza & Morgan, *op cit*. 67.

¹⁶ Craig Paterson. "On Clarifying Terms in Applied Ethics Discourse: Suicide, Assisted Suicide, and Euthanasia." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 43. No. 3. (2003). 354-355

¹⁷ Niceto Blázquez. "The Church's Traditional Moral Teaching on Suicide." in *Suicide and the Right to Die*. Eds. Jacques Pohier & Dietmar Mieth. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985). 63.

¹⁸ An example of this is found in Judges 9:53-54 where Abimelech demands his armour-bearer to kill him so no one can take it against him that he was killed by a woman. Another is Saul in 1 Sam. 31:3-5 wherein he dropped himself on his sword so no one can say that he was murdered by the uncircumcised.

¹⁹ Blázquez, *op cit*. 68.

²⁰ *Ibid*.

²¹ *Ibid.* 69.

²² An example of these would be the one implemented by the Council of Braga and Pope Nicholas I. "(The Council of Braga)... those we killed themselves in any way were to be excluded from liturgical intercession and taken to burial without the solemnity of psalm-singing." "(Pope Nicholas I)... suicides must be buried without liturgical ceremonial usual in the offices for the dead. In particular, mass was not to be said, since not only did they sin till their death, but even gave themselves death." *Ibid* 71-72.

²³ Annemarie Pieper. "Ethical Arguments in Favour of Suicide." in *Suicide and the Right to Die*. Eds. Jacques Pohier & Dietmar Mieth. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985). p45.

²⁴ A kind of act to which it dangles between the good and evil.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 47.

²⁶ Spinoza & Morgan, *op cit.* 66.

²⁷ The man referred to here is the stoic named Seneca.

²⁸ Spinoza & Morgan, *op cit.* 113.

²⁹ Steven Barbone & Lee Rice."Spinoza and the Problem of Suicide." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 34. 1994. pp 222-223.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ There is another argument regarding Seneca's suicide that Bennett and Rice have discussed. It may be posited that killing himself is an exercise of power and virtue. To this, Seneca might have thought that to defy Nero would pain him, and would give Seneca the pleasure of doing so. This can be grounded on Spinoza's 23rd proposition in the third part: "*He who imagines that what he hates is affected with pain will feel pleasure; if, on the other hand, he thinks of it as affected with pleasure, he will feel pain. Both of these emotions will vary in intensity inversely with the variation of the contrary emotion in that which he hates.*" *Ibid.* 233.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.* 235.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 236.

³⁵ Spinoza & Morgan. 62.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 239.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 240.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

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