The Trouble with Feelings, 
or Spinoza on the Identity of 
Power and Essence

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ABSTRACT Spinoza claims both that a thing’s essence is identical to power, and that emotions are fundamentally variations in this power. The conjunction of these two theses creates difficulties for his metaphysics and ethics alike. The three main worries concern the coherence of Spinoza’s accounts of essence, diachronic identity, and emotional “bondage,” and put in question his ability to derive ethical and psychological doctrines from his metaphysical claims. In response to these difficulties, this paper offers a new interpretation of Spinoza’s account of affects and his doctrine of the identity of power and essence. It shows that what is fundamental to his ontology of affects is the relation of modification or determination, a relation central to his ontology more generally. The paper argues that we cannot simply identify power and essence but should instead take affects to modify or determine essences as particular exercises of power (particular desires, appetites, and volitions). That is, Spinozistic essences should be viewed as intrinsically determinable, with affects supplying the determinations, and as consisting not in rigid sets of determinate properties, but in ranges of variable properties.

KEYWORDS Power, essence, affects, determination, identity, change, striving

ONE OF SPINOZA’S FUNDAMENTAL ASSUMPTIONS as a philosopher is that metaphysics provides necessary and sufficient foundations for psychological theory and moral philosophy. This is the assumption that gives the Ethics its basic architecture, as it moves from claims about substance to a catalogue of human emotions or ‘affects.’ As may be expected, given this assumption, at least some of the concepts that Spinoza first develops in the context of his metaphysics continue to do work in his discussions of psychology and ethics. ‘Essence’ and ‘power’ are two such concepts. Both are also central to Spinoza’s system. But there are reasons to doubt that the metaphysical roles of these concepts are consistent with the claims Spinoza makes about them in his psychology and ethics. At the heart of the difficulty are the following two doctrines Spinoza puts forward: first, his claim that a thing’s

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essence is identical to causal power; second, his claim that affects are fundamentally variations in this same power.¹

In Spinoza’s metaphysics, the doctrine of the identity of essence and power helps explain the existence of creatures (they are necessarily produced by God’s essence \([E\text{IP}\,6]\)). But it may be most familiar to readers from the role it plays in Spinoza’s conatus doctrine. That doctrine states that the essence of any existing thing necessarily gives rise to certain effects, consistent with that essence; this in turn constitutes the “striving” of the thing endowed with that essence \((E\text{III}P_{4–7})\).²

The idea that Spinoza views power and essence as identical is typically regarded as unproblematic, even if interpreters may disagree about how to flesh out related details (hence the many controversies surrounding the precise nature of striving).

What I would like to show in what follows is that, viewed alongside Spinoza’s theory of affects, the claim that a thing’s essence is power in fact creates substantial difficulties for Spinoza’s metaphysics and ethics alike. The three main worries concern the coherence of his account of essence, his account of diachronic identity, and his account of our “bondage” to external causes, the wretched state from which Spinoza’s philosophy is supposed to deliver us.³ In Spinoza’s view, theoretical philosophy is to be pursued not for its own sake—there is, after all, an infinite number of truths to be known \((E\text{II}P_{\text{Pref}})\)—but rather for the sake of a practical transformation: the achievement of autonomy. The aforementioned worries about the coherence of key Spinozistic concepts put in question Spinoza’s ability to make good on his promise to derive moral and psychological truths from his metaphysics.⁴

In what follows, I start, in section 1, with a sketch of the relevant concepts: power, essence, affect, and offer a preliminary account of how they all fit together. Next, in section 2, I describe the difficulties created by the conjunction of the identity doctrine and Spinoza’s theory of affects. Finally, in response to these difficulties, section 3 proposes a new interpretation of Spinoza’s theory of affects and of his claim that essences are identical to powers.

To anticipate, briefly, I conclude that we cannot simply identify Spinozistic powers and essences. I argue instead that Spinoza takes affects to modify or determine a thing’s essence as a particular exercise of power—as a particular desire, appetite, or volition. Hence we should view Spinozistic essences as intrinsically determinable, with affective variations in power supplying the relevant determinations. What turns out to be fundamental to the ontology of an affect is the relation of modification or determination, a relation acknowledged as central to Spinoza’s ontology more generally.


³For similar worries in relation to other Spinozistic doctrines see e.g. Rutherford, “Salvation,” and Bennett, Study, ch. 10.
I. THE PRELIMINARY ACCOUNT

Let me start with a preliminary sketch of how Spinoza understands essences, powers, affects, and their relations, first (in 1.1) in his metaphysics, and then (in 1.2) in his theory of affects. As noted, a key task of any such account is to come to a better grasp of how Spinoza understands the identity of power and essence, such that this doctrine does not threaten the consistency of his overall framework. In this section, I will offer a preliminary answer to this question; in section 3, we will have occasion to refine the account, as the difficulties with this preliminary version gradually come to light.

1.1. Essence and Power in Spinoza’s Metaphysics

As is well known, Spinoza is an essentialist: he holds that all things—whether actual or merely possible, real or ideal—are endowed with essences. This is often glossed as the claim that, according to Spinoza, any thing has at least some properties necessary and sufficient for being that thing, as suggested by his definition of essence:

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\text{to the essence of any thing belongs that which, being given, the thing is [NS: also] necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken away; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing. (E IIID2)}
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However, as has been pointed out before, to characterize Spinozistic essence solely in terms of necessary and sufficient properties is not enough. This is because, according to Spinoza, the essence of any actually existing thing is also a causal power \([potentia]\). Here is how Spinoza introduces this claim:

the power of each thing, or the striving by which it (either alone or with others) does anything, or strives to do anything—i.e. (by [III]P6), 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. \((E IIIIP7Dem, cf. E IIIP54Dem)\)

Given Spinoza’s rejection of ends and unactualized possibles \((E IIP17S, E IApp, E IVPref)\), the term \(potentia\) must be understood to pick out not a mere potentiality

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1Cf. e.g. Bennett \textit{Study}, §16.2; Crane and Sandler, “Identity.”


3I will not delve here into Spinoza’s reasons for asserting the identity of power and essence in the first place, but briefly the argument is roughly as follows: (i) God’s essence suffices for the production of all existents; hence the essence of God must be a causal power; (ii) given that all things other than God are ontologically only modifications of God’s essential nature, by the identity of God’s power and essence, all things other than God must be also determinations of God’s essential power \((E IIP34Dem, E IIP36Dem, E IIIIP56Dem)\).

4Cf. \(E IIP14, E IIIIP57Dem, E IVD8\), and \(CM 2.12\), which glosses ‘power’ as being the ‘sufficient cause’ of effects.

5In Spinoza’s ontology, the actual essence of a thing contrasts with its formal essence, the eternal and indiscernible implication of substantial essence \((E IIP8C, S; KV 2.20 n. C)\). In this paper I will speak of ‘essences’ simpliciter, treating the qualification ‘actual’ as implicit unless otherwise noted.

or a disposition of a certain type, but rather a determinate series of necessitated
effects—precisely a thing’s striving.

In what follows, I will refer to Spinoza’s claim that an existing thing’s power is
“nothing but” its essence (E IIIP7Dem) as his doctrine of the identity of power
and essence. A natural way to interpret this claim of identity is to conclude that,
in Spinoza’s view, there is only something like a conceptual distinction between
essences and powers. (He relies on this Scholastic theory of distinctions elsewhere
in his writings.) Using the language of properties introduced above, we can
also plausibly gloss the identity doctrine as the claim that, collectively, a thing’s
essential properties are also causally efficacious, or constitute an efficient cause.
For example, if we assume, with the tradition, that the essence of a human being
lies in rationality, then on Spinoza’s view the essence of a human being can be
described as consisting in the causal power to reason—i.e. (E IIP40S2) to produce
adequate general ideas. Finding out the essential powers of things is presumably
an achievement of “intuitive” cognition, directed precisely at the essences of things
(E IIP40S2).

Thus far I have been describing Spinoza’s position as if there were a one-to-
one identity between essences and causal powers—as if his view were that there is
some unique essential power essential to Spinoza being himself, another unique
essential power essential to Bucephalus being Bucephalus, and so on. But I think
that we need to be careful about the sense in which we commit Spinoza to such
one-to-one identity, especially given his nominalist leanings.

Spinoza seems to allow that a single essence may be identical to multiple powers. This is suggested
by his account of the ideal state of human existence:

10 Cf. Viljanen, Geometry.
11 For Spinoza’s use of this theory of distinctions see e.g. EIP10S, EIP15S [IV, V].
12 I offer an account of Spinozistic efficient causality in Hübner, “Formal.” For other interpreta-
tions see e.g. Bennett, Study, Carriero, “Necessity,” Della Rocca, Spinoza, Gueroult, Spinoza, Nadler,
Introduction, Newlands, “Monism,” and Viljanen, Geometry.
13 Some readers might balk at my use of the kind ‘human’ in giving an example of power, even if
Spinoza himself tends to talk in terms of kinds when discussing powers and affects (e.g. EIVPref). It is
often thought that Spinoza simply rejects kinds, universals, and general terms as inadequate. However,
as I argued elsewhere (Hübner, “Essences”), this conclusion does not seem to reflect Spinoza’s actual
position. It is true that, as E IID2 suggests, Spinoza holds that particulars in nature possess essences
unique to them. Given the identity of essence and power, for any existing particular, there will also be
a causal power (or collection of powers) without which this particular cannot be and which cannot
be without this particular. But Spinoza also allows for adequate, rational ideas of more general (less
determinate) essences that belong to mind-dependent kinds of things, such as human beings. It follows
that finite knowers like us will rationally represent certain causal powers as essential to the kinds into
which we (rationally and adequately) categorize particulars. The idea of any causal power that is less
than fully determinate and unique (for example, the idea of a power to ‘reason’) will be an idea of a
mind-dependent ens rationis. The individuation of such powers will be mind-dependent, and subject
to more and less adequate grounding in genuine similarities among formally real particulars. So, on
Spinoza’s view, there will be some unique causal power essential to me being myself; but a rational
representation of the world will also include the thought that there is some essential power without
which human beings in general cannot be and which cannot be without human beings. The same will
go for mammals, animals, and beings in general, with the relevant causal powers specified each time
at appropriate levels of generality.
14 For recent interpretations of Spinoza on universals see Hübner, “Essences,” and Carriero,
“Perfection.”
It is the part of a wise man . . . to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sports, the theater, and other things of this kind. (*Ethics* 4.5.2).

The ideal state of human existence thus seems to be one where we are able to exercise *all* of the various powers and capacities proper to our complex nature—motor, auditory, visual, digestive, olfactory, etc. The person who perfects human nature thus exercises not just a single power (for example, the power to reason), but rather a whole panoply of powers.

Given Spinoza’s naturalistic inclinations (that is, given his belief that all things observe the same laws, and differ in properties only by degree [*Ethics* Pref (II/138); *Ethics* 3.S]), what is true of human beings is presumably also true, to some extent, of all other things. If that is right, then just as Spinozistic bodies vary in the simplicity or complexity of their composition, things generally will vary in the complexity of their essential powers, and the degree of perfection any thing achieves will depend on whether it is able to exercise *all* of the powers of which it is essentially capable.

Moreover, we should keep in mind here that, according to Spinoza, human essence (and so also presumably the essences of other finite things) includes both active and passive elements (*Ethics* 9.Dem). That is, a thing’s essence gives rise both to effects this thing can bring about by itself, and to effects to which it is able to contribute only to a degree, perhaps a vanishingly small one (cf. *Ethics* 1.1). So the power identical to a thing’s essence should not be understood as consisting just in this thing’s power to “act,” i.e. to behave self-sufficiently. For Spinoza, a thing’s essential “power” is also its capacity to undergo or to suffer variously at the hands of other things. That is, wisdom is a state in which we are “equally capable of all the things which can follow from” our nature, capable “of doing many things at once, or being acted on [patientum] in many ways at once” (*Ethics* 3.S, emphasis added).

1.2. Power in the Theory of Affects

With this rough idea of how Spinoza understands powers and essences in his metaphysics in place, let me now turn to the role power plays in his theory of affects or emotions.

Far from being an obscure branch of Spinozistic psychology, the theory of affects is in fact crucial to Spinoza’s entire philosophical project in the *Ethics*. This is because, as noted above, a principal objective of that treatise is to free us from our servitude to passive affects, i.e. affects that do not originate in our own nature. And central to Spinoza’s conception of an affect is the idea of a variation,

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1Roman and Arabic numerals following a reference to the English translation of the above works are a reference to the volume and page numbers of the Gebhardt edition of Spinoza’s works.

2In Spinoza’s necessitarian framework this of course means whether this thing is determined to exercise these powers.


4An obvious question that arises is how to reconcile this goal with Spinoza’s conception of wisdom which, as we just saw, allows for passivity. I will not address this here in detail, but see references in the previous note for discussion.
or fluctuation, in power. 19 This is what, he thinks, affects fundamentally are—they are increases and decreases in a thing’s degree or level of power:

By affect I understand affections of the Body by which the Body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections [corporis affectiones quibus ipsius corporis agendi potentia augetur vel minuitur, juvatur vel coercetur et simul harum affectionum ideas]. (E IIID5)

The above definition suggests that, in Spinoza’s view, an affect occurs if two conditions are both met; namely, first, a body’s degree of causal power changes on account of some bodily “affection” (modification, determination); second, there is an idea of that modification in the mind. (That, necessarily, there will be an idea of this affection in the mind follows from Spinoza’s notorious commitment to each mind’s omniscience with regard to everything that to some degree inheres in its essential intentional object, which, in the case of human minds, is an actually existing body [E IIP11–13].) 20 The bodily affection in question can be understood in terms of alterations of constituent simpler bodies; for example, as a change in the number of parts, in the direction of their movement, or as an impression of some “image” by an external cause. 21 The waxing and waning of bodily power brought about by this bodily modification can in turn be understood in terms of what this body can do and undergo—for example, how many different effects it can bring about at any particular time (cf. E IIP13S).

In short, for Spinoza, the term ‘affect’ picks out a certain kind of bodily affection—the kind that aids or drains a body’s causal power—together with an idea representing this bodily affection. A modified bodily state, a new degree of power, and an idea of these changes in the mind, in a changing context of objects (E IIIP56), is all there is in metaphysical rigor to the vagaries of emotional life. 22

Spinoza concludes that fundamentally there are only two kinds of affects: we feel “joy [laetitia]” when our power goes up, “sadness [tristitia]” when it goes down (E IIP11S; II/148). 23 At first blush, this suggests that in his view the only changes in power that are relevant to affects are, so to speak, quantitative changes: increases and decreases. However, I suggest that we take Spinoza’s claim to be slightly weaker, namely that changes in power can always be understood at least quantitatively, that

19 Since Spinoza identifies the relevant power with striving it is worth noting that many early moderns tied affects to self-preservation in some way; see James, “Passions.”


21 E IIA3, E III.5–7. Like any affection, the affection that brings about a change in power can have been brought about either by the thing’s own essence or by this essence in conjunction with external causes (E IIA1, E IIP16, E IIIID2). In the former case, it cannot lead to a decrease in power (E IIIP6, E IIP12).

22 Thus, like Alanen (“Human mind”), I disagree with accounts that take Spinoza to reduce affects to mental representations alone (e.g. Della Rocca, “Amok”). Spinoza does seem to treat affects as purely mental phenomena in E IIIGen. Def. Aff. (and E IVP8, which appeals to E IIIGen. Def. Aff.). But E IIIGen. Def. Aff. is preceded by the caveat that it treats affects “insofar as they are related only to the Mind.” For other definitions that pick out things under multiple attributes see E ID6, E IIIIP9S.

23 Spinoza sometimes includes “desire”—the “conscious” production of essential effects in thought and extension (E IIIIP9S)—in his list of basic affects (e.g. E IIIDef. Aff.exp). I take it that this is because joy and sadness are desire qua increased or decreased (cf. E IIIP57Dem; Nadler, Introduction, 204).
is, as increases or decreases. But this does not mean that these changes cannot also be understood to consist in transitions to new kinds or qualities of power—for example, as a transition from a power to whisper to a power to speak. (Again, it is worth keeping in mind here Spinoza’s nominalism: all such categorizations will be mind-dependent.)

One last preliminary point about Spinoza’s definition of affect. As we saw, that definition mentions explicitly only bodily power. But we should not conclude from this that the mind’s power—its capacity to produce and undergo a variety of effects—remains unchanged in affective experiences. Such a conclusion would violate Spinoza’s commitment to the identity of human minds and bodies (EIIIP7S), and to the sameness of the causal orders in which they participate (EIIIP7). These commitments demand that whenever the power of a given body changes (for example, if this body now produces a greater variety of motions in neighboring bodies), the power of the relevant mind changes in corresponding manner. Hence, Spinoza also notes that an affect “determines the mind to think of this rather than that [mens ad hoc potius quam ad illud cogitandum determinatur]” (EIII Gen. Def. Aff.). In his view, ideas differ from one another not just by their truth or falsity but also in the richness of their implications. (For example, the idea of God is one that in principle allows a mind to produce all other possible ideas [TIE 42]). Affects that determine us to have true, consequence-rich ideas constitute modifications of the mind that increase its causal power—the power to think.  

2. THE TROUBLE WITH FEELINGS

We have on the table a preliminary account of Spinoza’s conception of powers and essences, and an outline of the roles these concepts play in his metaphysics and psychology. Let me now say why, appearances of harmonious coexistence notwithstanding, these different parts of Spinoza’s account are actually in tension.

Consider the following two doctrines, both of which our preliminary account in section 1 attributed to Spinoza: (i) essences are identical to powers—a thing’s power is “nothing but” its essence (EIIIP7Dem); (ii) affects are variations in this essential power. It is worth stressing here that Spinoza is explicit that the “power” that fluctuates in affects is the very same “power” that is identical to things’ essences. Thus he writes, for example, “Joy and Sadness are passions by which each one’s power, or [sive] striving to persevere in its being, is increased or diminished” (EIIIP57Dem).  

What I want to show in this section is that the conjunction of these theses generates a series of problems for Spinoza’s framework.

In the first place, their combination seems to undermine the possibility of robust diachronic identity for finite things in Spinoza’s framework. For if a thing’s essence is identical to a causal power, and if all finite things are constantly open to changes in that power—whether through their own striving or through encounters with

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24 Why then does Spinoza’s definition of affect focus on bodily power alone? Presumably for the same reason for which he insists that we must understand bodies in order to understand our minds at all (EIIIP3S): our minds are in their essential nature representations of bodies (EIIIP11, 13).

25 Cf. EIIIP28Dem, EIIIP52Dem. Spinoza’s focus on passive affects in many of the passages is to be expected: they constitute the ‘servitude’ he wishes us to escape.
external causes—then it is unclear that any finite thing can persist as self-same through an affect. This is because, as we saw, every affect by definition marks a new degree (and perhaps also quality) of power. Thus, it seems, every affect brings about a change in the essence of a thing. And so with every affect, a new and different thing—one endowed with a distinct essence—seems to come into being.  

According to the preliminary account, then, Spinoza appears to be committed to ontology of highly ephemeral beings, each existing only in the time-slice between two consecutive affects. Leibniz, for one, thought this was precisely Spinoza’s picture, although he reached this conclusion by considering not his theory of affects but the underlying conception of the human mind as an idea of an existing body:

    according to Spinoza, at any given moment, a soul will be different, since, when the body changes, the idea of the body is different. Hence, we shouldn’t be surprised if he takes creatures for vanishing modifications . . . Spinoza’s soul is so transitory that it does not exist even for a moment, since the body also does not remain the same. (Comments, 277)

If this is indeed Spinoza’s picture, as the preliminary account also suggests, then one might object that Spinoza’s ontology is both profligate and implausible: where common sense posits one thing, Spinoza sees a potentially infinite series of highly ephemeral individuals. His account also seems to run afoul of the common-sense belief that finite things can, and typically do, persist through emotional upheavals and all sorts of changes in power. A fellow philosopher may worry, furthermore, whether a view on which every affect generates a new entity can still count as a theory of ‘emotions.’ For presumably such a theory is supposed to bear not on an individual’s wholesale generation and corruption, but rather on her states (or judgements, dispositions, processes). Elsewhere, Spinoza explicitly attends to this traditional distinction between the two kinds of changes.

Nonetheless, such worries about the plausibility or idiosyncrasy of the account attributed to Spinoza in section 1 are not enough to reject that account. Spinoza may well be simply radically reinterpreting what it means to be a thing, and what it means to feel emotions. If his view is indeed that every affect, by marking a change in essential power, brings about a new thing endowed with a distinct essence, then he must also think that any sense of enduring selfhood is an illusion. But he would not be the only thinker to come to such a conclusion. Moreover, it is clear that Spinoza thinks that our self-understanding can be fundamentally mistaken in this way. This is true, for example, of our self-understanding as free, a self-understanding that Spinoza famously savages, reducing it to mere ignorance of natural causality.

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16 See Alanen, “Human mind,” on Spinoza’s affects in relation to other problems of identity.
17 Throughout, I use ‘individual’ in a non-technical, generic sense of ‘thing.’
18 I do not take plausibility or agreement with common sense to be good criteria of what counts as a good interpretation of Spinoza’s doctrines; nonetheless, in the present context they are worth keeping an eye on.
19 He distinguishes ‘change’ (“whatever variation there can be in a subject while the very essence of the subject remains intact”) from ‘transformation’ (“the corruption of things . . . which at the same time includes the generation following corruption, as when we say that peat is changed into ashes, or men into beasts”) (CM 2.4).

Since Spinoza identifies only actual (but not formal) essences with power, and since formal essences are not subject to fluctuations in power but are eternal and unchanging, sub specie aeternitatis finite things do not lack a robust identity altogether, even if the preliminary account were correct.
the trouble with feelings

In reality, we are indebted, he thinks, to infinitely many prior causes (EIP28). So perhaps he also thinks that, as the preliminary account suggests, there is likewise only an infinity of ephemeral selves. Indeed, such a claim would fit very well with the rest of Spinoza’s ontology. (Consider, for example, his insistence on the irrelevance of duration to a thing’s essential identity [EIVPref; II/268], or his refusal to grant finite things the status of substances [EIIo]. After all, one of the properties traditionally ascribed to substances was precisely persistence through change.)

In his most sustained treatment of personal identity, his account of an amnesiac Spanish poet, Spinoza concludes that there is no compelling reason to think that biological death is the only kind of death (EIVP39S; II/240). Perhaps in his view there is equally no compelling reason to think that affective deaths are not happening around us all the time.

Furthermore, other parts of Spinoza’s theory of affects, not part of the account laid out in section 1, are hardly more orthodox. For example, Spinoza also thinks that not just human beings but every finite thing experiences affects. (This is because, as we saw, all it takes for there to be an affect is a bodily affection, a change in power, and an idea of those changes. In Spinoza’s panpsychist framework [E IIIP3S], those three requirements are satisfied by every finite entity in extension.)

Hence, he writes, “we cannot in any way doubt that the lower animals feel things [sentire]” (E IIIP57S), but really his claim is much more far-reaching: not just lower animals, but also stones, blades of grass and stars have an emotional life on his view. Morally, this may be a much more attractive position than for example Malebranche’s cruel verdict that “animals . . . eat without pleasure, cry without pain, grow without knowing it; they desire nothing, fear nothing, know nothing” (Search, VI.2.vii). But one may wonder whether an account that allows stones to feel sad can genuinely explain the sadness of self-conscious, rational beings.

What is much more troubling than any such concern about plausibility or recognizability is the following implication of the preliminary account. As noted, the goal of the Ethics is to free us from a certain kind servitude to passive affects, affects not wholly grounded in our own natures. But if, as the preliminary account dictates, Spinoza’s ontology has no room for individuals who can persist as self-same through affects, then it is unclear that we can still make sense of the idea of such servitude. For if affects create and destroy individuals, then one and the same thing cannot be first enslaved and then free. To escape servitude is rather to altogether cease to be. In short, it seems that to accept the preliminary account, with its commitment to the corruption and generation of individuals through affects, is to come close to giving up on the coherence of Spinoza’s overall philosophical and emancipatory project.

This potential incoherence of Spinoza’s project is not the only reason to be skeptical about the preliminary account. Here is a further, textual reason: the claim

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29 Consider also Spinoza’s quasi-functionalist criterion of individuation, according to which it is rationally permissible to view as “one singular thing” any collection of individuals that produces “one” effect (EIID7). A ‘singular thing’ so defined can presumably be extremely transient—as transient as the grounds for it being considered ‘one.’

30 Wilson, Ideas, famously asks this sort of question in relation to Spinoza’s account of mind, and his ability to explain properly human rationality.
that affects destroy and generate individuals is also inconsistent with passages in the *Ethics* in which Spinoza clearly recognizes that finite things can and do persist through affective changes, as his emancipatory project seems to require. He writes, for example,

Men can disagree in nature insofar as they are torn by affects which are passions; and to that extent also one and the same man is changeable and inconstant [unus idemque homo varius est et inconstans]. (E.IV.33, emphasis added)

when I say that someone passes [transire] from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite, I do not understand that he is changed [mutatur] from one essence, or form, to another. For example, a horse is destroyed [destruitur] as much if it is changed into a man as if it is changed into an insect. Rather, we conceive that his power of acting, insofar as it is understood through his nature [agendi potentiam quatenus haec per ipsius naturam intelligitur], is increased or diminished. (E.IV.Pref, emphases added)

This second passage is especially illuminating for our purposes. For in it, Spinoza considers and then rejects precisely the sort of account we attributed to him in the previous section: he explicitly distinguishes changes in a thing’s degree of power or perfection from a wholesale change of its essence, i.e. from its “destruction.” Moreover, he insists that changes in power must be “understood through” a thing’s essential nature—for example, its equinity or humanity.\(^\text{31}\) In other words, Spinoza’s view seems to be that affects, as a certain type of change in power, are made intelligible by reference to an unchanging essential nature (even if that nature no longer deserves to be described as substantial). So contrary to the preliminary account offered above, for Spinoza affective changes in power are not only consistent with a thing retaining its essence (and so consistent with its ability to persist as essentially self-same through various affects),\(^\text{32}\) they require the existence of such an essence for their intelligibility.\(^\text{33}\)

Passages like the two cited above suggest, then, that Spinoza’s theory of affects does not in fact generate the problems identified above (the problems of a profligate and implausible ontology; of a failure to offer a recognizable account of emotions; of incoherence of the notion of servitude and thus of Spinoza’s overall philosophical project). More importantly, the passages suggest that, contrary to the preliminary account given above, and also contrary to the usual reading of Spinoza, we cannot simply identify Spinozistic “power” and “essence,” insofar as not every change in the one amounts to a change in the other: a thing’s power can change while its essence can—and indeed, for the sake of the intelligibility of the changes in power, must—stay the same.

\(^{31}\)See note 13 above.


\(^{33}\)They will also require a reference to other natures: a thing’s power is in part understood through the natures of other things, since, as noted earlier, it also consists in the passive capacity to undergo or suffer effects.

It is possible to draw a different conclusion from E.IV.Pref: because changes in power require for their intelligibility an unchanging substratum, but Spinoza does not provide such a substratum (since he deprives finite things of substantiality), it follows that the changes in power, and with them affects, are unintelligible. Given that by the PSR all that is is intelligible, both the changes and the affects are in metaphysical rigor illusory. For a similar argument from a different starting point see Della Rocca, “Amok.”
The preliminary account outlined in section 1 thus cannot be entirely correct. More precisely, what cannot be correct is its characterization of the relation between a thing’s essence, its power, and the affective changes in that power. What is needed is an account of the identity of power and essence that decouples affective changes in power from the essential identity of the thing, while respecting Spinoza’s commitment to the identity of power and essence. The task of the next and final section of the paper is to propose such an account.

3. THE AMENDED ACCOUNT

In what follows, I propose a different account of the relation between a thing’s essence, its power, and affective changes in power. Specifically, first (in 3.1), I show that Spinoza takes affects to determine things’ essences. Second (in 3.2), I argue that a thing’s power (whether it is understood as striving, desire, volition, or appetite) and a thing’s essence are not identical simpliciter. Rather, any Spinozistic essence is identical to a range of possible determinations of power, and hence also to a range of possible determinate strivings (determinate desires, volitions, appetites). In the last part of the section (3.3), I address some potential objections to my account.

3.1. Affects as Determinations, Essences as Determinables

Consider the fact that in the Ethics Spinoza states the identity doctrine invariably in terms of a thing’s power being identical to its essence, never making the assertion in the opposite direction, identifying a thing’s essence with its power. This suggests that the essence and power are one and the same for Spinoza in the sense that a thing’s essence suffices for this thing being essentially an efficient cause of some sort, but there may well be more to a thing’s essence than its causal power, and this essence may also be understood in other ways than in terms of power. Recall that Spinoza’s view is that in order to exist at all, a thing must have power (E IP11S; II/54). So part of the point of the identity doctrine seems to be that the grounds of power truly attributable to a thing can be sought in its essence — rather than, for example, only in accidental properties or, as occasionalists like Malebranche proposed, in another being altogether.

14 Manning considers this a question Spinoza does not have the resources to answer (“Physical,” 5.3).

15 Here are two other solutions. In a different context, Donagan proposes that we must distinguish higher- and lower-order powers within striving, where only the latter are subject to fluctuation, and only the former are identical to a thing’s essence (Spinoza, 192–3). I think the proposal lacks textual support.

One could also propose that what remains constant in affective experience is the capacity of a thing to suffer, as distinct from “power of acting [potentia agendi],” or to bring about effects autonomously. Such a proposal finds support in both E III1D3 and E IVPref, which describe the fluctuating power not as ‘power’ simpliciter but as ‘power of acting.’ Unfortunately, elsewhere Spinoza clearly describes power simpliciter—which I take to include both the power to act and the power to suffer—as the fluctuating power (see e.g. E III1P57). Spinoza also identifies both power and power of acting with striving (E III1P7Dem, E III1P28Dem, E III1P34Dem, E III1P33C2Dem) and with virtue (E IVD8, E IVP72Dem). See Viljanen, Geometry, 68–82 for more on potentia agendi.

16 Cf. Della Rocca, “Viljanen.” I do not take Spinoza to deny that a thing may also have merely accidental powers that it acquires in the course of their existence, as well as necessary-but-nonessential powers that may follow derivatively from its essence.
To see where the preliminary account goes wrong, consider further *E IIIP*56Dem, keeping in mind that for Spinoza terms like ‘desire,’ ‘appetite,’ and ‘volition’ all designate different ways of considering striving (volition, for example, is just striving considered in relation to thought alone) (*E IIIP*9S):

Desire [conscious striving] is the very nature, or essence, of each [individual] *insofar as it is conceived to be determined, by whatever constitution he has, to do something* ([*cupiditas est ipsa unius ejusque essentia seu natura quatenus ex data quacunque ejus constitutione determinata concipitur ad aliquid agendum*] (see [III]P9S). Therefore, as each [individual] is affected by external causes with this or that species of Joy, Sadness, Love, Hate, etc.—i.e., as his nature is constituted in one way or the other [ejus natura hoc aut alio modo constituitur], so his Desires vary and the nature of one Desire must differ from the nature of the other as much as the affects from which each arises differ from one another. (*E IIIP*56Dem, emphasis added)

What is most germane for our purposes about the above passage is its claim that different affects “constitute” a thing’s essence in different ways. Elsewhere Spinoza glosses ‘constitution’ as follows:

Desire is man’s very essence, *insofar as it is conceived to be determined, from any given affection of it, to do something.*

**Expl:** . . . For by an affection of the human essence we understand any constitution of that essence [per affectionem humanae essentiae quamcunque ejusdem essentiae constitutionem intelligimus], whether it is innate [NS: or has come from outside]. . . . Here, therefore, by the word *Desire* I understand any of a man’s strivings, impulses, appetites, and volitions, which vary [varii] as the man’s constitution varies, and which are not infrequently so opposed [oppositi] to one another that the man is pulled in different directions and knows not where to turn. (*E IIIDef. Aff. I, emphasis added*)

In other words, for Spinoza, a ‘constitution’ of a thing’s essence is to be understood as an ‘affection’ of that essence. On this understanding of *constituere*, for an affect to “constitute” an essence is for this affect to determine or modify this essence—and not, as on the preliminary account, to bring it into being simpliciter, thereby destroying and generating individuals. According to Spinoza, then, affects “constitute” essences in the sense that they modify or determine these essences. As the above passage makes clear, terms like ‘desire’ and ‘appetite’ are in turn meant to pick out a thing’s essence insofar as this essence is determinate, that is, determined to some particular effect. That is, particular desires, appetites, and volitions are all specific determinations of a thing’s essence.

On the amended account I wish to endorse, the doctrine of the identity of power and essence is taken to mean that a thing’s *essence is determinable as particular exercises of power*, that is, as particular cases of striving—particular desires, appetites, and volitions. For example, under the attribute of thought, to say that an affect determines a thing’s essence in a specific way will mean, as we have already seen, that a mind is “determine[d] . . . to think of this rather than that” (*E IIIGen. Def. Aff.*). This constitutes a determination of the essence of a thing as a particular volition (for example, to think of God rather than of the beauty of music), a volition . . .
characterized by a particular degree of power (particular degree of autonomy and of fecundity of implications of the ideas that compose this volition).

In short, the amended account thus takes Spinozistic essences to be at least in part intrinsically determinable, i.e. intrinsically subject to modification. More specifically, it takes essences to be intrinsically capable of modification with respect to a degree of power, where such changes in power are inseparable, in the attribute of thought, from changes in what we think about (God rather than music). I propose then that variation in power, central to Spinoza’s theory of affects, be seen as a case of the relation of modification or determination, a relation that fundamentally structures Spinoza’s ontology more generally. For, arguably, any Spinozistic mode bears, inter alia, a relation of determination to substance: “being finite is really, in part, a negation, and being infinite is an absolute affirmation of the existence of some nature” (EIP8S1), “an affection, or mode . . . expresses God’s nature in a certain and determinate way” (EIP1oCD; cf. Ep. 36). Likewise, finite modes bear determining relations to other finite modes (cf. E ID2). In similar vein, on the proposed reading, variations in power are viewed as diverse determinations of the essences of modes. This is not to say that understanding how Spinoza conceives of relations of determination is without its interpretative difficulties, but the theory of affects so understood does not introduce new or sui generis difficulties on this point. That is, whatever worries we may have about the idea that essences are determinable in affects, those same worries we may have about the determinability of substance and of modes more generally.

3.2. Conditions of Persistence

The element of the preliminary account that we should thus reject is its implicit assumption that Spinoza’s doctrine of the identity of power and essence—his claim that power is “nothing but” essence—implies that every change in power necessarily counts as a change in essence, and vice versa. On the amended account, a finite thing can persist as essentially the same through various affects as long as its essence qua determinable remains the same. More precisely, I suggest that what remains the same as long as the thing remains essentially the same is the range of degrees of power that this thing may have—that is, its range of possible determinations.

I base this suggestion on the following passage from the early Short Treatise, in which Spinoza outlines the conditions of diachronic identity:

if . . . a body has and preserves its proportion—say of 1 to 3—the soul and the body will be like ours now are; they will, of course, be constantly subject to change, but not to such a great change that it goes beyond the limits of from 1 to 3 . . . But if other bodies act on ours with such force that the proportion of motion [to rest] cannot remain 1 to 3, that is death, and a destruction of the soul. (KV IIIPref 12–14, emphasis added)

This passage is often referred to as Spinoza’s account of physical diachronic identity; in fact, however, it specifies what it takes for both body and mind (‘soul’)
to remain the same over time.\textsuperscript{41} In other words, the passage contains a perfectly general account of the conditions of diachronic identity of finite things, valid for both thought and extension (or at least the germ of such an account). The passage is also entirely continuous with Spinoza’s more detailed characterization of the conditions of diachronic physical identity in the \textit{Ethics}. (There Spinoza claims, for example, that “If the parts composing an Individual become greater or less, but . . . keep the same ratio of motion and rest . . . then the Individual will likewise retain its nature” \textit{[E III.5]}. I opted for a citation from the \textit{Short Treatise} because it explicitly introduces the idea of ‘limits’ to the changes a thing can undergo that would be consistent with this thing remaining essentially one and the same.\textsuperscript{42} According to the above passage, a key role of an essence in Spinoza’s view is to establish these limits—establish the maximum changes a particular with that essence can undergo.

We can use the KV passage to reconstruct how Spinoza thinks about identity and change in the context of his theory of affects. In particular, we can apply the idea of an essentially predetermined limit, or maximum, of permissible variability—variability consistent with maintaining essential identity—to explain how, in affective experience, a thing might persist through changes in its degree of power. Namely, as long these changes in degree are within the essentially-predetermined limits, the thing persists; i.e. contrary to the preliminary account, it is not destroyed by an affect. Determining what these limits are for any particular thing is presumably the task of intuitive cognition; what matters for our purposes is establishing the general underlying mechanism.

I suggest, then, that we see this range of possible determinations of power as essential to a thing, i.e. as among the properties necessary and sufficient for this thing to actually exist. A Spinozistic essence so understood consists not—or not merely—in rigid sets of completely determinate properties, but rather at least in part also in ranges of properties. Seen in this light, Spinoza’s claim that changes in a thing’s power must be “understood through [its] nature” will thus mean at least that any such change must be understood in terms of the range of determinability essential to that thing. To be a particular thing (or a certain kind of thing) will then mean, inter alia, to be intrinsically determinable in specific ways or within specific limits. The mistake of the preliminary reading was to take the identity of power and essence to mean that we must identify the essence of a thing with a specific degree of power, rather than with a range of possible degrees.

Now, recall also that, as Spinoza’s identification of wisdom with a moderate exercise of a panoply of powers suggests, a thing’s essence may be identical to a multiplicity of powers, rather than, invariably, to a single power. On the amended reading, not only would each of these powers have a certain qualitative or quantitative range of permissible exercise, the powers themselves would stand in relations that themselves would also be subject to ranges of permissible variation. For example, in the case of a goldfish, it would not be just the power to swim, or even to swim at a particular range of speeds, that would constitute its essence, but

\textsuperscript{41}Spinoza can do that because in KV minds causally depend on bodies.
\textsuperscript{42}Spinoza makes a related point when he says that it is metaphysically impossible for us to strive in certain ways. E.g. \textit{E IIIIP4–5}, r1.
rather the relation of her various essential powers with their particular ranges: the power to swim at certain speeds, a power to detect certain intensities of light, to digest and excrete certain kinds of microscopic nutrients, etc.

Presumably we can decide case by case whether any given change in a thing’s powers still permits us to count this thing as essentially the same. In some cases perhaps there will be no obvious answer, as suggested by Spinoza’s rather tentative remarks a propos the amnesiac Spanish poet. Some affective experiences may indeed exceed what a thing can bear, given what it essentially is.

3.3. Objections and Replies

That Spinoza regards essences as subject to determination or modification in the way I have outlined has not been noted often. Bennett is an exception here: he acknowledges in passing that Spinoza indeed speaks of “states” of an “essence,” but goes on to dismiss this as a merely “odd” way of referring to the states of an individual. I think this dismissal is a misjudgment on Bennett’s part. For unless we accept that Spinoza very much intends to treat essences as subject to modification, we will fail to understand the basic causal mechanism of Spinozistic affects, as well as the nature of the identity of power and essence.

Nonetheless, it is worth pausing over the question of why one might be inclined, like Bennett, to dismiss the idea that Spinozistic essences are determinable. There are four potential objections that come to mind. Addressing them will let me further clarify my account, especially its key notions of determinability and constitution.

First, one may worry that talk of ‘determinability’ requires Spinoza to allow for mere or unrealized potentialities, and, worse, makes such potentialities ontologically fundamental to the extent that essences are ontologically fundamental. Spinoza’s necessitarian framework does not allow for such potentialities.

To clarify, my talk of essences as a determinable is meant to be a shorthand for the following, more precise claim: on the reading I am proposing, the essence of a thing is identical not to a mere potentiality for determinations but to the entirety—the whole series, so to speak—of the ways in which this essence will be necessarily determined over the duration of the thing’s existence.

A second reason why one might want to reject, as Bennett does, the idea of modifiable essences is because one might think that modifications or determinations should be attributed only to things, not to their essences. On this objection, essences are simply the wrong kind of thing to be modified. So if Spinoza talks about the affections of an essence, as he does in E IIIDef. Aff.I, this is only because (goes the objection) he fails to properly distinguish between things and their essences, and hence attributes to the essences of things what is in fact

\[\text{\textsuperscript{44}}\text{Cf. Garrett, “Individuation,” 91–3.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{45}}\text{Bennett, Study, 222.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{46}}\text{Compare Spinoza’s reliance on the phrase “potential intellect” (EIP15).}\]

\[\text{On my reading, the formal essence of a thing can thus be viewed as the totality of this series of determinations of essence or as a rule for that series. Seen in this manner, Spinozistic essences anticipate Leibnizian monads. Cf. Schrijvers, “Conatus,” 69.}\]
attributable only to the things themselves. (This accusation has been lobbed at Spinoza before, in different contexts.)

This objection is also, I believe, defeasible. Rather than charging Spinoza with a failure to mark a rudimentary distinction, it seems more charitable to take him at his word and conclude that he holds a very broad conception of the possible scope of relations of determination or modification, and takes such relations to apply to things and their essences alike. That he does so is, again, confirmed by the way he characterizes the essence of substance: this essence too is subject to modification—indeed to all possible modifications (EIP16).

A third reason why might be inclined to dismiss the idea that Spinozistic essences are determinable is because of doubts about the ability of determinables to play the role of ontologically fundamental (or at least relatively fundamental) entities. Nonetheless, the position has defenders even in contemporary literature, so it is far from obvious that it is clearly untenable.

Finally, one may object to my gloss of ‘constitution’ as modification or determination. For, intuitively, to claim that x “constitutes” y seems to mean that x makes y be simpliciter, bringing it into being, composing it wholly or essentially. Since Spinoza thinks that affects “constitute” a thing’s essence (EIIIP56Dem), this interpretation of constitutuere would corroborate the preliminary account, and thus reintroduce all the attendant difficulties. This alternative gloss of the terminology of ‘constitution’ certainly seems to find support in some passages. (For example, Spinoza writes that “substance does not constitute the form of man,” and that instead the “essence of man is constituted [constituit] by certain modifications of God’s attributes” (EIIIP10&C). It seems difficult to construe ‘constitution’ as mere ‘modification’ in this instance. For it makes little sense for Spinoza to oppose the thesis that “human essence is modified by substance” (which, as we know, cannot be “in” anything else [EID3]), in favor of the tautological claim that “human essence is modified by certain modifications.” In contrast, it makes sense for Spinoza to intend here ‘constitute’ in the sense of making up or composing wholly or essentially. On that reading of the passage, Spinoza is opposing there the popular view that human beings are substances, in favor of the thesis that we consist merely in modifications of substances.) Likewise, when Spinoza explains that attributes are perceived to constitute substantial essences (EID4; cf. EIP10S), it seems more plausible to read that as the claim that an attribute brings a substantial essence into being, rather than as the claim that an attribute determines or modifies this essence. The latter reading seems to conflate modes and attributes.

In short, some passages (e.g. EIIIDef. Aff.IExpl) appear to identify ‘constitution’ with ‘modification,’ while others seem to require us to gloss ‘constitution’ as bringing into being or composing wholly or essentially. I suggest, therefore, that

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46 E.g. Della Rocca, Representation, 214, 259 n 24.
47 Thinking about Spinozistic essences generally as intrinsically determinable might go some way toward answering the ‘acosmic’ worry of German and British Idealists about Spinoza’s reasons for claiming that there must be a world of modes in addition to the infinite substance. On this reading, substance must produce things other than (modally distinct from) itself insofar as essences are such—and in the first place, the essence of the self-explanatory substance is such—as to be intrinsically determinable. Of course someone like Hegel might retort that we are appealing here to brute facts about substance.
48 E.g. Wilson, “Fundamental.”
we see these two senses of ‘constitution’ as describing cases on a spectrum: to “constitute” is to bring into being (to form, compose, make be) but such that this relation is subject to degrees: a thing can be “constituted”—brought into being—to different degrees, either wholly, simpliciter or merely in a certain way, with respect to certain properties.⁴⁹ The latter sense is then equivalent to determination or modification. On this reading, ‘constitution’ is analogous to causation: one thing can be either an adequate (complete) or an inadequate (partial) cause of another thing’s existing or having this or that property (E III 1). And the analogy is not arbitrary—the two relations should be subject to the same logic since ‘constitution’ presumably is just a certain kind of causal relation. More precisely, Spinoza’s usage suggests that the term ‘constitution’ is to be reserved for describing causal relations to a thing’s essence, as distinct from causal relations to its propria for example.⁵⁰

On the proposed construal of ‘constitution,’ when Spinoza says that affects “constitute” an essence this should be read, as suggested above, as the claim that in affective experience a thing’s essence comes to be in a certain way: determined with respect to bodily composition, degree of power, and ideas being entertained by the relevant mind. Glossing ‘constitution’ as bringing into being wholesale or simpliciter, as the preliminary account does, only entangles Spinoza’s system in a mess of difficulties.⁵¹

**BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ABBREVIATIONS**

*Spinoza’s works*


Individual works of Spinoza are abbreviated as follows:

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<td>TIE</td>
<td>Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect</td>
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In citing from the *Ethics* I use the following abbreviations:

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⁴⁹Cf. “inadequate ideas arise in us only from the fact that we are a part of a thinking being, of which some thoughts wholly constitute our mind, while others do so only in part” (TIE 73).

⁵⁰The *Ethics* is full of this use of *constituere* (see especially Part 2), see also TIE 69–71, 105, KV II 5, 8, CM II 9, Ep. 6, 8, 13, 23.

⁵¹Thanks to John Carriero, Sam Rickless, Marleen Rozemond, Don Rutherford, Stephen Zylstra, the participants of the UC San Diego’s History of Philosophy Roundtable, and the audience at the UCLA Conference in Early Modern Philosophy for valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
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